

Productive and Social Practices in Prehistoric and Protohistoric Earthen Building

Edited by
María Pastor Quiles,
Lucía Ruano Posada,
Alejandra Sánchez-Polo,
and Marta Mateu Sagués





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Cover: Fallen wall of reed-impressed daub from room A11 at Early Iron Age Sant Jaume d'Alcanar, Catalonia
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Contents

List of Figures and Tables.....	ii
The Social and Gender Fabric of Mud: Reviewing Earthen Architecture in Archaeology. Introduction to “Productive and Social Practices in Prehistoric and Protohistoric Earthen Building”	1
María Pastor Quiles, Lucía Ruano Posada, Alejandra Sánchez-Polo and Marta Mateu	
Macroscopic Evidence for the Use of Adobes at Minoan Malia (Bronze Age Crete)	11
Maud Devolder	
Production, Storage and Sustainability: The Use of Earthen and Sunken Architecture at Late Bronze Age Erimi-Pitharka, Cyprus	25
Lærke Recht and Katarzyna Zeman-Wisniewska	
Interactions and Continuity: Characterising Earthen Building Techniques of the Iberian Northern Plateau in a Transitional Period (Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age).....	39
Alejandra Sánchez-Polo and Lucía Ruano Posada	
‘Tell Me How You Build and I Will Tell You Who You Are’: Earthen Construction Techniques at Sant Jaume d’Alcanar (Catalonia, NE Iberian Peninsula) and Their Cultural Attribution.....	53
Marta Mateu, David Garcia i Rubert and Sonia Carbonell Pastor	
Early Neolithic Earth Mortar in the Iberian Peninsula: Chaff Tempering, Manufacture and Functionality in Domestic Structures	68
Magdalena Gómez-Puche and Ana Polo-Díaz	
Constructions in Raw Earth in the Bronze Age Navetiforms in Mallorca (Spain): A Microstratigraphic View of Naveta I at Closos de Can Gaià	88
M. Mercè Bergadà, Joan Carbonell-Roca, Marta Mateu, David Javaloyas-Molina, Bartomeu Salvà-Simonet and Gabriel Servera-Vives	
Rare Earth Elements Marking Anthropogenic Soil Development at the Geoglyphs of Acre (Brazil)	107
Gianni Gallelo, Mirco Ramacciotti, Ivandra Rampanelli, Sonia López-Melón, Fernando Ferreira, Jacó César Piccoli, Ángel Morales-Rubio, Laura Bartual Moreno, Adriana Serra-Meléndez, Carlos Arnau-Félix and Agustín Díez-Castillo	
A Geometric and Constructive Approach to Self-Supporting Domes and Vaults in the Architecture of the Ancient Near East.....	129
Luis Miguel Carranza Peco, Manuel Fortea Luna, Esther Rodríguez González and Sebastián Celestino Pérez	
Building a Mesolithic Hut. A Social Interaction Analysis of Coordinated Engagement with the Material Environment.....	144
Antje Wilton and Kenan Hochuli	
The EARTHERITAGE Project. Earthen Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean between Archaeology and Sustainability	156
Marialucia Amadio, Luca Bombardieri, Ivano Rellini, Sabina Ghislandi and Maria Luisa Germanà	

List of Figures and Tables

Macroscopic Evidence for the Use of Adobes at Minoan Malia (Bronze Age Crete) – Maud Devolder

Figure 1.	a) Location of Malia in Crete (EFA/L. Fadin and IMS-FORTH/M. Devolder); b) schematic plan of the Palace with preserved mudbrick walls shown in black (EFA/M. Devolder, after E. Andersen); c–d) views of Neopalatial mudbrick walls in the Palace (EFA/M. Devolder); e) view of Prepalatial mudbrick walls in the Palace (EFA/M. Devolder); f) elevation and g) plan of Protopalatial walls in the Eastern Magazines of the Palace (EFA/M. Devolder)	12
Table 1.	Chronological framework and occupation patterns at Malia throughout the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age (EBA, MBA and LBA)	13
Figure 2.	a) Detail of mud coating incorporating straw in the Palace (EFA/M. Devolder); b) general view of the Mu Quarter (EFA/J.-C. Poursat [R3274]); c) plan of the Mu Quarter (EFA/M. Schmid); d) mudbrick partition next to the lustral basin in House Delta Alpha (EFA/unknown author [R5294]) and e) mudbrick platform in House Zêta Bêta (EFA/unknown author)	15

Production, Storage and Sustainability: The Use of Earthen and Sunken Architecture at Late Bronze Age Erimi-Pitharka, Cyprus – Lærke Recht and Katarzyna Zeman-Wisniewska

Figure 1.	a) Location of Erimi-Pitharka on Cyprus. Adapted from Google Earth. b) Area I and Area 1A. The eastern and northern trenches of the new excavations are visible outside the modern cement wall (Area 1A), while the area inside the wall contains the earlier Department of Antiquities excavations (Area I, now backfilled). The light grey–almost white–visible across most of the area of the excavated trenches is the <i>kafkalla</i> -bedrock, while the light orange-red patches designate deteriorated mudbrick debris within the interior of rooms. Drone photo from the end of the 2022 excavation season. Photograph by A. Villani	27
Figure 2.	a) Eastern trenches of Area 1A, as seen at the end of the 2022 excavations season. Note the clear carving of the bedrock associated with W4, F2, F3 and F4. b) View of Walls 3 and 2, from the east. Photographs by A. Villani and M. Schutti	28
Figure 3.	a) Northern trenches of Area 1A, as seen at the end of the 2023 excavation season. b) Wall 7, from the south, interior of Room 101 during excavation. c) Wall 11, from the east, interior of Room 101 at the end of excavation. d) Mudbrick lump within the debris. Photographs by L. Recht	29
Figure 4.	Interior of “Cave 1” at Erimi-Pitharka. Note that conservation work has been carried out, most notably in the wooden floors and the reinforcement of walls, but the layout of the chambers has been preserved. Photographs by L. Recht	35

