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A brachiopod biotope associated with rocky bottoms at the shelf break in the central Mediterranean Sea:
Geobiological traits and conservation aspects

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A brachiopod biotope associated with rocky bottoms at the shelf-break in the central Mediterranean Sea: geo-biological traits and conservation aspects

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3 **A brachiopod biotope associated with rocky bottoms at the shelf-break in the central**
4 **Mediterranean Sea: geo-biological traits and conservation aspects**
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1 Abstract

- 2 1) In the Recent, brachiopods only seldom occur in benthic communities. A biotope dominated by
3 *Megerlia truncata* was identified in 2013 by Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) exploration of
4 the south-easternmost Adriatic margin.
- 5 2) Emerging rocky substrates next to the shelf-break at ca. 120 m appear intensely exploited by this
6 eurybathic rhynchonelliformean brachiopod attaining a population of >300 individuals/m².
- 7 3) Calcareous red algae are almost ubiquitous at this site and preferentially encrust sectors of the
8 substrate where brachiopods are minimal.
- 9 4) This *Megerlia* biotope is a novel finding for this part of the Mediterranean Sea, similar to a
10 situation previously observed in the Western Basin, off the Mediterranean French coast.
- 11 5) It is proposed that this remarkable brachiopod biotope and the adjacent Rhodolith bed are
12 considered important for conservation management.

13
14 **Keywords:** Brachiopoda, *Megerlia truncata*, Mediterranean Sea, ROV, habitat mapping, natural
15 heritage, conservation

17 Introduction

18 Brachiopods have been an important component of the benthic marine realm since the Cambrian
19 (Santagata, 2015; Carlson, 2016). They achieved an astonishing diversity and abundance in the
20 Paleozoic and, Mesozoic, with some 30,000 described species. A net decline took place in the
21 Cenozoic, with ca. 400 species known in the modern ocean (Emig, Bitner, & Álvarez, 2013). At
22 present, rhynchonelliformean brachiopods are prevalent throughout temperate to polar regions (e.g.,
23 Foster, 1974; Campbell & Fleming, 1981; Tunnicliffe & Wilson, 1988; Hiller, 1991; Lee, 1991; Roux
24 & Bremec, 1996; Baird, Lee & Lamare, 2013; Emig, 2017; Gordillo, Muñoz, Bayer & Malvé, 2018),
25 and, more rarely, at tropical latitudes (Laurin, 1997; Kowalewski, Simões, Carroll, & Rodland, 2002;
26 Simões, Kowalewski, Mello, Rodland, & Carroll, 2004). These filter-feeders settle on mobile to hard
27 substrates from subtidal to abyssal depths (Emig et al., 2013). Today, as for the past, their occurrence
28 is controlled by oceanographic factors, above all current strength, nutrient availability and oxygen
29 content (Fürsich, & Hurst, 1974; Tunnicliffe & Wilson, 1988; Kowalewski et al., 2002; Gordillo,
30 Muñoz, Bayer, & Malvé, 2018). Overall, brachiopods play a minor role in modern benthic
31 communities but there are a few examples where they achieve high abundances, like fjords of the

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3 32 Canadian Pacific (Tunnicliffe & Wilson, 1988), Chilean Patagonia (Baumgarten, Laudien, Jantzen,
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5 33 Häussermann, & Försterra, 2014) and New Zealand (Bowen, 1968), or the California shelf-break
6
7 34 (Pennington, Tamburri, & Barry, 1999). *Post-mortem* subtidal brachiopod shell accumulations are
8
9 35 also only seldom recorded (Simões & Kowalewski, 2003; Simões, Rodrigues, de Moraes Leme, &
10 36 Pires-Domingues, 2007).

11
12
13 37 The temperate Mediterranean Sea is home to a relatively diverse brachiopod fauna that includes up
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15 38 to 13-14 species (Logan, 1979; Logan, Bianchi, Morri, & Zibrowius, 2004, Emig, 2014). Many such
16
17 39 taxa are distributed at shallow depths, often in cryptic habitats (SPA/RAC–UN Environment/MAP,
18
19 40 OCEANA, 2017), and six (*Novocrania anomala*, *Gryphus vitreus*, *Terebratulina retusa*, *Megathiris*
20
21 41 *detruncata*, *Platidia anomioides*, *Megerlia truncata*) live deeper being either eurybathic (circalittoral-
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23 42 bathyal) or exclusively bathyal. The eurybathic *Gryphus vitreus* (= *Terebratula vitrea*) may form
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25 43 dense populations on mobile silty to coarser sediment on the outer continental shelf and upper slope
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27 44 (Pérès & Picard, 1964; Emig, 1989; Madurell et al., 2012; Aguilar et al., 2015; SPA/RAC–UN
28
29 45 Environment/MAP, OCEANA, 2017), or colonize hard substrates (Fourt, Goujard, Perez, &
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31 46 Chevaldonné, 2017). Large subfossil accumulations of *G.vitreus* of Pleistocene age are sometimes
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33 47 found (Emig, 2018, 34-35). Many equivalent fossil situations with terebratulid assemblages are
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35 48 documented in the Neogene to Pleistocene record of the Mediterranean basin (e.g., Gaetani & Saccà,
36
37 49 1983). *Terebratulina retusa* is often recorded from hard substrates at considerable depths (Taviani et
38
39 50 al., 2017) and also frequently occurs in the Mediterranean fossil record. The inarticulate brachiopod
40
41 51 *Novocrania anomala* can be found in considerable numbers attached to dead biogenic frames,
42
43 52 hardgrounds or bedrock, but documentation of this in fossil record is not known (Barrier et al., 1996).

