

Methods and Practices in Studies of the Economy of Messapia

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As part of this presentation I would like to discuss certain aspects of the archaeological research that make it possible to reconstruct the economic and relational framework of the Salento peninsula during the pre-Roman period. I will focus on three points in particular:

- Processes of interaction and exchange
- Settlements, landscapes and communities
- Production and consumption of food

Processes of Interaction and Exchange

From the quantitative analyses to the most recent cognitive approaches, the research in this sector has led to a radical overhaul of the concepts traditionally used to describe relations and contacts with neighbouring cultural systems.

Quantitative research has been applied in this field since the 1980s,¹ following an approach that seeks to mediate between contrasting conceptual positions that spring from different traditions of studies.

From the use of statistical methods, widely promoted by the Anglo-Saxon school of processual archaeology, the focus on the stratigraphic study of archaeological contexts (which has taken new forms in some sectors of Italian archaeology) and the sensitivity towards the disciplines of history and anthropology of the ancient world – closely associated with Mediterranean archaeology – a new model of analysis and interpretation of the data emerged.²

In the 1980s and 90s, this model was used to study the materials imported from Greece that were being discovered by the growing number of excavations in the area of Messapia in that period. From research based on data from the excavations in Otranto and the Iapygian settlements of the southern Salento,³ which yielded large quantities of Greek materials dated to the most ancient phases of the Greek occupation, to studies of imported materials of the Archaic and Classical periods,⁴ the basic tool used in the interpretive processes that made it possible to highlight dynamics of economic and social interest was spatial distribution analysis. For example, to explain the occurrences of Greek materials in the Iapygian settlement of Otranto in the 8th century the port-of-trade model, based on Karl Polany's reflections on the economic dynamics of the ancient world, was used.⁵ Considered within the broader context of commerce between the two shores of the Adriatic, the case of Otranto is helping to reshape our idea of the relations between cross-border communities (including those of the Illyrian and northern Greek

coasts), highlighting the role of local networks and redistribution centres. While these approaches enable a better understanding of the functioning of Archaic commerce, they also help redefine the dynamics of contact with the Greek world in the most ancient phases, and prompt us to reconsider the meaning of concepts such as ‘pre-colonisation’, for too long used as a key to interpret the Greek evidence in phases and contexts preceding the ‘Classical’ beginning of Greek colonisation.⁶ For this reason, the research in the Archaic Salento led to a broader reflection on the Mediterranean as a whole, helping to substantially revise our reading of relations and exchanges.⁷

The research on Greek imports in the Archaic period has given rise to interpretative approaches that have made it possible to revise our view of the economic dynamics of Messapian societies. From the methodological point of view, since the 1990s studies have sought to go beyond the essentially reductionist quantitative approaches by emphasising contextual data.⁸ Careful consideration of the function of objects in the individual contexts, understood not only in a stratigraphic and depositional sense, but as reflecting specific historical and social situations, has made it possible to read in the presence of Greek vessels linked to the sphere of wine evidence of the key role played in the Archaic societies by commensal practices centred on the use of alcoholic beverages. In order to decipher the various implications of this, it is not sufficient to refer to the research – important as it may be – into the role of the symposium in the Greek world, which was close in chronological, geographical and cultural terms.

Stimulating points for reflection emerged from research in the field of social anthropology, centred on the social role of practices linked to the preparation and consumption of food,⁹ which highlight the explicitly economic function of such practices in the context of pre-monetary societies. Models such as the working-feast¹⁰ illustrate the potential of this research, making it possible to associate the material characteristics of the objects with multiple semantic values. The distribution of food and alcoholic beverages can thus be read as part of an economic mechanism able to mobilise labour, but it also appears to be a key element of the dynamics that made it possible to acquire and consolidate power.