Interactions and Continuity: Characterising Earthen Building Techniques of the Iberian Northern Plateau in a Transitional Period (Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age) – Alejandra Sánchez-Polo and Lucía Ruano Posada

Figure 1.	Map of the area under study. 1) Fuente la Mora (Valladolid, Spain). 2) Sacaojos (León, Spain). 3) Los Barahones (Valdegama, Palencia). 4) Dessobriga (Osorno, Palencia, and Melgar de Fernamental, Burgos) (© ArchTerra Research Group)	41
Table 1.	General description of the studied earthen fragments	42
Figure 2.	Fuente la Mora (Valladolid, Spain): A) Plan of sectors 1 and 2 and a general map of the area (modified from Strato 2009). B) Earthen remains found in pits at the site (© ArchTerra Research Group)	43
Figure 3.	Sacaojos (León, Spain) hillfort. A) Plan of the site (modified from Misiego <i>et al.</i> 1999: fig. 3). B) Earthen remains from the site: a & b from pit 18, and c & d from pit 24 (© ArchTerra Research Group)	44
Figure 4.	Los Barahones (Valdegama, Palencia): A) Plan of Zone 5 (Barril Vicente 1995). B) Earthen remains: a) Fragment of wattle-and-daub wall. b) Fragment of lattice-and-daub wall. c) Fragment of clay box (© ArchTerra Research Group)	45
Figure 5.	Dessobriga (Osorno, Palencia, and Melgar de Fernamental, Burgos): A) Plan of the lower area (Misiego Tejada <i>et al.</i> 2003). B) Earthen remains: a) Fragment of wattle-and-daub wall. b) Fragment with red coating. c) Fragment of clay container. d) Hand-made mudbrick (© ArchTerra Research Group)	46
Table 2.	Key points in continuity, transformation and innovation in earthen building traditions between the LBA and the EIA	48

‘Tell Me How You Build and I Will Tell You Who You Are’: Earthen Construction Techniques at Sant Jaume d’Alcanar (Catalonia, NE Iberian Peninsula) and Their Cultural Attribution – Marta Mateu, David Garcia i Rubert and Sonia Carbonell Pastor

- Figure 1. Map of Sant Jaume and other contemporary sites within the Sant Jaume Complex (SJC), using a 2 m-resolution DTM from the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (IGN) as a base. Below, an orthophotograph of Sant Jaume showing the locations of the rooms discussed in this article. GRAP archive 55
- Figure 2. Building stratigraphy: a) Debris from the upper floor (earthen fragments, stones and archaeological material) (A7). b) Charcoal and ashes from the upper floor and its roof beams (A3). c) A11 ground floor with a combustion structure in the centre of the room. d) Preparation of the floor with pebbles and blocks (A11). All images GRAP archive 57
- Figure 3. Earthen building elements: a) Fragments of walls where we can see some painted and others with non-reed imprints (palm leaves can be seen). b) Fallen wall of reeds and daub (A11); c) Cross-section of different earthen construction elements. d) Images of upper-floor fragments clearly showing the reeds and some impressions of the ropes that connected them. e) Scan of the thin sections used in the micromorphological study with the microphotographs showing the sandy groundmass, with vegetal temper. All images GRAP Archive and Mateu 61

Early Neolithic Earth Mortar in the Iberian Peninsula: Chaff Tempering, Manufacture and Functionality in Domestic Structures – Magdalena Gómez-Puche and Ana Polo-Díaz

- Figure 1. Archaeological context and earth mortar artefacts analysed. A. Left: location of the sites studied in the Iberian Peninsula: 1) Mas d’Is. 2) Los Cascajos. Right: chronological range of occupation (Bernabeu *et al.* 2003; García *et al.* 2011) using summed probability distribution. Oxcal v. 4.4, IntCal20 (Reimer *et al.* 2020). B. Mas d’Is. Top left: digital terrain model (DTM) showing the settlement layout (Bernabeu *et al.* 2012); top right: House 1 layout (Bernabeu *et al.* 2003); bottom: earth mortar fragment of mobile domestic oven/heater (Bernabeu *et al.* 2003) to which the samples analysed (MID39 and MID43) belong. Scale is 5 cm. Note the whitish thin coating on the inner and outer walls and the base of the feature. C. Los Cascajos. Top: combustion structure in the field and plan of the site showing the distribution of structures (García and Sesma 1999); bottom: earth mortar fragment sampled for micromorphological analysis (LC325). Scale is 10 cm (Gómez-Puche unpublished) 70
- Figure 2. Left: flatbed scans of thin sections MID43 (top) and LC325 (bottom). Lime layer in MID43 and calcitic crust in LC325 (arrows). Note the highly porous groundmass of MID43 from chaff tempering (scale = 1 cm). Right: images of microscopic features. A: MID43. General view of chaff-tempered groundmass. Note angular morphology and edges of moldic voids (m) compared to vughs (v) (PPL). B: MID43. Detail of moldic void from grass inflorescence bract. Note multicellular structure of articulated, elongate dendritic and papillate cells affected by combustion (PPL). C: MID39. Contact between MFT1 (at the top) and MFT2 (at the bottom). Note concentration of very fine to fine light and dark brown sands (l) (lime lumps), embedded in a light brown matrix. Note also moldic void (m) and burnt fossil relicts (f) (PPL). D: MID39. Detail of lime lumps in MFT1. Left: mixture of aggregates displaying microcrystalline groundmass (l) with high (bright) and low (dark) birefringence (XPL). Right: brown-greyish microcrystalline aggregates (l) embedded in a light brown matrix. Note burnt calcitic microfossil—marl planktonic foraminifer—(f) (PPL). E: LC325. General view of the groundmass. Calcitic micritic crust at the top (c) and chaff-tempered matrix at the bottom showing moldic voids (m). Note indistinct plant residue inside moldic voids and subhorizontal fissures (PPL and XPL). F: LC325. Detail of rotation feature (p) in MFT2 (PPL) 73
- Table 1. Description of the main macroscopic and microscopic features of samples MID39 and MID43 from Mas d’Is and LC325 from Los Cascajos. Interpretation and relevant contextual information are also detailed 74

