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Edited by

Angelo Castrorao Barba
& Giuseppe Mandalà

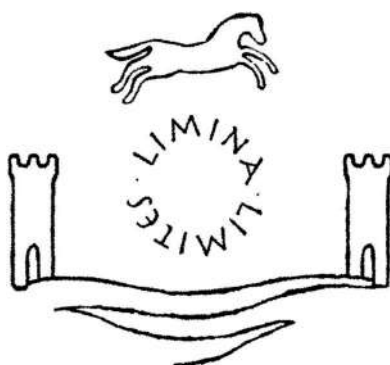




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Chapter 10

Historical and Archaeological Data for the Ancient Road Network in Western Sicily from the Roman Period to the Norman Age

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Introduction

The issue of the continuous use of the Roman road network system from the early Middle Ages to the modern Age has, for some time now, been fixed within the main historical coordinates.¹ The studies find an old age pre-conception responsible for the lack of interest on behalf of scholars regarding the development of the road network system in Sicily following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

The idea that historians and archaeologists have of a backward and decadent road network arose during the Bourbon age, an idea which seems to have automatically continued over the following centuries. It has been dismantled only lately by scientific investigation, together with Amari's historical model of a conquered and divided medieval Sicily.²

The study of ancient roads can help us understand in a significant way the relationship between urban and rural cultures in the past centuries and to highlight the capability of a central power to extend its control over the inland territory. Nevertheless, archaeological research has mainly concentrated on the long-distance routes along the coasts or inland routes for military-strategic reasons (paying great attention to the itinerary and the estimated distances), leaving out the importance of shorter roads to the internal road network which were essential for connecting rural settlements and the coast.

Summing up the contributions made by the research to date regarding the inland road network in Sicily, we have the following:

- a lack of a documented legal system to regulate the road network in late antiquity and the Middle Ages is not proof of the lack of the road network itself and its own physical consistency. Actually, we could suppose that the customary use of an already-existing network had left implicit the application of certain rules and regulations;³
- as a matter of fact, in the medieval documentation, in particular in notary deeds regarding the selling and buying of houses and land, references to the road network are always the defining element of the border between the properties, which is evidence of its remote origin and longevity within the landscape. From these frequent references, it is also possible to extract the names used to describe the road network, from which we also have a systematic hierarchy;⁴
- from the early Middle Ages, the distribution of religious institutions along the internal N-S connecting routes shows the dynamics of a historical phase marked by new needs of military control in a moment when the internal road network and the territories it connected needed to be defended.⁵

Furthermore, as has been noted many times, the Roman postal system had not been totally abandoned even though it did lose its original military purpose and partially fall apart after the new socio-political development.⁶ An internal road network is, in any case, implicit to this larger network because the connections between the main roads along the coast in the Roman age could have truly been functional only with an organized transversal road network. In the mountains, this is evidently made up by those corridors which mother nature made people take since prehistory. It is a network of drover's roads which pre-existed the Roman period and was very much part of the latter,⁷ which

¹ Arcifa 1994. The research, carried out on a historical-documentary basis, points out the need to valorise this aspect of the landscape as a tool for analysing the dynamics of the inland population, from late antiquity onwards.

² Amari 1880. This precious work has remained little discussed for a very long time. For this reason, the research carried out by Annliese Nef, Vivien Prigent and Adalgisa De Simone is very important, clarifying and defining historical passages which are very often underestimated, simplified and grouped together (late antique-Byzantine-Islamic).

³ Arcifa 1997; Szabò 1992.

⁴ Arcifa and Militello 2005.

⁵ Arcifa and Militello 2005: 32.

⁶ Uggeri 1994.

⁷ Such as the *diverticula* of the *Itinerarium Antonini*.

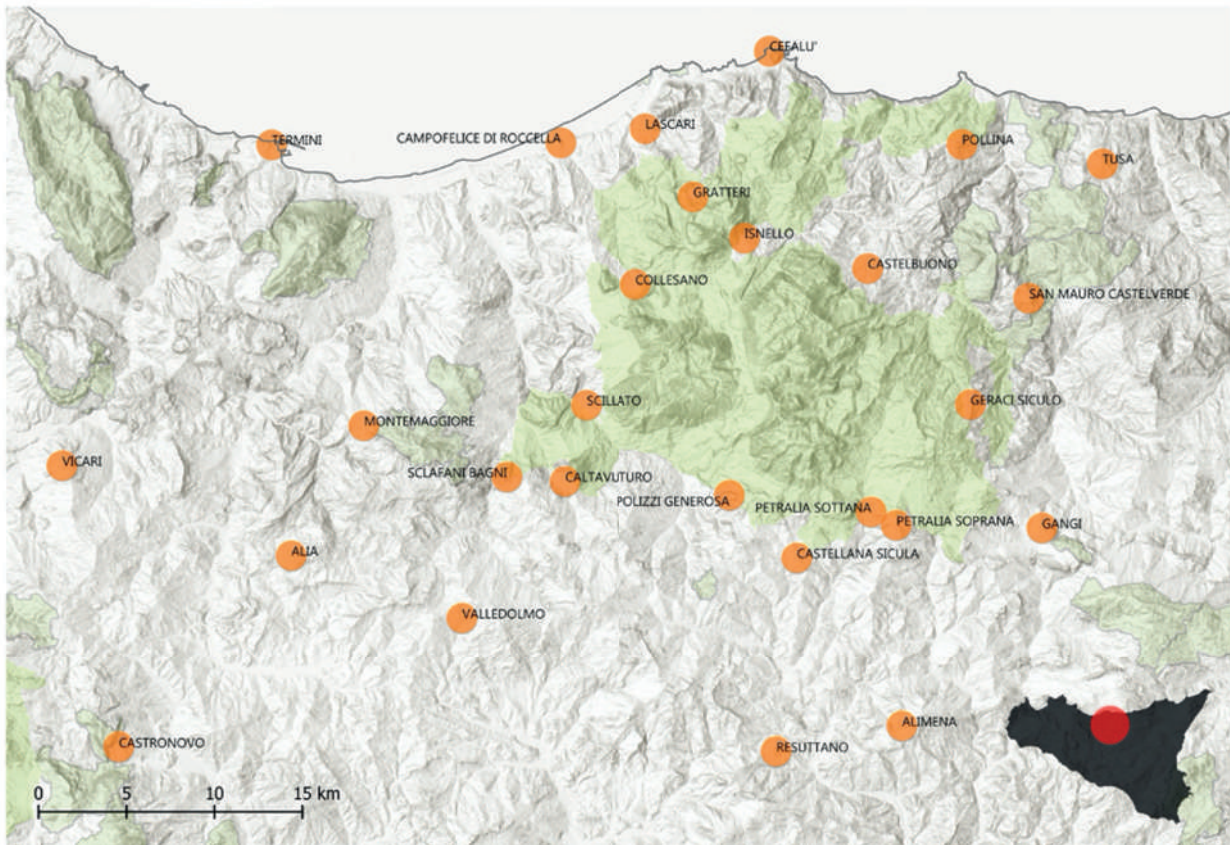


Figure 1 – General map of the study area

the socio-political changes of the early Middle Ages revitalized within new needs and, finally, which we find in the modern age documentation.⁸

Therefore, it is from these latest sources that we have to start in order to understand the development of the road network system and, through this, understand the population dynamics of the internal areas of Sicily.⁹

In this paper, we will examine the north-central part of Sicily, from the Madonie Mountains to the mountains going SW towards Vicari and Castronovo (fig. 1). It is a context, examined analytically and featuring tight analogies, which, with its high peaks – the Madonie are 2000 m a.s.l. while the others are about 1000 m a.s.l. – stands like a natural border of exchange rather than separation.¹⁰

Road network and settlements

The Palermo-Termini-Taormina route, known as the *via Messina per le montagne*, made it possible beginning

in the early Middle Ages to connect the fortified settlements of rural Sicily – in its new socio-political role as the border of the Byzantine Empire – and the northern and eastern coasts, becoming the internal backbone route which up to then had been carried out by the Roman *Catina-Thermae*.¹¹ Along this axis, within the area examined, there are three important junctions, in Polizzi Generosa, Petralia and Gangi.

The first one, Polizzi,¹² is directly connected to Cefalù,¹³ an important town on the Tyrrhenian coast from the Hellenistic to the Middle Ages (fig. 2).

al-Idrīsī¹⁴ gives us the earliest written account of this route, even though in his book the development of roads, *stricto sensu*, is only hinted at and therefore not always clear, nor is this account free from mistakes.¹⁵

⁸ Mainly at the Bourbon Registry office and in the documentation regarding the *regie trazzere* di Sicily (royal roads).

