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Edited by

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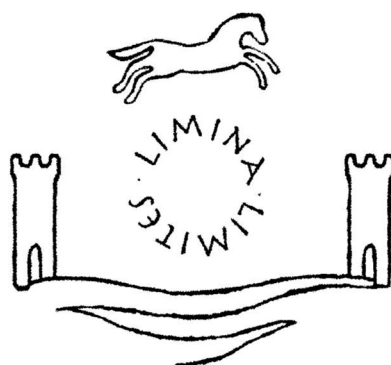




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Chapter 6

The Settlement of Contrada Castro (Corleone, Palermo) between the Byzantine and Islamic Periods (7th-11th c. AD)

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Introduction: The Harvesting Memories project ‘Ecology and Archaeology of Monti Sicani landscapes (central-western Sicily)’

Since 2015, a fruitful collaboration between a private bio-farm, Bona Furtuna LLC, the University of Palermo and the ‘Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA.’ has been established within the ‘Harvesting Memories’ project, which is focused on the study of long-term landscape transformations as a result of the diachronic interaction between human socio-economic patterns and environmental and ecological trends.¹ The project study area is located in the Sicani Mountains, specifically in a rural zone between the municipalities of Corleone and Campofiorito (Province of Palermo). The whole project area measures approximately 300 hectares, inside the Bona Furtuna estate, and includes Contrada Castro, Contrada Giardinello and Contrada Valle Fredda, which extends up the slopes of Monte Barraù (or Monte Barracù), a Special Conservation Zone (ZCS) of the Monti Sicani district (fig. 1).

The study area is quite diverse from a bioclimatic point of view, presenting different gradients from lower mesomediterranean (upper dry) to lower supramediterranean (lower subhumid).² The landforms were shaped by frequent changes in geological strata, such as the alternation of clayey or marly hills and calcareous reliefs in the Mesozoic Era (Sicana facies). This has resulted in a sequence of hills with gentle

slopes that are irregularly interrupted by isolated mountains with steep, if not abrupt, slopes, which reach the considerable height of 1420 m a.s.l. (Monte Barraù). The rural landscape is heterogeneous due to its environmental variability and centuries of human activities involving natural resource exploitation. The ecological characteristics of Contrada Castro and Contrada Giardinello – particularly rich in freshwater springs – offer optimal conditions for agricultural exploitation, sylvo-pastoral activities and historical human settlement. The area is an example of traditional Mediterranean farmland with a mosaic of arable land, olive groves, vineyards, mixed crops, fruit orchards and agro-forestry systems. A few remains of a holm oak forest, which once probably covered the area, are located on the southern slopes of Monte Barraù. Indeed, a Latin manuscript (5 October 1428) of the *Tabularium* of the monastery of Santa Maria del Bosco di Calatamauro (the owner of the area since at least the end of the 14th century) mentions a forest covering Mount Barraù.³ Today, the forest consists of a coppice of *Quercus ilex* characterised by a 5-10 m high closed woody layer and includes *Viburnum tinus* in the shrubby undergrowth. The agro-sylvo-pastoral system also includes extensive grasslands and garrigues dominated by *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* due to grazing and repeated burning of the vegetation.⁴

The case study area in the Corleone area of central-west Sicily has a long tradition of settlements, such as the renowned site of Montagna Vecchia⁵ and 30 settlements spanning from prehistory to the medieval period.⁶

¹ Castrorao Barba, Rotolo, Bazan, Marino and Vassallo 2017; Castrorao Barba, Rotolo, Bazan, Marino and Vassallo 2018a; Castrorao Barba, Miccichè, Pisciotta, Marino, Bazan, Aleo Nero and Vassallo 2018b; Castrorao Barba, Miccichè, Pisciotta, Speciale, Aleo Nero, Marino and Bazan 2020.

² Bazan, Marino, Guarino, Domina and Schicchi 2015.

³ Arcadipane, Balletta and Miceli 1991.

⁴ Bazan, Castrorao Barba, Rotolo and Marino 2018a.

⁵ D’Angelo and Spatafora 1995.

⁶ Spatafora 1997.

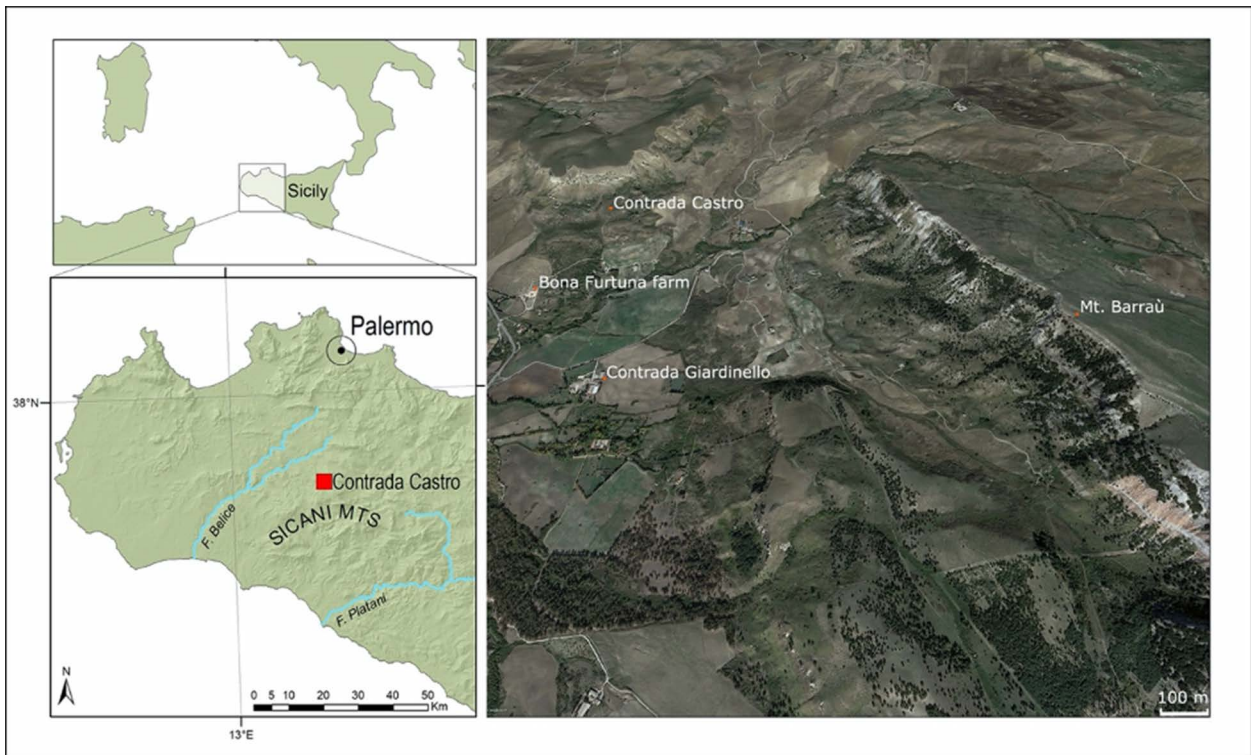


Figure 1 – Map and location of the case study area (Contrada Castro, Corleone, Palermo)

Within this huge district, our area was almost pristine from an archaeological point of view; the only known archaeological site was a small, allegedly prehistoric settlement located on the southern slopes of Rocche di Castro.

