

Reconstructing Early Colonial Identity: Funerary Space in Archaic Gela (Sicily)

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In recent years a number of scholars have drawn attention to the lack of research on the reconstruction of the **social profile and cultural identity of Greek colonies in Sicily**, a perspective which can be drawn from archaeological evidence and ancient written sources. In connection with this, the analysis of burial customs has increasingly been recognised as one of the most important tools in understanding past societies, their fears and anxieties, and their desires and ambitions.

Within this framework, the poster will focus on the results of a recent new examination of the **Archaic cemeteries of Gela**, containing mainly 7th and 6th century burials, a work I began more than ten years ago, whose results have just appeared in the book *Profumi di argilla. Tombe con unguentari corinzi nella necropoli arcaica di Gela*, Roma 2013 (fig. 1)

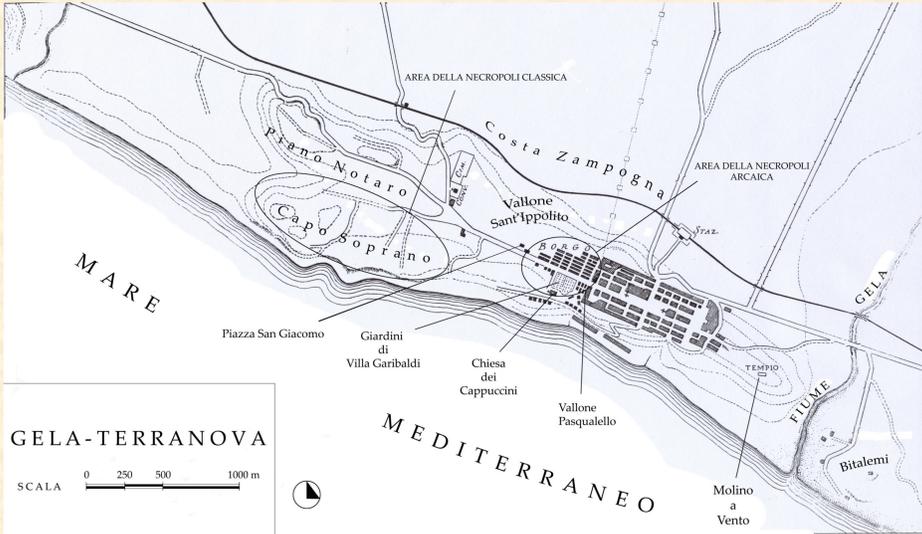


Fig. 2. Map of the ancient colony of Gela

The investigation of the Geloan Archaic *necropolis* was Paolo Orsi's first archaeological intervention in Gela at the beginning of the 20th century, after almost two hundreds years of foreign and private semi-illegal diggings. The main outcome of this excavation was the discovery of 570 graves (fig. 2-3). During the next decades, 70 other graves were brought to light by Dinu Adamesteanu and Piero Orlandini, two great figures of Gela archeology. In total **636 burials** were unearthed, about which we have only preliminary *data* published in *Monumenti Antichi dei Lincei XVII* (1906) and in *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità* (1956/1960).



Fig. 1. Il volume *Profumi di argilla. Tombe con unguentari corinzi nella necropoli arcaica di Gela*



Fig. 3. Paolo Orsi and his workers in Gela during the *necropolis* excavations (Archivio Fotografico del Museo Civico di Rovereto, inv. n. 7094/13).

The recent necessary review of the Archaic cemeteries of Gela has highlighted some important elements, dealing with the topography of the *necropolis*, the demographic significance of the remains, the burial variability (through burial rites and grave goods), the type and arrangement of grave goods ect. (fig. 4).

But the analysis has especially underlined a **crucial point**: the Archaic Geloan community, although dominated between the 7th and the 6th century B.C. by biological and cultural hybridism and characterized by broad *phenomena* of people and goods mobility in both directions (Greek and Indigenous), does not seem to be particularly interested neither in discriminating groups of different ethnicity (Cretan, Rhodian, Sikeli etc.), nor in “representing” different gender roles (masculine and feminine).

On the contrary, it's clear that the biggest effort in “displaying” a new cultural identity is expressed by the desire to appear as a **society in construction** and to show the crystallization of the young colonial community in social groups and in specific *oikiai*. In the funerary scenario this aim is achieved by a **special emphasis on family groups** (firm spatial aggregation of adult, adolescent, child and newborn graves of the same household), and by the custom of the multiple burial, which integrates adults and subadults or only subadults (also of different ages) in the same tomb, **underlying the *anchisteiai***.