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45 53 A rather common eurybathic rhynchonelliformean brachiopod in the Mediterranean Sea is *Megerlia*
46
47 54 *truncata* (Linnaeus, 1767). Its geographic range extends to the eastern Atlantic Ocean and occurs at
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49 55 depths between 5-800 m (Logan, 1979; Brunton, 1988; Anadón, 1994; Logan, Bianchi, Morri,
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51 56 Zibrowius, & Bitar, 2002; Logan et al., 2004; Çinar, 2014; Emig, 2014, 2018; Gerovasileiou & Bailly,
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53 57 2016; Álvarez, Emig, & Tréguier, 2017). In the Recent, *M. truncata* is generally associated with
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55 58 coarse detritic substrates, hardgrounds and bedrock, and with cold-water coral frames from the
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57 59 circalittoral to the bathyal zones (Madurell et al., 2012; Fourtet et al., 2017; Emig, 2014, 2018), their
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59 60 dead shells being abundant in submarine deposits (Remia & Taviani, 2005; Taddei Ruggiero, Buono
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61 61 & Raia, 2006). Although it may be common locally, it is not known to play a dominant role in benthic
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63 62 communities, with the exception of the assemblage found at ca. 105 m at Banc d'Esquine, off the
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65 63 Mediterranean French coast (Fourt et al., 2017). Finally, there are situations where some of the taxa
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3 64 mentioned above (*G. vitreus*, *T. retusa*, *M. truncata*, *M. detruncata* and *N. anomala*) share the same
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5 65 hard substrates at depth (Fourt et al., 2017).
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7 66 Here we report the first discovery of a distinct brachiopod biotope dominated by *Megerlia truncata*
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9 67 (Linnaeus, 1767) in the central Mediterranean Sea, offshore the Albanian-Greek shelf at the boundary
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11 68 between the Adriatic and Ionian seas. To the best of our knowledge, a comparable biotope has been
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13 69 previously identified only in the Western Mediterranean at similar depth and type of substrate (Fourt
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15 70 et al., 2017). This new finding is discussed in terms of biological characteristics, oceanographic and
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17 71 geo-sedimentary conditions, actuo-paleontological potential and conservation issues.
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19 72

21 22 73 **Material and Methods**

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24 74 The study-area is located in the Bay of Saranda at ca. 20 km from the Albanian coast at ca. 130 m
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26 75 depth (Figure 1). The site was surveyed during the COCOMAP13 oceanographic cruise R/V Urania
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28 76 (May 2013). Bathymetric data, Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) images, bottom samples, and
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30 77 hydrological casts were collected. Swath bathymetry was acquired using a hull-mounted Kongsberg
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32 78 Simrad EM302, with a nominal frequency of 30 kHz, swath coverage of ca. 4x greater than water
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34 79 depth and 512 beams per second acquired with Reson PDS2000 software. All data were plotted in
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36 80 the Transverse Mercator – UTM34N-WGS84 Coordinate System. A morphobathymetric map (Figure
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38 81 1b), with a cell size of 1x1 m, was obtained using CARIS SIS and HIPS software. Physical properties
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40 82 of the seawater were sourced from the World Ocean Atlas 2013 version 2 (WOA13v2) dataset
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42 83 (Locarnini et al., 2013), which provided long-term averaged (1955-2013) temperature and salinity
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44 84 values of 14.43 °C and 38.60, respectively.

45
46 85 The ROV dive (COC13-28) was performed using a Pollux III (Global Electric Italiana) equipped with
47
48 86 a low resolution CCD video camera for navigation and a high resolution video camera (SonyHDR-
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50 87 HC7) with an image frame of 2304x1296 dpi; three laser beams positioned 20 cm from each other
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52 88 provided the scale bar on the videos (metadata are reported in Table 1). The ROV was equipped with
53
54 89 an underwater acoustic tracking system which provides position and depth every 1s. Taxonomic
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56 90 identifications were made using high resolution still image analysis, while low resolution images
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58 91 were analysed for habitat mapping along the ROV track (Figure 1c-d). Low-resolution still frames
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60 92 were automatically extracted every 10s, all images were georeferenced using Adelle and ESRI
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62 93 ArcGIS software. Macro- (>0.5 mm) and mega-benthic organisms (>2 cm) were identified to the
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64 94 lowest taxonomic rank (Table 2); taxa that could not be identified from images to species-level, such

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3 95 as sponges, were identified only as morphospecies or morphological categories (e.g., Bell & Barnes,
4 96 2001; Santin et al., 2019). Taxonomic names conform to the World Register of Marine Species
5 96 database (WoRMS Editorial Board, 2019). A large volume (60 l) modified Van Veen grab was used
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7 97 to collect sediments from this site (sample COC13-29) which are stored at the ISMAR-CNR
8 98
9 98 Repository in Bologna.
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13 100 A 3D model (Figure 3b) was reconstructed using Agisoft Photoscan Professional Edition V. 1.2.5. A
14 101 set of georeferenced high-definition images from ROV videos was selected to reconstruct both the
15 101 brachiopod- and sponge-dominated rocky outcrops. Firstly, pictures were aligned at high accuracy to
16 102
17 102 create a dense-point cloud. Meshes were then constructed with a high polygon count and a texture
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19 103 layer of the outcrops was created using a mosaic blending mode and superimposed on the meshes.
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23 24 25 106 **Results**

