

Introduction

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This volume contains a selection of the papers presented at session no. 574, 'Suburbia and Rural Landscapes in Medieval Sicily', organised by Angelo Castrorao Barba, Giuseppe Mandalà and María de los Ángeles Utrero Agudo at the 24th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists held in Barcelona (8 September 2018).¹

Post-Roman Sicily stands as a sort of case study for Mediterranean dynamics, connecting continuity, transformation, innovation and resilience to a wider frame of political change: the island's role in the Byzantine State, the Islamic conquest, the Norman domination, and the emergence of the Swabian empire. The challenge of the present proposal is to approach medieval Sicily and to analyse and interpret the material evidence of these many 'transitions' through the archaeological record. This book aims to present 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.

A sign of the renewed interest in the archaeology of medieval Sicily, this volume collects the most recent results of research carried out by teams from various European research institutions and by the Soprintendenze per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali (Superintendencies for Cultural and Environmental Heritage) – and more specifically their Archaeological Heritage Departments – of the Sicilian Regional Government.

The historical framework offered by the analysis of written sources – masterfully conducted since the 1950s by Illuminato Peri² and Vincenzo D'Alessandro³

– has already produced important historical results, for example, as concerns the agrarian history of the late Middle Ages, the more general relationship between city and countryside, and also the legal status of 'villeins' during the Norman period.⁴ This vast amount of data and reflections was evaluated by scholars and was finally brought together in Sandro Carocci's handbook dedicated to the *Signorie di Mezzogiorno*,⁵ but no doubt this frame of reference should be enriched and reconsidered in light of the ongoing archaeological research.

While 'rooting' for the recomposition of the two research lines – i.e., archaeological and written sources – one can observe that, from a general point of view, no matter what method of investigation is adopted, land remains the foundation of the structural social processes governed by the relationship between city and countryside: this is the case with urban gardens and orchards as much as with the most isolated countryside.

These processes are supported by an economic system of production, distribution and sale that hinges on the relationship between the city (understood as a political-administrative pole and commercial and judicial centre) and the countryside (understood as a productive pole). In this area too, one must consider some well-established historiographical myths. For example, in Michele Amari's reconstruction,⁶ the arrival of the Muslims brought an end to the late-antique domination of *latifundia* – consequently restoring the freedom and dignity of the figure of the farmer-colonist – based on a land ownership system that was to reappear under the Normans. Now it is clear that Amari was projecting onto the myth of the Islamic golden age the urgent need for agrarian reform in nineteenth-century Sicily, since a recent historical-archaeological study has brought to light the existence of large-scale properties during the Islamic period, even though it is not possible to know whether these estates originally dated from an earlier time.⁷

¹ The full panel programme can be found in the European Association of Archaeologists. Annual Meeting 2018: 352–354.

² Peri 1978.

³ D'Alessandro 2010.

⁴ De Simone 2004; Nef 2011: 479–579.

⁵ Carocci 2014.

⁶ Amari 1933–39.

⁷ Arcifa, Bagnera and Nef 2012: 265–266.

The archaeological investigations we can expect to be conducted in the coming decades will enable a sharper focus on questions regarding the formation of the Islamic society of Sicily and the taxation system on goods produced on the island, especially in rural areas. Land sometimes served as a symbol of fertility, sometimes as a means to legitimise aristocratic status; at times it was synonymous with wealth or represented an instrument of supremacy. In any case, land – first as *latifundium*, then as fief in the legal sense of the term (*beneficium*), and later still as fief in a figurative sense (that is, again as *latifundium*) – was the cornerstone around which the medieval history of Sicily and its anthropological and cultural identity revolved. Still, this identity changes meaning and value according to time-contingent ‘values’.⁸

Moving on to archaeology, the preliminary archaeological research conducted by French scholars on medieval Sicilian settlements⁹ created neither a proper debate nor a real school of medieval archaeology in Sicily.¹⁰ To this day, no monographic books on late-antique settlements in Sicily have ever been published (only the last chapters in Roger Wilson’s volume on Roman Sicily are devoted to the 4th and 5th centuries AD).¹¹ The only comprehensive overview of settlement patterns in the Byzantine, Islamic and Norman periods remains Ferdinando Maurici’s book (from 1992), which is mainly based on written sources and very little material evidence or data from stratigraphic excavations.¹²

In recent decades, interest in the archaeology of early medieval Sicily has grown considerably.¹³ An increase in knowledge of chronological indicators in early medieval pottery in Sicily¹⁴ has made it possible to better identify the evidence from this age, especially as regards the lesser-known period between the 8th and early 10th centuries.