The Alto Belice Corleonese district probably acted as a hinge between the southern and northern coasts of Sicily. It is likely that a network of roads between Palermo and Agrigento had been established by the Roman period,⁷ as became apparent in the medieval period.⁸

In fact, it is not a coincidence that the first historical mention of the area dates to the Middle Ages. The toponym *Ra's Bū l-rakhū*, latinized into *Burrachu*,⁹ is cited in the *jarīda* of Monreale (1182 AD), a Sicilian medieval counterpart of a contemporary land register written in Latin and Arabic, which describes the boundaries (*divisae*) of the lands of Jato, Corleone, Battellaro and Calatrasi, which were donated by the Norman King William II to the Abbey of Santa Maria Nuova of Monreale.¹⁰ This toponym shows a clear Arabic origin, with a possible derivation from a former Greek toponym: *Ra's* and *Jabal Bū l-rakhū*, latinized into *Burrachu*. In the part of the *jarīda* that describes the

boundaries of the *Divisa Ialcii* (District of Jato) and the toponym *Burrachu*, it is possible to identify several other micro-toponyms of the area.¹¹ The reference to Monte Barraù is related to a dispute about the localization of *Qal'at Jālšū* (Calatjalci) which, according to Maurici, may be identified with Pizzo Cangialoso.¹²

The 'Harvesting Memories' project's field surveys¹³ (fig. 2), conducted within the boundaries of the Bona Furtuna, LLC, estate, led to the identification of 16 sites of human occupation dating from Protohistory to the Middle Ages to the Modern period. In particular, we identified and delimited 12 areas of concentrated pottery (Sites 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12 and 16) and 4 areas with architectural evidence (Sites 10, 13, 14 and 15).

A particular site in Contrada Castro (Site 5) emerged among the others for its location on top of a small hill in the foothills of the southern slopes of Rocche di Castro/Rocche di Mezzogiorno, its topographical shape as a plateau, with a clear visual connection with other important settlements such as Rocca di Entella and the Castellaccio di Campofiorito and the presence of 10th-11th century sherds of pottery (within few

⁷ Verbrugge 1976.

⁸ Uggeri 2001.

⁹ Caracausi 1994; Nef 2011.

¹⁰ Johns 2002.

¹¹ Cusa 1868-82.

¹² Maurici 1987; Maurici 1998.

¹³ Castrorao Barba, Rotolo, Marino, Vassallo and Bazan 2016; Castrorao Barba, Rotolo, Bazan, Marino and Vassallo 2017.

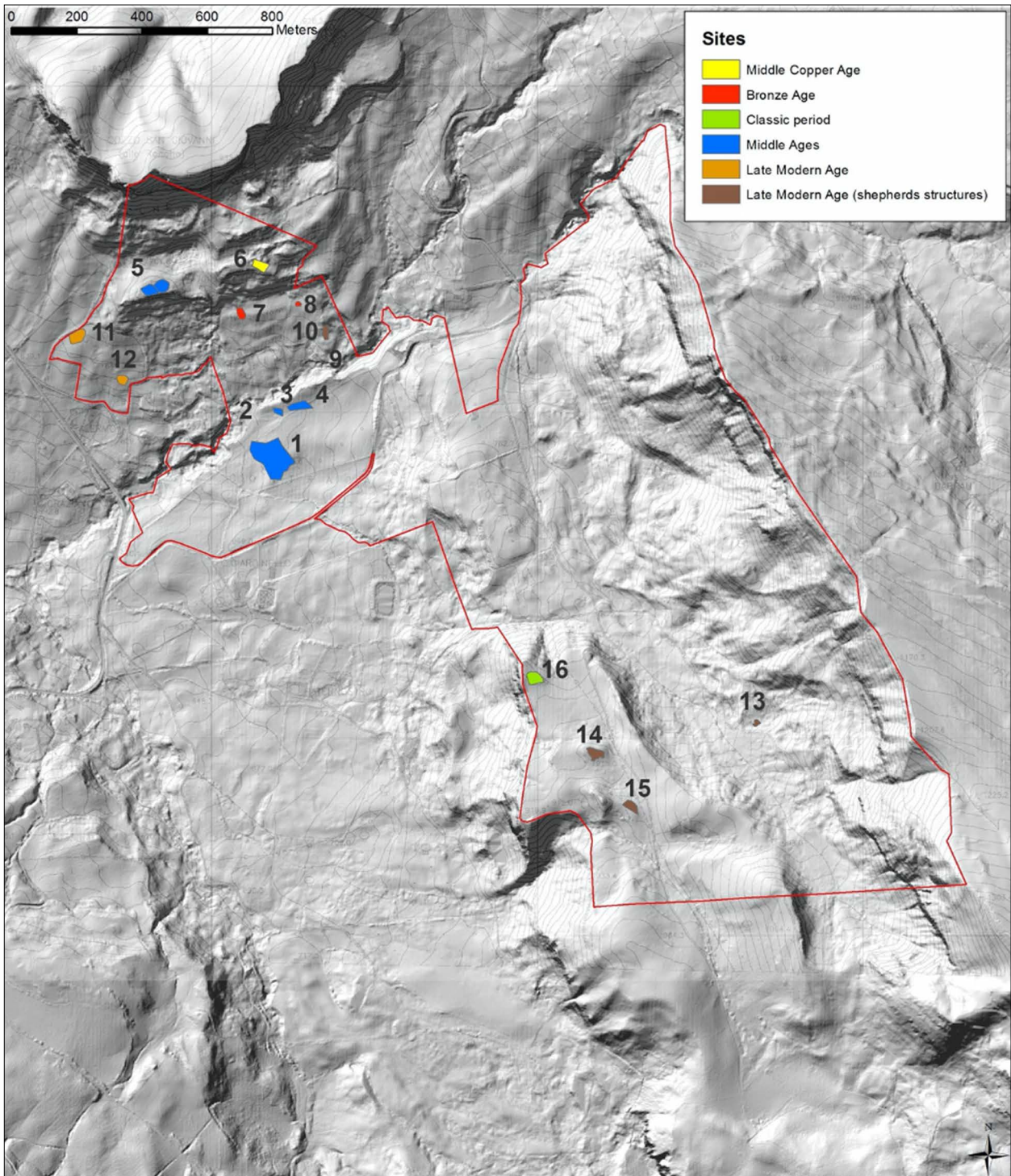


Figure 2 – Map of archaeological sites identified during the field survey

fragments of black gloss pottery). It was in this site that archaeological excavations started in 2017.¹⁴

In this paper, we present some results and data, some of them still in-progress, about the archaeological

evidence related to the early medieval occupation of the site between the 8th and 11th c. AD.

The archaeological excavation in Contrada Castro

The site of Contrada Castro extends over a flat, raised, east-west plateau (0.54 ha). In the north, it is adjacent to a sinkhole that separates it from the steep slopes of

¹⁴ Castrorao Barba, Miccichè, Pisciotta, Marino, Bazan, Aleo Nero and Vassallo 2018b.