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27 107 The outer shelf of the Albanian-Greek continental margin, where the site is located, is characterized
28 108
29 108 by a complex geomorphologic setting that includes rocky highs, blocks and concretions surrounded
30 109
31 109 by vast stretches of coarse biogenic-detrital sediment enriched in rhodoliths (Figure 1). It extends
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33 110 over an area of ca. 10 km² and is characterized by a structural high reaching a maximum elevation of
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35 111 ca. 100 m (from 201 to 107 m) and oriented northwest-southeast. The top of this tectonically-driven
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37 112 structure is dominated by small-scale (only few metres) geomorphic reliefs and backscatter (i.e.,
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39 113 reflectivity) image analysis shows high reflectivity that indicates the presence of a hard (rocky and/or
40 114
41 114 pebbly) substrate (Figure 1).
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44 116 The survey covered a total length of 1322 m between 108-130 m, and explored the area with the
45 117
46 117 maximum reflectivity value (Figure 1, Table 1). Two main biotopes were identified and mapped along
47 118
48 118 the ROV track: (1) a Brachiopod-dominated biotope (Bb) settled on hard substrates for a total length
49 119
50 119 of 417 m covering an area of 1251 m²; (2) a Rhodolith bed (Rb) distributed over a generally flat
51 120
52 120 surface (Figure 1c). The Brachiopod biotope is characterized by two main facies, one dominated by
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54 121 brachiopods, and another where brachiopods and encrusting/erect sponges co-occur (for a length of
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56 122 279 m). A third facies was observed on top of the blocks, characterized by small patches of
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58 123 *Filigrana/Salmacina* complex with *Axinella vacoleti* and *A. verrucosa* (linear extension of 14 m).
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3 125 Brachiopods colonized mostly steep hard substrates (along the ROV track, for a length of 138 m).
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5 126 *Megerlia truncata* was the species that typified this biotope (Figures 2a, c-e; 3a-c), which attained a
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7 127 mean density of 176 ± 128 individuals/m² and maximum density of >300 individuals/m² (Figure 3b).
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9 128 Brachiopods were preferentially distributed on rocks facing towards to the coast, from West to
10 129 Southwest, while Rb faced both sides (Figure 1d). The Bb is bathed by the Eastern Adriatic Current
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12 130 (EAC) that flows northward (e.g., Cushman-Roisin, Gačić, Poulain & Artegiani, 2013; de Ruggiero
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14 131 et al., 2018), however, as shown by the Adriatic Forecasting System model
15 132 (<http://oceanlab.cmcc.it/afs/>), the main water mass at 100 m depth in the Bay of Saranda flows
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17 133 southward. In general, *M. truncata* dominates over sessile and encrusting macrofauna (e.g., sponges),
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19 134 however, encrusting red algae seldom develop on living *Megerlia truncata* shells (ca. 10% of the
20
21 135 imaged brachiopods) and represents the main epibiosis affecting brachiopod shells (Figures 3c; S1b).
22 136 There was no evidence of other macroinvertebrates (e.g., bryozoans) was recorded on the surface of
23
24 137 the living brachiopods. *Rhabderemia* sp. and *Hexadella pruvoti* are the most common sponges
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26 138 recorded together with crustose coralline algae (CCA) on hard substrates (Figure 2c-e). Cnidarians,
27
28 139 such as the sea anemones cf. *Hormathia coronata* and the solitary coral *Caryophyllia calveri* are
29 140 relatively common, and among annelids *Protula* sp. and *Serpula vermicularis* are the dominant
30
31 141 species (Figure S1b-d). The red lance urchin *Stylocidaris affinis* and the hatpin urchin
32
33 142 *Centrostephanus longispinus* are vagile organisms that commonly occur also with abundant juvenile
34
35 143 specimens (<3 cm in diameter) of *C. longispinus* in the explored area (Figures 2a; S1b). Demersal
36 144 fish fauna is represented mainly by *Phycis phycis* and by the rare parrot seaperch *Callanthias ruber*
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38 145 that shelter under substrate cavities and ledges (Figure S2a, d; Table 2). All identified *M. truncata*
39 146 specimens were alive, often feeding (Figure S1b-d); no dead shells were found excepted for those
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41 147 recorded loose on the sedimentary cover at the base of hard substrates (Figures 3c-g; S1a).
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44 148 The Rhodolith bed extends for 668 metres, with a live coralline-algae coverage estimated at ca. 3 km²
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46 149 using backscatter mapping (Figure 1c). No detailed analysis of the living algal component is possible
47 150 based only on the ROV images, and floras have been generally indicated as CCA. The surveyed area
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49 151 represents one of the deepest living Mediterranean rhodolith beds (Aguilar, Pastor, de la Torriente &
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51 152 García, 2009; Basso, Babbini, Ramos-Esplá & Salomidi, 2017), and the 2005-2009 averaged value
52 153 of Photosynthetically Active Radiation (PAR) on the seafloor, extracted from EUSeaMap 2016
53
54 154 dataset (European Marine Observation Data Network (EMODnet) Seabed Habitats project,
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56 155 <http://www.emodnet-seabedhabitats.eu/>) indicate a value of 0.0014 that corresponds to the lowest
57
58 156 possible occurrence of red CCA (Runcie, Gurgel & Mcdermid, 2008 with references therein). In
59 157 general, rhodoliths take the form of small boxworks (<2 cm) which define the bed thickness (Bracchi
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158 et al., 2019). Biodiversity of the Rb is characterized by few dominant taxa (Table 2), mostly erect