Constructions in Raw Earth in the Bronze Age Navetiforms in Mallorca (Spain): A Microstratigraphic View of Naveta I at Closos de Can Gaià – M. Mercè Bergadà, Joan Carbonell-Roca, Marta Mateu, David Javaloyas-Molina, Bartomeu Salvà-Simonet and Gabriel Servera-Vives

- Figure 1. Closos de Can Gaià (Felanitx-Portocolom, Mallorca). a) General geographical situation and location of the Closos site. b) Aerial view of the five navetas. c) Orthophoto of naveta I. d) Phase 1 (c. 1550–1000 BC). Spatial distribution and light entrance reconstruction in the interior of the naveta, showing

	little light in the apse area. e) Phase 2 (c. 1000–850 BC). Spatial distribution and light entrance reconstruction in the interior of the naveta, lighting is significantly reduced.....	91
Figure 2.	Micromorphological sampling of Naveta I at Closos de Can Gaià. a) General view of the sampled profiles. Detail of stone floor (SU 15). b) Profile 1: SU 33 (sample 1) and SU 35 (sample 2). c) Profile 2: SU 34 (sample 3). d) Profile 3: SU 9 (sample 4) and SU 36 and SU 37 (sample 5)	92
Figure 3.	Quaternary substrate (SU 37) and floor preparation layer (SU 36) from phase 1 (c. 1550–1000 BC). a) Overview of the transmitted light scan thin section showing the units and the location of the following images. b) SU 37, silty clays with quartz sands (XPL). c) SU 37, residues of organic material marked with red arrows (PPL). d) SU 37, general view, showing the groundmass with calcitic hypocoatings (XPL). e) SU 37, detail of a calcitic hypocoating (XPL). f) SU 36, bone fragment (PPL). g) SU 36, pottery fragment (P) in inclined position in a biopore. h) SU 36, fragment of raw earth microaggregate (red discontinuous lines) and loose discontinuous infillings (black arrows) typical of biological activity. i) Detail of the previous image, with moldic voids (white arrows) (PPL).....	94
Figure 4.	Floor preparation layer and floor (SU 35) from phase 2 (c. 1000–850 BC), rear area of the naveta. a) Transmitted light scan of SU 35 thin section. The floor (SU 35a) and the floor preparation layer (SU 35b) are indicated. On the right, the raw earth balls are partially visible (dashed lines). The location of the following images is shown. b) SU 35b, raw earth microaggregates in groundmass (red arrows) (OIL). c) SU 35a, silica phytoliths included in the groundmass inside the ball (arrows) (PPL). d) SU 35a, anthropogenic components used as tempering agents such as raw earth microaggregate (RE), bone (B) and shell (S). Detail of bone (B), in PPL and XPL, and shell (S) in PPL; e) SU 35a, detail of arrow pointing to a moldic void typical of a plant debris (PPL). f) Subrounded raw earth aggregate with a curvilinear fissure and partially convolute morphology, <i>colombin</i> (PPL)	95
Figure 5.	Floor and Human activity surface (SU 9) from phase 2 (c. 1000–850 BC), front area of the naveta. a) Transmitted light scan of SU 9 thin section. The human activity surface (SU 9a) and the floor (SU 9b) are indicated, in which the ball modelling is shown (dashed lines). b) Type I, raw earth microaggregates, number 1 in the black box in a). c) Type I, detail of raw earth microaggregate with some vesicles (V). d) Type II, raw earth microaggregate, number 2 in a) (PPL). e) Same as d) (XPL). f) Type III, raw earth microaggregate, number 3 in a). Vesicular voids (V) are observed (PPL). g) Detail of a moldic void with elongate dendritic phytoliths (grasses) (arrow), in the black in f). h) Detail of the human activity surface, active zone (SU 9a). Charcoal remains (CH) and the detrital fraction, calcarenite (C) and limestone (L) show an oriented and horizontal distribution. It appears with horizontal and vertical fissuring denoting strong compaction, possibly due to trampling, in the black box in a)	96
Figure 6.	Raw earth aggregates from different SUs. a) Transmitted light scan of SU 36: b) reddish silty clays with sands with vesicular and moldic voids (PPL) and c) (XPL). d) Transmitted light scan of SU 9: e) detail of the groundmass with some possible burned bones (B) used as temper (PPL) and f) (XPL). g) Transmitted light scan of SU 35: h) detail of the interior of a moldic void with elongate dendritic phytoliths (grasses) by arrows (PPL) and i) detail of the groundmass with a predominance of silty clays with clay hypocoatings in voids, indicated by arrows (XPL). j) Transmitted light scan of SU 34. A possible imprint of a plant remains can be observed (arrows); k) detail of j) (PPL) and l) moldic voids indicating the addition of plant remains (PPL)	98
Table 1.	Micromorphological description of Naveta I at Closos de Can Gaià. Class frequencies (after Bullock <i>et al.</i> 1985; Stoops 2021): * very few (< 5 %); ** few (5–15 %); *** frequent (15–30 %); **** common (30–50 %); ***** dominant (50–70 %); and ***** very dominant (> 70 %). Class abundance of pedofeatures after (Bullock <i>et al.</i> 1985): + rare (< 2 %); ++ occasional (2–5 %); +++ many (5–10 %); ++++ abundant (10–20 %); and +++++ very abundant (> 20 %).....	99

