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Sicily in Transition Research Project. Investigations at Castronovo di Sicilia. Results and Prospects, 2015

Martin Carver – Alessandra Molinari

Il progetto Sicily in Transition è nato dalla collaborazione delle Università di York e di Roma Tor Vergata, con il pieno appoggio della Soprintendenza ai BB. CC. AA di Palermo. La finalità della nostra ricerca è quella di analizzare, attraverso il registro archeologico, in quale modo i mutamenti di regime politico hanno influenzato organizzazione, composizione e stili di vita delle popolazioni soggette. L'arco di tempo considerato va dal VI al XIII secolo, periodo nel quale la Sicilia ha visto diverse dominazioni: quella bizantina, islamica, normanna e sveva. Sicily in Transition prevede di analizzare con metodi in parte nuovi, in parte più tradizionali, sia insiemi di reperti (ecofatti e manufatti) prodotti da precedenti scavi, sia di acquisire dati attraverso nuove indagini. In particolare gli scriventi hanno scelto di indagare un'area molto promettente della Sicilia centrale: il territorio di Castronovo di Sicilia. Qui, in due campagne di ricerca durate ciascuna quattro settimane, sono state realizzate indagini magnetometriche, ricognizioni di superficie, di archeologia dell'architettura e sondaggi stratigrafici. La finalità era quella di valutare il potenziale archeologico dei principali siti storici del territorio. I primi risultati sono promettenti in relazione alla varietà tipologica e cronologica dei diversi insediamenti identificati: una fortezza dei secoli VII-IX sul Monte Kassar; un fortilizio con fasi del pieno medioevo e dell'età moderna sul Colle San Vitale; un ampio villaggio non difeso con fasi dall'età tardoantica al medioevo, incluse importanti testimonianze di età islamica, nell'area del Casale San Pietro. Le indagini preliminari hanno quindi confermato le ampie potenzialità informative dell'intero territorio di Castronovo rispetto ai temi della nostra ricerca e stanno quindi consentendo di programmare gli interventi futuri.

I. The Sicily in Transition Research Project

The period of history being studied by the present researchers is the sixth to thirteenth century AD, and the subject of interest is the social and economic change brought about by successive changes in regime on the island of Sicily. Recent historical and archaeological research[1] underlines the central role of Sicily in the transformation of the Mediterranean world between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Its experience of belonging to successive, and very different, political and cultural formations – the Byzantine, Islamic, Norman, Swabian – make it a vantage point for the first-hand observation of many themes that run through the current discourse between archaeologists and historians: migration, identity, conflict and co-existence, acculturation, social mobility, and more. The imposition of new aristocracies embracing different cultures, the establishment of a new capital city, the hypothetical arrival of new groups of shepherds and farmers, the changes in the economy and trade networks, these are matters of primary interest. They are being addressed by the new research project presented here, one that aims to enlarge the current debate on early medieval Europe and the Mediter-

[1] See NEF, PRIGENT 2010; NEF, ARDIZZONE 2014; MOLINARI 2014; EAD. 2015, with references

ranean by combining first-hand experience of Sicilian archaeology with the new frontiers of bioarchaeology (*Sicily in Transition*)[2].

Our research is underpinned by recent investigations, both archaeological and historical. For the seventh century, the work of Vivien Prigent[3], using written sources together with the evidence of seals and the circulation of coins has drawn a clearer picture of Byzantine Sicily as central to the joint interests of Constantinople and Rome, with an impressive amount of territory consisting of *latifundia* of the Empire or the Church, tapped by an efficient tax-based system. Archaeological research has demonstrated clearly that all the territory on the island was still linked by monetary circulation and a system of exchange, thanks to which international commodities (amphorae from North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, African red slip) were arriving in places far inland. It would seem that already from the fifth century, and especially from the gradual end of the *villae*, rural settlement was organised in villages, some particularly extensive. No archaeological traces of the earliest Islamic raids have been recorded, at least not yet.

In the eighth century, a key element bearing on economic and social change was the separation, through the agency of the Byzantine emperor, of the Church of Rome from its Sicilian properties and thus from the pervasive networks of power that had operated there. One result could have been an impressive increase in state property, another a simplification of the social structure. In any event, the Byzantine state remained the primary power operating in the island, and for most of the century the only one capable of building grand strongholds like Monte Kassar, of which more presently. If such sites are seen everywhere to have been subsequently lost, there are nevertheless other places situated on the plains where extensive agricultural townships endured.

