

# SOMA 2011

Proceedings of the 15th Symposium on  
Mediterranean Archaeology, held at the University  
of Catania 3–5 March 2011

VOLUME I

Edited by

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Archeologia, opzione internazionale



Università di Catania  
Scuola di Specializzazione in  
Beni Archeologici



General Association of  
Mediterranean Archaeology



Turkish Foundation for  
Underwater Archaeology

BAR International Series 2695 (I)  
2015

Published by

Archaeopress  
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports  
Gordon House  
276 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7ED  
England  
bar@archaeopress.com  
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S2695 (I)

*SOMA 2011 Proceedings of the 15th Symposium on Mediterranean Archaeology, held at the University of Catania 3–5 March 2011*

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ISBN 978 1 4073 1342 9 (Volume I)  
ISBN 978 1 4073 1343 6 (Volume II)  
ISBN 978 1 4073 1344 3 (Set of both volumes)

Printed in England by Information Press, Oxford

All BAR titles are available from:

Hadrian Books Ltd  
122 Banbury Road  
Oxford  
OX2 7BP  
England  
www.hadrianbooks.co.uk

The current BAR catalogue with details of all titles in print, prices and means of payment is available free from Hadrian Books or may be downloaded from [www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

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# Material Culture and People.

## Some Methodological Remarks on the Study of Aeolian Middle Bronze Age Settlement Contexts

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### Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss some methodological issues relative to the analysis of the social organization of the Aeolian Middle Bronze Age (hereafter MBA) communities (Thapsos-Milazzese period) (Fig. 1). The latter topic is the object of this author's current doctoral research program.

The article is made up of three parts. First, I will describe some features of the Sicilian Middle Bronze Age; a backdrop of the archaeological correlates of social complexity will be sketched out. Secondly, I will discuss what aspects of the Aeolian evidence have been evaluated in earlier works, and to what extent these studies have been able to shed light on the social organization of the Aeolian MBA communities. Finally, and more importantly, I will describe the aims and tools of my ongoing research, and some methodological remarks will be presented and discussed.

Before entering the core of this paper, I would like to express my sincere thanks to a number of scholars and researchers who have been providing support, each in different ways, during my research: in alphabetical order, Arch Michele Benfari, Dr Maria Clara Martinelli, Dr Annunziata Ollà, Prof Umberto Spigo, who provided help as far as the access to the published materials stored in the Aeolian Archaeological Museum "L. Bernabò Brea" (Lipari) is concerned. I wish to also express my sincere thanks to Prof Elisabetta Borgna, my PhD supervisor. Last but not least, thanks are due to the personnel of the aforementioned Museum.

### Sicilian archaeological evidence and forms of social complexity

It is common opinion that Sicilian MBA (1450-1250 BC) (chronology: JUNG 2005, 2006; ALBERTI 2007; 2008a; 2011) was an important period in the perspective of both local cultural sequence and Mediterranean connections. In spite of the disparities in the available documentation and even though key sites like Thapsos and Cannatello remains still unpublished, the available literature on MBA-related issues is wide. Today, it seems that there is consensus about the existence of forms of social complexities in MBA contexts or, more exactly, in some of the main settlements of this period (Fig. 2)

At Thapsos, the very presence of forms of social ranking is evidenced by the disparities in architectural layout, spatial organization, and (perhaps) ceramic assemblages, that feature different sectors of the residential quarter (VOZA 1985; DOONAN 2001: 173-81; MILITELLO 2004: 314-22 TOMASELLO 2004: 195-213; ALBERTI 2006: 401-22; TANASI 2008). Remarkably, sparse evidences of metalworking activities are also documented (ALBERTI 2006, 2007, 2008b; TANASI 2009; all also with earlier references). In a similar vein, disparities can be detected in Thapsos' funerary contexts. Judging from what can be inferred

from the available documentation, different types of chamber tombs, not to mention funerary assemblages made up of different kind of items, and also incorporating imported goods (from Mycenaean Greece, Cyprus, Malta), all seems to speak about the existence of strategies of display of status (VAN WIJNGAARDEN 2002: 229-36; MILITELLO 2004: 305-14; VIANELLO 2005: 70-3; ALBERTI 2006: 373-421; TANASI 2008: 75-80) (Fig. 3 A-B)

In south-central Sicily, along the way to western Sicily and Sardinia, another MBA settlement, Cannatello, stands out. Flourishing in an area that witnessed the development of trade in sulphur during the EBA period (as documented at Monte Grande: CASTELLANA 1998), Cannatello and its surrounding area are featured by evidences of imports from Mycenaean Greece, Cyprus, and Sardinia (DE MIRO 1999; DAY 2005). Funerary contexts lying in nearby sites have yielded sparse evidence pertinent to the presence of local elites, like ceramic imports from the Aegean area and bronze artefacts (basins and daggers) seem to suggest (LA ROSA 2000) (Fig. 3 C).

If the mainland Sicilian documentation argues in favour of the existence of outstanding sites, involved in wide-ranging Mediterranean trade, where forms of social ranking and display of status are likely to have existed, one may wonder what the situation was in the north-eastern fringe of Sicily, namely the Aeolian Archipelago, during the same time period.

### Aeolian MBA settlement evidences

The main Aeolian MBA villages are those laying at Montagnola di Capo Graziano (Filicudi), Lipari (Acropoli), Punta Milazzese (Panarea), and Portella (Salina) (Fig. 4 A-D).