Recent excavations are revealing a new degree of complexity in the Sicilian countryside, especially for the early medieval period: the Byzantine *castrum* of Monte Kassar (Province of Palermo);¹⁵ the Byzantine village of Rocchicella di Mineo (Prov. of Catania);¹⁶ the rural site of Colmitella (Prov. of Agrigento), with Byzantine and Islamic phases;¹⁷ the fortified Islamic granary of Pizzo

Monaco (Prov. of Trapani);¹⁸ the Byzantine/Islamic hilltop site of Contrada Castro (Prov. of Palermo);¹⁹ the post-Roman phases of occupation in villas²⁰ like the Villa del Casale at Piazza Armerina (Prov. of Enna),²¹ or in large villages along the road network, such as Casale San Pietro at Castronovo di Sicilia (Prov. of Palermo),²² and Philosophiana/Sofiana (Prov. of Caltanissetta).²³ Less known and debated is the archaeological evidence of Islamic architecture in the countryside, such as the baths at Cefalà Diana (Prov. of Palermo)²⁴ or the hilltop/fortified sites of Calatubo²⁵ and Calathamet²⁶ in northwestern Sicily (Prov. of Trapani).

The new relevance of medieval Sicily for a global reconsideration of the transition from late antiquity to the Middle Ages in relation to Mediterranean landscapes has inspired two European projects – *Mediterranean mountainous landscapes* (<https://memolaproject.eu/>) and *Sicily in transition* (<https://www.sicilyintransition.org/>) – along with various others (such as *Harvesting memories: the ecology and archaeology of Monti Sicani landscapes*), which have applied interdisciplinary approaches that may generate new debates and historiographical frameworks in the future.

While a recent volume has dealt with the transformation of early medieval Sicilian cities,²⁷ the present book focuses on extra-urban spaces, from suburban areas to inland territories, with the aim of presenting the critical mass of data that has been emerging in recent years from archaeological research on Sicilian landscapes.

The volume is divided into thematic areas: 1) *Urbanscapes, suburbia, hinterlands*; 2) *Inland and mountainous landscapes*; 3) *Changes in rural settlement patterns*; 4) *Defence and control of the territory*. The first part presents recent discoveries in the suburbs of Palermo which provide new data on the phases of occupation during the Islamic period (AD 831-1072).²⁸ Beyond the limits of the Punic/Roman city and the medieval/early modern walls, evidence relating to artisan quarters and cemetery areas from the Islamic period has been discovered in recent years. These discoveries confirm the indications given to us by Ibn Ḥawqal’s travel report (AD 973) and the mention of settlements just outside Palermo in the *Book of Curiosities* (AD 1020-1050).²⁹ In fact, these

⁸ D’Alessandro 2010: 7.

⁹ Pesez 1984.

¹⁰ Maurici 2013.

¹¹ Wilson 1990.

¹² Maurici 1992.

¹³ Nef and Prigent (eds) 2010; Nef and Ardizzone (eds) 2014; Molinari 2016; Molinari 2020; Arcifa 2021.

¹⁴ Arcifa 2010; Arcifa and Bagnera 2018; Sacco 2020; Vaccaro 2013.

¹⁵ Vassallo, De Leo, Di Stefano and Graditi 2015: 1–34.

¹⁶ Arcifa 2016.

¹⁷ Rizzo 2014.

¹⁸ Rotolo and Martín Civantos 2013.

¹⁹ Castrorao Barba, Miccichè, Pisciotta, Speciale, Aleo Nero, Vassallo, Marino and Bazan 2020.

²⁰ Castrorao Barba 2016.

²¹ Pensabene and Barresi (eds) 2019.

²² Carver 2019.

²³ Vaccaro 2017.

²⁴ Bagnera and Nef (eds) 2018.