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3 159 sponges, such as the fan-shaped cf. *Poecillastra compressa* and the erect *Aplysina cavernicola* (Figure
4 160 2e). Vagile fauna is dominated by *Stylocidaris affinis*, while demersal fishes of some commercial
5 161 value are *Pagellus erythrinus* and *Pagrus pagrus*. The lobster *Palinurus elephas* represents an
6 162 invertebrate recorded in the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable (IUCN, 2019).
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11 163 Finally, in the northernmost surveyed area (Figures 1b), the encrusting sponge *Dendroxea cf. lenis*
12 164 covers a wide portion of the substrate that prevents the settlement of other organisms, including
13 165 brachiopods.
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19 167 **Discussion**

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22 168 *General traits.* Dense aggregations of pedunculate brachiopods on hard substrates, such as vertical
23 169 walls or large boulders, have been rarely reported in the literature. Examples are from the Bay of
24 170 Fundy in the Canadian Atlantic where *Terebratulina septentrionalis* reaches an average density of
25 171 471 individuals/m² (Logan & Noble, 1971), the Chilean fjordland where *Magellania venosa* may
26 172 attain a density of 200 individuals/m² (Baumgarten et al., 2014) and in Canadian fjords of British
27 173 Columbia where brachiopods (such as the Rhynchonelliformea *Laqueus californianus* and
28 174 *Terebratulina unguicula*) reach a maximum of 945 individuals/m², with an average density of 190
29 175 individuals/m² (Tunncliffe & Wilson, 1988).
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36 176 The only other occurrence of *M. truncata* aggregations on rocky substrates at similar depths is that
37 177 on the French coast mentioned above (Fourt et al., 2017). No data are reported for the French site but
38 178 the density is comparable to the central Mediterranean site. The high abundance of this almost mono-
39 179 specific aggregation of *M. truncata* on the shelf-break seems to be a function of the following
40 180 conditions. Firstly, the peculiar geomorphology of a shelf typified by mobile sediments (and inhabited
41 181 by a related infauna and mobile epifauna), but complicated by the local occurrence of rocky blocks
42 182 that offer a substrate for sessile fauna. Secondly, the relatively high colonization potential of a
43 183 pedunculate brachiopod that displays a eurytopic distribution in terms of depth (5-600 m) and
44 184 substrate (coarse-particulate to hard); a key factor promoting this may be the recruitment of *Mergerlia*
45 185 larvae from different suitable habitats nearby. Thirdly, favourable oceanographic conditions that can
46 186 sustain a dense population of filter feeders, with bottom currents capable of transporting food particles
47 187 and winnowing the substrate; this oceanographic condition is guaranteed by the NE-flowing current
48 188 that flushes the shelf-break here, and is bound by the Adriatic Surface Water and the deeper Levantine
49 189 Intermediate Water deeper (Cushman-Roisin et al., 2013; de Ruggiero et al., 2018 with reference
50 190 therein).
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192 Conservation aspects

193 Brachiopod-dominated assemblages are commonplace in the geological record, and to a lesser degree
194 in the Recent. Regarding the Mediterranean Basin, one fossil site of Pliocene age is characterized by
195 a distinct terebratulid paleocommunity, which has been anecdotally proposed for protection (Pavia &
196 Zunino, 2008). Modern brachiopod communities of the Mediterranean Sea are not identified for
197 conservation, which is guaranteed if they occur in ecologically-valuable areas. This is the case of
198 Banc de l'Esquine off the French Riviera, which is located within the Calanques National Park. The
199 uniqueness of the Brachiopod biotope dominated by *M. truncata* located at the Albanian-Greek shelf-
200 break calls for taking formal conservation action, also given that it co-occur with a deep-water
201 rhodolith bed (e.g., Salomidi et al., 2012; Basso, Babbini, Kaleb, Bracchi, & Falace, 2016, Bracchi et
202 al., 2019). The ecological value is further strengthened by the presence here of invertebrates (Table
203 2 and Figure 2a) listed in the 'Protocol concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity
204 in the Mediterranean' of the Barcelona Convention, such as the erect sponge *Aplysina cavernicola*,
205 the lobster *Palinurus elephas*, and the hatpin urchin *Centrostephanus longispinus* (Annex IV of
206 Habitat Directive, Appendix II of Bern Convention and Annex II of the protocol of the Barcelona
207 Convention). ROV images document the existence of juvenile specimens of *C. longispinus*, what
208 makes the site highly interesting in terms of larval recruitment and, possibly, nursery grounds. Besides
209 the presence of these important taxa, the complex morphology of the site produces cryptic
210 microtopographic situations, ideal for various other sessile and mobile invertebrates, but also for
211 demersal fish (Table 2). At the time of our ROV survey (springtime 2013), there was no evidence of
212 noticeable impacts (e.g., excessive litter or trawl and longline fishing). Anthropogenic-driven
213 stressors, such as global warming and ocean acidification could potentially compromise the Good
214 Environmental Status of this biotope in the future. Especially important might be global warming,
215 which could modify the water mass sustaining the brachiopod community by affecting nutrient
216 content, current strength and flows path. The effects of ocean acidification on brachiopod calcite are
217 less likely to hinder the shell calcification process (Ye et al., 2018; Cross, Peck & Harper, 2018).
218 Thus, we do not foresee major concerns over the short-midterm for the continued survival of the Bb.
219 As a precautionary approach, however, we suggest that protective measures are needed to prevent
220 future disturbances to the biotope (dumping, infrastructure, fishery), such as the implementation of
221 marine protected area. Alternatively, this site should be considered as a Site of Community
222 Importance (SCI), in agreement with the EU Directive 92/43/CEE. The justification is to consider
223 this Bb as a subtype of 'reef' in the Habitat Directive. We propose a region that encompasses the most