In the ninth century, the story is dominated by the long Islamic conquest of the island (AD 827–902). It is the least-known period archaeologically, though it would seem that a situation of intense conflict did not result in a re-investment in fortified sites. The incomers appear to have substituted the existing state system of taxation for another of a similar kind. The thin distribution of sites and the paucity of finds suggests a fairly low demographic level. The written sources available are not numerous, but some are exceptionally rich in information about land ownership – for example the tenth-century judicial rulings of al-Dawudi. What is currently emerging from historical research on this material is that the system of landowning and taxation seems to be strongly linked to the arrival not only of immigrant military and administrative elites but also of groups of farmers. The enormous extent of state property, at the time of the conquest, the different effects of the takeover, the cultivation of abandoned land – which under Islamic law earned the right of freehold – all these will have resulted in a great variety of tenure. Extensive estates, awarded for example to members of the army [*jund*], would have existed side-by-side with peasant smallholdings.

By contrast to the ninth century, the tenth is blessed with a material record of extraordinary richness and complexity. It is very similar to that of Tunisia and resonates closely with that of all the western regions of Islam. Palermo grew apace and it is there that key industries were concentrated, for example the production of ceramic fine wares and the processing of sugar cane. Agricultural and technical innovations seem to appear first in urban and suburban areas rather than elsewhere. Pottery made in Palermo was distributed over all the island of Sicily and beyond its shores. In the countryside, existing sites were enlarged and new ones created. The status of 'District capitals' (hisn/husun) was affirmed, situated on the heights. The Sicilian gold *tarí* began to acquire its international prestige. The overthrow of the (Sunni) Aghlabids by the (Shi'ite) Fatimids in the early tenth century, and the establishment of a stable dynasty and strong Islamic state were fundamental elements of the political history.

Brutal events would follow during the twelfth century; here we want only to signal the fact that the Norman Conquest from 1061 and the immigration of the Latin Christians would bring about a violent transformation of human settlement in a conflict driven by social formations that were profoundly different. The dramatic outcomes of this confrontation, visible in the material evidence towards the middle of the thirteenth century, allow us to speak almost of an "archaeology of genocide."

Some of the specific questions may be itemised by the century. The eighth century is a time of substantial change, but one in which the archaeology becomes suddenly more elusive. Is it possible to detect the weakening of the grip of the Church of Rome, that prominent proprietor of the Sicilian heartland? What was the

[2] *Sicily in Transition* is a joint project of the Universities of Rome Tor Vergata and York, directed by the authors and executed through the good ofices of the Soprintendenza BB. CC. AA di Palermo (dott. Stefano Vassallo). See https://www.york.ac.uk/archaeology/research/current-projects/sicily-in-transition/ for updates.
[3] E.g. PRIGENT 2010.

social structure of the farming community and what form did it take on the ground? Will we be able to distinguish the hand of the state and especially that of the 'landed military'?

In the ninth century, we will seek to detect and define the effects of the invasion, the takeover of the elite and the arrival of new groups of farmers, noting especially the impact on the pre-existing communities.

In the tenth century, when the material assemblage changes so comprehensively, we will be investigating, as a potent factor, the role played by the emirs and the Islamicised elite of Palermo, not least through the commercialisation of agriculture. Did the continuous arrival of immigrants bear on the population increase? How did the rural communities organise themselves? Was the "new agriculture" universally applied? In what way can we sense the presence of the Islamic state?

To address these questions we have assembled a team of archaeologists and scientists, based for the most part at the Universities of Rome Tor Vergata and York, and formulated a programme comprising a valuable corpus of previously excavated material, extensive field surveys and new excavations, all of which will be subject to the latest methods of bioarchaeological analysis.

The aim of the inquiry is to write a history of the peoples of Sicily between the sixth and thirteenth century seen through the eyes of their demography, economy and landscape. These matters will be assessed using a variety of methods, both traditional and experimental, in order to determine the character of settlement and burial over the period of study, to assess the mobility and diet of both the human community and its animals, to identify the exploited and imported plants, and to classify the ceramics and determine their contents. We have begun to address the changes in diet, agricultural practice and animal husbandry using both the well-tried methods of ceramic and artefact research (at the University of Rome Tor Vergata), palaezoology (at the University of Sheffield) and a battery of techniques being deployed by the University of York's Departement of Bioarchaeology and by the University of Salento. These include stable isotope analysis of human and animal bone, designed to reveal both diet and mobility, and the detection of animals and plants at molecular level, including residues in pots, designed to show which foodstuffs are being commodified and transported. To provide a context and a chronological monitor for these changing trends, we have chosen for intensive investigation a site at which all the periods are represented. This is Castronovo di Sicilia.

II. The Castronovo di Sicilia Investigation

Castronovo di Sicilia is situated in the centre of the island (fig. 1), at the headwaters of the Platani and Torto rivers that flow respectively south and north, and at a crossroads of communications between east and west and north and south. Our area lies half way along the main road from Agrigento to Palermo. We also have a number of documentary notices which suggest that Castronovo was something of cultural hybrid in Islamic times: Christian saints were recorded there in the tenth century (San Vitale di Castronovo) and there was a muslim *gaito* (local chief) in residence at the time of the Norman conquest[4].