Rare Earth Elements Marking Anthropic Soil Development at the Geoglyphs of Acre (Brazil) – Gianni Gallelo, Mirco Ramacciotti, Ivandra Rampanelli, Sonia López-Melón, Fernando Ferreira, Jacó César Piccoli, Ángel Morales-Rubio, Laura Bartual Moreno, Adriana Serra-Meléndez, Carlos Arnau-Félix and Agustín Díez-Castillo

Figure 1.	Area of study and sampling section location for the geoglyphs AyF and PyN	109
Table 1.	Sampling data	114
Figure 2.	Sampled sections for the Geoglyphs AyF (top) and PyN (bottom)	115
Figure 3.	Samples/scores plot (a) of PCA and variables/loadings plots for PC1 (b) and PC2 (c)	118

Figure 4. Pearson correlation coefficients (r) for REE parameters and elemental concentrations. Non-significant coefficients ($p > 0.05$) are barred.....	119
Figure 5. Distributions of elemental concentrations and REE parameters in the four columns (outliers were not considered).....	120
Table A1.1. Concentrations of major elements and trace elements expressed as percentage (from Al to Fe) or mg/kg (from Rb to U)	125
Table A1.2. Concentrations of REE, expressed as mg/kg, and REE parameters	127

A Geometric and Constructive Approach to Self-Supporting Domes and Vaults in the Architecture of the Ancient Near East – *Luis Miguel Carranza Peco, Manuel Fortea Luna, Esther Rodríguez González and Sebastián Celestino Pérez*

Figure 1. Göbekli Tepe Enclosure D roof design, proven to be ‘implausible’ (Newman and Ainsworth 2024).....	132
Figure 2. Left: Reconstruction of the elevations and roofs of the <i>tholos</i> with stone foundations (Mallowan and Cruikshank 1935: 28). Right: Geometrical relationships and dimensions of the main hall of the Treasury of Atreus (Como 2007).....	133
Figure 3. a) Detail and section of a hemispherical dome with horizontal courses. b) Detail and section of a hemispherical dome with inclined courses	134
Figure 4. Detail and section of a dome with a square base and inclined courses	136
Figure 5. Vault of Tell al-Rimah. Reproduced from the original by Oates (1970: 21-22, 1990: 402 fig. 7).....	136
Figure 6. Detail of the geometric figures that comprise the vault of Tell al-Rimah.....	137
Figure 7. Detail and section of the Mesopotamian vault	137
Figure 8. Hypothetical evolutionary stages from the Mesopotamian vault to the Nubian vault	138
Figure 9. Construction stages of a Nubian vault	139

Building a Mesolithic Hut. A Social Interaction Analysis of Coordinated Engagement with the Material Environment – *Antje Wilton and Kenan Hochuli*

Figure 1. Multimodal transcript of Extract I: defining the outline. Transcription conventions for these videos are provided in Appendix I	148
Figure 2. Multimodal transcript of Extract II: joining the roof	150
Table 1. Transcription conventions, adapted from Selting <i>et al.</i> (2011) and Mondada (2016)	155

The EARTHERITAGE Project. Earthen Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean between Archaeology and Sustainability – *Marialucia Amadio, Luca Bombardieri, Ivano Rellini, Sabina Ghislandi and Maria Luisa Germanà*

Figure 1. Aerial photograph of Middle Bronze Age Erimi, in the Kouris Valley, Cyprus (Erimi Archaeological Project Archive)	159
Figure 2. Graphs showing the three intertwined research approaches applied in this study	159
Figure 3. Macroscopic analysis and documentation of mudbrick samples during fieldwork activities (EARTHERITAGE Project Archive)	160
Figure 4. Micromorphological sampling of a paleosol buried by a <i>Havara</i> deposit in the Kouris Valley during the geoarchaeological activities (EARTHERITAGE Project Archive).....	161

The EARTHERITAGE Project. Earthen Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean between Archaeology and Sustainability

Marialucia Amadio

Dipartimento di Filologia e Critica delle Letterature Antiche e Moderne, University of Siena
marialucia.amadio@unisi.it
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0445-6457

Luca Bombardieri

Dipartimento di Filologia e Critica delle Letterature Antiche e Moderne, University of Siena
luca.bombardieri@unisi.it
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6889-4106

Ivano Rellini

Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra, dell'Ambiente e della Vita, University of Genova
ivano.rellini@unige.it
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9744-3320

Sabina Ghislandi

Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra, dell'Ambiente e della Vita, University of Genova
sabina.ghislandi@edu.unige.it
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5902-3341