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224 valuable ecological components of this sector of the shelf, centered on the Bb and surrounding
225 Rhodolith bed, with a reasonably-wide buffer area (Figure 4), of 10 km² and 17 km², respectively.

226

227 **Conclusions**

- 228 1. A biotope dominated by the pedunculate brachiopod *Megerlia truncata* has been identified in
229 the Albanian-Greek offshore, Mediterranean Sea; a comparable biotope was previously only
230 known for the Western Mediterranean, off the French coast.
- 231 2. This biotope is located at the shelf-break at ca 120 m, where hard substrates emerge from the
232 mobile sediment represented by a rhodolith bed.
- 233 3. The combined Brachiopod biotope and Rhodolith bed host taxa of recognized conservation
234 value. The site is home to a variety of sessile and mobile invertebrates and demersal fish.
- 235 4. Conservation-wise, we suggest that this rare biotope and adjacent rhodolith bed deserve
236 protection status and the best area to implement a MPA is proposed.

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3 407 **Figure captions**

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10 410 **Figure 1.** Location and morphobathymetric maps of the investigated area. Habitats along the ROV path are
11 411 also shown on the backscatter and aspect maps.
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18 414 **Figure 2.** Main characteristics of biotopes in the area. a) Brachiopod biotope, bar = 20 cm; b) Rhodolith bed,
19 415 with *Poecillastra compressa*, bar = 20 cm; c) detail of the Brachiopod biotope, note substrate occupancy
20 416 by brachiopods and crustose coralline algae (CCA), bar = 10 cm; d) detail of the Brachiopod biotope
21 417 showing a predominance of *Hexadella pruvoti* (yellow sponge) and CCA over *Megerlia truncata*, bar = 10
22 418 cm; e) co-dominance of CCA, *Megerlia truncata* and sponges, bar = 10 cm; f) *Filograna/Salmacina*
23 419 complex with the sponges *Axinella vacaleti* and *A. verrucosa*, bar = 20 cm.
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34 422 **Figure 3.** a) Dense *Megerlia truncata* aggregations (> 350 individuals/0.36 m²), bar = 10 cm; b) 3-D image
35 423 of a block covered by brachiopods; c-d) photograph of brachiopod biotope and related artistic cartoon
36 424 highlighting living and dead *Megerlia truncata*, bar = 10 cm; e-g) station COC13-29, sediment collected
37 425 by grab from the Rhodolith bed: e) gravel-size/coarse sand fraction (> 1 cm), Rhodalgal facies showing the
38 426 absolute prevalence of rhodolith nodules over other biogenic components, bar = 3 cm; f) Foramol facies of
39 427 sand fraction (> 1 mm), S = serpulid, By = bryozoan, Bi = bivalve, G = gastropod (juvenile of *Bolma*
40 428 *rugosa*), bar = 1 mm; g) fine fraction > 63 μ m, brachiopod (B), bryozoan (By), foraminifer (F), bar = 0.5
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52 432 **Figure 4.** Core and buffer areas deserving adequate protection to protect the Brachiopod biotope and adjacent
53 433 Rhodolith bed.
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435 **Tables**436 **Table 1.** ROV metadata.

Cruise	Station	Date	Start lat N [deg/min]	Start long E [deg/min]	Start depth [m]	End lat N [deg/min]	End long E [deg/min]	End depth [m]
COCOMAP13	coc13_28_rov	30/05/2013	40.0128	19.5605	106	40.0173	19.5576	113

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Table 2. Living macroorganisms observed or sampled in the explored area. B indicates organisms that pertain to the newly described Brachiopod biotope while R to the surrounding Rhodolith bed. Asterisks indicate the legal instruments under which the species are protected: *Bern Convention, Appendix II, III (Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats); **CITES, Appendix II (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora); ***ASPIM Annex II, III; ****Habitat Directive, Annex II, IV, V.