Previous archaeological investigations have been carried out on the initiative of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Palermo, including exploratory excavations and preliminary surveys[5]. Three principal areas of archaeological interest have been defined: at **Monte Kassar** (1050 m asl) are the remains of a late Byzantine defensive system dated to the eighth/ninth century; at **San Vitale** (814 m asl) are the ruins of a later stronghold in which most surviving monuments are medieval and early mo-

Fig.1. Map of Sicily locating Castronovo.

[4] See MAURICI 2000.
[5] See VILLA 1997, VASSALLO 2007, 2009, 2010, CASTRORAO BARBA 2015, CASTRORAO BARBA *et al.* c.s.

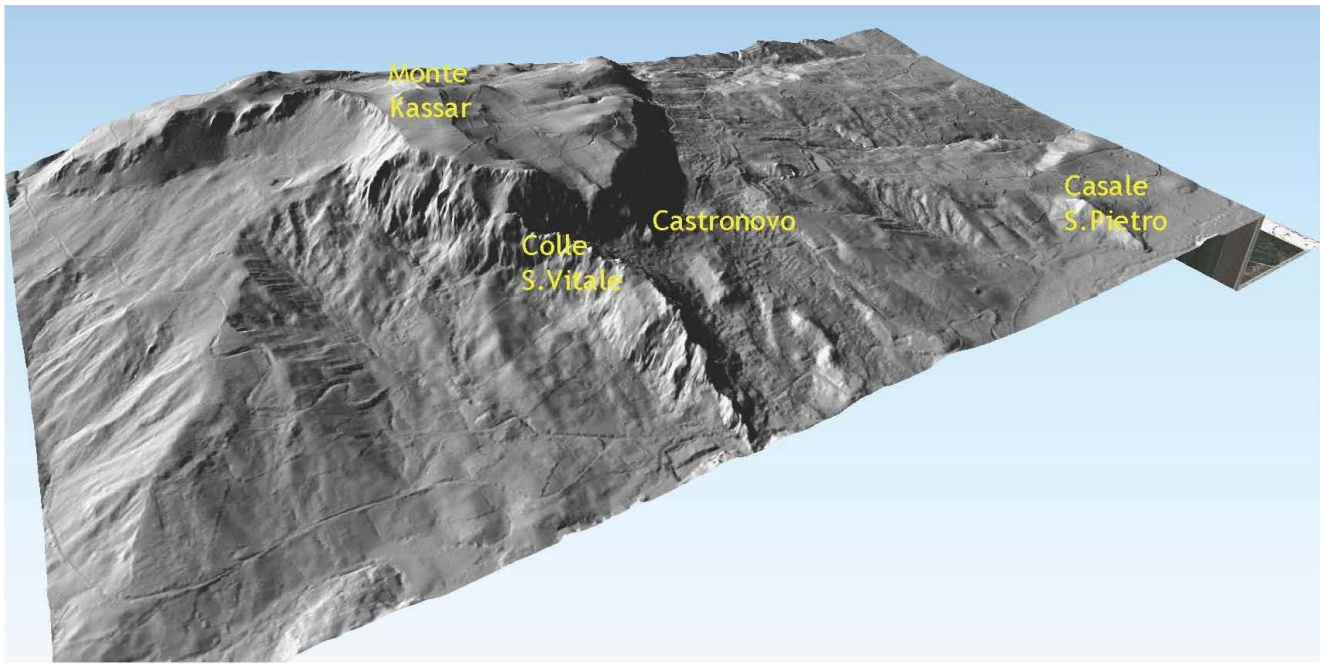

Fig. 2. The archaeological sites investigated in the area of Castronovo.

Fig. 3. Casale San Pietro. In the background Mount Kassar and the Colle San Vitale.

dern; and in the plain at **Casale San Pietro** (500 m asl) there is an upstanding historic building that includes a church and a tower (the *Casale*), surrounded by an extensive settlement with Late Roman, Byzantine and medieval phases of occupation (figs. 2 - 3).

These three adjacent sites, with overlapping time-spans and each with its own history, topography and archaeological sequence, offer an opportunity to construct accounts of changing agriculture, economy, demography and the use of the landscape, all of which are to be combined in an integrated narrative.