⁹ This work is part of the PhD research in Cultural Heritage Science – Archaeology, University of Palermo.

¹⁰ For this topic, see Franco 2011.

¹¹ Uggeri 2004; Burgio 2000.

¹² The origins of the town date back to the Hellenistic Age, even though earlier phases have emerged from excavations carried out in the medieval part of the town, in front of the main Church of the Norman age. Cucco 2018; Tullio 1997; Tullio 2009.

¹³ See, in particular, Tullio 2016: and previous bibliography; Cucco 2016a; Alfano 2016.

¹⁴ Peri 1955.

¹⁵ The route taken into consideration is the one described for *Regia Trazzera* n.115. In the report attached to the cartographic document, it is called '*montagne - marina*', a common definition for the drovers'

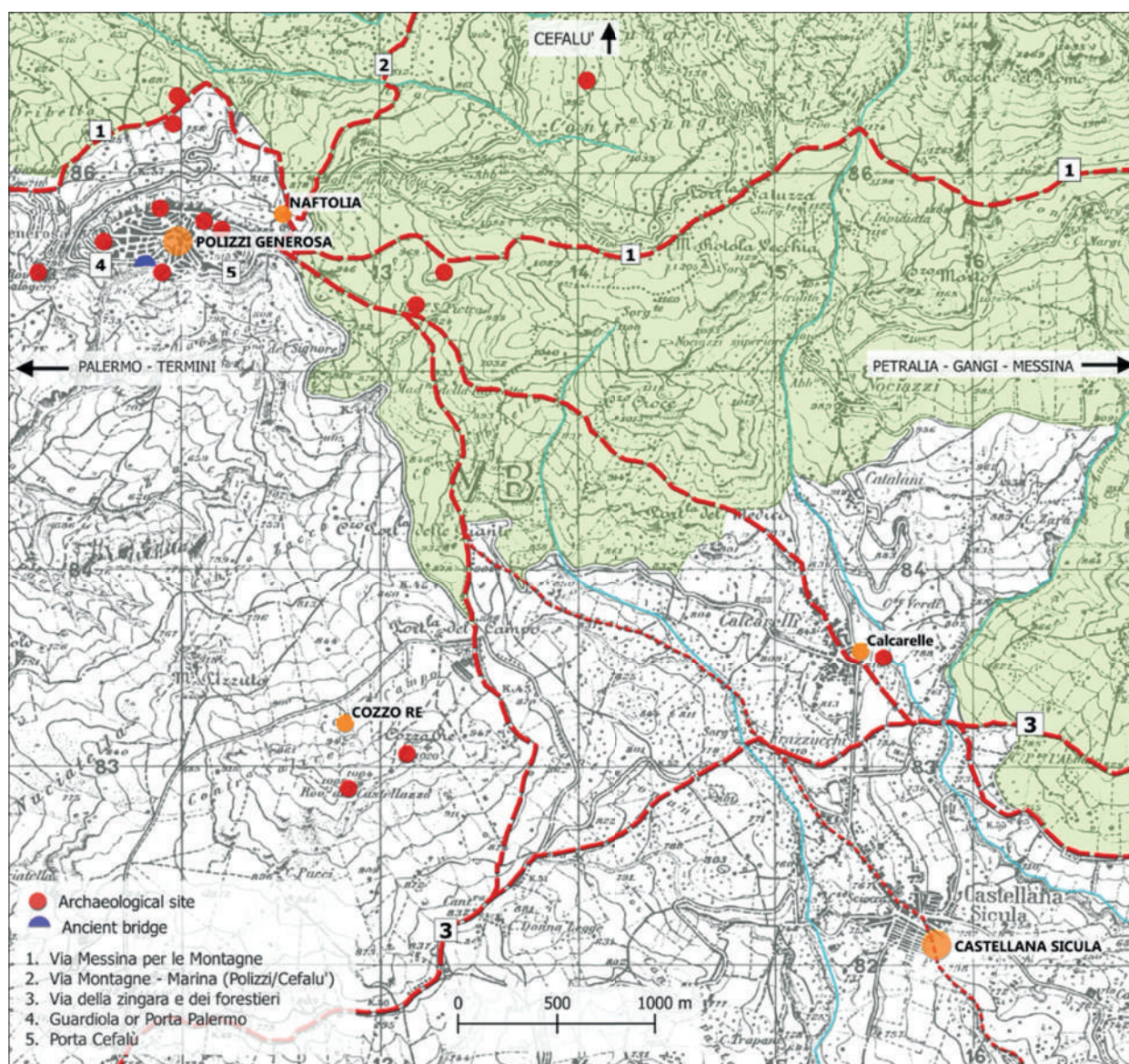


Figure 2 – Crossroads of Polizzi Generosa. Cartographic excerpt 1:25.000

Later on, in documentation from the Middle Ages, we find ‘[...] *contrada magne plate nel monte di Polizzi*’,¹⁶ which could be the road we are talking about.

Leaving from the town centre, paying particular attention to the toponyms, from the *Hospitale* of St. Nicola¹⁷ through Via Cefalù, one reaches Largo Porta Grande¹⁸ or Porta Cefalù. The toponym refers to one of the two historical gates of the town, painted in a 16th century painting by Giuseppe Salerno, and also

in a drawing of the same time.¹⁹ In this last drawing, another gate is clearly visible: the so-called Guardiola or Porta Palermo, located north of the town, was the exit gate to Palermo.²⁰

To the NE, outside Porta Cefalù and at the foot of the massif mountain Polizzi (fig. 3), the Naftolia spring marks the origin of the three roads (Palermo-Cefalù-Messina) in the place where the local collective memory locates a well-known but controversial triple-faced statue whose meaning and origin have been dealt with by many historians.²¹ Having been destroyed, it

roads running N-S.

¹⁶ Lo Cascio 2018.

¹⁷ Arlotta 2005: 842–843. It is one of the two *Hospitalia* founded in 1197 by Pietro da Tolosa. The one in Cefalù, *iuxta portam civitatis Cepheludi*, was located next to the ‘Porta d’Ossuna’ on the western side of the town, where nowadays the Church of San Nicola is located, having been restored several times since 1548.

¹⁸ Trans.: ‘The Big Gate Road’ and ‘The Cefalù Gate’.

¹⁹ Painting 300x20 cm. by Giuseppe Salerno, known as Zoppo di Gangi, 1620, kept at the Church of Collegio di Maria, Polizzi Generosa.

²⁰ Abbate 1997.

²¹ *Protests by the citizens of Polizzi Generosa after the loss of the ancient triple faced statue*, Cav. A. Gagliardo di Casal Pietra, 1775, re-published by the Associazione Naftolia di Polizzi Generosa.



Figure 3 – Polizzi Generosa and the Madonie Mountains, from the SE

is not possible to tackle the topic in a scientific way. Regardless, the identification with Hecate seems very likely, considering her function as protector of the three-way crossroads which the statue must have been.

Going along the road, which cuts through the central part of the Madonie mountains, and entering Cefalù by the Porta di Terra,²² the field survey investigation has recorded several settlements²³ which, in general, confirm the use of the highland territory since the late Neolithic age, probably due to the development of transhumance.

In the Greek period, this route was surely still in use because it is the shortest way between the two towns,²⁴ and also during the Roman age²⁵ and the early Middle Ages when, on the one hand, there was a need to protect the territory with defensive structures and, on the other, they laid down the basis for the development of the *latifundia*.

²² Trans: 'Gate of the land'.

²³ The methodology of the field research is based on the selection of sample areas investigated in a systematic way.

²⁴ The route connected Cefalù with the inland area and its resources, without which the town would not have been able to keep its important historical role throughout the ages.

²⁵ Above all, in the central area investigated (Isnello), where a large Roman settlement (4th century BC-3rd century AD) has been discovered and also a number of Byzantine and medieval settlements which have been added to the already-known surviving architectonic ones, which have not been properly investigated.

All this data is in contrast with an uninhabited landscape pictured by some historians²⁶ because of its poor accessibility, and the total lack of field studies and research to develop this topic. This is suggested by the medieval infrastructures, such as bridges, or the several parts of cobbled roads scattered along the drover's routes and now abandoned for ages, for which we are still not able to define a chronology.