The evidence yielded by the Archaic settlements, so rich in Greek material linked to the use of wine, has thus become a tool that makes it possible to read the structures of economic and social organisation of Messapian communities from the inside, highlighting the fundamental role played by commensal practices centred on the consumption of alcoholic beverages and reconstructing its ceremonial setting. We shall return to this aspect, but in the meantime I would like to stress that thanks to these methodological approaches the value of these objects as indices of ‘Hellenisation’ has been thoroughly revised as part of an interpretative process that makes it possible to go beyond the hermeneutic limits of this concept. The relationship with the Greek world has thus been repositioned within the endogenous dynamics underlying the formation and development of Messapian communities and the acquisition and management of power by Messapian elites throughout the Archaic period.¹¹

The tools of analysis of settlement archaeology have played an important role in the reconstruction of these dynamics.

Settlements, Landscapes and Communities

The global approach to the study of the region has made it possible to reconstruct the development of the settlement system over time.

Numerous projects¹² have sought to reconstruct the cultural landscapes, with specific attention to the relations between human beings and the environment and the establishment and socio-political organisation of the local communities.

Systematic exploration of the region, information technology and palaeo-environmental analyses, together with the focus on the human factor (agency) and cognitive approaches, are the key elements of this methodological framework.

I would like to make reference here to the 'Murge Tableland' project, conducted jointly by the University of the Salento, the Free University of Amsterdam and the University of Rome 'La Sapienza', and specifically to its contribution to deciphering the complex dynamics in progress from the Iron Age onwards.¹³

A renewed knowledge framework has made it possible to highlight the extensive growth settlements in the second half of the 8th century BC,¹⁴ with the stable occupation of marginal areas that had previously been frequented only sporadically. This process has been interpreted as 'internal colonisation',¹⁵ responsible for the high rate of growth of the settlements and mobility within the region. The systematic analysis of the cultural landscapes makes it possible to describe this framework in detail, highlighting a range of situations, determined by complex dynamics that were not shared by all local situations. Sites such as L'Amastuola and Castelluccio¹⁶ arose in the second half of the 8th century BC, a short distance from late Bronze Age settlements that had been abandoned at the beginning of the Iron Age. It may be hypothesised that they were the result of movement of human groups in search of more suitable territory. In contrast, the 8th-century BC settlement of Castello di Alceste¹⁷ arose in an area that had been frequented in the Bronze Age only sporadically (perhaps seasonally), a short distance from long-standing settlements such as Oria.¹⁸ It is probable in this case that the new settlement was founded by a group that branched off from the mother community.

Movements of populations and the mobility of communities within the same ethnos animate the picture of the Iron Age. The palaeo-environmental research reveals the important role played by the new agricultural practices. I refer here to the research in L'Amastuola and Castelluccio because it has highlighted the crops commonly grown in the Iron Age, including legumes.¹⁹ This not only reflects strategies for food production, but also indicates an awareness of the properties of legumes as natural fertilisers, enabling more exploitation of arable land. Taken as a whole, these data point to a framework characterised by more stable communities, occupying systematically



Fig. 1: The Iron age settlement of Castello di Alceste (S.Vito dei Normanni – BR): graphical reconstruction.

area that had previously perhaps been used only sporadically, on a seasonal basis (in accordance with a pattern more typical of communities that were economically more dependent on grazing).

Among the methods used for reconstructing the economic aspects of the Iron Age settlements, worthy of mention the efforts of experimental archaeology, which have made it possible to calculate the time required for the construction of Iron Age houses and have shown that the investment in terms of social energy is not consistent with the idea of fragile and ephemeral buildings.²⁰ They are structures suited to nuclear families (calculation of the spaces based on ethnographic comparisons), clustered in groups, surrounded by low walls. To examine their distribution and understand how they worked, the tools of cognitive archaeology were deployed, borrowing concepts and interpretative approaches from anthropological research, such as those that use the 'biographical' model as a key to studying the material characteristics of the objects and the development of settlements.²¹

Thus, in the groups of Iron Age huts it is now possible to see the growth of nuclear families, with the construction of neighbouring houses built for members of new families



Fig. 2: Castello di Alceste (S.Vito dei Normanni – BR): Experimental archaeology in the Diffuse Museum. Reconstruction of an Iron Age hut.

formed from the original nucleus (figs. 1. 2). And it is fitting that the Archaic houses, with different forms and materials, in accordance with a new architectural culture, were built over the clusters of Iron Age huts, as if reflecting the growth and transformation of the families that since the 8th century BC had occupied that space.²² Overlapping of this type is documented in Castello di Alceste and L'Amastuola, but also in the large Archaic settlement of Cavallino.