Investigations at Monte Kassar

The three centres have been re-evaluated archaeologically by four-week seasons in 2014 and 2015. In 2014 at *Monte Kassar*, a series of buildings was located on the summit of the mountain by magnetometry and a drystone house (6 × 8m) built on the inside of the defensive wall was excavated on the south side of a point previously investigated by Agata Villa (1997). This was the first certain indication that the Byzantine fortress was occupied (figs. 4 - 6). The house was plastered and had a hearth in its north-eastern corner. Its collapsed roof was partly still *in situ*. This roof is of particular interest because it was entirely composed of reused curved covering roof tiles (*coppi*) decorated by comb impressions or plain tiles tempered with straw (fig. 7). Based on L. Arcifa's recent (2010) studies, the tiles excavated at Monte Kassar could date to between the sixth and the eighth century. Here they were probably used in the latter century. Objects of great interest were recovered under this collapsed roof: a bronze belt buckle of so-called Hippo Regius type, generally dated between the sixth

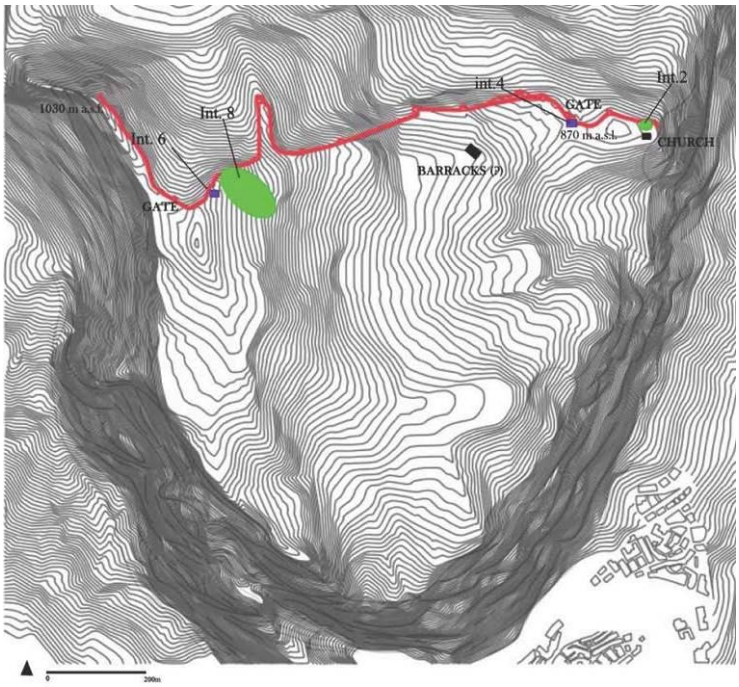

Fig. 4. General map showing the interventions of 2014 and 2015.

and seventh century[6]. In our case, the buckle had long been in use (judging by its worn state) and had also been roughly incised for a second time (fig. 8). A few fragments of glass vessels and beads were also found. The ceramic assemblage (recovered in a quite fragmentary state) is also of great interest (fig. 22B). It consists of sherds of wheel-turned cooking pots, of amphorae resembling globular amphorae (but with

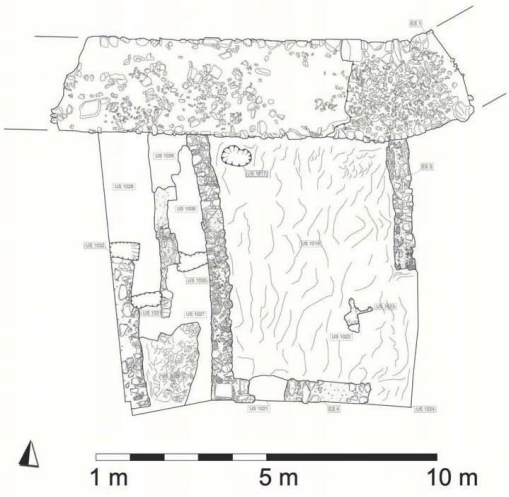

Fig. 5. Monte Kassar 2014. Excavated house built against the wall of the Byzantine fortress, 8th century.

Fig. 6. Monte Kassar 2014. Plan of the house built against the wall of the Byzantine fortress, 8th century.

Fig. 7. Tiles from the collapse of the roof of the late-Byzantine house.

Fig. 8. Byzantine belt buckle found on the floor of the excavated house.

[6] See for example RIEMER 2000, pl. 97.