All were objects of excavations lead by L. Bernabò Brea and M. Cavalier mainly between the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s of the past century, and were published in different points in time (BERNABÒ BREA and CAVALIER 1968; 1980; 1991). These researches contributed to the definition of the features of the MBA culture developing on the Aeolian archipelago, and to shed light on the material culture of these island communities. More recently, MC Martinelli has led new excavations at Portella (MARTINELLI 2005). The excavations provided an insight into the assemblages used by people during their daily tasks (Fig. 5 A-B).

Ceramic assemblages, made up of local grey hand-made vessels, went hand in hand with artefacts of foreign provenance: pots of Aegean and Apennine types were found inside the huts. Tool-kits made up of stone mortars, pestles, grinding stones, hearth, and textile-related objects (spindle whorls) were found as well. Huge local ceramic containers witnessed the storage activities performed on those sites, while open pedestalled vessels, decorated jugs, and other ceramic vessels, were witnesses of local practices related to consumption activities. Metal working

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activities are documented by moulds in local limestone and by some bronze spalls. These researches allowed to get an insight into the domestic architecture as well.

**Milazzese social organisation: state of the research, unanswered questions, and the need to reframe the research questions**

Thanks to Bernabò Brea, Cavalier, and Martinelli's researches, a huge amount of data have been brought to light and made available to scholars dealing with different issues linked to the Aeolian documentation. In fact, works that take into account the Milazzese settlements have been published in various points in time. To limit my self to a selection of the more recent ones, they have been faced with the issues of the Aegean imports (SMITH 1987, VAN WIJNGAARDEN 2002, ALBERTI and BETTELLI 2005, VIANELLO 2005; JUNG 2006; BLAKE 2008), of the imports from mainland Italy (MACCHIAROLA 1987, 1995; DI GENNARO 1997), of the domestic architecture (DOONAN 2001, ALBORE LIVADIE *et al.* 2003, MARTINELLI 2005), of the chronological development of the local ceramic repertoire (ALBERTI 2008a), of the marks on the Milazzese ceramic vessels (MARAZZI 1997a, MARTINELLI 2005). Other studies, in a more general perspective, have taken into account the Aeolian Archipelago within the framework(s) of the intercultural Mediterranean links during the Bronze Age (BIETTI SESTIERI 1988, 2003, 2005; KILIAN 1990; MARAZZI 1997b, 2003; TUSA 2000; LA ROSA 2002; MILITELLO 2004, 2005).

What about the social features of the Aeolian communities during the MBA? Leaving aside the views of the scholars about the role of the Aeolian Islands in the movements of people and goods along the Mediterranean, one may wonder what light has been so far shed on the way(s) in which life was organised in the Milazzese settlements.

Acknowledging the fact that the earlier studies are of utmost importance in the framework of the understanding of many facets of the period under discussion, in my opinion, specific questions related to specific facets of the Milazzese social organisation have remained somewhat unanswered so far. Besides, the opinions of scholars do differ with respect to some aspects of the Aeolian MBA communities. For example, Kilian (1990) maintained that a kind of domestic economy featured the Milazzese domestic contexts at Panarea, while Bietti Sestieri (1988), in her seminal article, spoke in favour of a growing economic organisation, basing her judgement on the evidence of the pot-marks on Milazzese vessels. On the other hand, Marazzi's (1997a) analysis (based on the evidence of pot-marks found on ceramic artefacts from Lipari) seems to suggest that these marks were not related to practices of centralised storing. As for the integration of foreign ceramic vessels in local contexts, Van Wijngaarden (2002) proposed rather contrasting views as to whether or not special social strata had privileged access to specific Aegean imports, whereas Vianello (2005) seemed to suggest that no evidence of social differentiation can be pinpointed in the available documentation.

In my opinion, in order to understand Milazzese material culture in a social perspective, it could be useful to reframe the research questions that constitute the guidelines for the analysis of the archaeological evidence. Some of those questions could be put as follows: what kind of social organisation did feature those villages? In what way material culture was used during daily tasks? How material culture was used in social relations? Did any aim exist to use it as marker of social boundaries? Did social

boundaries exist at all? And, ultimately, did any form of social differentiation exist within and among villages?

In my opinion, addressing the aforementioned questions means to adopt a bottom-up perspective, aimed to understand the way(s) in which material culture was used in daily practices, with different aims, in different situations, and in different social settings (HODDER and HUTSON 2003). This, in turn, implies that we have to focus on a complex body of evidences, in a perspective in which the archaeological documentation is to be analysed as a whole, by taking into account both material culture and its spatial correlates, both local artefacts and imported ones. The starting point of this kind of analysis is the study of the material culture patterning at the site level, at that micro-scale resolution that features household archaeology and its subsequent developments (NETTING, WILK, *et al.* 1984; STEADMAN 1996; SOUVATSI 2008; WILSON 2008). The study of the onsite distribution and associations of artefacts, of their complex occurrence and co-occurrence, of the quantity and quality, and of the spatial settings and correlates, represents in my opinion the basis for any subsequent level of analysis aimed to backtrack forms of social organisation from the empirical evidence (WASON 1994).

In the remainder of this article, I will present and discuss some of the analytical strategies used in my current research. First, I will provide some information on the data on which my study is based; secondly, some aspects of my analysis of the Milazzese settlement at Lipari will be discussed.