	Phylum	Class	Taxon	Habitat
1	Rhodophyta	Florideophyceae	Crustose Coralline Algae (CCA)	Rb, B
2	Foraminifera	Monothalamea	<i>Pelosina</i> sp.	Rb
3		Globothalamea	<i>Miniacina miniaceae</i> (Pallas, 1766)	B
	Porifera	Demospongiae	sp. 1	Rb
			sp. 2	B
			sp. 3	B
			sp. 4	Rb
			sp. 5	B
			sp. 6	Rb, B
4			Tetractinellida spp.	B
5			cf. <i>Poecillastra compressa</i> (Bowerbank, 1866)	Rb, B
			cf. <i>Suberites syringella</i> (Schmidt, 1868)	B
6			<i>Penares helleri</i> (Schmidt, 1864)	B
7			cf. <i>Rhabderemia</i> sp.	B
8			<i>Hamacantha</i> cf. <i>falcula</i> (Bowerbank, 1874)	B
9			<i>Mycale</i> sp.	Rb
10			cf. <i>Raspaciona aculeata</i> (Johnston, 1842)	B
11			<i>Axinella vacoleti</i> Pansini, 1984	B
12			<i>Axinella verrucosa</i> (Esper, 1794)	B
13			<i>Dendroxea</i> cf. <i>lenis</i> (Topsent, 1892)	B
14			<i>Haliclona</i> sp.	B
15			<i>Aplysina cavernicola</i> (Vacelet, 1959)*	Rb/B
17			<i>Hexadella pruvoti</i> Topsent, 1896	B
23	Cnidaria		Hydrozoa spp.	B
24		Anthozoa	<i>Alcyonium palmatum</i> Pallas, 1766	B
25			Cerianthidae sp.	B
26			cf. <i>Hormathia coronata</i> (Gosse, 1858)	B
27			Actiniaria sp. 1	B

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3	28			<i>Caryophyllia calveri</i> Duncan, 1873**	B
4	29	Mollusca	Gastropoda	cf. <i>Jujubinus exasperatus</i> (Pennant, 1777)	B
5	30		Cephalopoda	<i>Sepia officinalis</i> Linnaeus, 1758	Rb
6	31	Annelida	Polychaeta	<i>Bonellia viridis</i> Rolando, 1822	Rb/B
7	32			Sabellidae spp.	Rb/B
8	33			<i>Serpula vermicularis</i> Linnaeus, 1767	B
9	34			<i>Protula tubularia</i> (Montagu, 1803)	B
10	35			<i>Filograna/Salmacina</i> complex	B
11	36			Serpulidae spp.	Rb/B
12	37	Arthropoda	Malacostraca	<i>Plesionika narval</i> (Fabricius, 1787)	Rb/B
13	38			<i>Palinurus elephas</i> (Fabricius, 1787)*, ***	Rb
14	39	Brachiopoda	Rhynchonellata	<i>Megerlia truncata</i> (Linnaeus, 1767)	B
15	40	Echinodermat	Echinoidea	<i>Stylocidaris affinis</i> (Philippi, 1845)	Rb/B
16	a				
17	41			<i>Centrostephanus longispinus</i> (Philippi, 1845)*, ***, ****	B
18	42	Echinodermat	Asteroidea	<i>Peltaster placenta</i> (Müller & Troschel, 1842)	B
19	a				
20	43			cf. <i>Hacelia attenuata</i> (Gray, 1840)	B
21	44	Chordata	Tunicata	cf. <i>Clavelina lepadiformis</i> (Müller, 1776)	B
22	45		Actinopterygii	<i>Macroramphosus scolopax</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Rb
23	46			<i>Callanthias ruber</i> (Rafinesque, 1810)	B
24	47			<i>Facciolella oxyrhyncha</i> (Bellotti, 1883)	B
25	48			<i>Ariosoma balearicum</i> (Delaroche, 1809)	Rb
26	49			<i>Chlorophthalmus agassizi</i> Bonaparte, 1840	Rb
27	50			cf. <i>Molva macrophthalma</i> (Rafinesque, 1810)	Rb
28	51			<i>Phycis phycis</i> (Linnaeus, 1766)	B
29	52			<i>Pagellus erythrinus</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Rb
30	53			<i>Pagrus pagrus</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	B
31	54			<i>Spondyliosoma cantharus</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Rb
32	55			<i>Spicara smaris</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Rb/B
33	56			<i>Spicara</i> sp.	B

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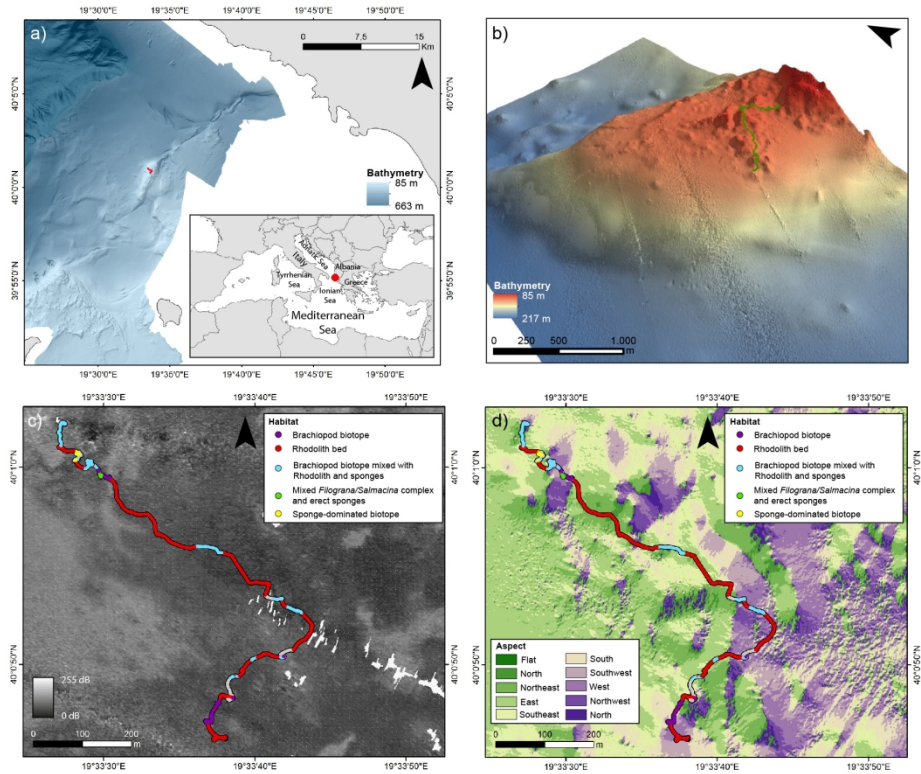


Figure 1. Location and morphobathymetric maps of the investigated area. Habitats along the ROV path are also shown on the backscatter and aspect maps.