The second junction is the modern crossroads of Portella Trinità, near the medieval town of Petralia Soprana²⁷ (fig. 4). From here we have: to the NW, the Sant'Ambrogio road (Cefalù) passing through Castelbuono;²⁸ the road heading south towards the Balza d'Areddula of Alimena²⁹ and Terravecchia di Cuti;³⁰ the so called *via della zingara e dei forestieri*³¹ an alternative in this area to the *via Messina per le montagne*. The already known Roman-Byzantine villa in Contrada

²⁶ Maurici 1998: 14.

²⁷ The medieval town has been for a long time at the centre of a complex debate regarding the identification of Petra mentioned in several sources, all of them after the first intervention of Rome in Sicily: Ptol., 3, 4, 14; Diod., XXIII, 18, 15; Sil. It., 14, 248; Cic., *Verr.*, 4, 90; Plin., *N. H.*, III, 91; Bejor in BTCGI XIII, s.v. *Entella*; Fazello 1992: 10, 211; Malaterra 2000: 84; Amari 1880: 317–318.

²⁸ On the historical development of the medieval town, see Cancila 2008: 26–62.

²⁹ Bejor: BTCGI III, s.v. *Alimena*.

³⁰ Burgio 2002; Epifanio Vanni 2011, in BTCGI XX, s.v. *Terravecchia di Cuti*.

³¹ Canale 2014. The route matches the *regia trazzera* n. 132, as it is called in the demonstrative report.

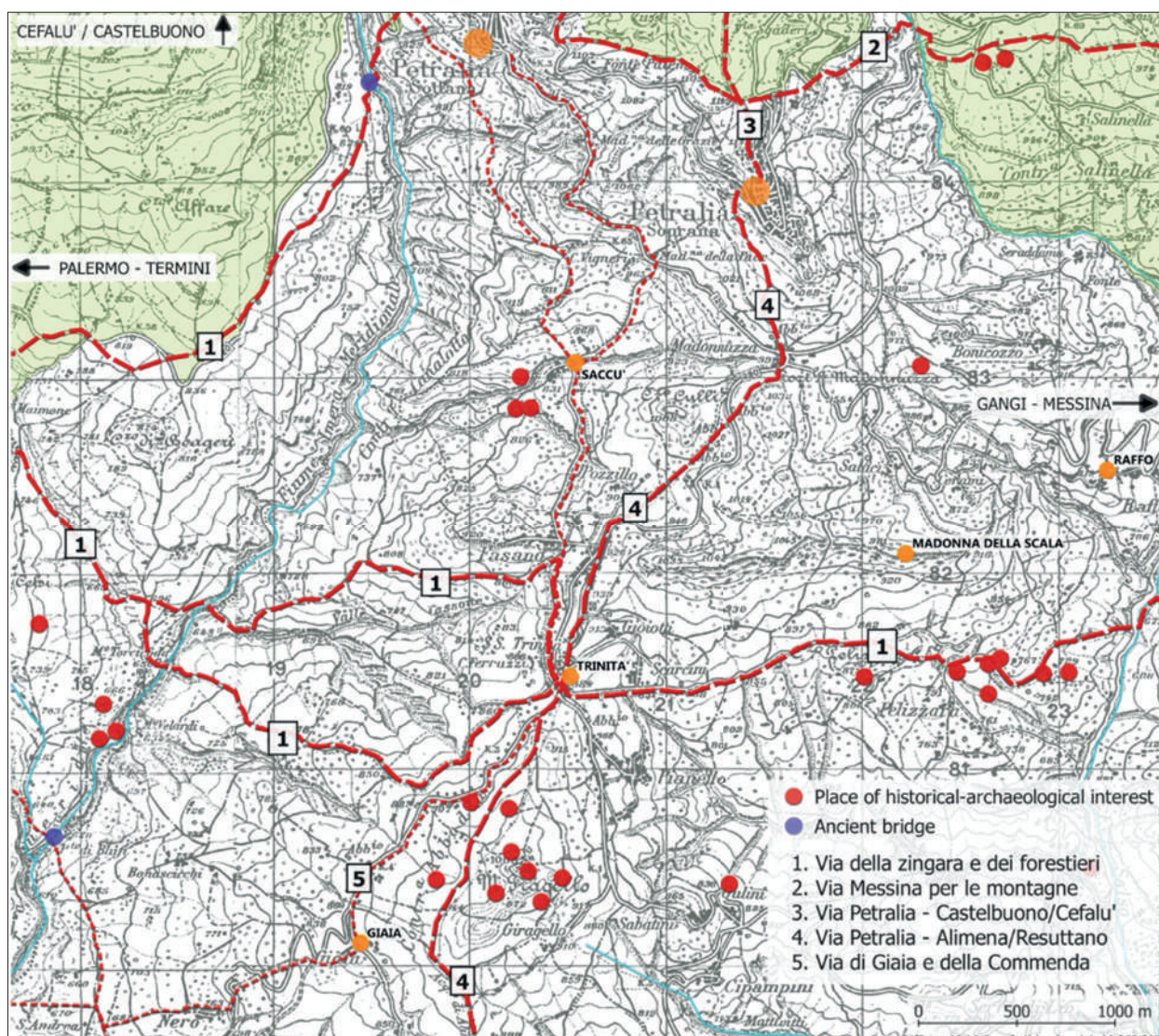


Figure 4 – Crossroads of Trinità and Petralia. Cartographic excerpt 1:25.000

Muratore (Castellana Sicula) is located along this route, half-way between Polizzi and Petralia.³²

The distribution of the sites along the fluvial system of the Imera Meridionale and Salso rivers, not far from the Blufi medieval bridge,³³ is evidence of a settlement strategy connected to the functioning of a road network articulated by land routes and river ways.

On the hydrographic left, the archaeological site of Contrada Saccù is rich in pottery, both local and imported (particularly African Red Slip ware, coarse and cooking wares, amphorae); terracotta tiles with comb decorations are quite numerous as well as the over-baked tiles which suggest the presence of a kiln.³⁴

³² Valentino and Vassallo 2016.

³³ Gaetani 1986.

³⁴ On this aspect, petrographic analyses of thin sections are being carried out.

Among the most significant finds are two Byzantine coins,³⁵ a potsherd of 'Rocchicella ware',³⁶ early medieval cooking ware from the southern regions of Italy³⁷ and tools for pottery production.

Further south, still on the hydrographic left of the Salso, rises Monte Gragello, where human settlements are distributed in several places along the hilltops, starting from the Iron Age, during the Greek period and at least to late antiquity. On the hydrographic right of the Salso – again in the area between the Blufi bridge and Portella Trinità – in Contrada Bonaschicchi,

³⁵ Follis, AE, Giustiniano I, 527-565 AD, Costantinopoli (for the type: Guzzetta 2010: 170, fig. 1); Pentanummo (?) – in very poor conditions.

³⁶ Arcifa 2010: 108–111, 120–121.

³⁷ They are potsherds of small amphorae with a high content of mica, therefore not a local product, but perhaps from the Monti Peloritani area (Messina) or even Calabria because of the widespread distribution of this lithical type in these areas.