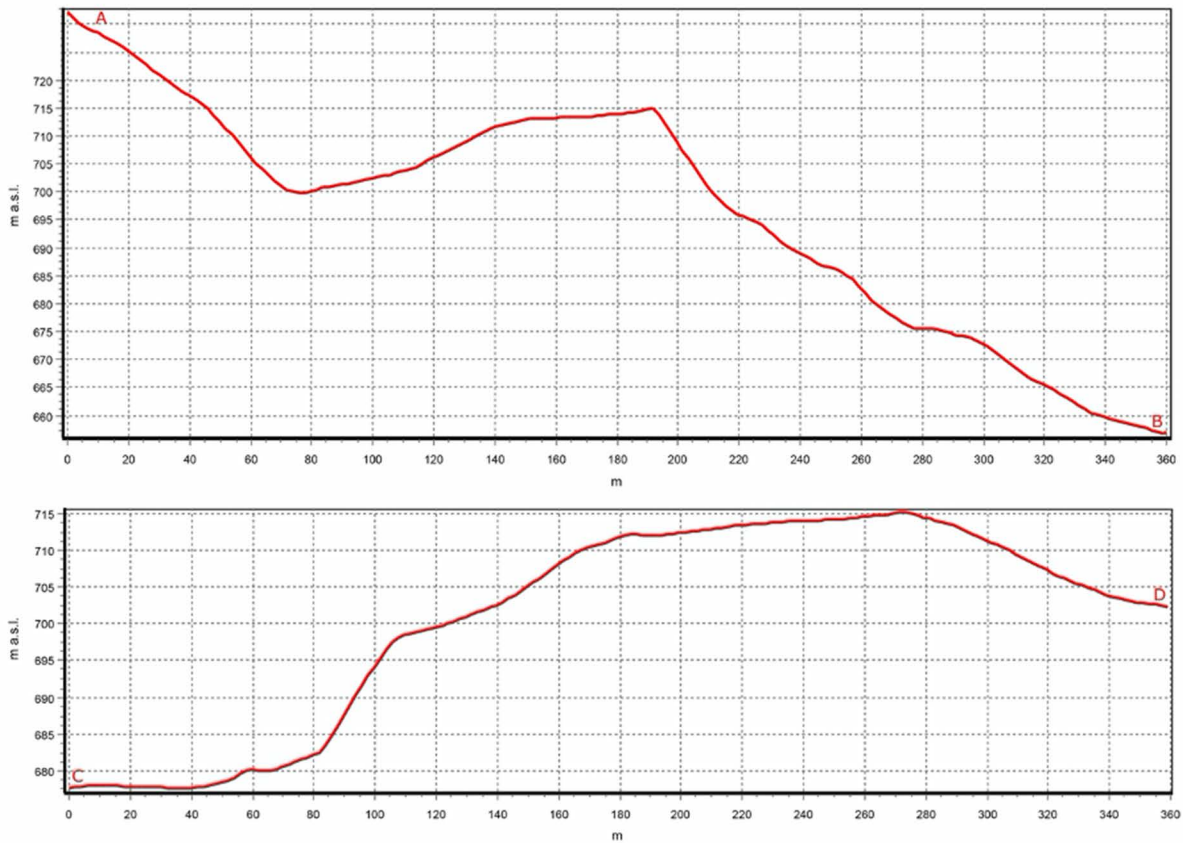


Figure 3 – Location of the site in Contrada Castro (Corleone, Palermo) and N-S and W-E profiles

Pizzo Castro/Rocche of Mezzogiorno, and in the south, there is an almost vertical slope towards the valley of the Giardinello torrent (fig. 3). The site is more accessible from the west via a non-carriage path and from the east via a dirt road built in recent years.

The site occupies a defensible and strategic position, but at the same time, is directly connected with underlying valleys that are potentially exploitable for agriculture and crossed by possible road axes in this sector of the Sicani Mountains. This plateau is occupied by the remains of interconnected enclosures with 1-m high dry walls formed by square blocks of various sizes

installed under dry conditions, which are related to transhumant herding activities.

In 2017 and 2018 (partially also in 2019), a first excavation area was opened in the southeastern part of the plateau. The open area excavation has revealed a long history of the hill that, after occupation in the 6th-5th c. BC, was reoccupied during the Byzantine and Islamic periods (7th – 11th c. AD) (fig. 4).

From the findings made up to the summer of 2019, the most ancient evidence of the site's occupation dates back to the pre-Roman period (late 6th-4th c. BC) and

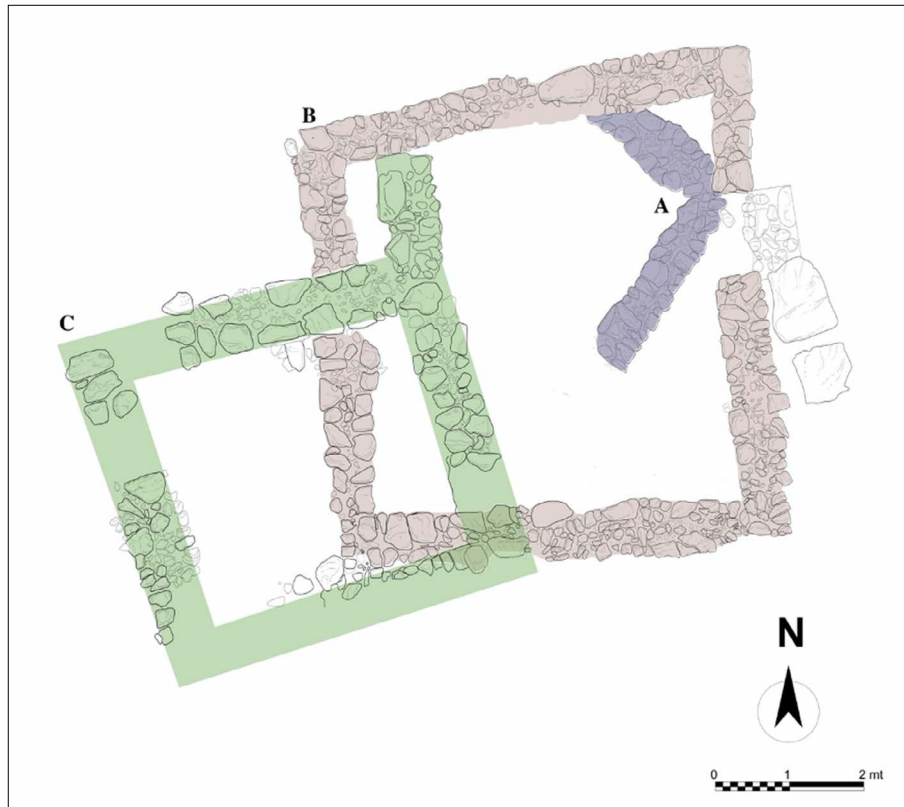


Figure 4 – Occupation sequence of the Contrada Castro settlement: a) 6th-5th century BC; b) late 8th-9th century AD; c) 10th-11th century AD

is testified by some ceramic finds related to a collapsed squared/rectangular building.

After a long hiatus, according to the current survey and excavation data, the site was reoccupied in the Byzantine period.

The only evidence above the classical period layers is represented by two peri-natal burials (fig. 5); the death of these individuals occurred at a gestational age of 40 ± 2 weeks. The first one was found in a layer cut by the southwestern walls of a later building (which we will discuss below). It is a simple oval burial with a northeast-southwest orientation containing a child lying partially on his right side, with the upper part of the body (trunk and head) rotated in a semi-prone position. The skeleton did not show any traces connected with the potential presence of a shroud or a bandage wrapped around the body. According to a radiocarbon analysis of bone samples, the individual's death dates to the 7th-early 8th c. AD (sigma 1 (65%) AD 662-AD 778; sigma 2 (95%) AD 620-AD 906). This chronology is further confirmed by the discovery of a roof tile decorated with stamped striations typical of the Byzantine period in Sicily¹⁵ on the surface of the layer where the burial was cut.

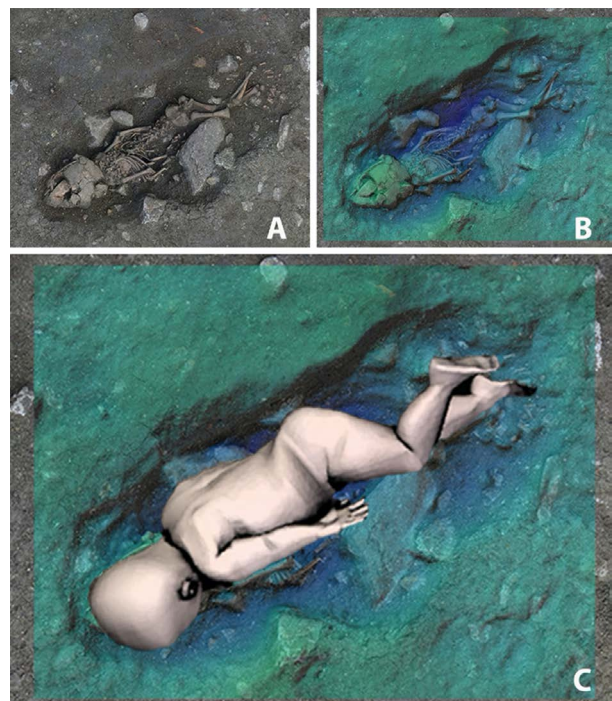


Figure 5 – Byzantine infant burial: a) orthophotograph; b) DEM generated using photogrammetry; and c) reconstruction of body position of the infant in the burial

¹⁵ Arcifa 2010.