²⁵ Di Liberto 2004.

²⁶ Lesnes and Poisson (eds) 2013.

²⁷ Arcifa and Sgarlata (eds) 2020.

²⁸ Vassallo 2023.

²⁹ Ibn Ḥawqal *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ* in Ibn Ḥawqal 1938-39: I, 118–131; French trans. in Ibn Ḥawqal 2001: I, 117–130; *Kitāb gharā’ib al-funūn*

new archaeological data open up new perspectives for research and reflection on Islamic urbanism in relation to the territory surrounding the city, which cannot be reduced to the area enclosed within the physical limits of the defensive walls.

This connection between suburban space and the city is an element of great interest in light of the new research carried out on the San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi complex located in the southernmost outskirts of Palermo.³⁰ This sector of the hinterland emerges as a key point of connection between the city and the countryside. The construction in this place of a Norman hospital for infectious diseases, under royal patronage, testifies to its strategic importance as part of an important road axis extending along the so-called Ponte dell'Ammiraglio, which linked the outskirts to the city-centre of Palermo. Recent archaeological investigations (2017, 2019-2020) have made it possible to expand the picture of the Islamic and Norman occupation of the suburbs of Palermo. Indeed, the Norman hospital was founded around the middle of the 12th century on a site that, according to both written and archaeological evidence (a layered occupation sequence, buildings, an Islamic-rite burial), was an Islamic settlement between the 10th and mid-11th centuries.

Further along this road axis, which allowed access to the city of Palermo for those coming from Messina, essentially overlapping with the Roman Via Valeria, we find another religious complex from the Norman period, the church of Santa Maria di Campogrosso.³¹ The excavations conducted and the study of its architecture have confirmed the chronology for the foundation of the Norman monastery, which is in line with the data from written sources, from the first half of the 12th century. According to the Polish team researching the site, the church shows close parallels to churches within Norman monasteries in France, while the coins associated with the burials in phase with the building and some radiocarbon dating indicate that the complex was in use between the 12th century and the end of the 13th.

A cross-analysis between territory and urban landscape has been conducted for Agrigento.³² Here previous research on the Valle del Platani, new data on the Colmitella excavations, and the new season of archaeological investigations promoted by the Archaeological and Landscape Park of The Valley of the Temples have provided a considerable range of data for a solid reconstruction of the changes between late antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The second part of the volume, discussing inland and mountain territories, shows – already from the first contribution, devoted to the Entella area³³ – how the urban and suburban dynamics of Palermo were connected to the transformation of settlement dynamics in the inland territory, thereby reaffirming the close relationship between medium and long-range connections between city, suburbs, and countryside. In Entella (Contessa Entellina, Prov. of Palermo), many years of excavations and surveys have enabled a reconstruction of medieval population trends. After underlining our very limited knowledge of the Byzantine period, the authors note how the Aghlabid conquest of the island led to an initial intensification of the occupation of the countryside between the end of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th which, however, underwent even greater development starting from the mid-10th century. This increase in sites and therefore in the vitality of the countryside during the second half of the 10th century is related to the parallel reoccupation of the ancient Rocca di Entella, perhaps in connection with the decree issued by Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz in 356/966-967, ordering the scattered population to be brought together in the administrative centres of the various rural districts.³⁴

This trend in the Entella area is reflected in the results pertaining to the discovery of a new rural site in Contrada Castro in the neighbouring area of Corleone (Prov. of Palermo).³⁵ The stratigraphic sequence for the Contrada Castro settlement, supported by radiocarbon dating, appears to shed considerable light on the transition from the Byzantine period to the first phases of the Islamic occupation. Indeed, it reveals that the reoccupation of this high ground – already inhabited between the 6th and 4th centuries BC – took place in the mid-7th century, while it was between the late 8th and 9th centuries that masonry structures were built, including a kiln for ceramics and tiles. This attests to a stable occupation connected to agricultural exploitation and animal breeding practices documented by archaeobotanical and archaeozoological finds. A clear change in the topography of the site did not occur immediately following the Islamic conquest of nearby Corleone in 840 but a few decades later, when the buildings collapsed, and during the first half of the 10th century, when new buildings were erected with a different orientation from the previous ones. This site, in other words, experienced intense occupation precisely in the transitional period between the end of the Byzantine era and the first phases of the Islamic occupation. As such, it shows the great potential of new investigations on rural contexts that are totally

wa-mulaḥ al-'uyūn in Rapoport and Savage-Smith (eds) 2014: 178–187 (Arabic text), 457–466 (English trans.).