Production and Consumption of Food and Beverages

The research is now making it possible to describe with concrete data the production and use of alcoholic beverages, highlighting the economic and social significance. The consumption of fermented beverages can now be associated with local ceramics with geometric decoration, thanks to analyses of the organic residues and functional research.²³ The ceremonial character of these objects is increasingly evident, as shown by the discoveries in Roca and Vaste,²⁴ but also the large hut in Pelli property (Cavallino), where Iapygian ceramics are associated with numerous vessels imported from Greece. Perhaps in contexts such as these, it is already possible to see the emergence of commensal practices of a ceremonial kind, which would become more explicit in the Archaic period thanks to a series of indicators, as can be seen in the large Archaic building in the settlement of Castello di Alceste (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Castello di Alceste (S.Vito dei Normanni – BR): Plan of the excavation area on the hilltop showing the Archaic ‘large building’ built over the clusters of the Iron Age huts.

Built in the 6th century on one of the Iron Age clusters is what we have called the ‘large building’, which differs in size and building technique from the other dwellings discovered in the vicinity. While these houses are 100–200 m² on average, the large building has an area of 700 m², mostly occupied by the large courtyard (fig. 4). The latter contains an enigmatic structure made of stones, which, on the basis of a series of indicators, has been interpreted as an altar (fig. 3).²⁵ This is a Archaic type which, in the absence of comparisons with conserved structures, can be compared with iconographic sources on Attic ceramics. A number of clues already discussed in the presentation of the data suggest that it was linked to the cult of the ancestors. The residential part includes spaces with specific functions that are currently being studied, starting with the distribution of the artefacts (fig. 5): the banqueting hall (room 4) is a large room with a prevalence of ceramic containers (for conserving foodstuffs but also for displaying accumulated wealth), while in the area on the north side, clear traces of cult activities were recognised (votive deposits with sheep and goats’ horns associated with imported ceramics). The currently available evidence suggests a link to the ceremonial and cult sphere (fig. 6). The entire complex can be interpreted in relation to the exercise of power: we can see here a direct and powerful reflection of



Fig. 4: The Archaic settlement of Castello di Alceste (S.Vito dei Normanni – BR): graphical reconstruction.

the presence, by now consolidated, of a group that holds power and exerts under the aegis of the ancestors.

Throughout this complex there is a strong presence of Greek ceramics: these are mostly small vessels for drinking, but also large Attic volute and calyx-kraters, vessels which in southern Italy, appear only in highly important contexts, proving the importance of the activities that took place in this building. Another feature is the imported Greek cooking ceramics, which are numerous in this context.²⁶ These objects are rarely discovered in Archaic indigenous contexts. They mark what I consider to be a highly important phenomenon, i.e. the presence of innovations, acquired from outside, in the ways of preparing and consuming food. Analyses of the residues show traces of cooked meat, together with plant compounds, as well as the remains of cattle butchered for consumption, according to archaeo-zoologists.²⁷

All this is seen in a context with a pronounced ceremonial and ritual dimension. I believe that Greek cooking vessels and ceramics for wine were used in collective ceremonies that were also performed in the large open-air courtyard. In these activities we can recognise the mechanism employed by the elites to acquire and consolidate power, by offering prestige foods and beverages such as wine. As social anthropology teaches us, there is also an economic aspect in collective commensal practices, clearly