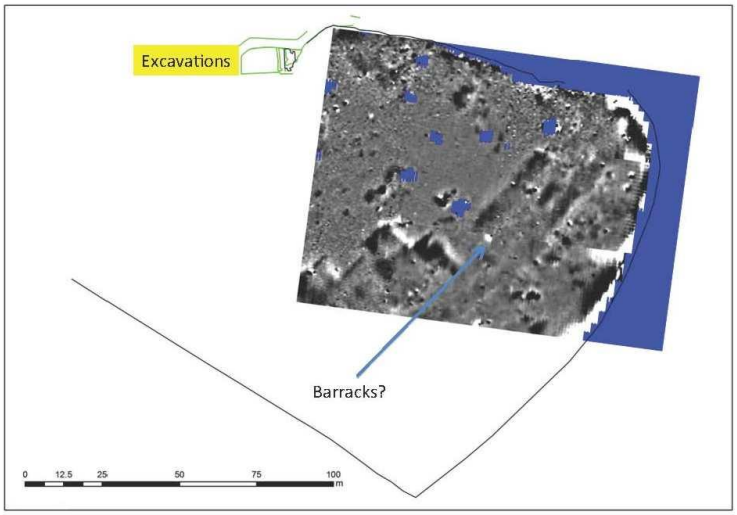

Fig. 9. Monte Kassar: Magnetometry survey carried out in 2014.

thinner walls), apparently not produced locally, and of other fragments of fine wares. The complete absence of African red slip ware and of Late Roman amphorae is significant; these are however known from elsewhere in the area (especially at Casale San Pietro in the plain below). Current thinking suggests that the date of the assemblage recovered inside the Monte Kassar house, under its collapsed roof, is confined to the late seventh and eighth century. Geophysical survey adjacent to the excavation raised expectations that rectangular buildings had survived – perhaps barracks or granaries (fig. 9).

In 2015 we examined the area to the north of the previous intervention. It proved to be an open yard created by levelling prior to the construction of the defensive wall. Standing on this yard were drystone walls of two buildings (fig. 10), one of which was an annexe to the house excavated in 2014. These walls had few diagnostic features, but are thought to be closely associated with the defensive wall, both in time and purpose. The defensive wall, built of irregular blocks of limestone and with good-quality mortar, incorporated at this point a double set of steps that allowed access to a *chemin de ronde*. A layer of tread leading to them suggested intensive use over a considerable period.

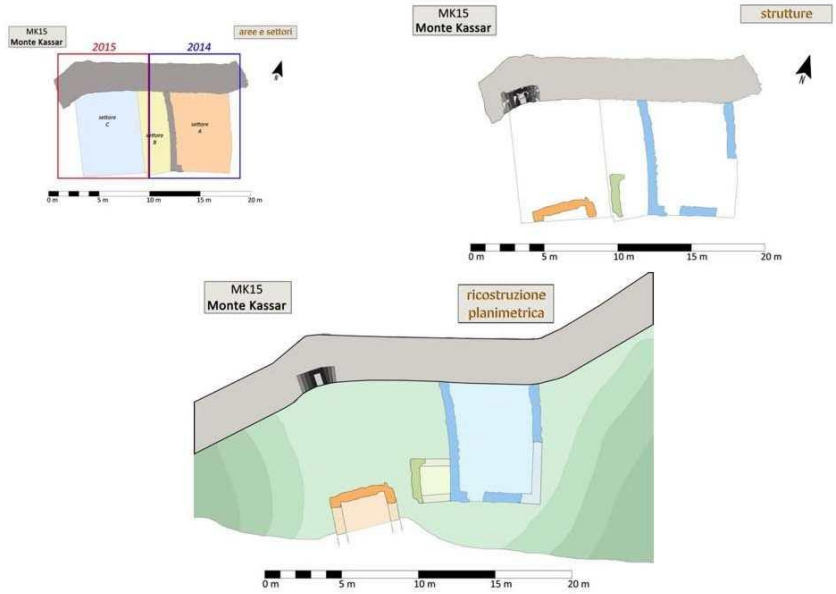

Fig. 10. Monte Kassar – 2014-2015 excavations.

The previous excavations by Agata Villa for the Soprintendenza had contacted a spread of plaster thought to have underlain the Byzantine features. The plaster was encountered on the west side of a rudimentary wall assigned a date in the Archaic period (6th – 5th B.C.). Exploration of this plaster floor over a more extensive area showed that it had been laid in a semi-circular hollow cut through the blocky sandstone natural. There was no wall associated with this semi-circular cut, but a shallow scoop was located in the centre of the plaster spread containing a rich assemblage of Archaic pottery and lumps of pure lime. This may have been intended as a hearth but there were few signs of burning (figs. 11-12).

Colle San Vitale: study of extant structures[7]

On this site investigations focused on establishing a general map of the structures still visible in elevation and on identifying the main structural phases and building techniques (fig. 13). On the basis of the stratigraphic

[7] Research on this site was conducted by Dr. Nicoletta Giannini.