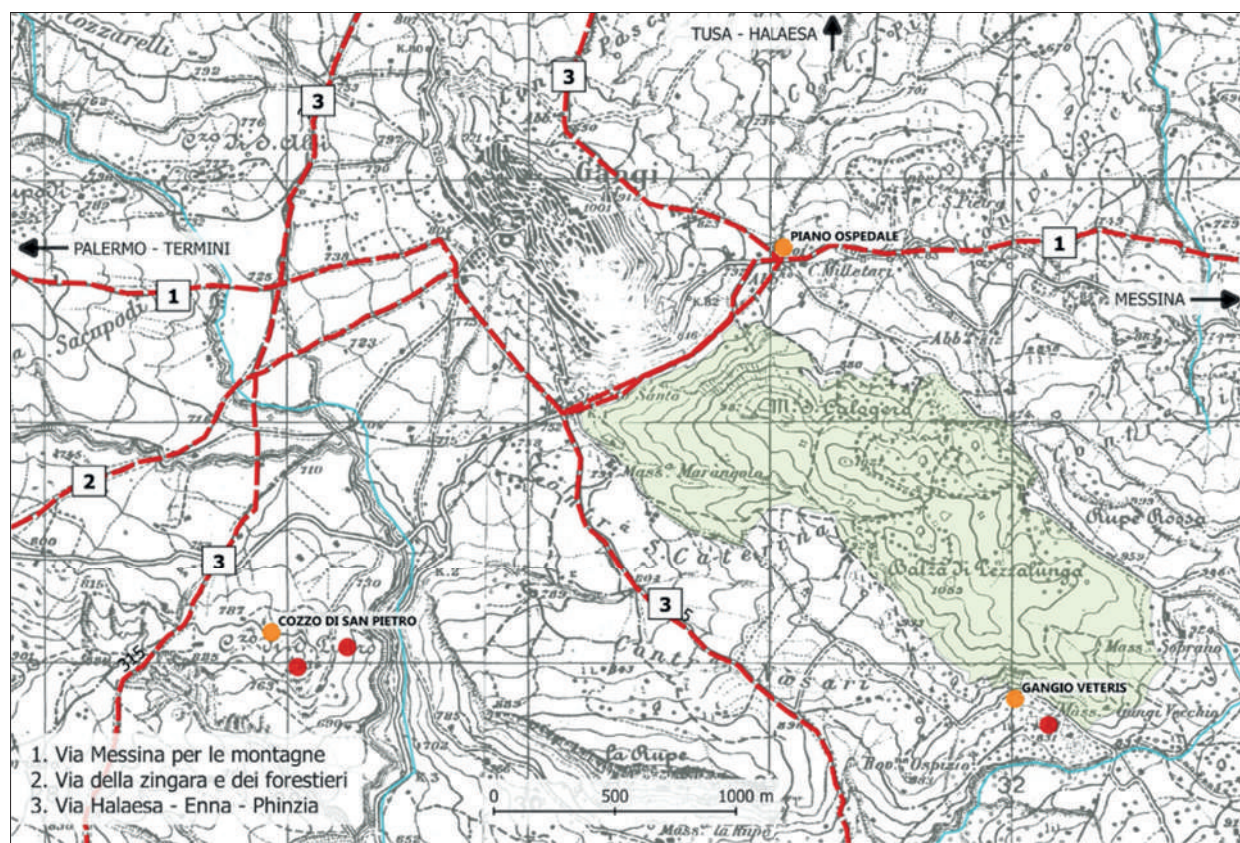


Figure 5 – Crossroads of Gangi. Cartographic excerpt 1:25.000

a bell-shaped silo (grain storage) dug into the bedrock is evidence of the ancient wheat vocation of the southern side of the Madonie on the border with the flat lands of central Sicily (region of Caltanissetta). It is not possible to date the phases of use of the silo for the lack of fill, but it is clear that the structure was dug out of a previous feature, probably a late Copper Age necropolis. This typology is well known in western Sicily with the exception of the flooring made of large slabs, which could indicate a later use of the structure. The total lack of wall covering/plaster on the inside could be a further element indicating the construction of the structure around the 9th-10th centuries. As a matter of fact, in this period a layer of mud and straw would have been laid out on the floor, and which had to be done again every time the silo was filled up. Even though there is no strong evidence, it is possible to hypothesize that the silo was no longer in use after the 13th century, when we have the building of *masserie* (modern farmhouses), and goods began to be stored in the warehouses of the farm.³⁸

Therefore, one can clearly see how the topographic development of the road network mirrors the need to connect the settlement to the natural resources used

for the growth of the economic activities. Such is the case of the *via della zingara*, which goes to the rock salt *madonita* quarry, already known to Vitruvius³⁹ and mentioned in a document dated 1302 as *via publica qua itur ad salenam*.⁴⁰ In 1399, nearly a century later, the King's commission 'Lord of the Salt Pans of *Gurrafi*' to Antonio Ventimiglia confirms without a doubt the importance of local economic activities.⁴¹ In support to the theory of short-distance exportation is the total lack of saltworks in the sectors closer to the Tyrrhenian coast, and also because of the characteristics of the Petralia rock salt itself, which is found on the surface and easily quarried.

Continuing to the east, along *via Messina per le montagne* or its alternative route *via della zingara*, one can reach the Piano Ospedale junction at the foot of the Gangi cliff (fig. 5). The investigation carried out within the *Gangio Veteris* Abbey and its surroundings,⁴² plus research at the Alburchia⁴³ site, have given input for new and

³⁹ Vitruvius, VIII, 3, 7. On this topic, see Canale 2014.

⁴⁰ Salamone Cristodaro 1990: 116.

⁴¹ Canale 2014: 453; Salamone Cristodaro 1990: 214. The '*saline de lu Gurrafi*' are the salt mines located at the current village of Raffo, frazione of Petralia Soprana.

⁴² Ardizzone and Manenti 2015; Beck, Maccari and Poisson 1975.

⁴³ Franco 2011.

³⁸ A thorough report on the topic is in Alfano and D'Amico 2017.

interesting questions, confirming the importance of these settlements related to the internal road network of Sicily.

A very reliable source⁴⁴ tells us that grain travelled from Henna to Halaesa and Phinzia in the territories around the modern town. Inherited from the Roman road network, the road is known through Cicero who accused Verre because he had the *frumentum Hennenses admetiantur vel Phintia vel Halaesam vel Cathinam*, through the Piano Ospedale junction and heading north to Halaesa, passing through the Contrada Portelle along the easiest route.⁴⁵

In the early Middle Ages, controlling the vast valley below was Cozzo di San Pietro⁴⁶ where there is a building made in dry stone with no mortar. It is a wall which enclosed two distinctive rooms, placed on a triangle-shaped flat area featuring steep slopes all around it. The wall, preserved only in two courses, has a marked breaking on the northern side, probably where the arched entrance was, which gives us the opportunity to look at the structure in cross-section. It is a double-faced wall with roughly hewn stones of different sizes and shapes placed in irregular rows. The interstices between the big stones are filled up with rubble and broken terracotta tiles rich with straw. On both sides of the wall, it is possible to see the rubble of the collapsed upper part of it mixed with potsherds, mainly terracotta roof tiles. On the inside, the layer of rubble shows evidence of looting; as a matter of fact, there is a big pit which was surely dug out with a machine by tomb looters, and there are also bone fragments. On the outside of the enclosure, there is further evidence of other walls emerging from the fields, all of them very much like the former one which exploited the natural inaccessibility of the hill closing it on the most exposed side. The pottery collected is mainly made up of terracotta tiles which have a high concentration of straw, some with a comb decoration, and by very few coarse wares.

The building, probably already in use at the end of the 8th/9th centuries, could have been a small monastery.⁴⁷ A document dated 1155 could be of great significance: among the listed donations to the monastery of San Giorgio in Gratteri is the church of San Pietro, located, the document says, 'in the region of Petralia near Gangi, provided with pastures, rough land and water'; the property is confirmed in a second document dated 1182⁴⁸ to be the same monastery of the church of San Pietro di Prate Gangi.

In the Middle Ages, the road network served the pilgrimage as a political-religious phenomenon which, at least along the internal roads of Sicily, was not only destined to reach *via Valeria* and the port of Messina. As a matter of fact, from documents, we can see the financial difficulty that people had when crossing to the Holy Land.

Therefore, a local sanctuary could have been a place for pilgrimage, only a few days or hours distant. In this way, the worship of San Calogero⁴⁹ might have marked the *itinerarium peregrinorum* through the central Madonie, particularly from Petralia Sottana (he remains the local Patron Saint) up to Cefalù, through Polizzi Generosa and Isnello. At the entrance of all the main stops on this road we find the ruins of a medieval church or a hermitage dedicated to the black-skinned saint. That this road was created for pilgrimage is confirmed by the two *Hospitalia* founded at the same time by Pietro di Tolosa in Cefalù and Polizzi Generosa, where the *Ospitalieri* stayed for a long time; the Abbey of Santa Croce (Holy Cross), founded around the 13th century five km from Polizzi, in the direction of Cefalù, where a fresco of the Madonna Odigitria⁵⁰ is kept; and the Gibilmanna sanctuary, of which we have no certain founding date, but which has been and remains a pilgrimage destination along the same road.⁵¹

The finding of a small medallion dating from the late 1800s, lost by a pilgrim along the ancient path near Isnello, is a reminder of such a practice, along with the presence of several votive chapels.

The spiritual exercise of pilgrimage involves several places of the landscape which have been meaningful in that sense since antiquity. At less than 2 km east from the Portella di Termini crossroads in Petralia Soprana, near Pellizzara, the *via della zingara* crosses the Calascibetta, one which runs along the large late imperial farm located in Santa Marina, very likely the nucleus of a very large *fundus*.⁵² The road is quite steep and rough and heads towards north, climbing the wall of rocky crag reaching the little church of the *Madonna della Scala*.⁵³ It is set at 920m and can be reached by going through a tight passage with steps cut right into the bedrock.

