

“BRIDGES”

The former Sicily-Malta land bridge

M.F. Loreto, E. Lodolo, M. Ferrante, R. Lucchi, A. Caburlotto, E. Milia,
J. Fonseca, F. Gois Smith

CRUISE REPORT



30 dec 2025 – 6 jan 2026

1. ABSTRACT

Sicily and Malta/Gozo, an area of the central Mediterranean that was completely exposed during the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM, 33 to 18 kyrs BP). This period is defined as the most recent time when continental ice sheets reached their maximum extent and sea level was at its lowest (about -130 m), as evidenced by aim of the survey well-described in the Gaia Blu ship time application.

In this project, we aimed to reconstruct the palaeo-geographic configuration of the former land bridge between southeastern numerous proxy records. We planned to collect new high-resolution geophysical data (Multibeam echosounder and high-resolution seismic profiles) and integrate them with advanced Glacial Isostatic Adjustment (GIA) models that simulate the horizontal displacement of coastlines in response to sea level rise. In addition, we planned to conduct laboratory analyses on newly recovered sediment cores, including radiocarbon measurements on carbonate biogenic fraction, to constrain the position of the paleo-shoreline during the LGM. Determining the position of the coastline before sea level rise is crucial not only for palaeo-geographic reconstructions but also for underwater archaeology. Numerous studies have shown the existence of early Palaeolithic coastal communities in the Mediterranean during the LGM and have demonstrated that the sea and offshore islands were central to understanding ancient settlement and land use, especially during periods of low sea level. The reconstruction of former land bridges and corridors therefore has significant implications for human settlement, megaherbivore distribution, landscape preferences, and dispersal and expansion routes from the mainland to distant islands.

Keywords: cruise report, Last Glacial Maximum, geophysical survey

2. CRUISE TEAM

The BRIDGES cruise was a multidisciplinary scientific proposal based on the collaboration between the ISMAR-CNR, the OGS, and the Univ. of Malta.

Name	Role	Position	Affiliation
M. Filomena Loreto	Party Chief	Researcher	CNR-ISMAR
Emanuele Lodolo	Co-Chief	Researcher	OGS - Trieste
Andrea Caburlotto	Samp. Surveyor	Researcher	OGS - Trieste
G. Matilde Ferrante	Geoph. Operator	Researcher	OGS - Trieste
Renata Lucchi	Samp. Surveyor	Researcher	OGS - Trieste
Fernando Gois Smith	Geoph. Operator	Researcher	OGS - Trieste
Julia Fonseca	Geoph. Operator	Researcher	OGS - Trieste
Enrico Milia	Geoph. Operator	Master student	Cagliari Univ.

3. FIELD ACTIVITIES

The often-prohibitive sea conditions and strong winds during the campaign, with significant wave heights frequently exceeding 2 m, forced the bridge to stop operations. In total, we operated in the study area for no more than 24 hours. As a result, we were unable to achieve the planned scientific objectives. Additionally, mobilization and demobilization activities, along with long transit times from Naples to the target areas and to the disembarkation port in Cagliari, further reduced the time available for data acquisition. We therefore

request a reallocation of ship time during a more suitable period for these activities, preferably in summer or early autumn 2026.

Below we provide a summary of the acquisition system used.

Multibeam echosounder (Kongsberg EM 2040). A total of 344 km of high-resolution swath bathymetry were acquired with the Kongsberg EM 2040 (200–400 kHz; 800 beams). Maximum port and starboard steering angles were set to 60°, and beam spacing was set to equidistant. To ensure adequate coverage, adjacent swaths were planned with ~20% overlap. Onboard acquisition software was used to generate a preliminary Digital Terrain Model (DTM) with a 1×1 m grid cell size.