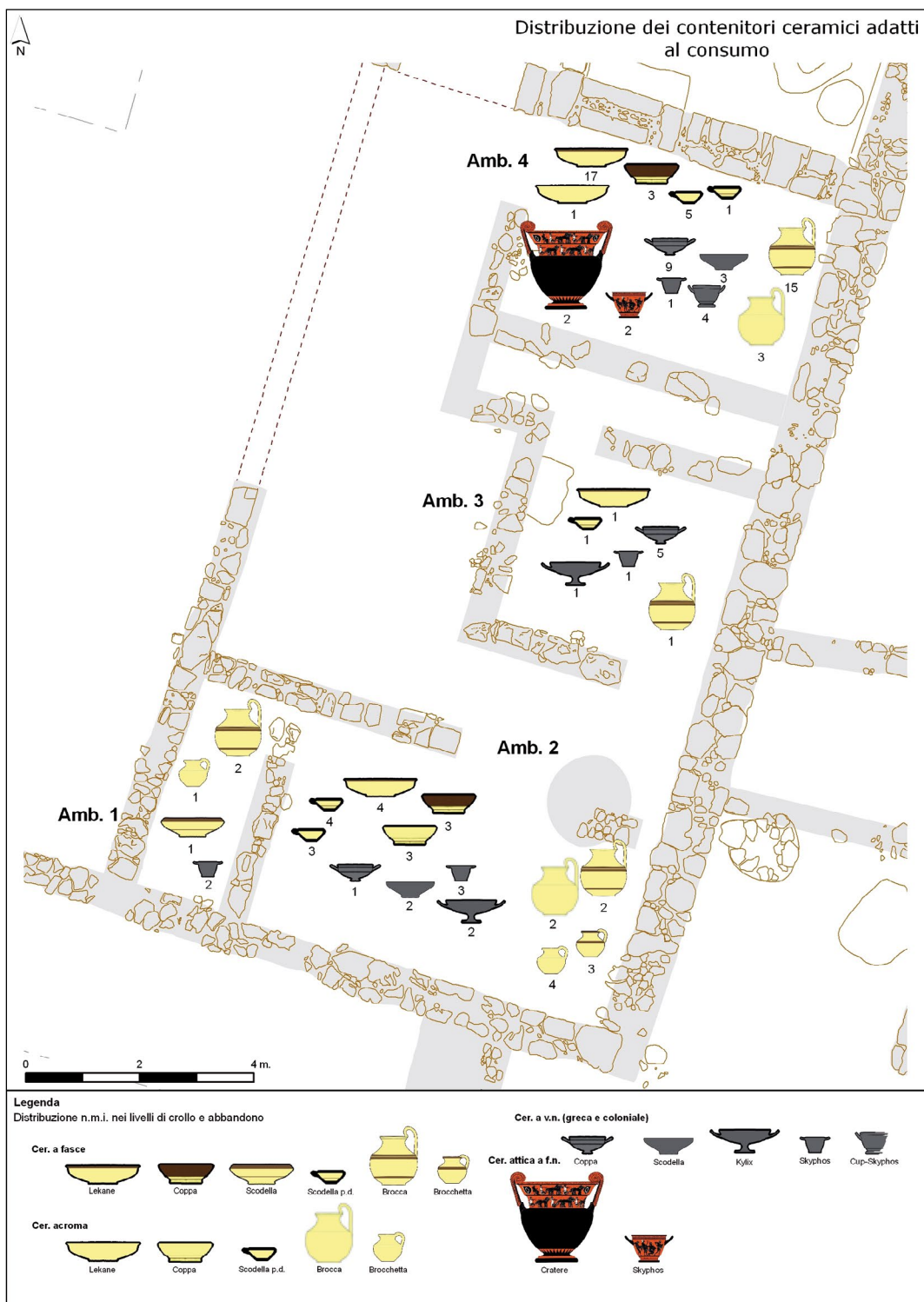


Fig. 5: Castello di Alceste (S.Vito dei Normanni – BR): The eastern rooms of the ‘large building’. Spatial distribution of the pottery.



