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# The wreck off Mahdia, Tunisia and the art-market in early 1st c. B.C.

Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway

GISELA HELLENKEMPER SALIES (ed.), with HANS-HOYER VON PRITZWITZ UND GAFFRON and GERHARD BAUCHHENß, *DAS WRACK. DER ANTIKE SCHIFFSFUND VON MAHDIA* (Kataloge des Rheinischen Landesmuseums 1.1-2, Bonn 1994; Rheinland-Verlag GmbH, Köln). 2 vols., Pp. xxiv + 1122, 38 color plates, 941 photographs and line-drawings in text, two folding maps. ISBN 3-7927-1442-6.

We are becoming accustomed to thematic loan exhibitions accompanied by extensive and lavishly illustrated catalogues; indeed, each occasion is often the impetus for the writing of original essays presenting important scholarly viewpoints, so that such publications acquire an interest-lifespan well beyond that of the temporary display and become essential research tools in our libraries. Yet never so far, in my opinion, has a museum show generated the amount of new information and intellectual contribution, as well as excitement, produced by the exhibits from the Mahdia shipwreck and by the two superb volumes under review. This enterprise was surely a landmark occasion, not only because of its international nature, but also because it allowed the happy collaboration of scientists and archaeologists in restoring, re-examining, and examining for the first time a highly diverse group of objects from a closed context — a time capsule of the 70s B.C.

The first discoveries of underwater antiquities approximately 5 km from the village of Mahdia (between Sousse and Sfax) off the coast of Tunisia were made by Greek sponge fishermen during the summer of 1907. The Directorate of Tunisian Antiquities (at the time, under French protectorate, represented by A. Merlin) was notified and, having located the wreck at a depth of c.40 m, carried out a series of six diving campaigns (with intervals) which ended in 1913. Quantities of marble and bronze objects were recovered and taken to the Bardo Museum in Tunis. Others were noted but could not be lifted, especially the many (at least 60) marble columns, some of which were partially moved to another underwater location (the "Fossa Mahdia") and are now untraceable. Lack of funds prevented further exploration, but the most important pieces had already been found and were almost immediately published, giving rise to lively scholarly dialogue. A new diving campaign, with more scientific equipment, took place in 1948, under the direction of Philippe Tailliez and Jacques-Yves Cousteau, and two more occurred in 1954-55 (by the Club de Recherches Sous-Marines de Tunisie under Guy de Frondeville). Although new finds, by comparison, were negligible, some columns and anchor stocks were lifted, parts of the ship were identified, a color film was taken, and a tentative plan of the wreck was made.

Whatever had been recovered from the site was cleaned, restored, and displayed in the Bardo Museum, although only the objects with art-historical interest received proper installation. Wooden elements from the ship itself, pottery, including one of the terracotta lamps that had provided the first chronological indication, and other minor items were either left outdoors, exposed to weathering, or mixed with other antiquities and today can no longer be found. A thorough publication of all the sculptures together (both marbles and bronzes) was made by Werner Fuchs in 1963 (*Der Schiffsfund von Mahdia*), and had remained the main source of information until now. New circumstances however prompted a second look at this important material as a whole.

In 1984 a fire in the Bardo Museum had necessitated closing to the public the wing containing the Mahdia finds. The Tunisian authorities, moreover, noted a distinct deterioration in the various objects, which early 20th-c. technology could not properly clean and consolidate. Help