**The Data**

For the purposes of my research, the published documentation of the MBA Aeolian settlements underwent a multi-level classification. Among other things, a functional one was developed in order to be used as heuristic tool (ADAMS AND ADAMS 1991; READ 2007) with the aim to recognize specific activity areas (KENT 1987, 1990). At the same time, a relational database (which I hope to make available on-line in the future from my personal web-site: <http://xoomer.alice.it/gianmarco.alberti>) was built in Microsoft Access environment.

The aim of this database is multi-fold. It allows to record every single artefact (local or not) or feature occurring in every single archaeological context (huts, annexes, open areas). It was developed in order to also provide the possibility to record the vertical provenance as well as the finding spots. The former feature provides the important possibility to select (during the analytical process), among hundreds of entries, only those ones that come from reliable layers. In essence, the database turns out to be an invaluable tool not just to storage and sort data, but, more importantly, to select data according to the reliability of their finding contexts and, ultimately, to reconstruct the artefact inventories of each context being studied. Just to provide a minimum of quantitative information about the database, the sheer number of the registered items is equal to 2.043 units, corresponding to a total of 1.813 quantifiable objects. Further details are provided in Fig. 6.

As previously stressed, this corpus is organised into a multilevel classification, like the one based on the type of material in which objects are made, or on the basis of various functional classes. Leaving aside the problem of the quantification, that represents an important aspect of the analysis, also the ceramic inventory (comprising both local and non local artefacts) has been subject of a multilevel classification compatible with the ones devised

by BIETTI SESTIERI, CAZZELLA, *et al.* 2002 and by MARTINELLI, BARONI, *et al.* 2002. In this case as well, the reconstruction of the functional aspects of the ceramic types being analysed bears a strong importance from an analytical standpoint.

#### **Analysis of Lipari MBA settlement: methodological remarks and preliminary interpretations**

In the last part of this paper, I will take into account the documentation of the MBA settlement unearthed by Bernabò Brea and Cavalier on the Acropolis of Lipari (BERNABÒ BREA and CAVALIER 1980). It must be stressed from the outset that the study of the material culture from this site is faced with difficulties, due to the intricacy of the stratification, whose time-span stretches thousands of years, with buildings of different cultural horizons superimposed on one another.

The analytical approach that I am going to discuss is meant to address the issue that represents the starting point of any inquiry into the organisation of a prehistoric community. To put it in a nutshell, the basic question is: does any pattern exist in the material culture at that site? To answer this question means to develop analytical tools allowing to identify pattern in complex data; this, in turn, relies on a series of preliminary steps, that are the very ones previously mentioned, like the functional classification of the artefacts and the scrutiny of the stratification.

Thanks to the aforementioned relational database, I am in the position to retrieve information about each archaeological context (hut, open area, space between huts), to filter the information on the basis, for example, of specific finding spots, or on the basis of the type of strata we are interested in. Ultimately, we are in position to reconstruct assemblages of artefacts that could be related to the tasks performed in each context in the past.

It is obvious, but it is important to stress it nevertheless, that in situation like Lipari the intricacy of the stratification imposes caution in any interpretation of the on-floor assemblages. But, the very selection of the artefacts on the basis of the finding strata allows to reasonably reduce the biases they are likely to have been caused by post-depositional processes (SCHIFFER 1987).

The process of data retrieving and selection enable to build a two-way data-matrix, representing the distribution of artefacts across contexts. To analyse data like this, I choose Correspondence Analysis as the appropriate analytical tool in an exploratory perspective (GREENACRE 2007). The choice rests on a host of reasons, including the capability to operate on two-way data matrices, and the possibility to isolate underlying factors responsible for data variability. In essence, the capability of CA to highlight patterns in data fits the archaeological needs of exploring complex data in search for material culture patterning (SHENNAN 1997: 308-40; DRENNAN 2010: 263-64).

In commenting the analysis performed on the data from Lipari, I will not go in deep into details. In particular, I will not discuss the important statistics usually accompanying CA results' discussion, since I wish to keep this article as more accessible to a general audience as possible. I will limit myself to provide only general information about a number of relevant archaeological aspects. These are (it is worth recalling) object of this author's current study and, consequently, are meant to be only preliminary in nature and bound to be further developed and improved in the near future.

The analysis allows to isolate different trends of variation in the data (Fig. 7 A).

On the basis of the presence of different proportions of artefacts, the analysis succeeds in pinpointing two groups of contexts, here labelled A and B. As you can see from the histograms, these two groups are featured by the presence of different artefacts. The groups share some of them, while other items have a higher frequency in one group and not in the other (Fig. 7 B). As a case in point, let's see for example the frequency of local storage vessels, split up between long term (pithoi) and short term (olle, Italian word for jars). It is evident that they occur with higher frequency in one of the two groups. By the same token, the analysis seems to suggest that the two groups also differ in proportion of ceramic vessels (both local and non-local) functional to eat and drink: see, for example, the different proportion in pouring (brocche, Italian word for jugs) and eating vessels (coppe su alto piede=pedestalled cups). Interestingly, leaving aside the occurrence of sherds not closely identifiable as far as typology is concerned (see, e.g., cup/kylix?, jug/jar?), it seems that the two groups also differ in proportion of Aegean open drinking vessels (cup/mug).

