

# Underwater Archaeology, Research and Excavation

by *Sebastiano Tusa*

It would be superfluous to reiterate the wonderful values of Ustica diving, rightly described by many as the capital of scuba diving and all that is connected with the exploration of the deep. Much has been written and discussed about Ustica's underwater archaeology, documented reporting, discovery and recovery of numerous archaeological finds, but above all, for the construction of the first underwater archaeological tour of Italy in the beautiful setting of the Marine Reserve near Tower Spalmatore.

Even if the images of the Ustica's seabed have now been imprinted on our memories, its history is not so well known. It is one of the smallest and remotest islands in the Mediterranean, however this being so offers fascinating working corollaries alongside the invaluable experience of diving, as well as innovations in the field of underwater archaeology.

The first traces of life on the island date back to the Copper Age or Eneolithic (III millennium BC) located in the famous Grotta Azzurra (Blue Grotto) and the adjacent San Francesco Vecchio. A few fragments of terracotta vase testify to the fact that even back then the main concern of Ustica citizens due to a perennial lack of water was to collect the little water that dripped from the walls of the natural cavities during the summer months.

From the Eneolithic period, Ustica had been inhabited continuously up until at least the end of the Middle Bronze Age (XII sec. A.D.). After the Copper Age, in fact, up until the ancient Bronze Age (early second millennium BC) we have archaeological evidence of a settlement (yet to be excavated) on the hill of Culunnella, not far from Cala Santa Maria. The settlement connects some burial caves carved into the rock on the sides sloping down to the south coast, which are still visible today.

It is certain that a vibrant maritime dynamism was achieved by Ustica with the subsequent Milazzese facies (Middle Bronze Age: late second millennium A.D.). This facies has been confirmed in the villages of the Faraglioni and Omo Morto. Everything indicates that at this time of Ustica history it became part of the Tyrrhenian routes both as a destination or as a stopover point between Sicily and Sardinia and southern Italy. The settlement of the island of Ustica lies as an intermediate location between the two spheres of commercial influence which connected in the routes to the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean with the West and the Tyrrhenian Sea, partially influenced by the Mycenaean.

After this association during prehistoric times, far from being unimportant, given the implications of the settlement of the Ustican's population in the



Mediterranean. The evidence of human presence on the island disappeared until the late Hellenistic period (IV - III century BC).

Beyond the controversial quotes in historical sources, it seems that the island remained outside of the events that highlight both the Greek colonization itself (which is justified by its geographical location), but also of that of the Phoenician — Punic colonization, which as it is known was interested in the coast of Sicily including Palermo and Solunto.

After the Second Punic War (241 BC) when Sicily and its islands passed under Roman rule, the role of Ustica quickly becomes important because of its favourable geographical location and its point of connection between Sicily and the Tyrrhenian coast of the Italian peninsula. Ustica now took impetus from being inserted in the routes of the Roman cargo ships carrying Sicilian wheat. With III sec. A.D. Ustica became more intensely populated. The interest must have been dictated for strategic reasons; but the typical rural settlement dislocation in the various districts of the island indicates the focus on the agricultural and pastoral supply problem. Therefore, the occupation of the island was not only a strategic nature, but also constituted an opportunity for genuine colonization. The archaeological site that offers the most data, not so much because of its prominence and importance for the Ustica's landscape of that time, is the Falconiera because it is the only one of the sites that has been studied and partially excavated.

Today it is a fascinating place to go trekking. By the first century of the Christian era it would be that Ustica's defence preoccupation cease. This can be seen



through the reinforcements, that still have to be verified archaeologically, the colonization of the plains, which had already been occupied in the Hellenistic period, and connected to the natural harbours of the island. It is likely that the well-known "Pax" Roman had led to this relatively quiet and peaceful situation, since being part of the Tyrrhenian routes the island's defensive tension was relaxed. Moreover, with the existence of the more intense maritime traffic, the same had happened many centuries before in the Middle Bronze Age involving the villages of the Faraglioni and Omo Morto, favoured the inclusion of the island in the Tyrrhenian businesses.

It is in this period of great development and prosperity for the small island of Ustica, which lasted up until the crisis of the Roman Empire (V century AD), that we have been able to date back the last underwater archaeological discovery, made on the sea bed near the island, proving once again the historical and archaeological richness of Ustica seas.

Thanks to a verification and reconnaissance campaign, carried out in Ustica by the Sicilian Group of Archaeological Underwater Survey, with the technical support of the Palermo Municipal Police divers and the fundamental contribution of the Nature Reserve and the Municipality of Ustica, a wreck has been identified which dates back the early fifth century AD, near Punta Galera (south coast) at a depth of about 18 m. The ship had been shipwrecked against the steep cliff, perhaps driven by a strong sirocco wind. Its cargo and its structure scattered along the steep rocky slope that goes from 0 to about 50 m leaving considerable traces scattered across a wide area. Numerous fragments of cylindrical African amphorae and a large lava millstone have also been found. What we see is only a small part of the wreck and its cargo which is well concealed both under the sand at the base of the escarpment and below a huge rock fall from the coast above.

Preliminary findings indicate the presence of traces of the wreck of a boat perhaps from North Africa which was navigating up the Tyrrhenian route to Rome or the Gulf of Naples. Its tragic end was probably caused by the onset of a strong sirocco wind. The ship was more than likely to have been in the vicinity of the island or

perhaps attempting to get away just before the onset of the wind. But the manoeuvre failed and as in other cases, the southern coast of Ustica was the sad grave of another boat.

After this period of great economic development, the fate of Ustica assimilated that of the Roman Empire in advanced and fatal decline. We have no current evidence of vandalic invasions in Ustica, but it is likely that it suffered some of the repercussions of what was happening in Sicily and the peninsula. The end of a political and economic system like the Roman Empire made its effects felt on small territory, such as Ustica, whose political and economic system was based on the last centuries of its development. Nor does it seem that the momentary revival of Sicily under the Byzantines may have had any effect on the island.

We know, however, that Ustica was in hands of the Arabs until at least the tenth century, up until the Norman conquerors arrived and founded a church and a Cistercian monastery, which is located in the area *Casa Vecchie*. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth century the Saracens raged on the island. The repopulation attempts made by the Spanish failed and the few inhabitants captured by Barbary pirates were sold into slavery. In 1763 the Bourbon government organized a re-population of Ustica by transferring of about one hundred families from the Aeolian Islands, to which were added a few Palermitani and Trapanesi families. The island was now equipped with two towers (tower of St. Mary and Tower Spalmatore) and a fortress (the so-called "Castello Saraceno" on the Falconiera), as well as a garrison of 250 soldiers. The town rose up around the Cala Santa Maria and in 1771 it became the Municipality of Ustica.

It became a penal colony under the Bourbon, and did the Italians capture and to imprison Arab soldiers during the war in Libya (1911). During the period of Fascism, it also housed political prisoners including Antonio Gramsci. He remained in this land of exile until 1961. After which the island started to take on its current appearance of a prestigious and sought after tourist destination for travellers whose only concern was to explore nature and the sea, and whose aim was to forget the outside world.

In addition to the underwater archaeological places mentioned there are others at the port of Santa Maria where you can see the remains of a Hellenistic-Roman shipwreck at the "Scoglio del Medico" and "Secca della Colombaia".

The underwater archaeological landscape of Ustica is rich but still needs further development and a detailed study of its characteristics so as to make it accessible to the public by offering something more, other than the underwater archaeological itinerary which is already flourishing within the reserve.

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