Sub-bottom profiler (Knudsen CHIRP 3260). A total of 344 km of high-resolution sub-bottom profiles were acquired with a Knudsen CHIRP 3260 operating on two channels (3.5 kHz and 12.0 kHz). To maximize penetration, the 3.5 kHz channel was selected as the primary channel. CHIRP data were collected concurrently with Multibeam acquisition. To minimize acoustic interference between the Multibeam and CHIRP systems, pinging was externally synchronized via a K-Sync system, resulting in an average ping interval of ~0.6 s. Data were acquired in proprietary raw format and subsequently converted to SEG-Y using Knudsen proprietary software. To account for rough sea conditions, data were automatically heave-compensated using the heave sensor and the acquisition software’s integrated filtering. Several tests were performed to identify optimal acquisition parameters for the study area under the prevailing sea state, the selected settings are reported in TABLE 3.

CTD casts (Valeport). CTD casts were conducted before and after the Multibeam surveys to measure key water-column parameters (temperature, salinity, dissolved oxygen) used to calibrate sound-speed (water-velocity) profiles.

Figure 1 shows the gridded Multibeam area covered during the 24 hours of operation, whereas Figure 2 shows the original program of the cruise.

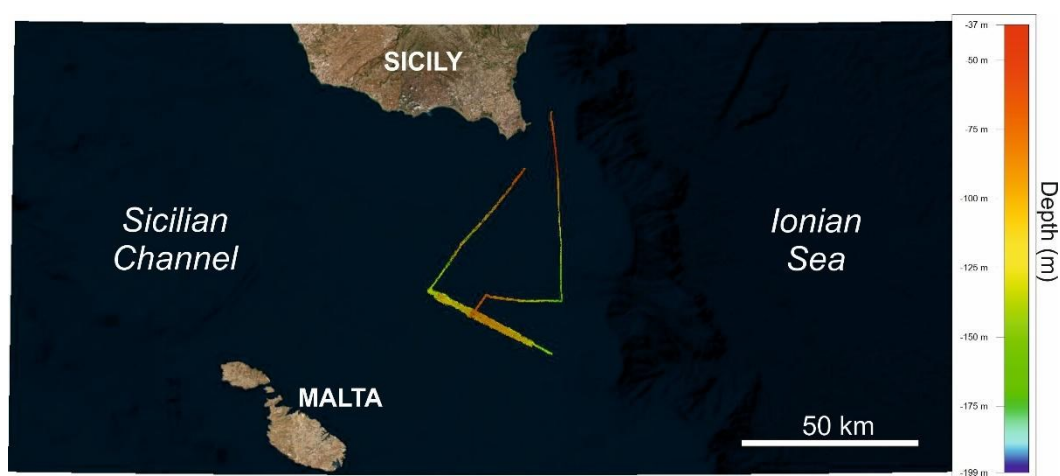


FIGURE 1 – Map of the geophysical data (Multibeam + CHIRP) acquired during the “BRIDGES” project.

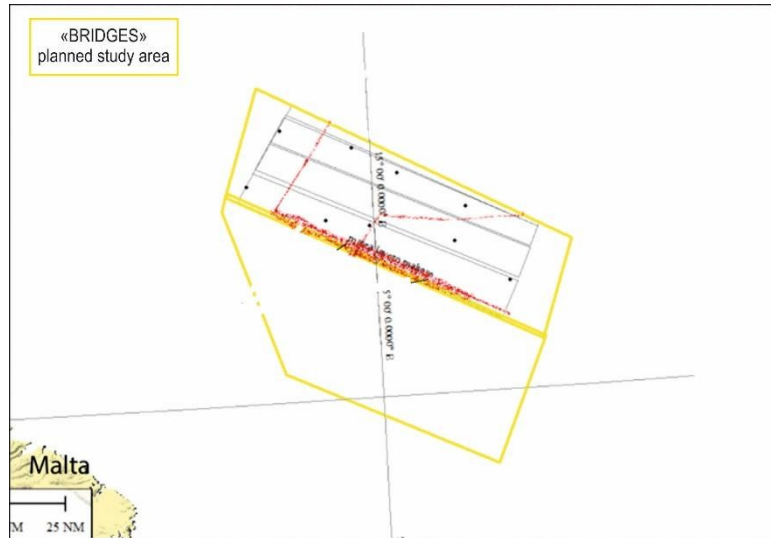


FIGURE 2 – Comparison between the planned survey area and the mapped area during the “BRIDGES” project.