Fig. 11. Monte Kassar: Steps discovered within the fortress wall, looking North.

relationships between the main building tracts on the Colle San Vitale and their respective building techniques, it has been possible to identify three major phases (fig. 14). Only one square tower and a long wall with an opening can so far be attributed to the oldest phase. The second phase involved the construction of the church dedicated to S. Giorgio (or to the Giudice Giusto or Just Judge) and other structures. All these buildings were enclosed and reinforced by straight walls

Fig. 12. Monte Kassar. The Archaic levels and associated pottery.

without towers and by a counter-scarp wall (*muro di scarpa*). By way of hypothesis, it may be that the first phase dates to between the Late Islamic and Norman period (eleventh to twelfth century), the second to the full later Middle Ages (thirteenth to fifteenth century) and the third and last phase from the beginning of the Early Modern period (sixteenth century). Only future excavations could put such a hypothesis to the test, given that earlier excavations have not yielded clear dating evidence for the various structures on the Colle.

Fig. 13. Colle San Vitale from the East.

Casale San Pietro

In 2014 the area on the plain to the west of the historic buildings of Casale San Pietro was surveyed by surface collection and magne-tometry (figs. 15 - 16), the results of which sug-gested a dense occupation at least from the fourth to the fourteenth century. Coins recovered from the ploughsoil included a seventh-century bronze coin (likely to be an issue of Constans II)

Fig. 14. Colle San Vitale: Map showing the main building phases.

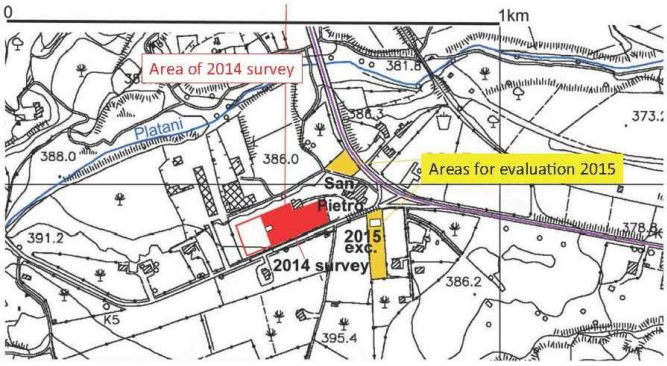

Fig. 15. Areas of investigation at Casale San Pietro.

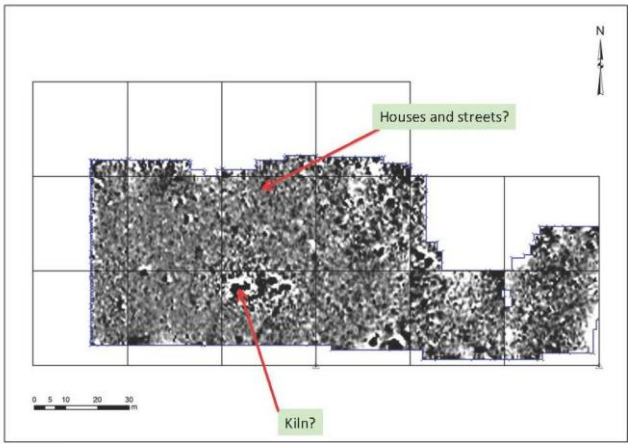

Fig. 16. Magnetometry plan of features in the field next to San Pietro church, 2014.

and a fourteenth-century denarius (probably of the Aragonese period). Pottery collected on the surface consists of African red slip ware (type D) and amphorae but the most plentiful type was glazed or red-painted ceramics of the tenth-eleventh century predominantly from Palermo. Test excavation showed that this area had been subject to deep destruction and dispersal of materials due to ploughing. Only two sixth/seventh-century burials of children (fig. 17) and a twelfth-cen-tury hearth had survived; these were cut into or situated just above the natural concreted gravel of the flood plain.

Fig. 17. Tomb 1 at Casale San Pietro.

In 2015, the zone indicated by surface finds as belonging to a settlement of the Byzantine period was explored with two test excavations in the vicinity of the standing buildings of the casale (figs. 15 and 18). A test trench 50m south of the casale showed that the destruction by ploughing had been thorough: recent ploughsoil lay on natural gravel 0.25 - 0.30 m from the surface. A wall had survived, built of well mortared

Fig. 18. The historic buildings at Casale San Pietro on the Agrigento-Palermo road. Monte Kassar in the background.

Fig. 19. Casale San Pietro: the trench 50m south of the casale.

Fig. 20. Casale San Pietro. The trench situated to the north of the historic building.

les with striped design, plain pottery, African red slip ware of type D, a fragment of glass) show that this part of the site was occupied mainly between the sixth and perhaps the eighth century AD.