Preliminary genetic data produced by the Laboratory of Molecular Anthropology and Paleogenetics, Department of Biology, University of Florence showed that the skeletal remains from Corleone still contain well preserved endogenous DNA. Therefore, it was possible to determine that the individual was male and that his mitochondrial DNA belonged to the rare sub-clade HV4a2b of haplogroup HV4, belonging to the macro-haplogroup HV*, which is more frequent in the Middle East.

The other peri-natal inhumation was found in the northeast corner of the building, which was built in a subsequent period and whose construction activities affected this earlier sepulchral context. The skeleton, north-south oriented, was laid in a dorsal decubitus. The skull was slightly facing east. The upper right limb was folded up, with the hand under the face, while the upper left limb was only represented by the humerus, which was laterally placed along the axis of the body. The lower limbs, only partially recovered, were disturbed by subsequent activities that did not allow a satisfactory interpretation of their original position. However, the presence of the proximal part of the right

femur cautiously would suggest a spread position of the lower limbs. The maintenance of the main anatomical connections would indicate a decomposition of the body in a full space.

The occurrence of these two perinatal burials opens many interpretive questions about the use of this area (a marginal zone dedicated to infant burials due to an extremely high infantile mortality during childbirth?) and the settlement layout in this early Byzantine period.

Apparently not much later (probably the second half of the 8th c. AD), a squared 5x5 m building with two pottery kilns was constructed in this area (fig.6).

This building is partially sunken, cut in the bedrock in the south and in an earlier layer in the west, while the entrance to the building is open on the east side through a sort of sloping ramp. In the first phase, the building was probably not entirely covered, perhaps only a roof of tiles on some sides and, inside it, only craft activities related to pottery and tile production took place. In fact, in the south side of the building, the

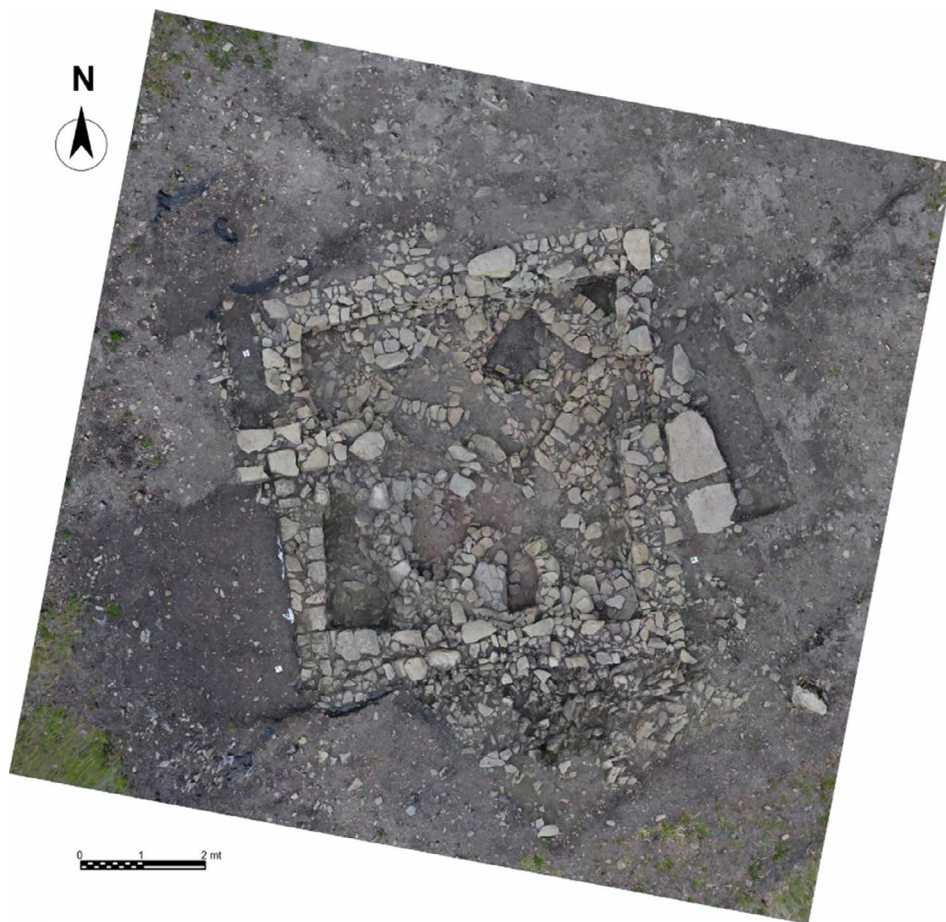


Figure 6 – Orthophoto of the squared building within the remains of the two productive kilns in the southeastern corner