Sub-Bottom Profiler			Survey: BRIDGES				Survey Area: SC		Vessel: R/V Gaia Blu									
Acquisition system:			Knudsen															
Date	Time (UTC)	File name	Area	Latitude (N)	Longitude (E)	Speed (kt)	Heading (deg)	Depth (m)	Pulse lenght (ms)	Pulse power (no unit)	Range (m)	Operator	Remarks					
01/01/2026	13:19	RAW_063	Transit	36.454983	15.018127	11.0	224.6	97	1	1	100	GMP	SOL					
01/01/2026	14:14	RAW_063	Transit	36.331925	14.894733	11.0	171.4	112.39	1	1	100	Caburlotto	EOL - Sonda					
01/01/2026	14:57	RAW_064	BRIDGES	36.330824	14.892879	6.7	208	119.22	1	1	100	Caburlotto	SOL - Linea perpendicolare - Starting Line (aumento velocità 8.5kn)					
01/01/2026	15:37	RAW_064	BRIDGES	36.265897	14.836197	8.5	172.7	129.67	1	1	100	Caburlotto	EOL					
01/01/2026	15:40	RAW_065	BRIDGES	36.261838	14.841919	9.5	172.68	129.67	1	1	100	Caburlotto	EOL - (Heading reale 180-172.68=8°)					
01/01/2026	17:49	RAW_065	BRIDGES	36.105668	15.211589	9.0	172.7	126	1	1	100	Caburlotto	EOL					
01/01/2026	17:55	RAW_066	BRIDGES	36.105342	15.216240	8.2	214.4	136.55	1	1	100	Caburlotto	SOL					
01/01/2026	18:32	RAW_066	BRIDGES	36.150753	15.108958	9.1	214		1	1	100	Julia	EOL					
01/01/2026	18:33	RAW_066 LINEA VISTA	BRIDGES	36.151375	15.107632	9.8					100	Julia	Linea vista, sola 23 tracer					
01/01/2026	18:33	RAW_068	BRIDGES	36.151375	15.107632						100	Julia	EOL					
01/01/2026	20:08	RAW_068	BRIDGES	36.265479	14.835758	5.9	219.3	129.82	1	1	100	Julia	EOL					
01/01/2026	20:11	RAW_069	BRIDGES	36.266847	14.837117	5.9	130.7	129.91	1	1	100	Julia	SOL					
01/01/2026	20:32	RAW_069	BRIDGES	36.241897	14.895786	9.4	117.7	121.13	1	1	100	Julia	Change from equidistance to equidistance					
01/01/2026	22:06	RAW_069	BRIDGES	36.132753	15.158105	7.5	207.3	122.54	1	1	100	Julia	EOL					
01/01/2026	22:07	RAW_070	BRIDGES	36.132753	15.158105	7.5	207.3	122.54	1	1	100	Julia	SOL - AT 23-45 velocity reduced by traffic					
02-01-2026	00:03	RAW_070	BRIDGES	36.267944	14.837781	5.5	287.4	130.17	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL					
02-01-2026	00:08	RAW_071	BRIDGES	36.264559	14.834369	5.3	139.0	130.41	1	1	100	Julia	SOL					
02-01-2026	02:06	RAW_071	BRIDGES	36.127682	15.154561	4.7	129.3	120.97	1	1	100	Julia	EOL					
02-01-2026	02:10	RAW_072	BRIDGES	36.125627	15.153108	4.5	213.8	119.89	1	1	100	Julia	EOL					
02-01-2026	04:02	RAW_072	BRIDGES	36.263522	14.832536	9.1	305.5	130.44	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL					
02-01-2026	04:07	RAW_073	BRIDGES	36.262290	14.832393	9.2	129.5	130.57	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL					
02-01-2026	06:01	RAW_073	BRIDGES	36.126168	15.150294	9.3	115.5	118.45	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL					