Leaving behind the two Petralias, one continues heading north towards Castelbuono along the Imera Meridionale River. Along the route there is the

⁴⁴ Cic., Verr. 3, 83, 192.

⁴⁵ Di Maggio 2008.

⁴⁶ Canale 2014.

⁴⁷ Arcifa 2010.

⁴⁸ Burgio 2017: 114; Townsend White 1984: 316–317.

⁴⁹ Verde 2009.

⁵⁰ Abbate 2016.

⁵¹ The Sanctuary is mentioned for the first time in the foundation deed of the Bishopric of Troina in 1087, see Bresc: 1985: 55–58. According to some scholars, the sanctuary could be one of the six sanctuaries founded by Pope Gregory the Great in Palermo, see, e.g., De Luca 1856: 12–19.

⁵² Belvedere, Burgio and Cucco 2016.

⁵³ Canale 2014: 456–457.



Figure 6 – Sant'Elia bridge (left) and San Pancrazio bridge (right)

Sant'Elia bridge (probably built in the 11th century) (fig. 6a) which crosses the Petrusa stream, and the San Pancrazio bridge⁵⁴ (fig. 6b) which crosses the Torrente Mandarinini. On the left-hand side of the path, at the locality of San Miceli, there are the ruins of the Monastery of St. Michael the Archangel, placed there to control the passage, whose events of the 12th century are well known from a Charter which has Roger II's seal.⁵⁵ Once past this last bridge, with a day's march the pilgrim could reach both the *hospitale* of Cefalù by re-joining the Polizzi-Cefalù road near the Portella Arena, or continue towards Sant'Ambrogio and reach the *via Valeria* and the *Hospital of Halaesa* through Castelbuono, controlled at the entrance by the Hermit of Liccia.

The centrality of Polizzi Generosa, the strategic importance of the junctions and the interior territories which they served, did not pass unobserved to the Teutonic Knights who, having been recruited to fight against the Muslims, took it over starting within 70 years. In Polizzi we have substantial evidence considering that it was one of its main seats in Sicily.⁵⁶ In Petralia and Gangi, it is the toponomy that re-designs the geography of the possessions.

At the foot of Monte Gragello (Petralia Soprana), from the road conjunction of Portella Trinità, the path *Giaia*

e della Commenda runs in Contrada Abbadia, abutting the mountain on the west side and reaching the Imera Meridionale River. Continuing east for another 4 km towards Gangi, at the junction Portella Massariazza, the *via della zingara* crosses the route named *della Maggione*.⁵⁷ On the southern side it goes around the fortified site of Alburchia⁵⁸ and, on the northern side, in the eponymous district, the site of Cozzo San Pietro, before reaching the *via Messina per le montagne* at the crossroads of Piano Ospedale and then heading north up to the *Hospitale of Halaesa*.

It is evident that the selection of the places was made in the context of a precise policy of control. Even though there are no precise topographical references in the documentation, the evidence that has emerged from the territory gives the impression that Gangi represents the eastern border of the Teutonic possessions in Val Demone.⁵⁹ How can we explain this 'lack' of information in the documentation considering the hard evidence found in the modern landscape? It could be useful to go back to the 1155 charter where, among the donations granted to the St. George's Monastery of Gratteri, is St. Peter's church located 'in the region of Petralia near Gangi', from which we can understand that Gangi was still juridically within the territory of Petralia. If the reasoning is confirmed, the Teutonic property,

⁵⁴ Canale 2014: 456; Maurici and Minnella 2006: 97–98 and fig. 65.

⁵⁵ Ferrara 2002: 64–79.

⁵⁶ Toomaspoeg 2003. The author deals with the question regarding the rise of Polizzi in the late Middle Ages in several parts of his vast work.

⁵⁷ Caracausi 1993.

⁵⁸ Cucco 2016b; Ferraro and Franco 2011; Cerami, Farinella and Ferraro 2004; Tusa 1983; Naselli 1951.

⁵⁹ This is one of the administrative districts of medieval Sicily, located in the NE of the island.

very likely the building on Cozzo San Pietro, should be sought in the charters and documents which refer to Petralia and not Gangi which, as a matter of fact, never shows up except indirectly.⁶⁰

As we have seen, Polizzi Generosa is the main city in the Madonie, and because of its centrality it attracted the interest of the Teutonic Knights. The importance of this town, and of the two Petralias, Sottana and Soprana, since the Middle Ages is also shown by the large extension of land of the current municipalities, which from the Madonie extend to the south and southeast, reaching the mountain ridge that is the watershed from the Imera Settentrionale, Imera Meridionale and Platani rivers. From Cozzo Re to Sella di Xireni (Cozzo Fra Giacomo and Monte S. Giuliano), and from Serra di Puccia, Fili di Paolazzo and Cozzo Puccia (nowadays Tre Monzelli), the waters of these rivers start their trip towards the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Strait of Sicily. From here there are several roads heading in different directions, which in the SE exploit the Imera Meridionale River, while to the south and west they follow the alignments of the highlands, all over 800m asl: Monte Catuso, Cozzo Tutusino, Cozzo Terravecchia and Monte Chibbò heading S; Rocca di Sciarra (Caltavuturo), Cozzo Brignoli, Sclafani Bagni heading W; and further to the west, along the watershed of the Platani and Torto rivers is the Mountain of Alia and Monte Ragiura, beyond which are the towns of Vicari and Castronovo, another area – important for the road network in central-western Sicily – where the Teutonic Order managed vast estates.

Therefore, in this diverse landscape, there are mountains with great strategic features whose peaks are, for the majority, occupied by villages or small settlements, the latter probable look-out posts for each district, in a system characterized by tight relationships of inter-visibility.⁶¹ The places mentioned are little known places of inland Sicily yet were the important junctions of a district, fundamental for the communications along the N-S and E-W of the island.

Cozzo Terravecchia – containing the most important settlement of the district, Terravecchia di Cuti, which with two fortification walls was vital from the Archaic age to the beginning of the 4th century BC – looks down over the long-distance routes. In the 5th century BC, the Greeks from Agrigento reached this place by marching up the Platani River, in the Roman age the road network *Thermae-Catina* could even reach these mountains,⁶² and later the pilgrimage routes as well, as the toponym Chiesazza,⁶³ between Puccia and Catuso,

clearly suggests. Other important crossroads were the Masseria Varco⁶⁴ and the Passo di Landro, the latter a post station in the Bourbon age along the road from Palermo to Catania, and Noto-Syracuse,⁶⁵ where during WWII there was an important battle which also involved the nearby Recattivo.⁶⁶

The area examined here contains three distinctive districts: Sella Xireni-Cozzo Re; Serra di Puccia-Monte Catuso; quadrivium Brignoli-Portella di Granza. Further to the west there is the mountain ridge that separates the Imera Settentrionale and Meridionale rivers from the Platani River valley, over which rises – about 30 kms further west – the Castronovo cliff.⁶⁷

The Sella di Xireni (near the Rovine del Castellazzo)⁶⁸ is crossed by the NE-SW route that went from Polizzi down to Imera Meridionale (Passo di Mattina-Fondacazzi stream) and then up towards Monte Catuso bordering the Fosso San Giacinto (*Strada Comunale del Catuso*), touching the pluri-stratified site of San Giacinto (a large Hellenistic and Roman settlement, with some evidence of Byzantine and early medieval occupation)⁶⁹ (figs. 2, 7). In this area, some 14th-century evidence can be traced back to the property of Polizzi:⁷⁰ around 1330, a certain Orlandus de Milite from Polizzi owned the fiefs of Puccia and Catuso;⁷¹ Puccia is mentioned as a *Casale* in 1275 and as an uninhabited fief in 1330; in 1398, Tudia and Chircosa were also fiefs and hamlets, the former very likely located in the eponymous district,

Puccia-Verbumcaudo route, there is a building known as Chiesavecchia, where for the moment there is no archaeological evidence.

⁶⁴ Near Chiesavecchia, along the same route mentioned in the footnote above.

⁶⁵ Cucco and Maurici 2014: 26.

⁶⁶ Battle July 17th-19th 1943: Maltese 1981: 235-236, 247.

⁶⁷ These are a number of peaks which form a sort of arch which goes from the NE to the SW, joining the Valledolmo area to Alia and then to the Colle Madore site (Vassallo, *Madore*), and to the west with Castronovo di Sicilia, on the western branch of the upper Platani valley.