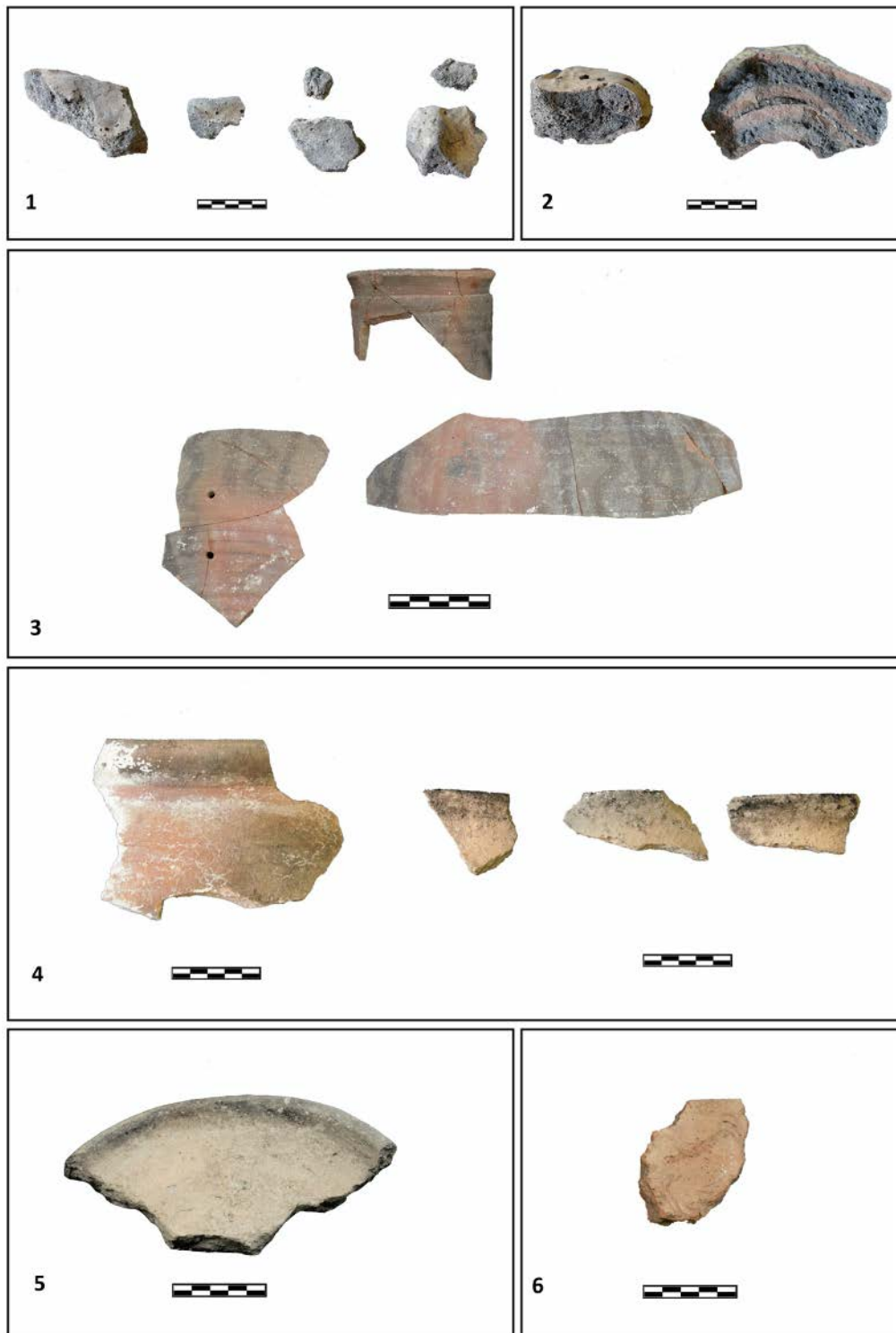


Figure 7 – Early medieval pottery: 1-2) late 8th-9th c. sherds of pottery production waste; 3-6) 9th century painted amphora; cooking pot; flat bread baking plate; combed tile with grass inclusions

remains of two circular kilns were found, connected to burnished layers and a good amount of production waste (fig. 7, 1-2).

A first kiln (diameter 1.26 m) was dismissed soon and another one (diameter 1.12 m), well preserved, was

built nearby. This latter kiln presented a circular stone-structure. Immediately in front of the kiln's mouth the soil was strongly reddened by solid ash layers full of charcoal linked to combustion processes. One of the charcoal pieces, a fragment of the small shrub *Pistacia* sp., was radiocarbon dated, which confirmed the use

of the building between the second half of the 8th and the 9th centuries (sigma 1 (65%) AD 774-AD 878; sigma 2 (95%) AD 762-AD 900). The inner part of the firing chamber and the dome were probably made of a yellow clay that also created a sort of curb around a pilaster made in stone to support a probable cooking floor.

Evidence of a cooking floor was not found because, during a second phase, the building was transformed: the western entrance was closed – some restoration traces are recognizable also in the eastern walls – a new earth floor covered the disused southeastern kiln, and the other was converted into a cooking oven (for bread?), and in the northern part a base for a hearth was added.

Fragments of loop-motif painted amphorae with sinusoidal decoration and ollae (cooking pots) and so-called *testi* – flat bread baking plates – in ceramic and stone belonging to the same phase have also been found (fig. 7, 3-4-5).

This building completely collapsed as attested by a thick stone layer. In association with this layer, cooking pots such as ollae, a flask painted with sinusoidal bands as well as a fragment of a combed tile with grass inclusions have been found (fig. 7, 6). Radiocarbon analysis of an animal bone found in this layer indicates a probable chronology of the collapse during the 9th century (sigma 1 (65%) AD 800-AD 878; sigma 2 (95%) AD 766-AD 897).



Figure 8 – Orthophotograph generated using a photogrammetric procedure with the stone layer, in particular, the walls of a medieval building (10th-11th century AD) were already partially visible

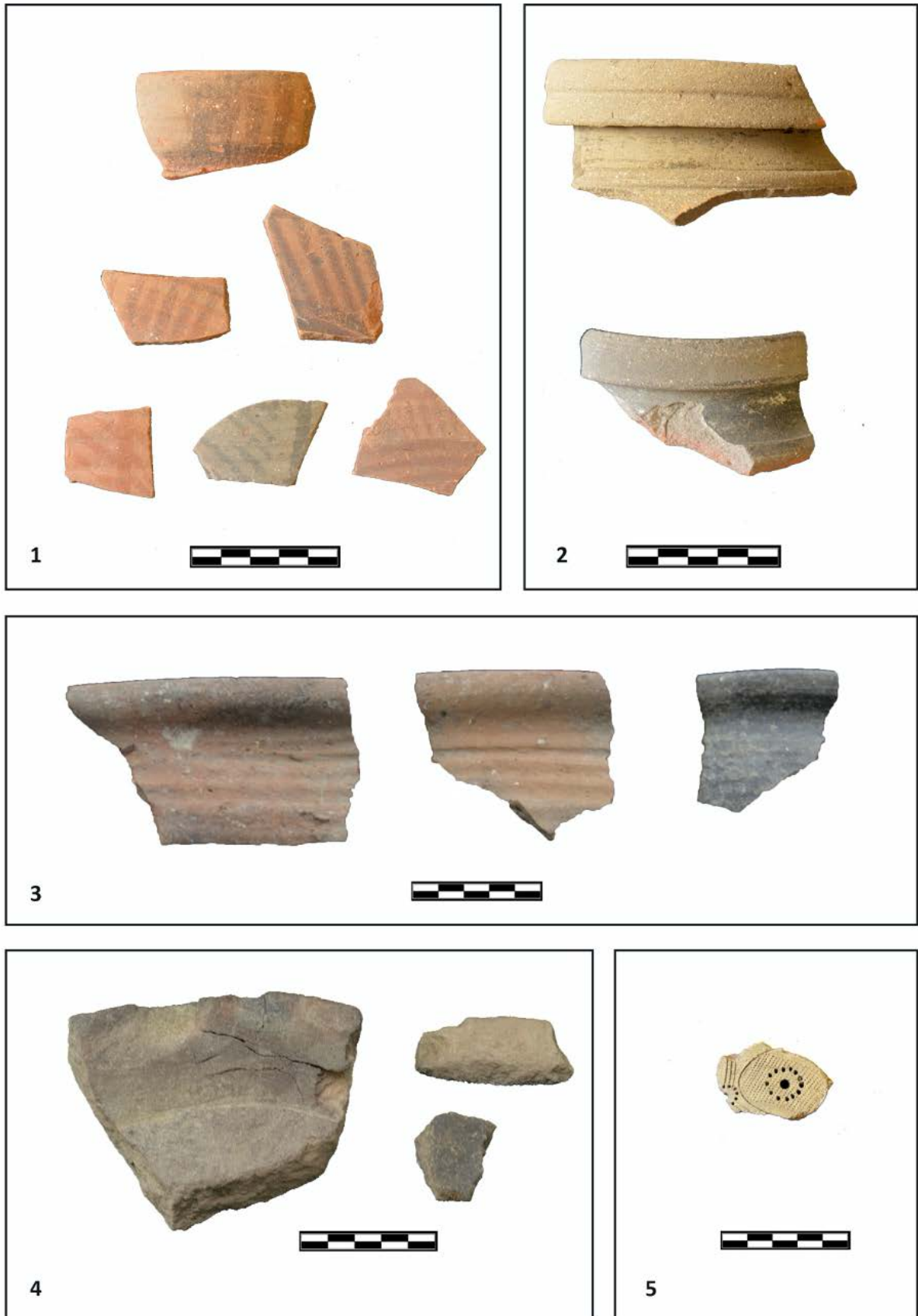


Figure 9 – Islamic period pottery (10th-11th century AD): 1-2) painted amphorae; 3-4) cooking pot (olla); 5) lithic flat bread baking plate; 6) jug with filter

After the collapse of the structure, some layers with many sherds of pottery and animal bones probably indicate the transition to a new occupation period, related to another building with a completely different orientation than the previous one. This new building was preserved in a single foundation row and was, presumably, made in two different periods (fig. 8), as will be further explained.