02-01-2026	06:04	RAW_074	BRIDGES	36.124243	15.151280	8.1	306.3	118.72	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL					
02-01-2026	07:59	RAW_074	BRIDGES	36.261621	14.831072	9.8	301.4	130.57	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL					
02-01-2026	08:03	RAW_075	BRIDGES	36.260123	14.831354	8.5	113.5	130.73	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL					
02-01-2026	08:33	RAW_075	BRIDGES	31.223141	14.911271	5.8	136.5	118.37	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL - STOP FOR CTD					
02-01-2026	09:00	RAW_076	BRIDGES	36.221221	14.920877	2.7	130.4	117.67	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL					
02-01-2026	09:22	RAW_076	BRIDGES	36.196635	14.963097	6.8	92.3	84.87	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL - BEFORE TURNING N					
02-01-2026	09:25	RAW_077	BRIDGES	36.200944	14.967837	9.1	21.2	81.23	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL - TRANSFER 2					
02-01-2026	09:47	RAW_077	BRIDGES	36.252218	15.012487	10.0	45.3	79.56	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL - TRANSFER 2					
02-01-2026	09:48	RAW_078	BRIDGES	36.255901	15.015219	10.1	95.8	76.94	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL - HEADING X1 - v reduced at 15.13° (close to x2) to 8 km					
02-01-2026	10:15	RAW_078	BRIDGES	36.237747	15.124945	11.4	94.1	112.65	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL					
02-01-2026	10:17	RAW_079	BRIDGES	36.237679	15.125528	11.4	93.6	112.91	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL					
02-01-2026	10:43	RAW_079	BRIDGES	36.237513	15.222219				1	1	100	Fernando	EOL					
02-01-2026	10:43	RAW_080 LINEA VISTA	BRIDGES															
02-01-2026	10:45	RAW_081	BRIDGES	36.237341	15.227716				1	1	100	Fernando	SOL					
02-01-2026	10:51	RAW_081	BRIDGES	36.266434	15.248462	8.2	356.5	132.03	1	1	100	Fernando	EOL - X2					
02-01-2026	10:54	RAW_082	BRIDGES	36.238538	15.250868	5.5	349.8	143.09	1	1	100	Fernando	SOL - HEADING X3					
02-01-2026	11:28	RAW_082	BRIDGES	36.314784	15.248185	8.5	357	138.16	1	1	100	Caburlotto	EOL - Crash SIS					
02-01-2026	11:30	RAW_083	BRIDGES	36.318617	15.248197	8.3	356.9	138.50	1	1	100	Caburlotto	SOL - HEADING X3 restart					
02-01-2026	11:51	RAW_083	BRIDGES	36.366434	15.248462	8.2	356.5	132.03	1	1	100	Caburlotto	EOL					
02-01-2026	11:52	RAW_084	TRANSIT	36.366434	15.248462	8.2	356.5	132.03	1	1	100	Caburlotto	SOL - TRANSFER 3 - Gain value 8 dB					
02-01-2026	13:11	RAW_084	TRANSIT	36.413397	15.228316	10.9	350	53.93	1	1	100	Caburlotto	SOL - TRANSFER 3 - Gain value 8 dB					
02-01-2026	13:12	RAW_086	TRANSIT	36.413397	15.228316	10.9	350	53.93	1	1	100	Caburlotto	SOL - TRANSFER 3 - Gain value 8 dB					
02-01-2026	14:48	RAW_086	TRANSIT	36.773095	15.226287			123	1	1	100	Caburlotto	SOL - TRANSFER 3 - Gain value 8 dB					