Maria Luisa Germanà

Dipartimento di Architettura (DARCH), University of Palermo
marialuisa.germana@unipa.it
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8895-8787

Abstract: This paper presents the EARTHERITAGE Project, a two-year research programme focused on the analysis, documentation and development of preservation strategies for earthen architectural heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean, with particular attention to the island of Cyprus. The project was grounded in a synergic dialogue between archaeological, geoarchaeological and architectural approaches, involving multiscalar analyses of prehistoric earthen architectural evidence across the island. Research activities integrated archaeological and geoarchaeological investigations of prehistoric earthen building materials with detailed geomorphological and pedological studies of the natural environment of southern Cyprus, selected as the main study area. The resulting dataset supported a programme of technical experimentation on implemented earthen products, informed by ancient construction practices and local raw materials. Experimental analyses are currently ongoing and aim to contribute to the development of a research framework for evaluating the potential use of these materials as sustainable solutions for the conservation and preservation of archaeological earthen structures in Cyprus.

Keywords: Earthen Architecture, Prehistoric Cyprus, Cultural Heritage, Eastern Mediterranean, Geoarchaeology.

Riepilogo: Il Progetto EARTHERITAGE qui presentato rappresenta un programma di ricerca biennale i cui obiettivi primari sono l'analisi, la documentazione e lo sviluppo di strategie di conservazione del patrimonio architettonico in terra cruda nell'area del Mediterraneo orientale, con particolare attenzione all'isola di Cipro. Il progetto promuove un dialogo sinergico tra approcci archeologici, geoarcheologici ed architettonici, e si è focalizzato su un'analisi multiscala delle evidenze in terra cruda relative all'architettura preistorica sull'isola. Le attività di ricerca hanno integrato indagini archeologiche e geoarcheologiche sui materiali da costruzione preistorici con

studi geomorfologici e pedologici dell'ambiente naturale della regione meridionale costiera di Cipro, selezionata come regione-chiave per lo sviluppo dell'indagine. I dati ottenuti dall'integrazione delle analisi archeologiche e geoarcheologiche hanno supportato un programma di sperimentazione tecnica su prodotti in terra cruda realizzati secondo pratiche costruttive antiche e materiali locali. Le analisi sperimentali sono attualmente in corso e mirano a contribuire allo sviluppo di un quadro di ricerca finalizzato a valutare il potenziale impiego di questi materiali come soluzioni sostenibili per la conservazione del patrimonio architettonico in terra cruda nell'area del Mediterraneo orientale.

Parole chiave: Architettura di terra, Cipro preistorica, Patrimonio culturale, Mediterraneo orientale, Geoarcheologia.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the rich archaeological and vernacular earthen architectural heritage of the Eastern Mediterranean has been the focus of interdisciplinary research involving archaeologists, geoarchaeologists and architects. A wide range of methodological applications has been developed to investigate this architectural legacy. These include environmental and geoarchaeological studies aimed at reconstructing the formation, use and degradation processes of earthen structures in both archaeological and vernacular contexts (e.g. Friesem *et al.* 2011, 2013), as well as analytical and compositional studies of mudbricks and earthen construction materials addressed to examine properties and technological choices (e.g. Devolder and Lorenzon 2019; Lorenzon 2024; Love 2012; Nodarou *et al.* 2008). In parallel, research programmes and conservation initiatives have addressed the protection and enhancement of the earthen Mediterranean landscape (e.g. Achenza and Sanna 2011; Costi de Castrillo *et al.* 2017; Germanà 2013), while experimental and interdisciplinary approaches have been increasingly employed to test sustainable solutions for the preservation of ancient and modern earthen architecture (e.g. Sadozai and Gandreau 2020). Together, these studies have highlighted the need for multiscale and integrative frameworks capable of bridging material analysis, environmental context and conservation practice.

Thanks to its rich archaeological and vernacular earthen architectural heritage, Cyprus represents a key case study for advancing current knowledge on earthen architectural practices in the Eastern Mediterranean. In particular, the southern region of the island offers significant potential for investigating long-term continuities and transformations in earthen building traditions across prehistoric, historic and modern contexts. The local geology, characterised by white chalk and marl of the Pachna Formation (Noller 2009), has created favourable conditions for earth-based construction practices. In fact, soils and bedrock derivatives have been traditionally exploited for wall construction, roof systems and surface finishes, resulting in a diversified but technologically coherent earthen architectural tradition. The widespread use of *Havara* (surficial, soft and carbonaceous, clastic rock) and *Kafkalla* (calcium-rich duricrust of pedogenic origin) (Schirmer 1998) constitutes the primary material basis of earthen architecture on the island from the Neolithic period onwards.

Interdisciplinary investigations of archaeological and vernacular earthen structures in southern Cyprus have already demonstrated the analytical potential of combined archaeological, architectural and geoarchaeological approaches (Amadio 2024; Gkouma *et al.* 2021; Lorenzon and Iacovou 2019; Lorenzon *et al.* 2023; Hourani 2003, 2011; Mylona *et al.* 2023, 2021; Philokyprou 2018; Philokyprou and Limbouri-Kozakou 2015; Philokyprou *et al.* 2017). These studies have underscored the strong interdependence between geological resources, construction techniques and architectural performance, while also revealing the vulnerability of earthen structures to environmental and anthropogenic degradation. Nevertheless, despite the growing body of research, systematic and comparative investigations that

explicitly integrate material characterisation, environmental analysis, experimental replication and conservation-oriented testing remain limited.