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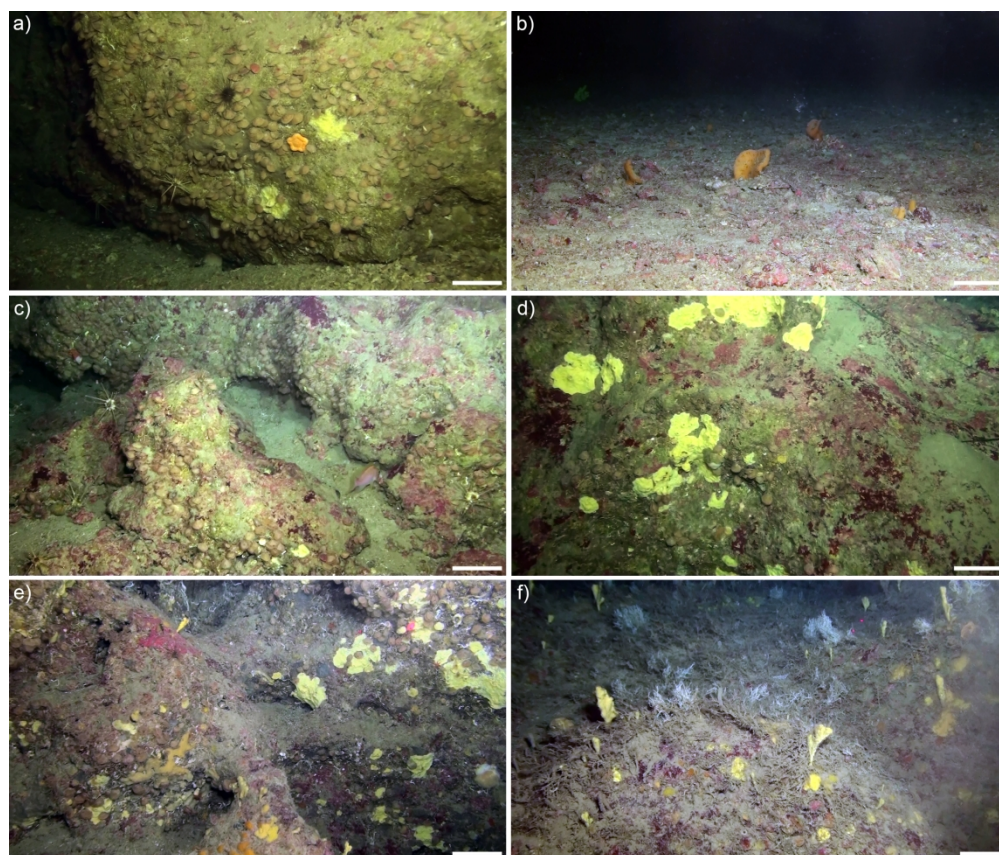


Figure 2. Main characteristics of biotopes in the area. a) Brachiopod biotope, bar = 20 cm; b) Rhodolith bed, with *Poecillastra compressa*, bar = 20 cm; c) detail of the Brachiopod biotope, note substrate occupancy by brachiopods and crustose coralline algae (CCA), bar = 10 cm; d) detail of the Brachiopod biotope showing a predominance of *Hexadella pruvoti* (yellow sponge) and CCA over *Megerlia truncata*, bar = 10 cm; e) co-dominance of CCA, *Megerlia truncata* and sponges, bar = 10 cm; f) *Filograna/Salmacina* complex with the sponges *Axinella vacoleti* and *A. verrucosa*, bar = 20 cm.

