

Between local and long-distance: a Roman shipwreck at Fig Tree Bay off SE Cyprus

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Introduction

At some point probably during the 2nd c. A.D., a small merchant vessel with a modest capacity and crew departed from Cilicia or NW Syria on a routine regional voyage that was meant to last anywhere from a few days to a week or slightly more. Having successfully navigated the only open-water segment of its journey, the crossing to Cyprus, it was traveling southward along the island's E coast with a small load of 5-6 tons of primarily local Cilician and Syrian agricultural produce, especially wine, when, either in distress or by simple accident, it ventured too close to shore, striking the rocks and reef. As it drifted and sank, strong wave action and swift local currents scattered the cargo débris across the rocky seabed.

Recent investigations of a shipwreck at Fig Tree Bay off SE Cyprus offer this image of a direct shipment from the nearby coast of Cilicia or NW Syria. The final voyage of this Roman merchant vessel provides a glimpse into the broader mechanisms of exchange by which different regions of the Mediterranean were tied into a larger economic world. The profile of the ship's small cargo, principally drawn from a narrow coastal area around the Bay of Iskenderun, offers a context for understanding the scale and organization of local maritime exchange that integrated parts of E Cyprus with the mainland. Regular voyages of merchants such as these, who carried modest tonnages over short distances, bound producers and consumers around this corner of the NE Mediterranean Sea into a discrete economic neighborhood.

At the same time, minor components of the cargo shed light on how local trade intersected with larger, longer-distance commerce, and, in doing so, created opportunistic markets for the circulation of new regional products. Although the specific port where a group of comparatively exotic Gaulish jars from the W Mediterranean were loaded remains unknown, their presence within what is otherwise a distinctly regional shipment signals how the redistribution of products from farther abroad was facilitated through these same economic channels. Beyond ensuring reliable access to nearby agricultural goods and occasionally more unusual products, the integration of networks allowed the introduction, by at least one Cilician producer, of specialty wine — locally-made but following a Gaulish tradition. The circulation of Gaulish-style wine alongside wines imported from Gaul opens a window into issues of taste and imitation, and raises questions regarding how economic regions facilitated the marketing of niche products.

The shipwreck and its cargo

Archaeological survey off SE Cyprus has focused on locating and documenting the material evidence for long-term patterns of seaborne exchange and maritime infrastructure development during antiquity.¹ Underwater work north of Cape Greco, in the area of Fig

1 Survey of the Roman and Late Roman maritime remains off the coast of Cyprus was previously undertaken by Leonard (2005). On the Eastern Cyprus Maritime Survey and the 2006-9 work around Cape Greco in particular, see my forthcoming article in *RDAC*.