#### **Discussion and Conclusions**

From a general perspective, and bearing in mind that we have dealt here with just an handful of analytical outcomes, it seems that there is ground to test the hypothesis that different functions were performed in different sectors of the village. In fact, the analysis shows that different proportions of artefacts feature different clusters of contexts. If the analysis of the quantitative aspects of the evidence is coupled by the analysis of the qualitative and functional ones, some interesting patterns seem to emerge.

Some of the functions performed in a number of contexts seem likely to have been linked to forms of commensality, possibly featured by shared consumption of beverages and food. This analytical evidence could be further explored in a more general perspective aimed to pinpoint at the site-level traces of socially relevant activities. It is well known, in fact, how food and beverage sharing was important in social contexts, and were integral parts of various kinds of social strategies in different social settings (DIETLER and HAYDEN 2001).

It must be added that taking into account only the onsite distribution and association of artefacts would possibly capture only part of the complexity of past behaviours. It is common opinion in anthropological/archaeological theory that artefacts and bounded spaces are not two separate domains: artefacts were used in spaces, and spaces enclosed activities performed with artefacts (KENT 1990; RAPOPORT 1990; for an archaeological application of these theoretical premises, see e.g. FISCHER 2009). As consequence, a next level of the inquiry will be the study of the relation between material culture patterning and its spatial dimensions. That is, seeking to explore the existence of relations between cluster of artefacts and contexts that bear peculiar features (as far as layout, or dimension, or other qualitative/quantitative aspects are concerned).

What preliminarily showed so far is meant to convey the idea that, among several dimensions of complexity, different patterns seem to be identifiable in the available documentation, once data have been systematically classified, cross-checked, cross-analysed and explored.

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From a methodological standpoint, I would like to underscore the need to reframe the research questions we have in mind when approaching Aeolian MBA contexts. A bottom-up perspective, rooted in a household-level analysis, could lead to better explore the ways in which relations were created and maintained within Aeolian MBA communities. Also, it is tempting to advocate an integrated approach, aimed to explore the relations between different kinds of documentary evidences, and the need of a study that takes into account the whole material culture. In my opinion, these are the basic premises for inferring forms of prehistoric social organisation from the empirical evidence. Last but not least, I would like to stress the importance of the choice of an appropriate analytical tool, capable to deal with complex set of data and to highlight patterns of variation.

Of course, any pattern that the analysis succeeds to pinpoint is to be set against the backdrop of general theoretical models allowing to make sense of them in social and, generally speaking, human perspective. The aforementioned importance of food and beverage sharing in ancient societies is a case in point.

The latter endeavour is the more complex and challenging aspect of my current research, and in the future I will be pleased to provide scholars with a more complete (and, I hope, interesting) picture of the achievements of this study.

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Bronze Age phases defined on archaeological grounds (facies)			Sicilian Bronze Age cultural periods	Aegean imports	Approximate starting and ending dates (BC) of the Aegean phases (Low Chronology)	
Mainland Italy	Aeolian Islands	Mainland Sicily			start	end
ProtoApennine B	Capo Graziano 2	Castelluccio 2-Rodi-Tindari-Valllunga	Early Bronze Age (advanced)	LH I	1580	1530
				LH II A	1530	1470
				LH II B	1470	1400/1390
Apennine	Milazzese 1	Thapsos 1	Middle Bronze Age	LH III A1	1400/1390	1370/60
	Milazzese 2	Thapsos 2		LH III A2	1370/60	1340/30
		Thapsos 3		LH III B	1340/30	1185/80
SubApennine	Ausonio I	North Pantalica	Late Bronze Age	LH III C	1185/80	1065

FIG.1 SICILIAN BRONZE AGE CHRONOLOGICAL CHART (AFTER ALBERTI 2011)