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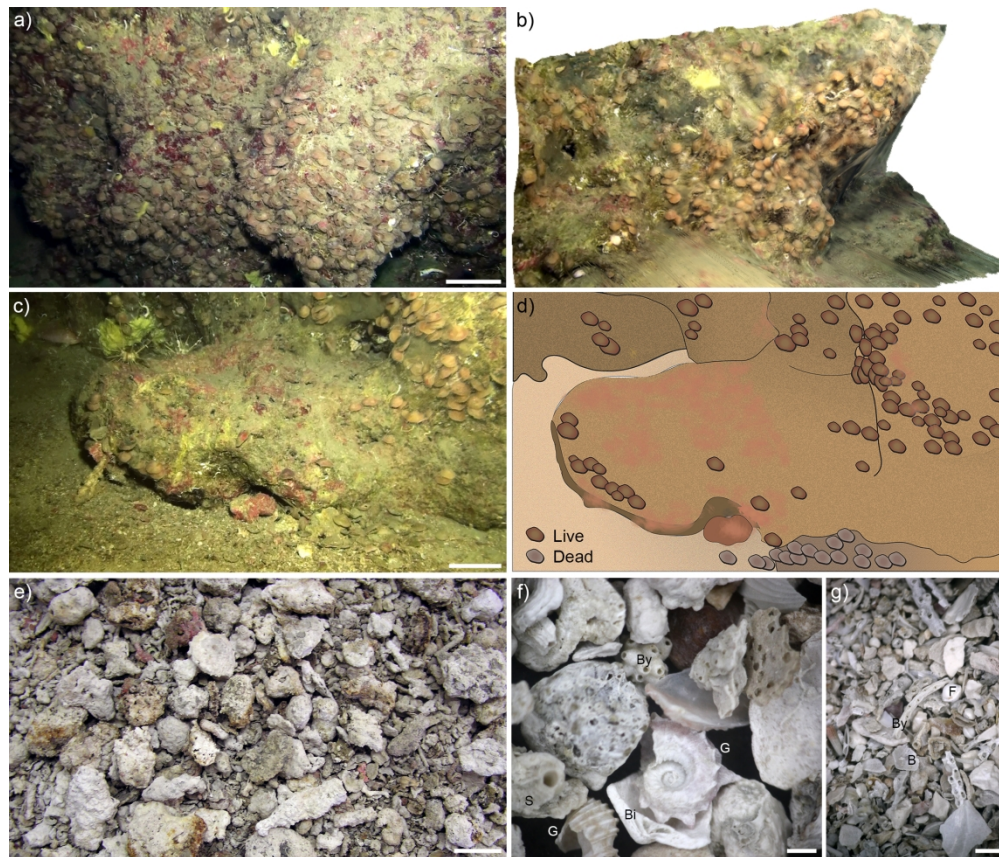


Figure 3. a) Dense *Megerlia truncata* aggregations (> 350 individuals/ 0.36 m 2), bar = 10 cm; b) 3-D image of a block covered by brachiopods; c-d) photograph of brachiopod biotope and related artistic cartoon highlighting living and dead *Megerlia truncata*, bar = 10 cm; e-g) station COC13-29, sediment collected by grab from the Rhodolith bed: e) gravel-size/coarse sand fraction (> 1 cm), Rhodalgal facies showing the absolute prevalence of rhodolith nodules over other biogenic components, bar = 3 cm; f) Foramol facies of sand fraction (> 1 mm), S = serpulid, By = bryozoan, Bi = bivalve, G = gastropod (juvenile of *Bolma rugosa*), bar = 1 mm; g) fine fraction > 63 μ m, brachiopod (B), bryozoan (By), foraminifer (F), bar = 0.5 mm.

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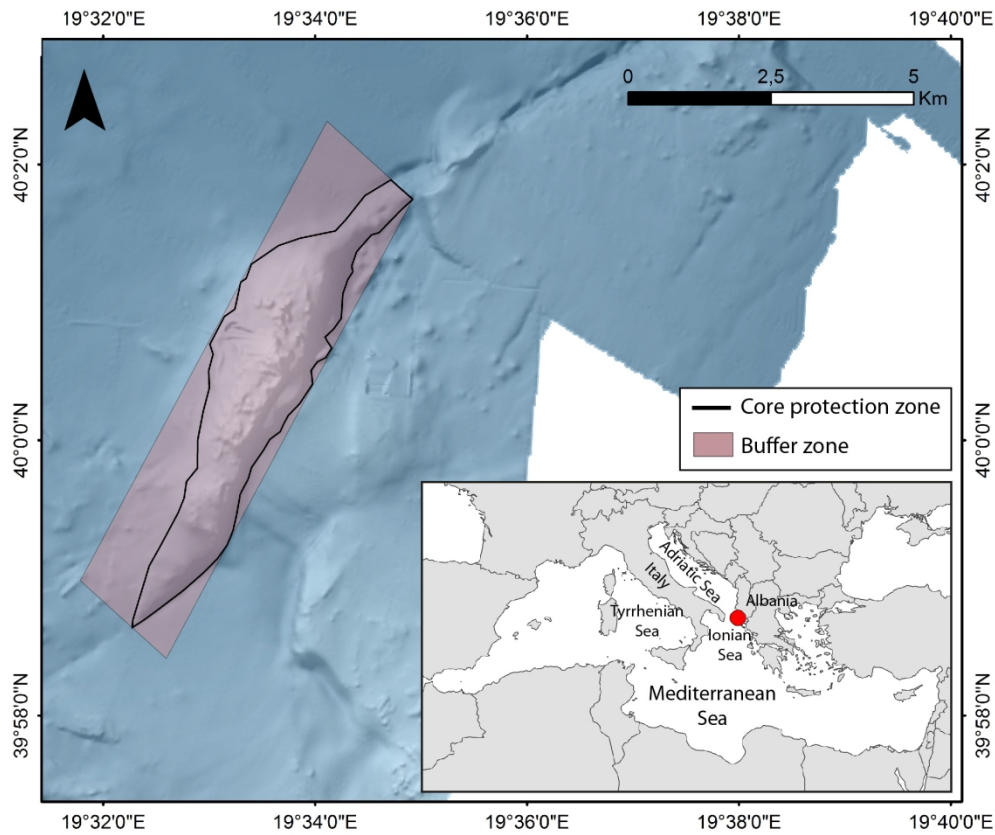


Figure 4. Core and buffer areas deserving adequate protection to protect the Brachiopod biotope and adjacent Rhodolith bed.

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