During the first construction stage, an east-west wall (approximately 2.95 m in length) consisting of a single line made up of two outer faces formed of large blocks put in place from the flat side (thickness of approximately 0.8 m) was built. The structure was formed by a continuous wall interrupted in the west by a wide gap of 1.15 m filled by materials from the upper layer, after which it continues, with the same orientation, into a strip of wall 0.9 m long and 0.7 m wide that may have functioned as a threshold 0.85 m wide. After the first building stage, two rough walls made of medium dry-stones were attached: on the east side, there was a north-south wall approximately 3.5 m long and 0.65 m wide; on the west side, there was a north-south wall approximately 2.06 m long and 0.68 m wide. The structures of this building and the life layer of this period are very badly preserved and heavily damaged by post-abandonment spoliations and agricultural activities. In fact, a stone layer found below a dark layer full of findings, immediately under the top-soil surface, was a result of the spoliation and levelling of medieval structures after the abandonment of the site and perhaps, during the construction of the shepherd's enclosures, which may have been built with reused stones. Among the many animal bones from this stone layer, the ones of particular interest included the skeletal elements of a donkey with a radiocarbon date in the 10th-11th century AD (sigma 1 65% AD 965 – AD 1042, sigma 2 95% AD 890 – AD 1159). In addition, several classes of pottery for storage/transport, including fine and coarse ware, cover this chronological range (Islamic period, 10th-11th c. AD).

Among the most frequent shapes are amphorae with enlarged and introflexed rims and external painted decoration in brown or red, which are comparable to those found in some Islamic contexts especially in the Province of Palermo¹⁶ (fig. 9).

Additionally, many common types of pottery, fine-ware and lamps are representative of the Islamic period. In particular, sherds of a mug with a dark surface, a simple carinated bowl with a rounded rim and a fragment of a jug with a filter, which may have been imported from North Africa, lamps with elongated canal nozzles and other planar and circular objects with filling holes

on the domes, which may both have been made in Palermo, were found. The cooking pottery includes a large variety of *olle* (deep cooking-pots) with a brimmed rim and an ovoid body marked on the outside by a series of grooved lines and a few examples of flat-bottomed pots. These types are very frequent in urban contexts of Palermo from the 10th and 11th century AD, found in Castello San Pietro;¹⁷ the Church of the Gancia;¹⁸ the Kalsa district;¹⁹ Piazza Bologna;²⁰ Via Imera.²¹

According to the pottery data, this is the chronology of the last medieval occupation of the site that was only sporadically frequented and then abandoned during the 12th c. AD, and then just partially used for agriculture and shepherding practices until the early 20th century.

Zooarchaeological data

The zooarchaeological analysis was mostly aimed at exploring, in a diachronic perspective, all interactions between human and non-human animals to provide fundamental information on economic and productive aspects of the ancient communities that lived on the Castro hill-top, and their relationship with the surrounding natural environments.²²

Although most of the osteological sample is still under study, it is possible to present a preliminary report that has some interesting evaluations on the husbandry practices and the exploitation of animal resources over the two main periods of occupation of the site (late 8th -9th and 10th -11th centuries AD).

The sample analysed consists of a thousand specimens of which 46% (n.461) was taxonomically attributed at species level. The prevalent presence of domestic species characterised the faunal assemblages for both periods.

The fauna found in the layers attributed to the occupation of the area for the late 8th -9th centuries (fig.10) see the caprovines (*Ovis aries/Capra hircus*) as the most numerous group, which alone constitutes 51% of the identified fraction, followed by pigs (*Sus domesticus*) with 19% and cattle (*Bos taurus* L.) with 16%. The domestic assemblage also includes poultry (*Gallus gallus*) which, together with a group of remains attributed more generically to the order of the galliforms, reaches 8% of the sample examined. Wild animals are little represented, with a distribution between 1% and 2% of the identified fraction and report the presence of hares

¹⁷ Arcifa and Bagnera 2014.

¹⁸ Ardizzone, Pezzini and Sacco 2014.

¹⁹ Spatafora and Canzonieri 2014.

²⁰ Aleo Nero and Chiovaro 2014.

²¹ Ardizzone and Agrò 2014.

²² Castorao Barba, Speciale, Miccichè, Pisciotta, Aleo Nero, Marino and Bazan 2021.

¹⁶ Castello S. Pietro in Palermo, see Arcifa and Bagnera 2014; Corretti, Facella and Mangiaracina 2014.

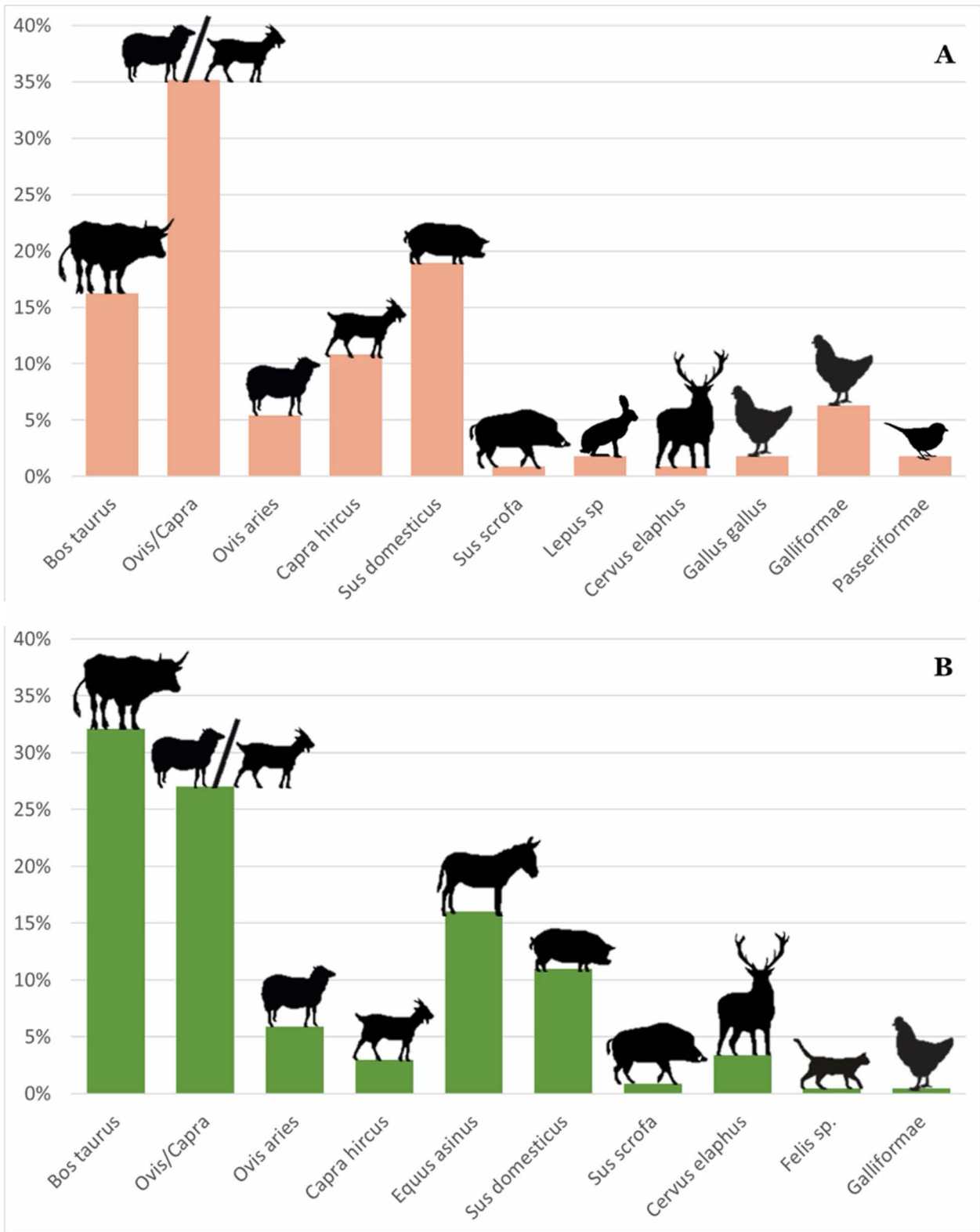


Figure 10 – A) Percentage distribution of identified faunal remains of the late 8th-9th century AD; B) Percentage distribution of identified faunal remains of the 10th-11th century AD

(*Lepus* sp.), deer (*Cervus elaphus* L.), and wild boar (*Sus scrofa* L.).