⁶⁸ It is a building, perhaps a tower (Belvedere: UT 116, 199-200), whose strategic meaning is connected to the town of Polizzi Generosa, where there is a castle (Regione Siciliana 2001); as a matter of fact, from the Castellazzo one can control the valleys of Imera Settentrionale and Meridionale. Although there is no written evidence, it is very likely that Castellazzo can be dated to the Middle Ages (it is believed that the Great Count Roger himself had some works carried out at the Castle, which already existed, and he also built a new one in Contrada Campo). Therefore, it is significant that Portella del Campo, an important road junction along the already mentioned *via della zingara*, is overlooked on the SE by Castellazzo and Cozzo Re, and to the NE by Cozzo Croce (m. 1116) and Monte Rotola Vecchia (m. 1205), mountain peaks with the same strategic position even if there is no archaeological evidence to date.

⁶⁹ Burgio 2002: UT 8-9, 53-58: only terracotta roof tiles rich in straw were found, probably a sign of a brief re-occupation between the 12th and the 14th centuries, or probably made up by a group of poor houses, because Arabic glazed pottery is totally absent.

⁷⁰ Bresc and D'Angelo 1972: 380, 402, figs. 1, 8; Burgio 2002: 169-170.

⁷¹ It is not in my intention to rebuild the extension and the borders of the fiefs, but it is quite significant that the eponymous districts are located in the watershed area between Serra and Puccia and Monte Catuso.

⁶⁰ Toomaspoeg 2003: 467, n. 82, n. 94. Several documents mention *Johannes de Gangio Teutonico*.

⁶¹ Vassallo 1990; Vassallo et al. 1999; Belvedere et al. 2002. Burgio 2002.

⁶² Burgio 2000.

⁶³ Burgio: UT 40, 94-97. Going a few kilometres along the S. Giacinto-

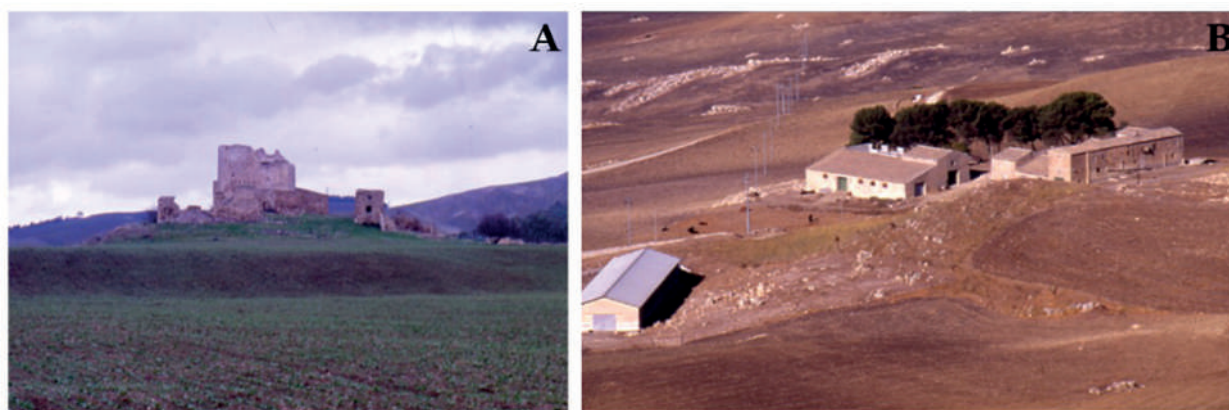


Figure 7 – A) Resuttano Castle; B) Chiesazza

NW of Cozzo Tutusino, the latter probably along the Imera Meridionale River where, nowadays, there is the toponym of Irosa and the eponymous *Masseria*.⁷²

At Xireni, the road described crosses the NW-SE one which, from the Tyrrhenian coast (along the Imera Settentrionale River valley), reaches the Imera Meridionale: the area is rich in meaningful toponyms, such as Fondacazzi,⁷³ Casale, Fondaco di Vanella, from where you head N-E uphill towards Trinità and the Madonie. The arrival place of this route is the Resuttano Castle (fig. 7a), set in a strategic position on a fluvial terrace,⁷⁴ overlooked by Terravecchia di Cuti and by the important Archaic and Classical age fortified settlement of Balza d'Areddula.⁷⁵ Resuttana is mentioned as a fief before 1337, as uninhabited by 1396, when the Resuttana Castle surely existed:⁷⁶ the few potsherds dated to the 11th and 13th centuries allow us to hypothesize the existence of a structure of control, a castle or a tower; as a matter of fact, a tower can still be clearly seen within the central part of the building, and the term *Torre* is mentioned in the documents dated 1373 and 1375, when they belonged to Manfredi Chiaramonte.

Along the axis of the Fondacazzi-Imera Meridionale river valley another possible route of the *Catina-Therme* Roman road could have been connected;⁷⁷ later, the changes in the paleographic assets of the Byzantine age and of the early Middle Ages influenced the organization of the road network, addressing it towards the southern part of the Madonie, as it turns out from al-Idrisi's book⁷⁸ and, above all, from the medieval and modern road network (the Messina road through the mountains). Furthermore, it is important to note that the modern road network, in particular the *regia trazzera* which connected Palermo to Catania, followed the valley of the Imera Settentrionale in this area.⁷⁹

The second district, which opens up in the south on the Platani River basin, has its centre in the Puccia-Catuso system, the highest peaks (over 1.000 m) of the area (fig. 8).

The above road, which runs next to the Fosso San Giacinto, goes up to the passage which separates Monte Catuso from Cozzo Puccia: heading SW it goes down to the Chiesazza⁸⁰ place (fig. 7b), near the important road junction of Portella del Vento,⁸¹ and Contrada Susafa,⁸² Tudia and, a little to the SW, Verbumcaudo.

⁷² It is totally hypothetical that Irosa (from the Latin *glareosus*, gravelly, in Caracausi 1993) is the relic of Chircosa. The land survey did not find any archaeological evidence, probably because the area has been deeply changed by modern agricultural activities.

⁷³ Late-Classical and/or Hellenistic age evidence has been found, and also from the 12th to the 14th centuries, with interesting evidence from aerial photography and historical cartography (Burgio 2002: UT 21, 66–69). It is known that the toponym refers to the presence of buildings connected to the road network: Bresc and Bresc 1975: 95–106.

⁷⁴ Stretto del Castello, in IGM 260 III SO. Historical and bibliographical data in Regione Siciliana 2001 s.v. Resuttano; Burgio 2002: UT 29, 79–81.

⁷⁵ The *poleis* of eastern Sicily were interested in this area because the ancient settlement of Krastòs is very likely to be here, which the cities of Akragas, Gela and Himera fought over: Belvedere 2001: 732–733; Burgio 2002: 149.

⁷⁶ Burgio 2002: UT 29.

⁷⁷ Burgio 2000; Burgio 2002: 173–174.

⁷⁸ Santagati 2013.

⁷⁹ The evidence from aerial photography is significant, as is the presence of nearby rural settlements; Burgio 2002: 173–174.

⁸⁰ Burgio 2002: UT 40, 94–97 (most of the pottery is dated between the 12th and the 14th centuries); nearby there is very little archaeological evidence in the districts of Ciaramito and Susafa (Burgio 2002: UT 45, 55, 99, 110–111).

⁸¹ Burgio 2002: 176–177. Going south from Portella del Vento, you reach the Passo di Landro and Recattivo, as already mentioned, key places for the road network system of central Sicily, in antiquity and modern times. See also Arcifa 1997: 183 and fig. 2, who, based on topographic evidence that the toponym Chiesazza does not exist, traces a road that reaches Portella del Vento itself from Gurfa and Verbumcaudo.