TABLE 1 – Log of the CHIRP acquisition.

Multibeam						Survey: BRIDGES		Survey Area: SC				Vessel: R/V Gaia Blu			
Acquisition system:			EM2040												
Date	Time (UTC)	File name	Area	Line	Latitude (N)	Longitude (E)	Speed (kt)	Heading (deg)	Depth (m)	Water column (Y/N)	Operator	Remarks			
01-01-2026	12:31	0001		Transit	36.572851	15.134291	11.0	216.9	66.33	Y	Julia	SOL			
01-01-2026	14:14	0007		Transit	36.331925	14.894733	11.0	171.4	112.39	Y	Enrico	EOL			
01-01-2026	14:29	CTD_01	BRIDGES		36.199268	14.536195	0	-	-	-	Enrico	Sonda CTD a mare			
01-01-2026	14:33	CTD_01	BRIDGES		36.195537	14.533683	0	-	-	-	Enrico	Sonda CTD fondo mare profondità 118m			
01-01-2026	14:37	CTD_01	BRIDGES		36.195553	14.533678	0	-	-	-	Enrico	Sonda CTD a bordo			
01-01-2026	14:57	0008	BRIDGES		36.330824	14.892879	6.7	218.7	199.22	Y	Enrico	SOL (aumento velocità 8.5kn)			
01-01-2026	15:37	0010	BRIDGES		36.285676	14.836197	5	172.7	129.67	Y	Enrico	EOL			
01-01-2026	15:40	0011	BRIDGES		36.285676	14.836197	9.4	172.7	129.67	Y	Enrico	SOL (Heading reale 180-172.68=8°)			
01-01-2026	17:49	0019	BRIDGES		36.105064	15.216672	5.5	172.7	136.55	Y	Enrico	EOL			
01-01-2026	17:49	0020	BRIDGES		36.105064	15.216672	9.5	314.4	136.55	Y	Enrico	SOL (apertura beam 65°)			
01-01-2026	20:08	0031	BRIDGES		36.265479	14.835758	5.9	319.3	129.82	Y	Julia	EOL			
01-01-2026	20:10	0032	BRIDGES		36.266847	14.837117	5.9	130.7	129.91	Y	Julia	SOL - change from auto angular coverage to MANUAL			
01-01-2026	20:32	0033	BRIDGES		36.241897	14.895786	9.4	117.7	121.13	Y	Julia	Change from equiangle to equidistance			
01-01-2026	22:04	0041	BRIDGES		36.131242	15.157747	5.5	95.8	122.51	Y	Julia	EOL			
01-01-2026	22:06	0042	BRIDGES		36.132753	15.158105	7.5	307.3	122.54	Y	Julia	EOL			
02-01-2026	00:03	0051	BRIDGES		36.267944	14.837781	5.5	287.4	130.17	Y	Julia	EOL			
02-01-2026	00:03	0053	BRIDGES		32.288064	14.837118	5.2	267.2	130.18	Y	Julia	SOL			
02-01-2026	02:06	0062	BRIDGES		36.127682	15.154961	4.7	129.3	120.97	Y	Julia	EOL			
02-01-2026	02:10	0063	BRIDGES		36.125627	15.153108	4.5	313.8	119.89	Y	Julia	SOL			
02-01-2026	04:02	0063	BRIDGES		36.263522	14.832536	9.1	305.5	130.44	Y	Fernando	EOL			
02-01-2026	04:07	0073	BRIDGES		36.262290	14.832393	9.2	129.5	130.57	Y	Fernando	SOL			
02-01-2026	06:01	0082	BRIDGES		36.126168	15.150294	9.3	115.5	118.45	Y	Fernando	EOL			
02-01-2026	06:04	0083	BRIDGES		36.124243	15.151280	8.1	306.3	118.72	Y	Fernando	SOL			
02-01-2026	07:59	0092	BRIDGES		36.261621	14.831072	9.8	301.4	130.57	Y	Fernando	EOL			
02-01-2026	08:03	0093	BRIDGES		36.260123	14.831354	8.5	113.5	130.73	Y	Fernando	SOL			
02-01-2026	08:33	0095	BRIDGES		31.222141	14.917271	5.8	136.5	118.37	Y	Fernando	EOL - STOP FOR CTD			
02-01-2026	09:00	0096	BRIDGES		36.221221	14.920877	2.7	130.4	117.67	Y	Fernando	SOL			
02-01-2026	09:22	0097	BRIDGES		36.196635	14.963097	8.8	92.3	84.87	Y	Fernando	EOL - BEFORE TURNING N			
02-01-2026	09:25	0098	BRIDGES		36.200944	14.967837	9.1	21.2	81.23	Y	Fernando	SOL - TRANSFER 2			
02-01-2026	09:47	0099	BRIDGES		36.252218	15.012487	10.0	45.3	79.56	Y	Fernando	EOL - TRANSFER 2			
02-01-2026	09:48	0100	BRIDGES		36.253001	15.015219	10.1	95.8	76.94	Y	Fernando	SOL - HEADING X1			
02-01-2026	10:15	0101	BRIDGES		36.237747	15.124945	11.4	94.1	112.65	Y	Fernando	EOL - HEADING X2			
02-01-2026	11:28	0106	BRIDGES		36.314784	15.248185	8.5	356.9	138.16	Y	Enrico	EOL - Crash sistem GAIA (HEADING X3)			
02-01-2026	11:30	0107	BRIDGES		36.318617	15.248197	8.3	356.9	138.50	Y	Enrico	SOL - Reboot sistem GAIA			
02-01-2026	11:51	0108	BRIDGES		36.366434	15.248462	8.2	356.5	132.03	Y	Enrico	EOL - X3 reached			
02-01-2026	11:52	0109	Transit		36.366434	15.248462	8.2	356.5	132.03	Y	Enrico	SOL - TRANSFER 3			
02-01-2026	13:49	0115	Transit		36.695076	15.218465	11.1	345.7	76.75	Y	Enrico	Stop of water column acquisition			
02-01-2026	13:57		Transit		36.427208	15.130768	4.22			N	Enrico	Interruzione del EM2040			