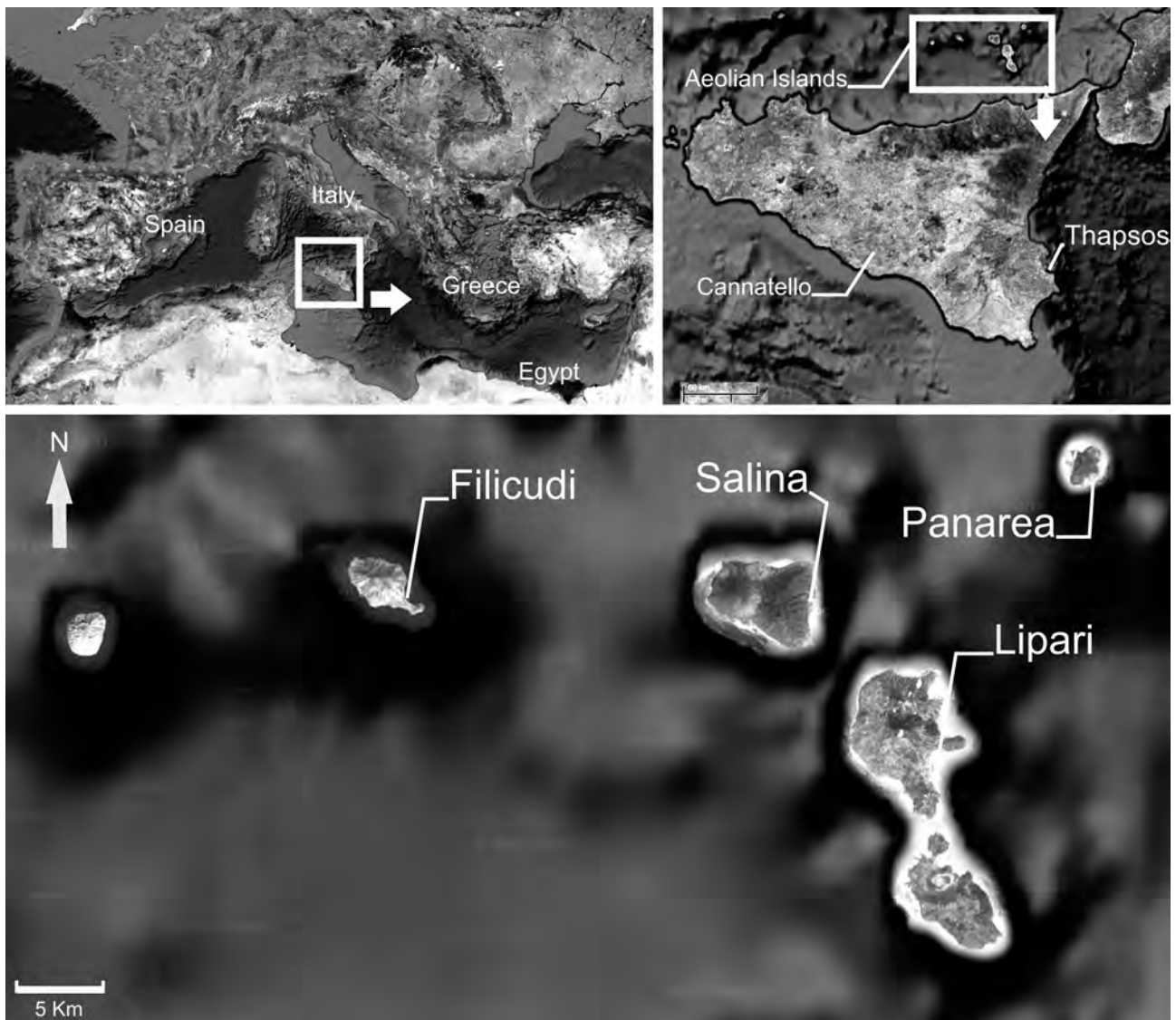


FIG. 2 MEDITERRANEAN BASIN, SICILY, AND AEOLIAN ISLANDS, WITH INDICATION OF THE MBA SITES QUOTED IN THE TEXT (AFTER GOOGLE EARTH™ MODIFIED)