⁸² The eponymous *casale* could be in the locality of Case Vecchie Susafa, along the *regia trazzera* which links Chiesazza and Chiesavecchia (Bresc Bautier and Bresc 1988: 66: anyhow, there is no medieval pottery). As I have already mentioned (Burgio 2002: UT 49,

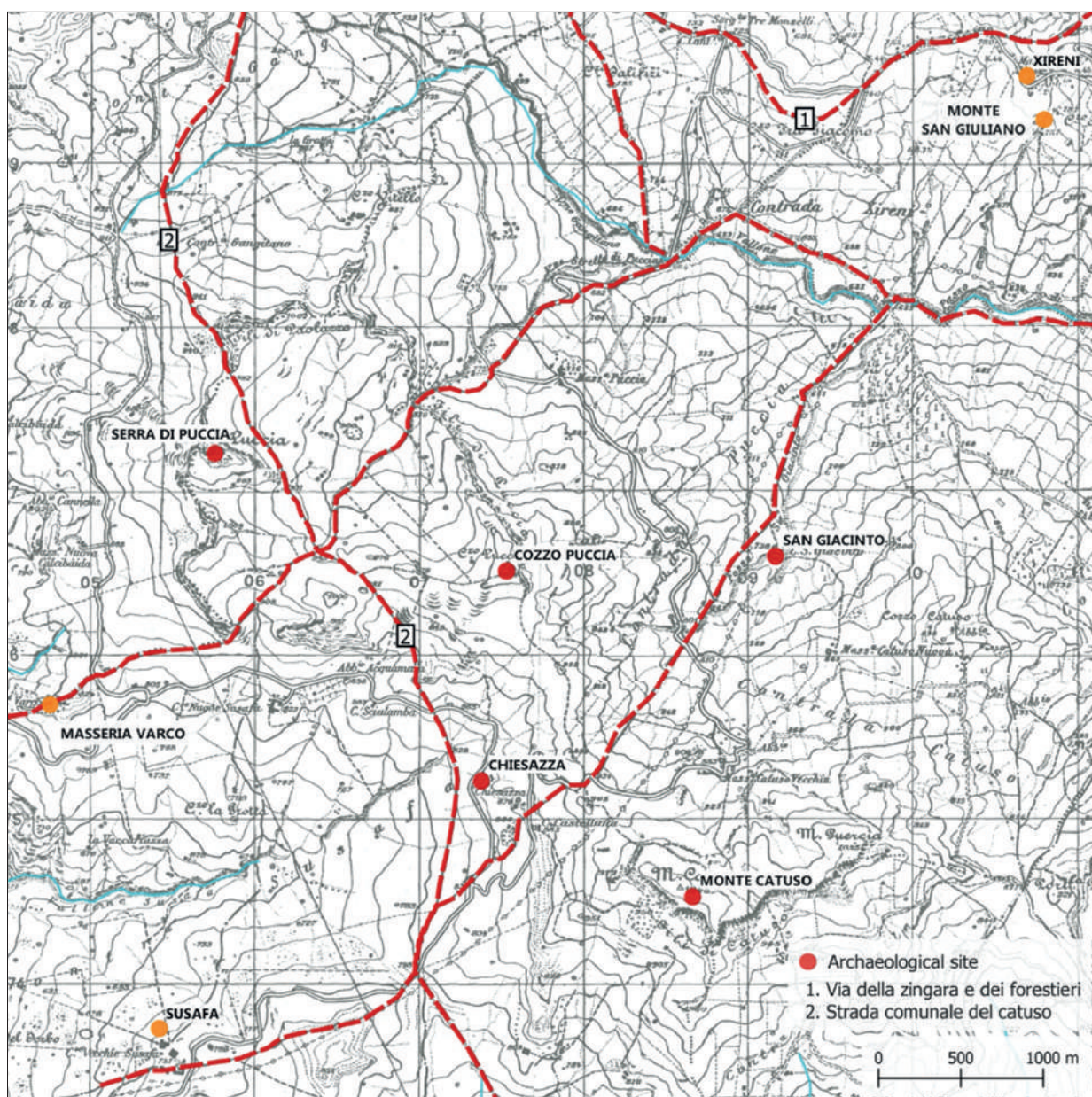


Figure 8 – Crossroads of Xireni and Puccia. Cartographic excerpt 1:25.000

The Chiesazza could be the most important junction of the district, at least regarding the late Middle Ages.

As is known, the toponym Chiesazza could be a consequence of the policy of control of the territory, referring to a Norman structure,⁸³ part of the process of the conversion of the Muslims, a religious and political process which saw the reinforcement of royal power

102), it seems to me quite plausible that the *casale* Susafa should be sought in Chiesazza.

⁸³ Chiesa di San Michele in Campogrosso (Chiesazza, in IGM 250 III SO), near Altavilla Milicia, on the Tyrrhenian coast between Termini Imerese and Palermo. Cfr. also Regione Siciliana 2001 s.v. San Michele di Campogrosso; Moździoch, Baranowski and Stanisławski 2017; Vassallo *et al.* 2018.

in areas like the upper Platani River where Islamic communities still lived and which passed there for the control of important places of the road network.

The central role of this district, whose highest peaks were previously occupied by small hamlets and controlling structures of the Archaic and Classical ages, was maintained throughout the centuries and consolidated in the Middle Ages thanks to the presence of the Teutonic Order. *Verbumcaudo* is one of them. From here, passing through the districts of Regaleali, Fontana Murata and Regalmici, you reach the Torto River and the fief of the Gurfa, another very important property of the Teutonic Knights, near the modern town of Alia. Going west, a network of roads and natural

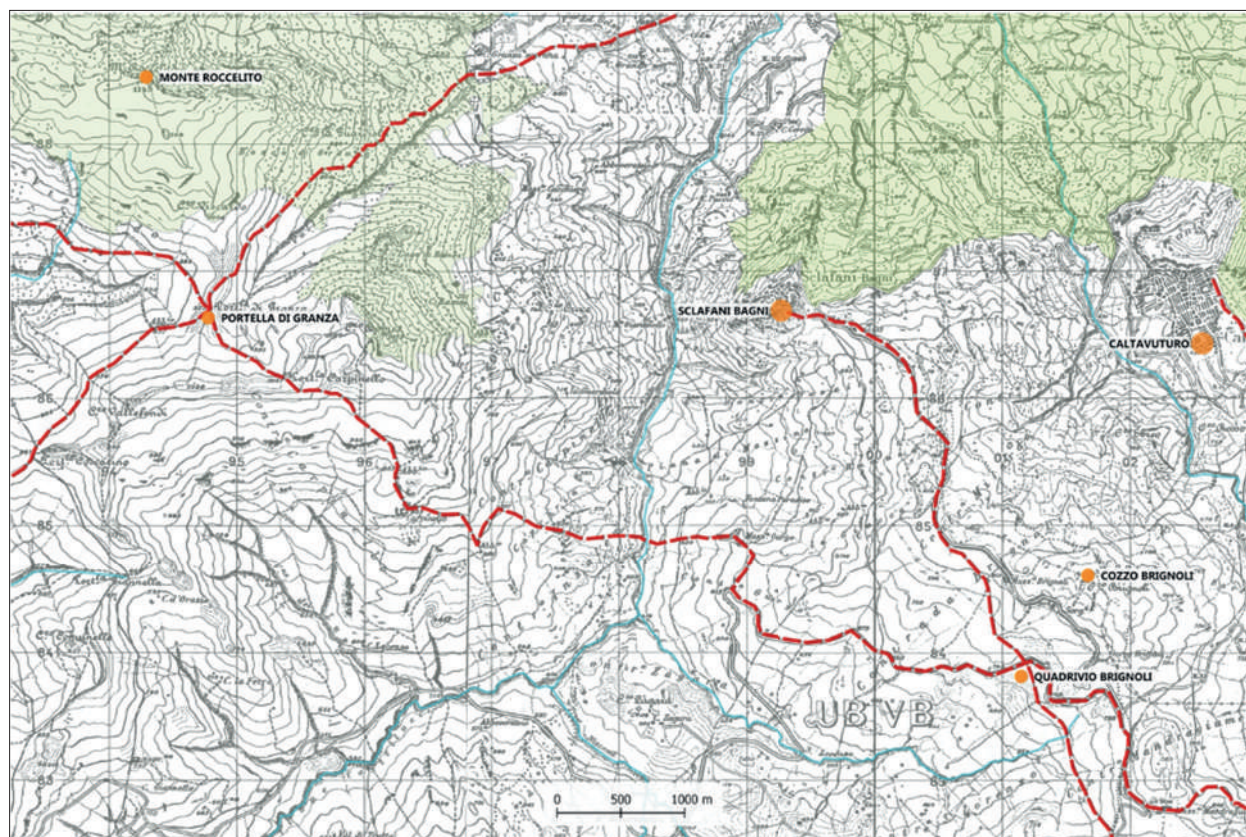


Figure 9 – Crossroads of Granza and Brignoli. Cartographic excerpt 1:25.000

paths, among which are the one retraced by the Ragiura stream and the modern road SS 121, link up in the area where the Roccapalumba-Alia train station is and at the watershed of the Torto.