The second test trench at Casale San Pietro was situated to the north of the historic building, and here one of the first well-stratified sequences with culturally Islamic pottery of the tenth-eleventh century in Sicily was contacted. The evaluation indicated that survival was potentially very good: the walls of a buil-ding had survived to a height of seven cour-ses, that is to a height of 0.65 m above its contemporary ground level (figs. 20-21). The wall had been constructed in a foundation trench, its stones bonded with clay and a lozenge-shaped river cobbles, sealed by a spread of tiles and rubble at the base of the recent ploughsoil (fig. 19). Examination of areas of mortar extruding from the wall showed that its elevation, which stood to 0.53 m, mainly comprised foundations set in mortar laid in a U-shaped trench (*al sacco*). The plough had the-refore removed all traces of floors or exterior surfaces of activity and truncated the wall to its foun-dations. A row of mortared stones displaced from the wall remained in formation. This levelling of the settlement and the spreading of the consequent debris is con-sistent with the results obtained in 2014. The few finds recovered (ti-

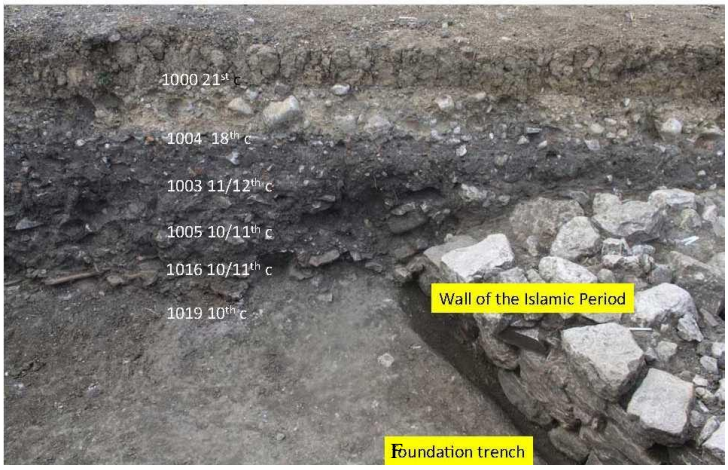

Fig. 21. Casale San Pietro: the stratigraphy of the trench situated to the north of the historic building.