TABLE 2 – Log of the Multibeam acquisition.

Pulse lenght (ms)	1-2
Pulse power	1-4
Gain mode	Manual
Gain Value	8-12 dB
Acquisition range (ms)	50-500
Phase Mode	Auto
Overlap	50%
Sound speed (m/s)	1519

TABLE 3 – CHIRP Acquisition parameters.

4. VERY PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned, the extremely short data acquisition time does not currently allow us to develop even an approximate understanding of the study area. However, it can be anticipated that the currently available bathymetric maps (e.g., EmodNet) contain substantial gaps and do not accurately represent the morphology of the seabed between Malta and Sicily. Despite being in waters relatively close to the coast, where various vessels have passed for millennia, and in modern times with advanced equipment for high-resolution bathymetric reconstruction, there are still unknown areas. The limited Multibeam surveys conducted so far indicate that the ancient land bridge between Malta and Sicily is much more complex than shown by the available bathymetric maps and features a series of morphological highs that in some cases resemble coral reefs. We are not yet able to map these morphological elements, but it is reasonable to anticipate that the ancient emerged corridor could have been represented by a landscape similar to a series of islands elongated in a preferential N-S direction, accompanied by coral reefs in the distal parts and separated by lagoons of varying size and extent. Figure 3 shows small portions of these morphological elements and sections of CHIRP profiles and Multibeam swaths. During the surveys, we also identified from seismic data the beginning of the post-LGM marine transgression, with the presence of ravinement surfaces. A further study campaign is strongly recommended to verify these hypotheses.

As a final remark, we emphasize that submerged areas surrounding our country remain largely unknown, even in coastal areas, and, despite the availability of high-resolution survey equipment, seabed mapping is still at an early, largely exploratory stage.