The fief of the Gurfa – the most western sector of the area here dealt with – can also be reached by another road coming from Petralia and Polizzi, crossing the territory of Caltavuturo, an important fortified village in the Byzantine and Islamic ages,⁸⁴ touching the Brignoli quadrivium, perhaps the *quadrivium unde procedit via que ducit Petraliam et Castronovum et Biccarum et Panormum* reported in a document dated 1132⁸⁵ (fig. 9).

After Brignoli quadrivium, one reaches Portella di Granza and Portella Legnaioli. Portella di Granza⁸⁶ is

⁸⁴ The ruins of the castle placed on Terravecchia overlook the current town: Regione Siciliana 2001 s.v. Caltavuturo: 302; Vassallo: 6-7.

⁸⁵ Arlotta 2005: 866, note 115.

⁸⁶ I wonder if the toponym might come from *Gancia*, which could indicate a 'hospice for religious people', a 'non-autonomous church or convent' but also a 'warehouse for crops': Caracausi, *Dizionario*, s.v. Gancia, Grangi, Granza). If so, it could be connected to a religious property and give further importance to the location of Portella in relation to the places of worship mentioned above, and to the proposed itinerary. See what has been highlighted (Arcifa 1994: 100-111) regarding the control over the roads by the monasteries, in the 12th century in the Nebrodi and Etna area, by building small places of worship which contribute to the creation of a proper road network.

another important crossroads: to the NE one can reach the Salito stream, that is the Imera Settentrionale River (area of Portella dei Sette Frati and Ponte Vecchio Diruto), then the Roman road that linked *Thermae* to *Catina*,⁸⁷ to the west one reaches Monte Roccelito (1145m), a natural massif barrier – where there was a *castellum* in the second half of the 13th century⁸⁸ – nowadays characterized by a wooded area which from the Portella di Granza (S. Maria and Cardellino woods) stretches out to the town of Montemaggiore Belsito. It is very likely, even though there is no objective data, that even the ancient woods covered vast areas of Roccelito, and it was wise to go around it to the north by a road probably not very different from the modern one.⁸⁹ An interesting alternative – regarding the identification of the places and important districts from a point of view of the sacred signs – is the southern road of the Roccelito, along which are the country churches of Madonna del Carmine and Madonna degli Angeli; further west along the same road, beyond the Vaccaro bridge (the easiest ford in this part of the Torto River, near the Montemaggiore train station) there are a number of very significant toponyms, probably the heritage of

⁸⁷ At the Ponte Vecchio flow the waters of Vallone Fondachello, which reaches Caltavuturo: Burgio 2000: 190.

⁸⁸ Maurici 1992: 331; Regione Siciliana 2001 s.v. Montemaggiore; Cucco 2017: 9-10.

⁸⁹ It links Cerda, Aliminusa and Montemaggiore.

pilgrimage routes, such as Passo della Madonna, the San Giacomo district,⁹⁰ and Giacometta stream. From there we can reach an area rich in settlements of the Norman age, of which the most important are Cozzo Balatelli, Cozzo Casale, Sambuchi and Pizzo Pipitone.⁹¹

The latter is on the peak of a rocky mountain overlooking the San Leonardo River, and the Piani di Vicari and on the other peak of Vicari, looking west one can reach the Margana Castle. Located a few kilometres to the NW of Castronovo, it was one of the largest and most important properties of the Teutonic Order:⁹² nearby we have the meaningful toponyms of San Nicola and Cozzo Trinità, the latter at the confluence of the Margana and Mendola rivers. It is the road that, going further west, reaches Corleone, yet another district where there were Teutonic properties, crossing Zuccarrone, well known for the milestone found along the *via Aurelia* from Palermo to Agrigento.⁹³ The vast area between Vicari, Castronovo and Corleone is the most western sector of the territory examined. Here, in the Norman age, a number of routes were created, among which the so called *via Francigene*, an expression used by the end of the 11th century in two documents, one referring to Castronovo⁹⁴ itself, from where, going west, a *via quae tendit Corniglion* (Corleone) starts. Along this road were located several *xenodochia* and *hospitalia*, to welcome the pilgrims at the end of each day of walking. The *hospitalia*⁹⁵ were sometimes inside the towns but also far from them, like the *stations* of the roman *cursus publicus*. Some of the above are mentioned in the 12th and 13th century documentation of the main roads, such as the *hospitale iuxta portam civitatis* in Cefalù, and that of San Nicola in Polizzi.

In the 12th century, in the eastern suburbs of Castronovo there was a *hospitale* attached to the Church of Madonna dei Miracoli (or Odigitria, protector of the crossroads and wayfarers), and another was probably attached to the church of Casale San Pietro,⁹⁶ located down in the valley below the town near the Platani River. It is in this period that, in the district of Castronovo, the property of the Teutonic Knights of the Magione church became more substantial and came to be among the features of the landscape that enable us to grasp the essential

aspects of the road network connected, or referable to the *via Francigene*.⁹⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, examining a landscape in a diachronic perspective as it changes over time, observing how it was tightly linked to the needs and perceptions of the communities who lived off the land and its resources, is the right approach for a productive study of the road network. One must not fall into the temptation of looking at the settlement landscape and the road network system as a single model, valid for all antiquity, therefore running the risk by building systems with a deterministic character. As a matter of fact, there is no doubt that the different communities had different perceptions of the landscape, or that the road network landscape in each historical phase would have been unique. In the Archaic and Classical ages, in the Hellenistic age and again in the late Middle Ages, the defensive needs needed the communities to be located on naturally fortified peaks, which did not include all the settlement typologies.

On the contrary, in the Roman age (but also in the Islamic period) there are several rural sites, farms and hamlets, even quite large, in flat and open areas, often at the confluence of streams, and yet there are also settlements and flourishing cities located on the mountain peaks.

As regards the area examined, there are a number of potential sites which should be checked, starting from a more accurate documentary research. The road network system highlights, over time, forms of persistence and of transformation which become – as elsewhere⁹⁸ – a system of directions, of parallel routes potentially usable during the same historical phase, to which a political feature was often associated in the Middle Ages, which manifested physically in resting places or in places of control, such as towers and castles, hamlets and feuds, *hospitalia* and rural churches. Some of them are known through written sources, others are identifiable through topographic field research (surveys), others still remain suggestions for starting new archaeological, topographic and archival research, which induces us to move along those itineraries which humans have walked, and still walk, every day.

⁹⁰ It is known that the Cult of St. James spread in Sicily with the Norman conquest, and that it is linked to the road network: about this topic, Arlotta 2004. *Guida alla Sicilia jacoepa*. Pomigliano d'Arco, and, for the area taken into exam, Burgio 2017.

⁹¹ Lauro 2009, *passim* (some were inhabited before, and probably continuously from late antiquity). Even Regione Siciliana 2001 s.v. Petterana.

⁹² Regione Siciliana 2001 s.v. Margana; Toomaspoeg 2003: 281.

⁹³ Uggeri 2004: 70–71; Prag 2006.

⁹⁴ For the data regarding the roads near Castronovo, see Arlotta 2005: 866–868; Burgio 2017.

⁹⁵ Arlotta 2005: 849–850.

⁹⁶ Carver and Molinari 2017.

⁹⁷ Arcifa 1994; Arcifa 1995; Toomaspoeg 2003.

⁹⁸ See the alternative paths regarding the Roman *via Catina-Agrigentum mansionibus nunc institutis* in the *Itinerarium Antonini* (Uggeri 2004: 251–266) and the *via Catina-Thermae* from Thermae to Henna (Burgio 2000).

Author contributions

'Introduction': A. Canale; 'Road network and settlements': A. Canale (142-149), A. Burgio (149-153); 'Conclusion': A. Burgio.

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Suburbia and Rural Landscapes in Medieval Sicily presents the results of the main ongoing archaeological and historical research focusing on medieval suburbia and rural sites in Sicily. It is thus intended to update traditional views regarding the evolution of this territory from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages by bringing into the picture new data from archaeological excavations undertaken at several sites across Sicily, new information from surveys of written sources, and new reflections based on the analysis of both material and documentary sources. The volume is divided into thematic areas: Urbanscapes, suburbia, hinterlands; Inland and mountainous landscapes; Changes in rural settlement patterns; and Defence and control of the territory. The essays underline the fundamental contribution of archaeological research in Sicily to the debate on the formation of early medieval landscapes at the crossroads between the Byzantine and Islamic worlds. A comparison with other research areas and constant dialogue with historical sources constitute essential elements for advancing our knowledge of the rural and suburban world of Sicily as a case study illustrating wider Mediterranean dynamics.

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