³⁰ Mandalà, and Utrero Agudo 2023.

³¹ Moździoch, Moździoch and Szubert 2023.

³² Rizzo 2023.

³³ Corretti and Mangiaracina 2023.

³⁴ al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, in Amari 1987-88: II, 494; Italian trans. in Amari (ed.) 1997-98: II, 546; Amari 1933-39: II, 314.

³⁵ Castrorao Barba, Miccichè, Pisciotta, Speciale, Aleo Nero, Vassallo, Marino and Bazan 2023.

unmentioned by the written sources, and which therefore prove fundamental for the reconstruction of settlement dynamics, as well of the social and economic aspects of the early medieval Sicilian countryside.

A relationship of fundamental integration between written sources and archaeological documentation, on the other hand, is emerging from the research on the Madonie Mountains area in which information from the geographical descriptions by al-Muqaddasī (10th cent.) and al-Idrīsī (12th cent.) is being combined with archaeological evidence from important contexts such as Caltavuturo, Petralia Sottana, Petralia Soprana and Collesano (Prov. of Palermo).³⁶ Inland and mountain areas such as the Madonie show enormous potential when it comes to understanding the population structure of a ‘continental’ island such as Sicily, which in its long history owes a great deal to the productive potential of – and human-environment interactions within – this varied hinterland made up of valleys, cultivable hills, and mountains rich in forest-pastoral resources and suitable for animal husbandry.

The inland area of the Erei Mountains is a key territory for understanding the ‘long-lasting economic prosperity’ of the Sicilian countryside during the ‘Long Late Antiquity’.³⁷ This period was characterised by the presence not only of large villas such as Piazza Armerina and the recently excavated one in Contrada Gerace, but also – and especially – by secondary settlements, such as Sofiana. For a long time, the latter maintained a central role both in the management and exploitation of rural spaces and in ensuring a connection with long-distance markets, as demonstrated by imports of North African pottery (African red slip ware and amphorae). The endurance of a certain degree of demographic density in the inland areas of central Sicily – at least between late antiquity and the early Byzantine period – is witnessed by the presence of numerous rock necropolises – such as Nicosia and Sperlinga – which would seem to suggest precisely a pattern of unbroken occupation from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, especially in the case of settlements connected to the road network. Furthermore, new investigations in the Ninfa district of Enna – between the Castello di Lombardia and the Rocca di Cerere – and at Case Bastione (Villarosa) have highlighted important stratigraphic sequences that attest to the intensity of occupation in the full Byzantine period, between the 8th and 9th centuries, thus opening up new possibilities in terms of the evaluation of demographics and settlement patterns in Sicily on the eve of the Islamic conquest.

A new perspective on the impact of the formation of an Islamic society on rural landscapes in Sicily is offered

by the typical approach of hydraulic archaeology, which over the past few decades has become consolidated through the study of al-Andalus,³⁸ yet has never been applied to the Sicilian context.³⁹ Despite the differences between the two geographical areas of al-Andalus and Sicily, Arabic-Berber terms connected to water and hydraulic infrastructures persist in the micro-toponymy, such as the well with a domed covering known as *cuba* or *cubicella* from *qubba*, or the hydraulic wheel called *senia* from *sāniya*. The mapping of evidence related to the traditional use of water in the Calatafimi area and the economic and anthropological reflections on agro-systems certainly offer new ideas to go beyond a site-centric vision of the network of settlements and to adopt a more holistic approach to the landscape as a stratified system. The ultimate aim is to provide historical reconstructions of the medieval rural world that take environmental characteristics and human-environment interactions into account.