During the 10th -11th centuries, the distribution of the various *taxa* identified highlights a general continuity with the situation of the late 8th - 9th centuries, although showing significant exceptions (fig. 11). Even though the number of wild species remains extremely low and the percentage of caprovines remains high, the settlement saw a marked increase in cattle during this period. The killing patterns of cattle would suggest herd management mainly aimed at meat production since most of the cattle remains referred to animals killed in sub-adult age. A further discontinuity factor in the distribution of the fauna between the two periods of occupation of the site is the presence of the donkey. Indeed, remains of this equine were found only in the 10th-11th century sample, where they had a fair distribution that reached 13% of the total of the identified remains.

The general picture presented by the zooarchaeological analysis, although still partial and incomplete, would seem to refer to the substantial maintenance of a rural economic model strongly characterised by caprovine husbandry, to which, starting from the 10th century, was joined by the will to significantly increase the economic role of cattle. This change in the exploitation of animal resources could perhaps be an expression of a period of greater economic dynamism in the settlement during the 10th-11th centuries.

Woods exploitation and human-environment interactions

Soil samples for archaeobotanical analyses were selectively collected during the 2017 and 2018 excavation campaigns. For each stratigraphic unit, 8-15 litres were randomly collected on average: only in a particular case - the layers of burnt soil from the kiln - a total sampling of the stratigraphic units was carried out. The preservation of the vegetal remains was quite good, despite 19% of the specimens not being taxonomically identifiable.

Thanks to a comparison with the local current vegetation, 10 species were identified [*Quercus ilex* L., *Quercus virgiliana* (Ten.) Ten., *Pistacia terebinthus* L., *Rhamnus alaternus* L., *Anagyris foetida* L., *Fraxinus ornus* L., *Ulmus minor* Mill., *Acer campestre* L., *Ostrya carpinifolia* Scop., *Sorbus torminalis* (L.) Crantz, *Populus nigra* L.]; identification reached the detail of genus or families in 4 cases (*Phillyrea* sp., *Prunus* sp., *Pyrus* sp., perhaps a species belonging to Moraceae).

The tree vegetation is therefore represented by evergreen oaks, semi- and deciduous oaks, maples, ash trees, associated with riparian species such as

elm, poplar and hornbeam, and shrub species such as buckthorn, terebinth, sorb, plum trees.

In the late 8th-9th century phase, 9 species/genera are present. The holm oak prevails with 35% of the samples and, together with the other oaks, represents 48% of the total. Terebinth makes up 9% of the wood charcoal, and all other species are present at a percentage between 1 and 5%.

Finally, in the second medieval phase (10th-11th centuries), the variability seems slightly greater, with 11 species/genera, but with a clear preponderance in the presence of the holm oak, which in terms of volume constitutes 49% of the total, followed by lower percentages of unidentified oaks, terebinth, poplar, elm, a leguminous plant perhaps identifiable as *Anagyris foetida*. The identification of the mulberry (Moraceae) is more doubtful.

Crossing the archaeobotanical data with the analysis of the current vegetation series allowed us to confirm the possibility of using the phytosociological approach to determine the potential use of the land.²³ The species found in the archaeobotanical record indicate a co-presence in the exploitation of different environments, from the thermophilic forest to the riparian contexts; this variability reflects the current heterogeneity of the area, both in terms of present vegetation and ecological and geomorphological features. The potentially cultivated species represent a very low percentage, consisting of Prunoideae and other Rosaceae (for the latter, the comparison with *Pyrus* sp. is the most likely one);²⁴ for this reason, an exploitation of wild species of these families is presumable, and they are naturally present in the current territory as well. Furthermore, at this phase of analysis, no tree fruits were identified in the archaeobotanical record. On the other hand, the presence of mulberry wood (identified only in a few fragments and therefore indicated here only in a hypothetical way) should stimulate a debate on the introduction of this tree in the local flora.

The holm oak is by far the most exploited species for all the chronological phases, with percentages ranging between 30 and 50%. The massive use on the site of wood species referable to different stages of the holm oak vegetation series clearly indicate an exploitation of the range of this series for silviculture, while the low percentage of woody elements attributable to the series of deciduous oaks allows us to hypothesise a limited use of this forest resource, probably due to the fact that the area of deciduous oaks was intensely deforested to make space for land to be used for

²³ Bazan, Speciale, Castrorao Barba, Cambria, Miccichè and Marino 2020: 3201.

²⁴ Marino, Schicchi, Barone, Raimondo and Domina 2013.

agriculture.²⁵ Agricultural exploitation is documented in the recovered charred seeds of varieties of cereals and legumes, which are representative of cultivation in the area. The data indicates the prevalence of wheat in the cereal diets. The genus *Triticum* (wheat in the generic sense) identified in the samples belongs to the small- and medium-hulled varieties, and also to naked varieties, although it is not possible to clearly distinguish between ‘common’ or ‘bread wheat’ and/or ‘durum’ or ‘pasta wheat’. The relevance of hulled grains could be explained by the persistence of food traditions or other agricultural choices. Another cereal present, although less represented than wheat, is barley. The cultivated landscape, therefore, was characterised by cereal farming, and the identification of a fair number of legumes (beans, ervils, chickpeas, peas, lentils) is an indicator of the practice of crop rotation.

Considering the archaeobotanical data of the same phases from Sicily, the site of Contrada Castro fits well into the context of the sites known so far during the Middle Ages; a high exploitation of wild species is recorded, although the absence of olive trees, a species widespread in the Sicilian countryside,²⁶ and a low percentage of cultivated arboreal species deviates from the average of the sites of western Sicily. This absence could be attributed to the high investment of time and effort and the continuity of work required by some tree cultivation activities and to economic choices, such as the reliance on other staple resources like cereals and pulses.

Conclusions

This discovery of a new site paves the way for new knowledge of the dynamics of settlement patterns in Sicilian rural landscapes under a long-term perspective. The development of hill-top sites or sites in defensible locations that were optimal for controlling valleys was a phenomenon that characterised many parts of central-western Sicily between the archaic and Hellenistic periods.

The first period of occupation of the elevated plateau of Contrada Castro is attested by the late archaic pottery found in the lower layer, which is probably related to the presence of a rural community linked to the exploitation of agro-pastoral resources. Choosing to occupy a location higher than the surrounding area, with a well-defined perimeter, seems to have been linked not only to primary defensive needs but also to the opportunity to occupy a strategic position among hilly areas and plains, perhaps a fertile area suitable for agriculture with the high reliefs of Pizzo Castro or Rocche of Mezzogiorno to the north and Monte Barraù

to the east mainly exploited for pastoral activities. The site of Contrada Castro provides significant and unique evidence of a small archaic settlement that seems to have grown from the need to exploit local resources in a landscape rich in water, fertile soil and productive rural space that created ideal conditions for demographic and settlement development in the Belice Valley and, more generally, in central-western Sicily.

It is very likely that, during the archaic/classical period, the inhabitants of Contrada Castro had to refer to more extensive centres of this area of the Belice Valley, such as Entella (Contessa Entellina)²⁷ and Monte Maranfusa (Roccamena)²⁸ or other sites that are known only through surveys or small excavations and are closer to Contrada Castro: Montagna Vecchia (Corleone),²⁹ Pizzo Nicolosi (Corleone)³⁰ and Monte Triona (Bisacquino).³¹ A not-very-dissimilar settlement to the Contrada Castro site was recently discovered on Castellaccio di Campofiorito,³² a relief located not far from Contrada Castro, which is only three kilometres away. These two sites were probably connected to the indigenous settlement pattern formed by the two large fortified centres mentioned above, which were in a widespread network of sites strategically located to control productive activities.