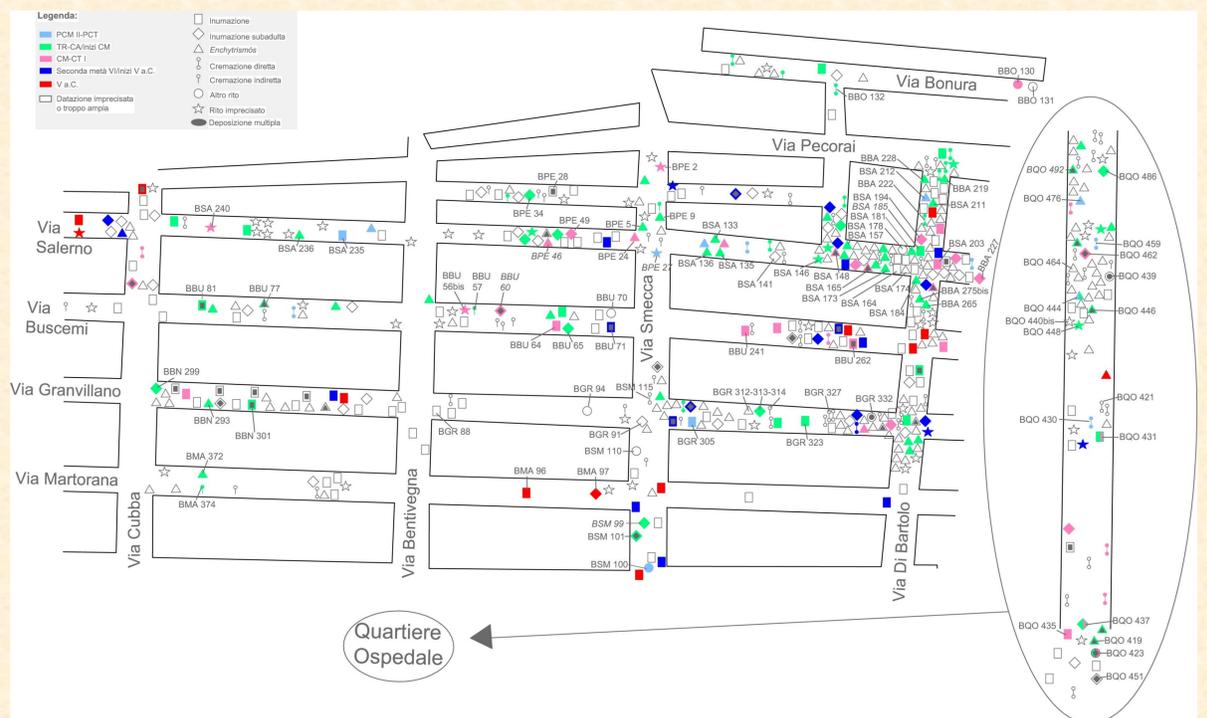


Fig. 4. Demographic *data* and burial rites in a sector of the Geloan Archaic cemetery.



Fig. 5. Gela, Borgo *necropolis*, Quartiere Ospedale, T. 476: an *enchytrismos* containing «tracce di scheletro», 650-630 B.C. (Siracusa, Museo Archeologico Regionale).



Fig. 6. Gela, Villa Garibaldi *necropolis*, T. 20: burial in monolithic sarcophagus, belonging to «una fanciulla di 10-12 anni», 630/620 B.C. (Gela, Museo Archeologico Regionale).



Fig. 7. Gela, Borgo *necropolis*, Via Pecorai, T. 49: burial in monolithic sarcophagus belonging to a young girl; ca. 570 B.C. (Siracusa, Museo Archeologico Regionale).

Moreover the young Geloan community shows a careful and constant solidarity in the formalization of **infant death**, particularly by addressing to a selected group of young people and children (linked by similar high *census* parameters) special death rituals, which imply an economical and cultural effort more significant than the one employed for adult burials. In fact, the following customs seem to be closely related to *elite* subadults tombs: the use of the monolithic sarcophagus (an expensive object, because of the lack of good cutting stones in the area of Gela); the deposition of exotic and precious artefacts (alabaster and *faïence* perfume vases, East Greek plastic vases, gold and silver jewellery, numerous import vessels); the recurrence of redundant grave goods ect. (fig. 5-7).

The Geloan choice to promote so carefully the **funerary visibility of a *jeunesse dorée*** is not an isolated ritual behavior, but is also shared by other Sicilian colonies between the 7th and first half of the 6th century B.C., as it has been correctly underlined by Gillian Shepherd in some her recent works. This marked visibility conferred after death to an *elite* group of children and adolescents, even if certainly due to emotive factors, can also be interpreted as a “compensatory” and “representative” reaction to the strong social investment in the offspring by the household, which aspires to cover *elite* roles within a society in formation.

It is exactly through numerous and vigorous offspring, an indispensable resource for the future, that the aristocratic *ghene* of Archaic Gela could hope to survive and establish themselves in the territory. It is through sumptuous funerals for premature deaths that the families could reassert their ties and exorcise the danger of the dynasty extinction. The closer the young man or the future beautiful bride was to the adult age, the more severe were the pain and the representative effort after death, because they were proportional to the investment of energy, resources and emotion tied to their growth.