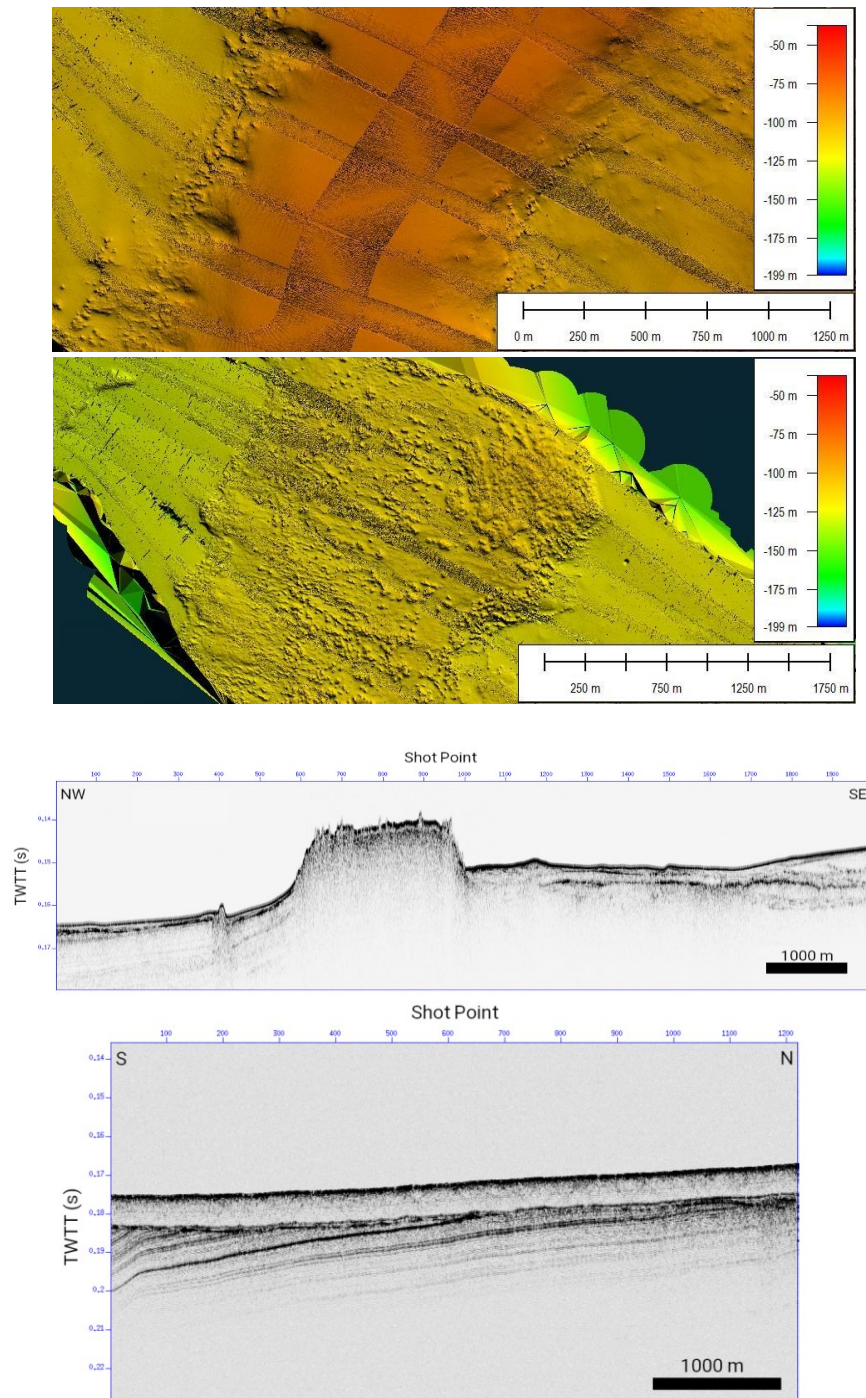


FIGURE 3 – top: examples of unprocessed Multibeam data across two morphological highs recognized in the southern part of the BRIDGES survey; bottom: two CHIRP profiles showing a possible coral reef feature (?) and a ravinement surface generated by the post-LGM marine transgression.