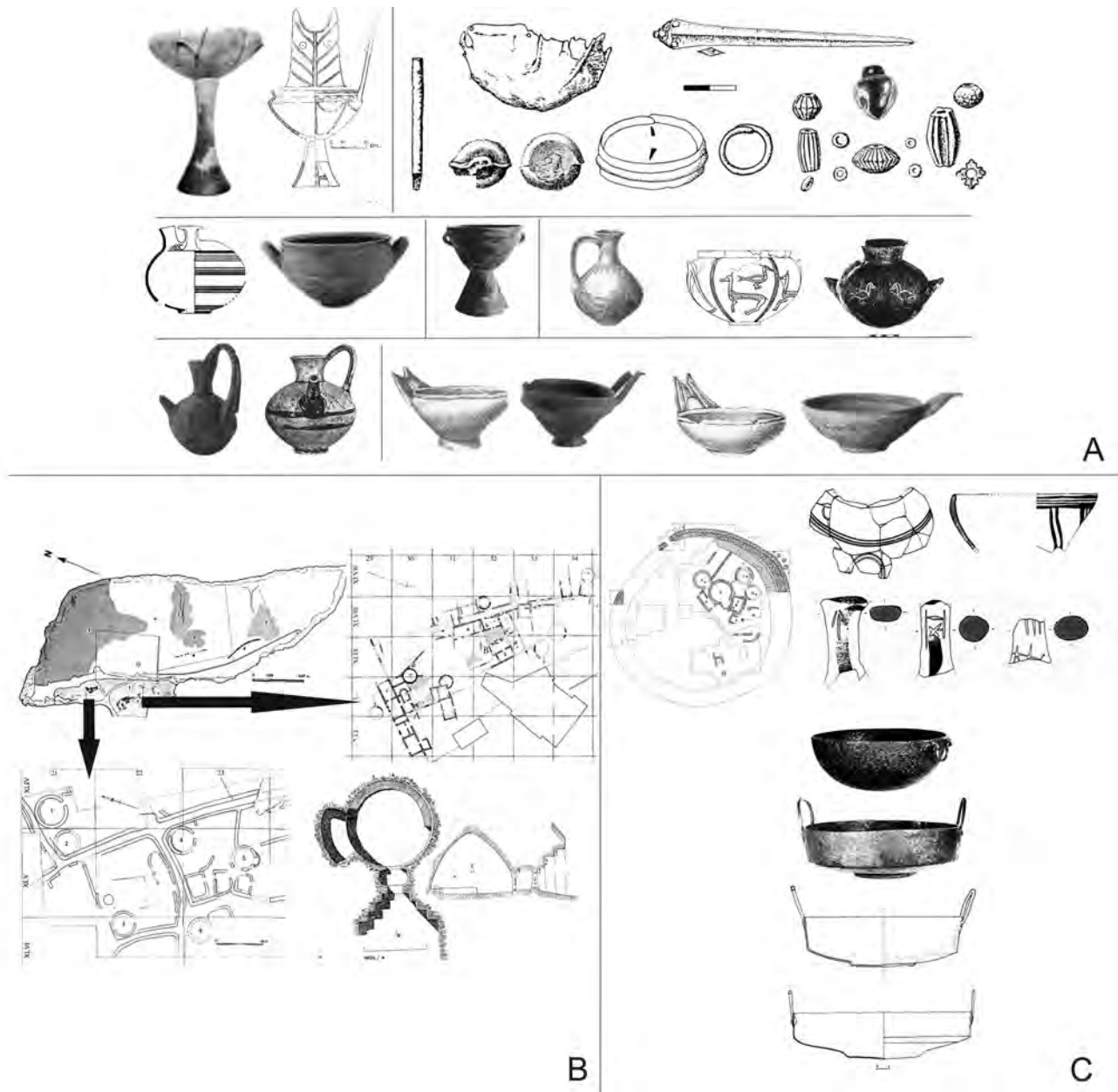


FIG. 3 A) THAPSOS-CULTURE ARTEFACTS: TWO PEDESTALLED VESSELS FROM THE RESIDENTIAL QUARTER (TOP ROW, LEFT); BRONZE TOOL, BASIN, DAGGER, DISCS (WEIGHTS?), PENDANTS AND WHORLS (TOP ROW, RIGHT); TWO IMPORTED AEGEAN POTS (MIDDLE ROW, LEFT); ONE MALTESE PEDESTALLED VESSEL (MIDDLE ROW, CENTRE); THREE LOCAL POTS WITH ENGRAVED DECORATION (MIDDLE ROW, RIGHT) (AFTER ALBERTI 2008B MODIFIED, WITH FURTHER REFERENCES THEREIN); LOCAL JUG AND ITS AEGEAN PROTOTYPE (BOTTOM ROW, LEFT); TWO LOCAL BOWLS AND THEIR CYPRIOT PROTOTYPES (BOTTOM ROW, RIGHT).

FIG. 3 B) THAPSOS SITE ON THE MAGNISI PENINSULA: NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN (CENTRAL) RESIDENTIAL QUARTER; PLAN AND SECTION OF A THAPSOS-TYPE THOLOS-LIKE CHAMBER TOMB (AFTER ALBERTI 2008B MODIFIED, WITH FURTHER REFERENCES THEREIN).

C-MBA EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH-CENTRAL SICILY: CANNATELLO SETTLEMENT PLAN; CYPRIOT AND AEGEAN CERAMIC IMPORTS FROM CANNATELLO; BRONZE BASINS FROM SOUTH-CENTRAL SICILIAN AREA (TOP TWO FROM CALDARE, MIDDLE ONE FROM MILENA, BOTTOM ONE FROM CAPRERIA) (AFTER ALBERTI 2008B MODIFIED, WITH FURTHER REFERENCES THEREIN). NOT TO SCALE.