Within this research landscape, the EARTHERITAGE Project was carried out between February 2024 and February 2026 and was conceived to address this gap by developing a multiscalar and interdisciplinary framework for the study of earthen architecture in Cyprus. The project builds upon a long-term research trajectory at the Middle Bronze Age site of *Erimi-Laonin tou Porakou* (henceforth *Erimi-LtP*), where preliminary archaeological and geoarchaeological investigations of earthen materials have been conducted since 2013 (see Amadio 2017: 259–276, 2024). By combining archaeological and geoarchaeological analyses of prehistoric earthen buildings with detailed geomorphological and pedological investigations of the surrounding landscape, the project generated a comprehensive dataset on raw material procurement, material selection and construction practices. This dataset encompasses a wide range of earthen architectural components, including mudbricks, roofing materials and plasters applied to floor and wall surfaces. This formed the basis for targeted experimental programmes aimed at implementing and testing earthen products derived from local materials, with the explicit goal of evaluating their suitability for sustainable conservation and preservation strategies.

In doing so, the project contributes not only to the reconstruction of past building knowledge but also to the development of context-sensitive approaches for safeguarding earthen architectural heritage in Cyprus and more broadly in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Research framework and analytical approach

This study builds on the research activities carried out within a two-year programme dedicated to advancing current knowledge of earthen architecture in Cyprus. The research was centred on the integrated analysis, documentation and conservation-oriented assessment of earthen architectural heritage, combining archaeological, geoarchaeological and architectural perspectives. A multiscalar analytical framework was applied to prehistoric earthen architecture from the Middle Bronze Age site of *Erimi-LtP* (c. 1950–1650 BC) (Bombardieri 2017) (Figure 1), selected as a key case study due to the good preservation of its earthen structures. The research was conducted within the framework of the EARTHERITAGE Project. Activities were developed as a joint research initiative involving the Universities of Siena, Genova and Palermo, each contributing complementary expertise in archaeological investigation, geoarchaeological analysis and architectural and material studies. This institutional collaboration enabled the integration of field-based observations, laboratory analyses and applied architectural research within a coherent methodological framework.

The analytical strategy adopted in this study is structured around three interconnected sets of approaches, designed to address earthen architecture as both a material and cultural phenomenon and as a resource for sustainable heritage preservation. These approaches combine (1) archaeological and geoarchaeological analyses of earthen building materials and construction techniques, (2) geomorphological and pedological investigations aimed at reconstructing the environmental context of raw material procurement and (3) experimental and architectural studies focused on the implementation and testing of earthen products for conservation purposes. Together, these methods allow for the examination of production choices, technological knowledge and material performance, while also assessing the potential transferability of past building practices to present-day conservation strategies (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Aerial photograph of Middle Bronze Age Erimi, in the Kouris Valley, Cyprus (Erimi Archaeological Project Archive).

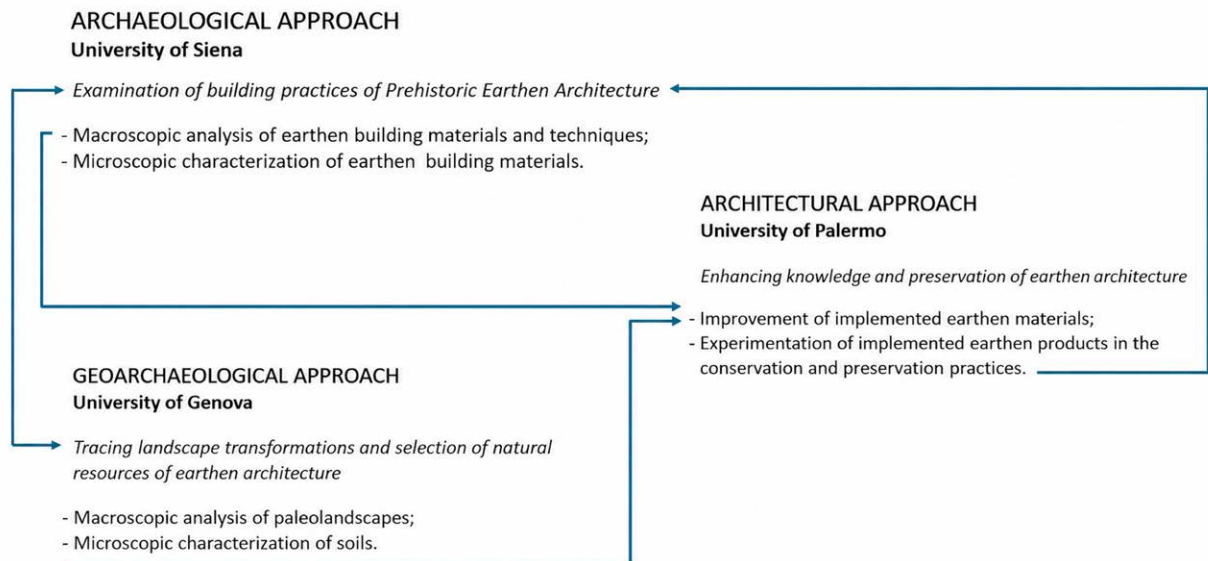


Figure 2. Graphs showing the three intertwined research approaches applied in this study.



Figure 3. Macroscopic analysis and documentation of mudbrick samples during fieldwork activities (EARTHERITAGE Project Archive).

Archaeological and material analytical approach

The archaeological component of this study focuses on the scientific examination of earthen architectural remains preserved in the prehistoric archaeological record of Cyprus. The Middle Bronze Age site of Erimi-LtP constitutes the primary context of investigation, serving as both a case study for the analysis of ancient earthen construction practices and a reference framework for evaluating preservation and conservation strategies. Rather than being treated solely as a conservation target, Erimi-LtP is approached as an analytical laboratory for examining the materials, techniques and organisational choices underpinning earthen architecture in antiquity.