In order to offer an analysis of the changes that occurred during the Middle Ages compared to the previous periods, the third part of the book collects a series of contributions that show various aspects of continuity, change, and resilience in the formation of medieval Sicilian landscapes. A detailed analysis of the relationship between ancient roads and medieval settlement models has been undertaken for the central-northern part of Sicily.⁴⁰ The parallel analysis of the road system, toponymy, historical attestations, and data from archaeological surveys has proven to be an appropriate methodology for identifying persistence and innovations in the formation of a medieval landscape of ‘castles, hamlets and feuds, *hospitalia* and rural churches’ in relation to the endurance and transformation of the ancient road network.

In addition, in a comparative analysis of two survey areas, namely Gela and the Monti Sicani in the hinterland of Agrigento, settlement dynamics show the unbroken occupation up to the Middle Ages of various valley bottom sites which had already been occupied in Roman times or late antiquity.⁴¹ A distinctive phenomenon is the ‘ascent to the heights’ in various sites both in the lower Platani valley (i.e., Pizzo di Minico, Pizzo Santa Anastasia, Monte Castelluzzo) and in the hinterland of Gela. Here – especially at Butera – Iron Age and Greek settlement sites were newly occupied in the Middle Ages after a hiatus during Roman times.

A broken continuity, but with significant structural and functional changes, is found in the late-antique Villa del Casale in Piazza Armerina in the province of Enna.⁴² The

³⁶ Cucco 2023.

³⁷ Valbruzzi 2023.

³⁸ Barceló, Kirchner and Navarro (eds) 1996; Kirchner 2019.

³⁹ Martín Civantos, Corselli and Bonet García 2023.

⁴⁰ Burgio and Canale 2023.

⁴¹ Bergemann 2023.

⁴² Pensabene and Barresi 2023.

revision of the old excavations of the 1950s and, above all, the long excavation campaigns in recent decades have made it possible to outline the history of the villa ‘after the villa’, during the Byzantine and Islamic periods. A relevant issue is the new interpretation of some large pits referable to the Islamic period and interpreted as anaerobic grain stores. These are probably associated with the collective responsibility for the taxation of grain; therefore ‘a similar placement of storage pits could correspond to the need for control among the peasant families of the same community, or be a sign of strengthened control over peasants by owners or administrators’.

Another very interesting area marked by a long period of occupation of late-antique sites at least throughout the Byzantine period is the slopes of Mt. Etna.⁴³ Very interesting ideas have come from the new interpretation of a double wall of large lava stone blocks, extending for almost two kilometres, at Santa Venera (Bronte, Prov. of Catania), which is located next to a fortified enclosure from the Byzantine period.

This presence of defensive structures introduces the fourth part of the volume, dedicated to the defence and control of eastern Sicily in the Byzantine period. A fundamental element in the structuring of the countryside from late antiquity to the late Middle Ages across Europe and the Mediterranean was the progressive militarization of society⁴⁴ and the formation of fortified settlements, often on hilltops.⁴⁵

In the years following the establishment of the *thema* of Sicily and prior to the landing of the Aghlabid army on the west coast, the formation of a system of fortifications – including the imposing public fortification identified at Monte Kassar, in a hinge area between the western and eastern parts of Sicily – can also be seen to reflect a deliberate choice to concentrate defences on the eastern part of the island to protect the capital, Syracuse. The detection of new pottery indicators, such as hand-made casseroles and new types of architecture such as the circular dry-stone dwellings of the villages of Rocchicella di Mineo and Contrada Edera in Bronte,⁴⁶ and the reinterpretation of the rupestrian/rock-cut sites in the Syracuse area or the Byzantine phase of reuse and fortification of the prehistoric site of Pantalica⁴⁷ are elements providing a new wealth of archaeological data for a historical period such as the 8th–9th century that, until a few decades ago, was considered a real ‘Dark age’ from the point of view of material evidence.

⁴³ Gennaro 2023.

⁴⁴ Bennett, Berndt, Esders and Sarti (eds) 2021.

⁴⁵ Christie and Herold (eds) 2016.

⁴⁶ Arcifa 2023.

⁴⁷ Cacciaguerra 2023.

The essays in this volume underline the fundamental contribution of archaeological research in Sicily to propose new topics for the debate on the formation of early medieval landscapes. 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 Mediterranean dynamics at the crossroads between the Byzantine and Islamic worlds.

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