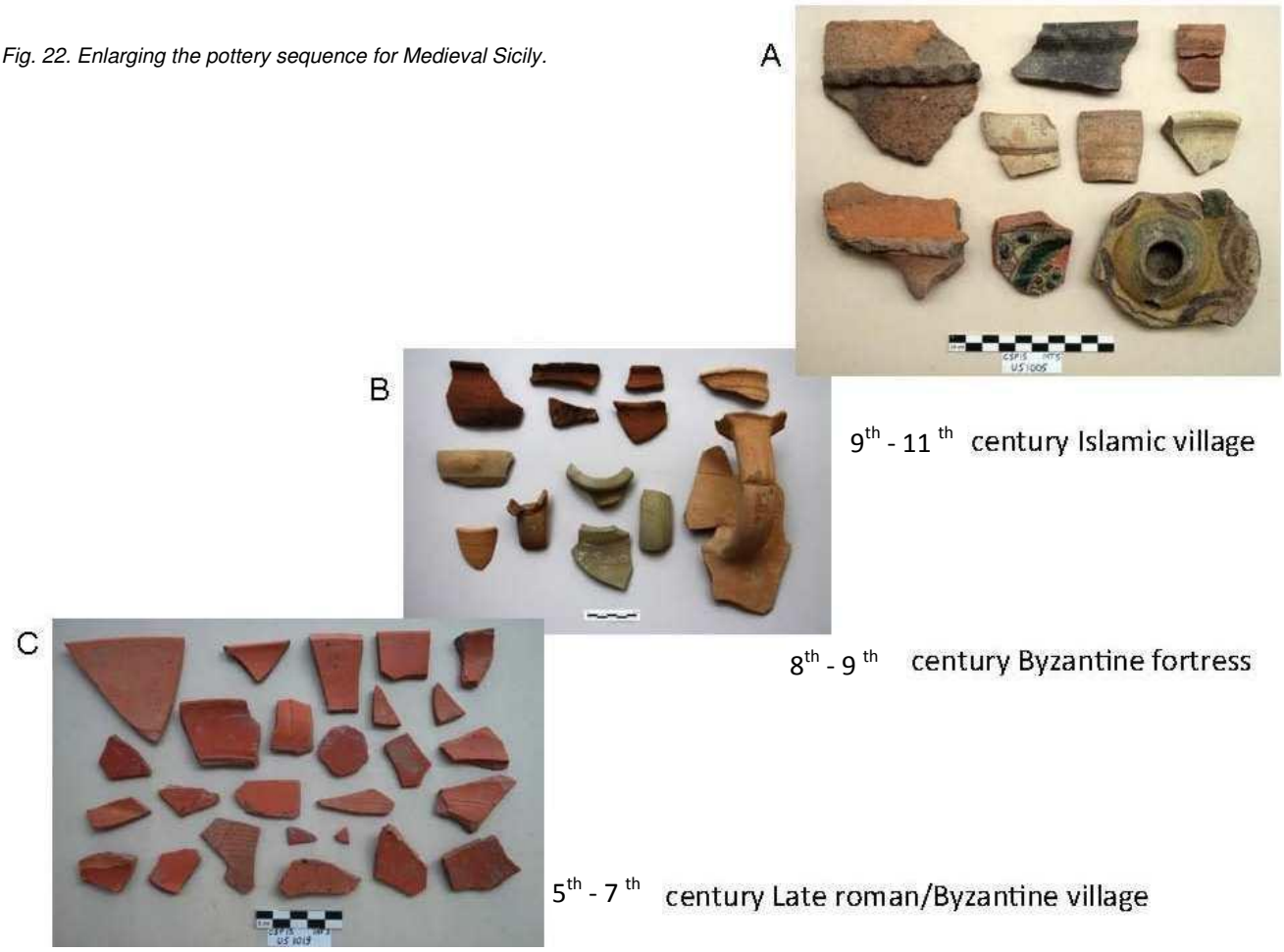

Fig. 22. Enlarging the pottery sequence for Medieval Sicily.

second parallel wall add been added alongside, probably a bench (*mastaba*). The top of this surviving structure was encountered 0.5 m below the present surface of the ground, and 1.80 m below the present floor of the adjacent church. The walls were sealed by layers of tiles, rubble and ploughsoil capped by a recent metalled track beneath the modern plougsoil (fig. 21).

The historic layers were well stratified and rich in ceramics suggesting a coherent sequence of sealed assemblages from the ninth to the twelfth century (fig. 22). Beneath the occupation zone of the wall, the lower deposits – which are still to be excavated – yielded only Late Roman and Byzantine pottery (for example red slip ware of type D, African amphorae and plain pottery) (fig. 22C). Other walls still showing on the surface in the neighbourhood of the Casale building, or embedded in its fabric, could also be survivors from the Islamic phase. It can be surmised that about 2.5 m of stratified deposits from the Middle Ages (ninth to thirteenth century) survive under the church floor in the Casale San Pietro mound. The fourth to seventh century Byzantine phase should be intact below that. At present it is not certain (given that the test excavation was quite small) whether an occupation can also be suggested for the eighth century in this part of the site of Casale San Pietro. However, between the three areas investigated, a continuous sequence from the fifth to the thirteenth century is represented at Castronovo dio Sicilia.

III. Synthesis and future

At Monte Kassar we have now obtained significant information on the use of the fortress and growing evidence of its construction date between the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth century. There is little doubt that it represents a serious investment: the defences are 1.8 km long and more than 3 m thick, comprise 11 towers, two gates, a *chemin de ronde*, and on some stretches further defensive works, such as an outer wall. This must represent an initiative by the Byzantine state to defend the island at a key point in the road network during the eighth century, but by the ninth century the defence had become ineffective. These dates

are consistent with military occupation by a resident garrison in the eighth century, indicated by ceramics, and the eventual surrender of the site in the mid ninth century as implied by the written documents. The interior of Monte Kassar has produced little surface material, implying that the garrison was largely quartered near the wall and occupied in a watching role, especially to the north, east and west. Topographic survey suggests that a number of other towers remain to be discovered outside the main defensive circuit, especially in the area of the northern approaches. Further exploration can be conducted by magnetometry, which has already produced useful results on this terrain. Monte Kassar also invites development as one of the most important and most neglected monuments in Sicily. A priority would be the commissioning of a conservation and display plan.

The investigations in the area of Casale San Pietro show that in the fields and orchards of the plain the destruction of the Byzantine and later occupation has been very thorough and virtually nothing remains above its contemporary ground level. However, negative features, such as furnaces, kilns and stone foundations give strong signals to magnetometry and much of the area of occupation could be mapped by this means.

By contrast, in the area within and round the Casale San Pietro historic building, the stratigraphy is rich and deep and far from destroyed. This area not only has the potential to reveal the architecture and economy of Islamic Sicily, but is probably the only place where the Byzantine 'agro-town' has not been destroyed by ploughing. For these reasons, a programme of research, conservation and public reception is highly desirable. The area that is still free of buildings is extensive enough to address the bulk of the research questions asked today. It should also be noted that the dumping of large amounts of Byzantine or earlier building stone, observed by the directors at first hand (including fragments of a large column), shows that the land is under continual pressure from farming, road-widening and redevelopment.

Martin Carver
Departmenty of Archaeology, University of York
E-mail: martin.carver@york.ac.uk

Alessandra Molinari
Università degli Studi di Torvergata
E-mail: alemoli@fastwebnet.it

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