Archaeological analyses were structured according to multiple and increasing scales of observation and combined in-field recording with laboratory-based investigations. Fieldwork activities included systematic macroscopic examination and documentation of prehistoric earthen structures at Erimi-LtP, with particular attention to construction techniques, architectural layouts and the main constitutive elements of walls, floors and associated features (Figure 3). This phase aimed to reconstruct technological practices and material choices related to the production and use of mudbricks and other earthen building materials, such as plasters and roofing components. Observations from Erimi-LtP were contextualised through comparison with published evidence from other prehistoric sites in Cyprus and the wider Eastern Mediterranean.

Field investigations also involved a targeted sampling strategy designed to capture variability in production modes and construction practices. Earthen building materials were sampled from both domestic units and productive or communal architectural contexts within the settlement. This comparative approach allowed for the examination of potential differences between household-level



Figure 4. Micromorphological sampling of a paleosol buried by a *Havara* deposit in the Kouris Valley during the geoarchaeological activities (EARTHERITAGE Project Archive).

and supra-household or communal building practices, contributing to broader discussions on labour organisation and social dynamics within Middle Bronze Age communities on the island. Archaeological fieldwork and sampling were carried out in close coordination with geological investigations, enabling continuous data exchange and the refinement of in-field analytical strategies.

Macroscopic observations were complemented by high-resolution laboratory analyses aimed at achieving a comprehensive characterisation of the sampled earthen materials. These analyses included: (a) micromorphological investigation of thin sections (Figure 4), (b) particle size analysis, (c) elemental characterisation through X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF) and Electron Microscopy coupled with Energy Dispersive Spectroscopy (SEM-EDS), and (d) mineralogical and molecular analyses using X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) and Fourier-Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR). The integration of these methods enabled the reconstruction of raw material selection, preparation techniques and manufacturing processes, providing a robust analytical basis for interpreting technological knowledge and construction practices in prehistoric Cypriot earthen architecture.

Geoarchaeological and landscape analytical approach

The geoarchaeological component of this study investigates human-environment interactions within the broader landscape of the Kouris Valley, where *Erimi-LtP* is located. Geomorphological and pedo-stratigraphic analyses were employed to reconstruct landscape evolution, sedimentary processes and soil formation dynamics relevant to both settlement development and raw material procurement.

The geomorphological analysis involved the production of a standardised geomorphological map, developed within a GIS environment combining the interpretation of stereo-aerial photographs and

field survey in the selected area to characterise the different morphologies. This mapping strategy enabled the identification of landforms generated by fluvial, colluvial and other surface processes, the assessment of the spatial distribution of erosional and depositional dynamics, and the reconstruction of palaeo-landscape evolution during the Holocene. Chronological constraints on sedimentary processes were obtained through the combined use of artefacts embedded within alluvial and colluvial deposits as relative chronological markers and selected radiocarbon analyses, providing numeric age estimates for major landscape formation and infill events.

Soil chronosequences and toposequences (catenas) were analysed to establish stratigraphic control and to correlate geomorphic units across the study area. In parallel, statistical analyses of spatial relationships between archaeological site locations and mapped geomorphic units were conducted to assess potential correlations between settlement patterns and specific landscape features. These procedures allowed for the integration of geomorphological data with archaeological evidence at a regional scale.

Geomorphological results were combined with newly acquired pedological data to construct a pedo-landscape map illustrating the spatial and temporal distribution of soils within the Kouris Valley. This dataset provided a key reference framework for evaluating the provenance of raw materials used in earthen architectural structures at Erimi-LtP. Soil samples collected from stratigraphically described horizons (Figure 4) were analysed using a suite of complementary laboratory techniques, including soil micromorphology, particle size distribution, pH, total carbonate content, total organic carbon and nitrogen, cation exchange capacity and concentrations of extracted chemical elements, as well as micromorphological, XRD and SEM-EDS analyses.

The resulting pedological and geochemical data were systematically compared with analytical results obtained from archaeological earthen materials. This integrated approach enabled the identification of shared compositional and mineralogical signatures, contributing to the reconstruction of raw material sourcing strategies and to the definition of the geological ‘fingerprint’ of earthen building materials used in Middle Bronze Age Cyprus.

Architectural and experimental conservation approach

The architectural component of this study integrates technical experimentation on earthen materials with applied testing of their use in conservation and preservation practices. These two dimensions are closely interrelated and were developed to bridge material performance studies with conservation-oriented architectural applications. At a technical level, the research focused on improving the mechanical behaviour and durability of earthen bricks, while at a technological level, it explored the applicability of the resulting materials within experimental conservation contexts.

Technical experimentation was directed at enhancing the mechanical strength and reducing the vulnerability of earthen bricks through the controlled addition of stabilising agents to the raw earth mixtures. Building on previous research, this study investigated the use of nanoparticles as stabilisers, with particular attention to Laponite®, a ‘natural-synthetic’ layered silicate (Scalisi and Sposito 2015). Two stabilising formulations were tested: a commercially available laponite and a laboratory-modified variant obtained through chemical surface treatment. In order to maintain a sustainability-oriented approach, chitosan was selected as a green polycation derived from renewable resources and industrial by-products of shrimp processing (Aguilar *et al.* 2016; Cavallaro *et al.* 2021; Zavaleta *et al.* 2024).