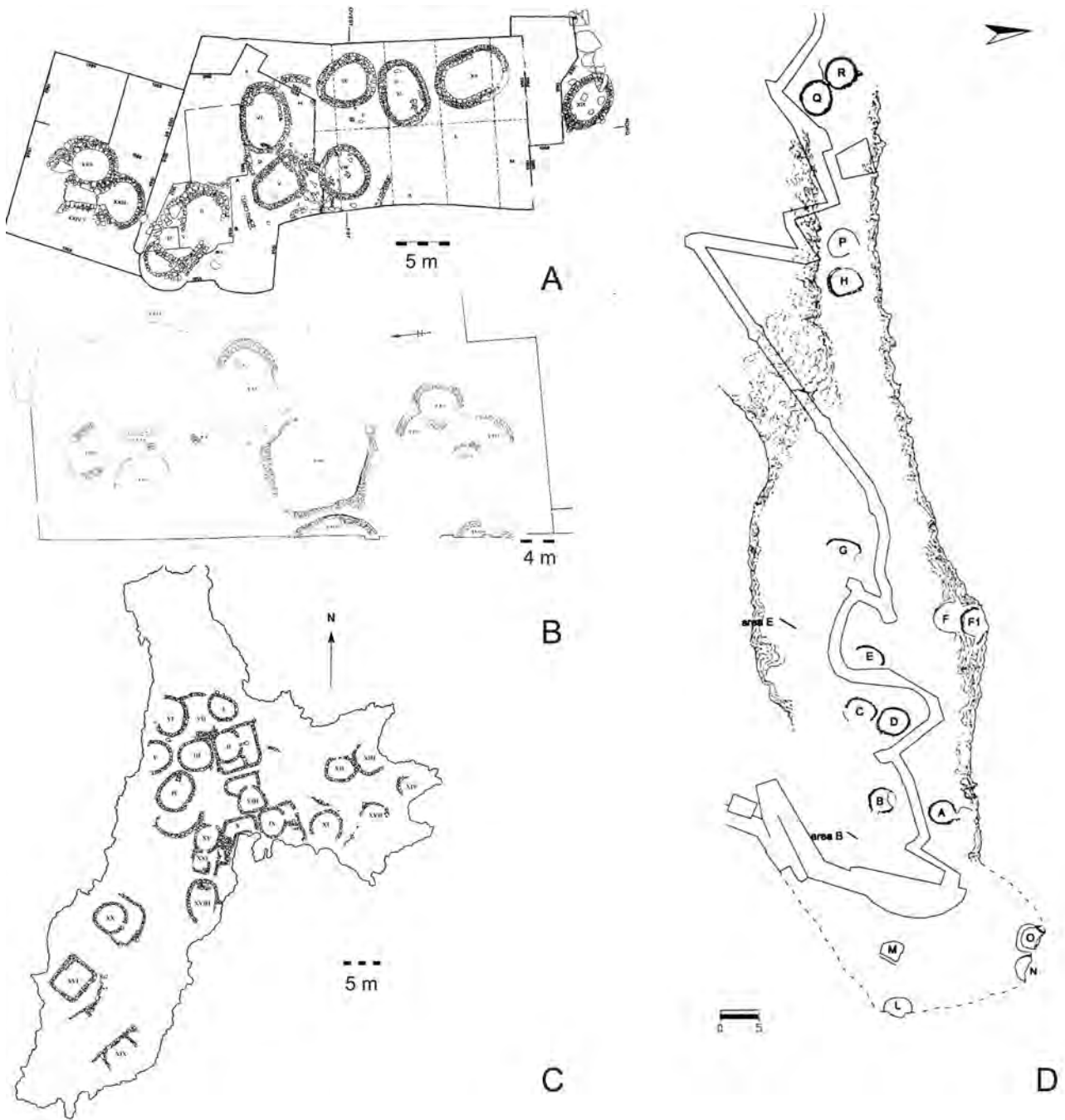


FIG. 4 AEOLIAN MBA SETTLEMENT PLANS: A) MONTAGNOLA DI CAPO GRAZIANO AT FILICUDI; B) ACROPOLI AT LIPARI (VILLAGE'S CENTRAL SECTOR); C) PUNTA MILAZZESE AT PANAREA; D) PORTELLA AT SALINA (A AFTER BERNABÒ BREA AND CAVALIER 1991; B AFTER BERNABÒ BREA AND CAVALIER 1980; C AFTER BERNABÒ BREA AND CAVALIER 1968; D AFTER MARTINELLI 2005; ALL MODIFIED).

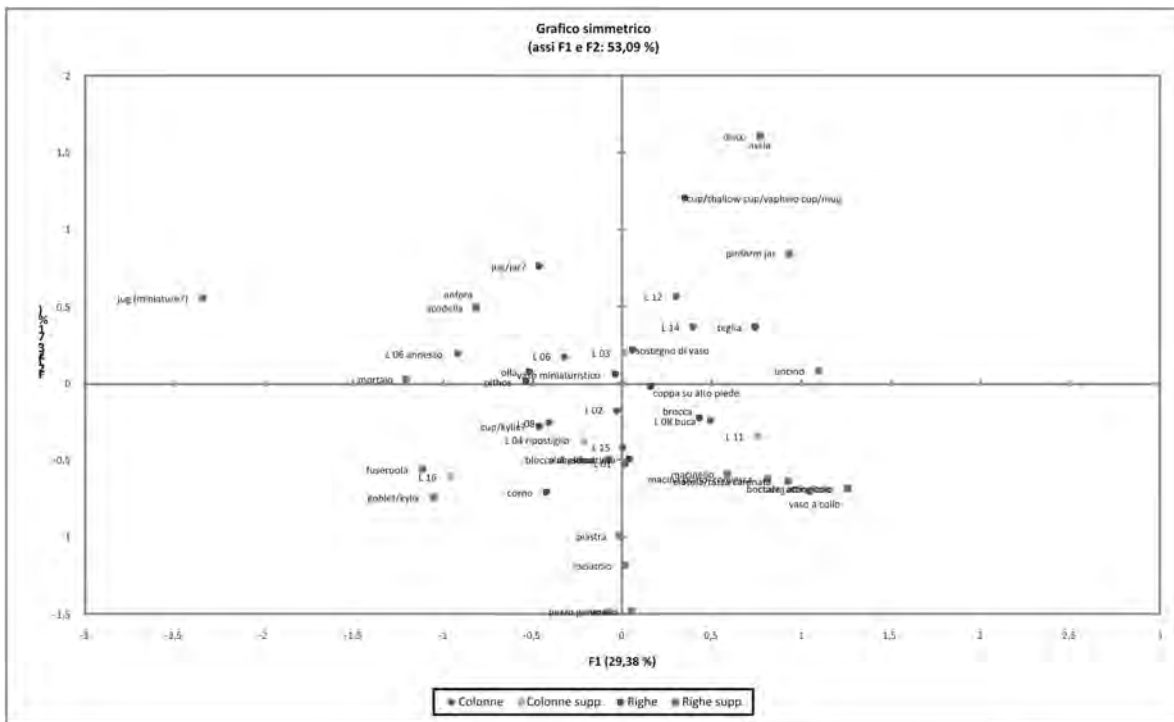


FIG. 5 MILAZZESE MATERIAL CULTURE: A) AEGEAN IMPORTS (POTS AND JEWELLERY); B) LOCAL LONG-TERM STORAGE CONTAINER (LEFT); LOCAL PEDESTALLED VESSEL AND JUG WITH ENGRAVED DECORATION (BOTTOM ROW, CENTRE AND RIGHT); IMPORTED APENNINE CUP WITH ENGRAVED DECORATION (TOP ROW); LOCAL LIMESTONE MOULD (MIDDLE ROW, RIGHT) (AFTER BERNABÒ BREA AND CAVALIER 1968, 1980, MODIFIED; NOT TO SCALE).