Fig. 6: The banqueting hall.

illustrated by the *travail-fête*, a system by which labour can be mobilised and activated in societies that do not use cash, offering a banquet in lieu of wages.²⁸ Those who are economically in a position to provide food and drink are also able to mobilise the labour force (for example for tilling the fields or large-scale construction), thereby increasing their economic prestige. This brings us back to the crucial role played by the production of wine and other alcoholic beverages in Archaic societies. The recent discoveries in the area behind the building enrich the picture set out above.²⁹ Behind the building we discovered equipment that appears to be linked precisely to the production of wine. This is composed of a number of installations, in which recesses for pithoi and traces of a wooden container next to a stone platform that can be interpreted as the base of a counterweight press, a very ancient form documented on black-figure Attic vessels, can be recognised.³⁰ The materials from the levels of occupation include commercial amphorae, jugs and pithoi, all linked to the use of wine. To these clues may be added the traces of plant remains recognised in the sediments associated with the structures.³¹ It seems therefore that there are all the signs for recognising this as one of the rare Archaic workshops for the production of wine.³²

Aside from the objective importance for the study of viticulture in southern Italy, I believe that it is extremely important to have discovered this production context in association with such a large settlement. In addition, an oil press and spaces used for

grinding cereals were recognised nearby: an entire system centred on the production of food.

The large building represents an important piece of the puzzle for reconstructing the development of Messapian communities and the emergence of their elites. It is precisely in this period that the presence of elites is manifested on the funerary level, with tombs rich in precious pottery and bronze, as seen in Cavallino and Ugento³³ and figured kraters that probably symbolise the decisive role played by commensal practices in the social life of the Messapian elites.

Notes

¹ Semeraro 1990.

² See Semeraro 1997, chapter 2.

³ D'Andria 1995.

⁴ Semeraro 1997; Mannino 2006.

⁵ See discussion in D'Andria 1995.

⁶ See the reflections on the issue of 'pre-colonisation' by D. Ridgway 2000.

⁷ See for example Malkin 1998; D'Andria 2012.

⁸ Semeraro 1990; 1997.

⁹ Goody 1982.

¹⁰ Dietler 1990; Dietler – Herbich 2001.

¹¹ See discussion in Semeraro 1997, chapter 2.

¹² See for references D'Andria 1997.

¹³ See the presentation of the project in Burgers – Recchia 2009; Semeraro 2012a.

¹⁴ D'Andria 1991.

¹⁵ Burgers 1998; see further discussion in Semeraro 2014; 2016.

¹⁶ Burgers – Crieelard 2007; 2011; Semeraro 2009a.

¹⁷ Semeraro 2009b; 2014.

¹⁸ See Semeraro 2009a; for the long-lasting site of Oria: Yntema 1993;

¹⁹ For l'Amastuola: Lentijes 2011; for Castelluccio: Semeraro 2014; 2016.

²⁰ Semeraro 2015

²¹ Semeraro 2015; 2016.

²² Semeraro 2016.

²³ Semeraro 2016; 2017. About organic residues analyses in the archaeological context of the Salento region see Lettieri – Notarstefano 2010; Notarstefano et al. 2011; Notarstefano 2012.

²⁴ Roca: Pagliara – Guglielmino 2005; Corretti et al. 2010; Vaste: D'Andria 2012.

²⁵ Semeraro 2009b; De Grossi Mazzorin et al. 2015.

²⁶ Semeraro 2000; Notarstefano 2012.

²⁷ De Grossi Mazzorin et al. 2015.

²⁸ Dietler 1990.

²⁹ Semeraro 2012b; in press.

³⁰ See skyphos in Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 99.525: Brun 2004, 91; Foxall 2011, 36 fig. 1.

³¹ F. Notarstefano, personal communication.

³² Brun 2011; Foxall 2011.

³³ See Mannino in this volume.

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