Hybrid laponite-chitosan nanomaterials were prepared following ratios defined by surface charge measurements and colloidal stability analyses of the mixtures. Experimental protocols were grounded in the characterisation of both raw natural materials and archaeological samples, ensuring methodological consistency with traditional earthen construction practices. Experimental brick specimens were

produced using two manufacturing techniques: hand-moulded bricks formed by placing the mixture into moulds and compacting it manually, and compressed blocks manufactured using mechanical presses. All soil types employed in the experiments were sampled from the Kouris Valley area in southern Cyprus, ensuring coherence with the geological and pedological context of the archaeological case study.

The experimental samples were subjected to a series of physical and mechanical tests, and the results were compared both across sample types and with reference values reported in the literature. Material durability was assessed through exposure to natural weathering agents and through accelerated ageing tests conducted under controlled laboratory conditions. Following ageing procedures, specimens were re-tested to evaluate changes in physical and mechanical performance relative to unaged samples.

The results provide a basis for defining future directions in the sustainable conservation and valorisation of earthen heritage in Cyprus and the wider Eastern Mediterranean.

Results

The integrated archaeological, geoarchaeological and architectural analyses produced a coherent and multi-layered dataset that significantly advances current understanding of earthen construction practices in prehistoric Cyprus. Archaeological and material analyses of the Middle Bronze Age architecture at Erimi-LtP documented a high degree of technological consistency in the selection, preparation and use of earthen materials, while also revealing variability linked to functional contexts and construction scales (Amadio *et al.* forthcoming).

Geoarchaeological investigations in the Kouris Valley resulted in a detailed reconstruction of the geomorphological and pedological framework of the area (Rellini *et al.* forthcoming). The combined geomorphological mapping, soil analyses and stratigraphic correlations clarified Holocene landscape evolution and sedimentary dynamics, providing essential contextual data for interpreting settlement location, raw material availability and post-depositional processes. The pedo-landscape reconstruction demonstrated a strong correspondence between locally available soil resources and the compositional characteristics of archaeological earthen building materials, allowing for the definition of a geological and geochemical fingerprint for raw material procurement strategies (Ghislandi *et al.* forthcoming).

Experimental and architectural investigations are currently generating a growing body of data on the performance of stabilised compressed earthen blocks. Preliminary observations emerging from the analytical programme and the reviewed literature indicate measurable improvements in mechanical behaviour and durability, particularly in terms of compressive strength and resistance to weathering, depending on the adopted mix design and stabilisation strategy (Germanà and D'Amore 2025). These trends are being further examined through ongoing laboratory testing to better characterise material responses under standard conditions. Architectural experimentation at Erimi is ongoing and is conceived as an exploratory assessment of the potential applicability of the experimental materials within conservation-oriented archaeological contexts.

Conclusive remarks

Overall, the results highlight the potential analytical value of a multiscalar and interdisciplinary methodological framework for the study of earthen architecture. The integration of material characterisation, geoarchaeological landscape analysis and experimental conservation-oriented research enables a more contextualised interpretation of earthen building materials and construction practices, relating technological choices to environmental settings and architectural performance. While architectural experimentation and material performance assessments are still in progress, the ongoing experimental work is expected to contribute comparative data relevant to discussions of

material compatibility and durability in conservation contexts. Taken together, these results support the applicability of integrated approaches for improving both archaeological interpretation and the development of informed, context-sensitive strategies for the conservation of earthen architectural heritage in Cyprus and the wider Eastern Mediterranean.

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Productive and Social Practices in Prehistoric and Protohistoric Earthen Building presents new perspectives on one of the most widespread yet historically undervalued forms of construction. Bringing together contributions from leading researchers, the volume explores the production, use and social significance of earthen architecture across a wide range of prehistoric and protohistoric contexts.

Drawing on evidence from the Mediterranean, Europe, the Near East and South America, the chapters examine construction techniques, architectural traditions, domestic and monumental structures, and adopt approaches including experimental reconstruction and the application of advanced archaeometric and micromorphological techniques. Together, they reveal how earthen buildings provide unique insights into technological innovation, cultural interaction, collective labour and the organisation of past communities.

The volume also considers the continuing relevance of earthen building traditions within contemporary debates on heritage management and sustainable construction, demonstrating the enduring value of these ancient practices in addressing modern challenges.

María Pastor Quiles is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Alicante, focused on earth construction techniques in the late prehistoric Iberian Peninsula. She has also carried out research on the various uses of mud in domestic contexts, being broadly interested in the study of materials, production processes, technology, ethnoarchaeology, and experimental archaeology.

Lucía Ruano Posada is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Lisbon, focused on the archaeology of domestic construction during late prehistory, specifically examining the technical processes of earthen building and the functional organisation of household spaces.

Alejandra Sánchez-Polo is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Valladolid whose work is defined by a multidisciplinary approach that combines documentary sources, archaeological analysis, and cutting-edge geoarchaeological techniques. With a particular focus on domestic architecture, her research explores construction practices, material choices, and ritual practices in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages of Iberia.

Marta Mateu Sagués is an archaeologist and director of the Sant Jaume excavations. Currently, she is a GRAP collaborator (University of Barcelona), and an affiliated researcher at the ICAC. Having completed several postdoctoral fellowships, including in Mexico, she specialises in micromorphology and earthen architecture. Her research explores protohistoric domestic spaces and construction techniques, notably through the MICRODOM project, applying micromorphological analysis to northwestern Mediterranean settlements. She actively promotes academic dissemination.