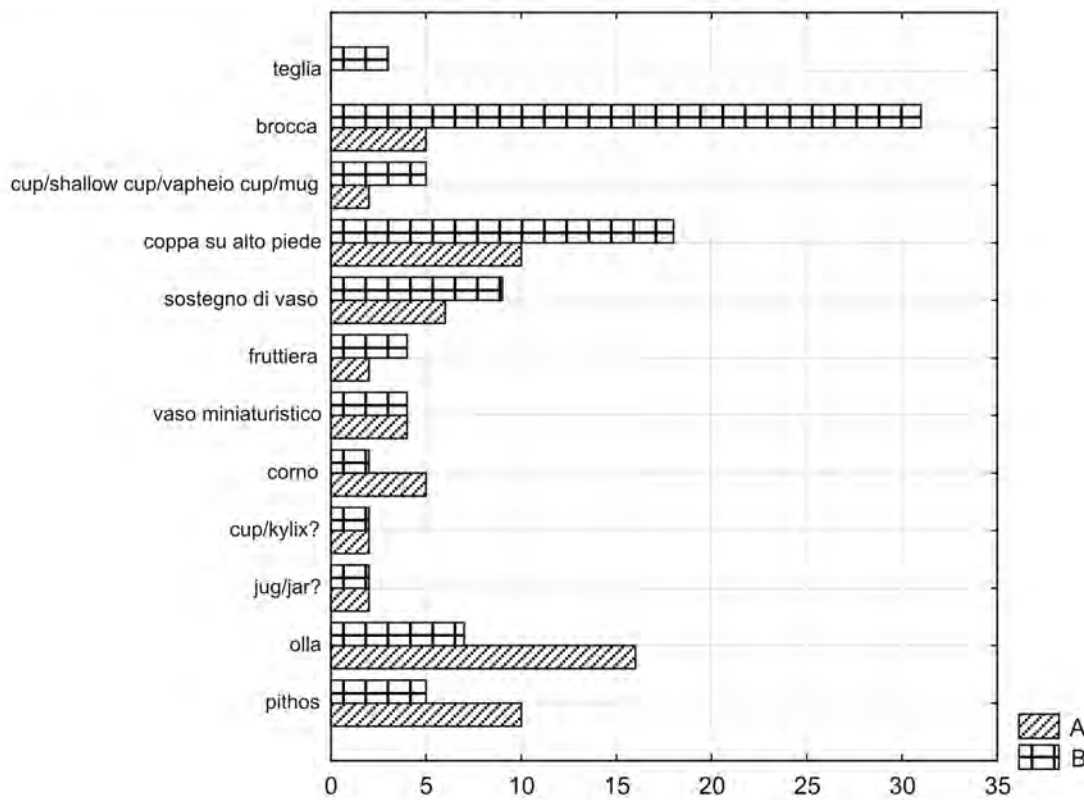
SOMA 2011

<b>Milazese</b>	<b>1585</b>	<b>Apennine</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>bronze artifact</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>clay artifact</b>	<b>125</b>
<i>ornamental object</i>	1	<i>vessel-type artifact</i>	125
ornamental	1	accessory	2
<i>residue</i>	6	storage	17
residue of working activity	6	dinner	88
<i>tool</i>	1	dinner?	1
working	1	N/D	17
<b>stone artifact</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>Aegean</b>	<b>103</b>
<i>residue</i>	116	<b>clay artifact</b>	<b>103</b>
residue of working activity	116	<i>non vessel-type artifact</i>	1
<i>tool</i>	222	cultural?	1
generic	55	<i>vessel-type artifact</i>	102
working	165	storage	15
weaving?	2	storage?	8
<i>tool?</i>	74	storage/dinner?	3
working?	73	cooking	1
<b>clay artifact</b>	<b>1159</b>	dinner	49
<i>non vessel-type artifact</i>	220	dinner?	11
cooking	33	N/D	15
cooking and/or other	30		
cultural	61		
spinning	85		
spinning?	1		
N/D	9		
<i>vessel-type artifact</i>	939		
generic	2		
storage	175		
storage and/or other	82		
storage?	1		
storage/cooking	12		
cooking	75		
cooking?	3		
dinner	532		
dinner/praparation/storage	22		
preparation	2		
praparation/storage	27		
N/D	6		
<b>bone artifact</b>	<b>2</b>		
<i>residue</i>	1		
N/D	1		
<i>tool</i>	1		
working	1		
Grand Total: 1813. Number of Database entries: 2043.			

FIG. 6 FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE ARTEFACTS (LOCAL AND IMPORTED) FROM MBA SETTLEMENT AT THE ACROPOLIS OF LIPARI. NUMBERS INDICATE THE OBJECTS' FREQUENCIES CALCULATED AS MINIMUM NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS. FOR THIS REASON, THE TOTAL IS SMALLER THAN THE TOTAL OF THE DATABASE ENTRIES.



A



B

FIG. 7 A) SCATTERPLOT OF THE CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS (CA) PERFORMED ON THE DATA FROM LIPARI. B) HISTOGRAMS SHOWING THE DIFFERENT FREQUENCIES OF SOME MILAZESE ARTEFACTS BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS OF CONTEXTS (A-B) PINPOINTED BY CA. FOR THE TRANSLATION OF THE ITALIAN TERMS INDICATING MILAZESE CERAMIC TYPES, SEE THE TEXT.