Furthermore, at the current stage of research, we do not have any evidence of a significant phase during the Hellenistic period, which is apparently in contrast to the data from this part of the island, where there had been a general revival of large settlements and small centres since the mid-4th century BC.

The settlement pattern linked to the selection of reliefs and hills as places for controlling rural districts seems to have changed in the Roman age, when it was characterised by the intensive occupation of low-lying lands associated with potential agricultural productivity and proximity to road networks. A shift in the settlement pattern with the rise of agglomerated hill-top settlements during the early Middle Ages was a global phenomenon³³ that is also documented in the Sicilian landscape.³⁴ In western Sicily, there are several cases of re-establishment of ancient sites located in hilly positions, often after a long hiatus (or significant contraction) during the Roman period and the Byzantine, Islamic and Norman period, for example, at: Pizzo Casa in Campofelice di Fitalia (second half of

²⁵ Bazan, Castrorao Barba, Rotolo and Marino 2018b.

²⁶ Gianguzzi and Bazan 2019; Gianguzzi and Bazan 2020.

²⁷ Nenci 1993.

²⁸ Spatafora 2003.

²⁹ D'Angelo and Spatafora 1995.

³⁰ Vassallo 1984.

³¹ Spatafora, Scarano, Maggiulli and De Giosa 2009.

³² Vassallo and Graditi 2010.

³³ Francovich and Hodges 2003; Quirós Castillo 2009; Christie and Hajnalka 2016.

³⁴ Maurici 1992; Molinari 2016.

6th-early 3rd centuries BC/11th-13th centuries AD);³⁵ Monte Iato in San Giuseppe Jato (8th-1st centuries BC/late antiquity, Byzantine period and 12th-13th centuries AD);³⁶ Monte Maranfusa/Calatrasi in Roccamena (7th-5th centuries BC/11th-14th centuries AD);³⁷ Makella in Marineo (8th-3rd centuries BC/Byzantine period and 11th-12th centuries AD);³⁸ Rocca di Entella in Contessa Entellina (6th-3rd centuries BC/11th-13th centuries AD);³⁹ Castellaccio di Campofiorito (7th-5th centuries BC/12th-15th centuries AD);⁴⁰ Monte Kassar in Castronovo di Sicilia (7th-5th centuries BC/late antiquity and 7th-8th centuries AD).⁴¹

Therefore, the site of Contrada Castro could reflect the dynamics of a rise in hill-top settlements in changed socio-economic contexts that marked a shift compared to the Roman villa system and the later phase characterised by the emergence of large villages – so called agro-towns⁴² – that were probably related to Church estates.⁴³ These large rural agglomerations remained active in the Byzantine period during which, upon the impulse of the State, defensive sites were built across the countryside, including the impressive fortification on Mount Kassar in Castronovo di Sicilia, which dates to the thematic period (late 7th-8th c. AD).

The 7th-early 8th c. perinatal burials at Castro are the only evidence of the first Byzantine (re)occupation of the hill-top plateau. At this stage of our research, it is very difficult and dangerous to suggest any kind of concrete interpretation about the settlement type during the Byzantine period.

The production of pottery and especially of tiles, so concentrated in a short time-frame, may be the sign of a planned and ‘quick’ reorganisation of the site.

The data from the new area (Area B) excavated in Spring 2019 will surely improve our knowledge of the Byzantine period. In fact, a very preliminary interpretation of the excavation is oriented toward interpreting the massive two-room rectangular building as a storage structure with a small paved storage room and a silo dated back to the late 8th and 9th centuries.

If this interpretation is correct, a new interpretative scenario may be built up: could it have been a nucleated village or a military (fortified?) settlement

created during the insecure period before the Muslim invasion of Sicily and then re-organized (or re-settled) in the Aghlabid period after the fall of the closer city of Corleone in AD 840? Also, in this building, as in the structure with the kilns, a second phase of reuse is probably dated to the 9th century.

In Contrada Castro, evidence of a radical change probably did not occur before the 10th century when the previous structure was in ruins and not visible anymore and new buildings were built – in Area A, as well as Area B – with a completely different orientation and not used after the late 11th century.

The early stages of rural settlement during the Aghlabid period (827-910 AD) are poorly known in the archaeological record. Knowledge improves for the phases between the mid-10th and 11th centuries AD when the number of low-land sites increased and hill-top settlements often developed in places that had been long abandoned. The layout of these hill-top Islamic settlements is unclear; fortifications that date to the 10th-11th centuries AD with certainty have not yet been documented, and the internal topography, household articulation, indicators of social hierarchy and presence of public, communal and religious buildings are uncertain.⁴⁴ This reshaping of post-Roman settlement patterns⁴⁵ does not imply a consequent and absolute depopulation of low-lying areas. The occupation of low-lying lands and valleys during the 10th and 11th centuries AD was detected in several field surveys conducted in western Sicily in the Trapani Mountains,⁴⁶ Jato and Belice valleys⁴⁷ inland of Entella.⁴⁸ These low-lying settlements have also been investigated by excavations of new early medieval sites⁴⁹ that were re-occupations of Roman rural complexes⁵⁰ or long-term secondary settlements related to road networks.⁵¹

To conclude, the investigation of this ‘unknown’ site of Contrada Castro reveals new insights into the settlement dynamics before and after the first stage of the Aghlabid

³⁵ Vassallo and Maurici 1987.

³⁶ Isler 1995.

³⁷ Spatafora 2003.

³⁸ Spatafora 1997.

³⁹ Corretti, Michelini and Vaggioli 2010; Corretti, Facella and Mangiaracina 2014.

⁴⁰ Vassallo and Graditi 2010.

⁴¹ Vassallo, De Leo, di Stefano and Graditi 2015; Castrorao Barba 2015; Carver and Molinari 2016.

⁴² Wilson 1990: 232–236.

⁴³ Molinari 2013.

⁴⁴ Molinari 2015.

⁴⁵ Molinari 2009.

⁴⁶ Rotolo and Martín Civantos 2013.

⁴⁷ Alfano 2015.

⁴⁸ Corretti, Michelini and Vaggioli 2010.

⁴⁹ Relevant new excavations have been conducted in Contrada Colimitella (8th-early 13th centuries AD) in Racalmuto-Agrigento (Rizzo, Danile, Romano, Scibona and Zambito 2012) and Rocchicella (8th-9th centuries AD) near Mineo-Catania (Arcifa and Longo 2015).

⁵⁰ Castrorao Barba 2016. Medieval rural settlements (10th-12th centuries AD) re-occupied the Roman sites of Villa del Casale di Piazza Amerina (Pensabene 2010) during the second half of 10th-12th centuries AD and of Caliatà a Montevago during early 11th-13th centuries AD (Castellana 1992).

⁵¹ Contrada San Nicola/Hyccara a Carini was occupied until the 12th century AD (Cucco 2012); Casale San Pietro/Statio Petrina (?) in Castronovo was also occupied until the 14th century AD (Castrorao Barba 2015; Carver, Molinari, Aniceti, Capelli, Colangeli, Driue, Fiorentino, Giovannini, Hummler, Lundy, Meo, Monnereau, Orecchioni, Primavera and Ughi 2019; and Sofiana/*Philosophiana* in Caltanissetta was occupied until the 13th century AD (Vaccaro 2017).

conquest of western Sicily, a real ‘dark age’ from the perspective of archaeological knowledge, especially in a rural area. The material culture, archaeozoological and archaeobotanical data have also indicated the high potential of the site for the reconstruction of economic and human-environment interaction trends of an early medieval community during the complex transition from the Byzantine to Islamic periods.

Only the continuation of research will allow us to understand some open issues and shed more light on settlement patterns, landscape management and lifestyles in the early medieval Sicilian countryside.

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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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