Consumption of Luxury Goods and Art among Messapian Aristocrats

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In studies of the economic systems of the ancient world, Messapia represents an area of great interest thanks to the large amount of data produced by the archaeological research both in the field and – in accordance with a range of multidisciplinary approaches – on the theoretical level. The aspect analysed in the present paper can be considered especially fortunate. Indeed, on the basis of innovative work by Francesco D'Andria and Grazia Semeraro in the 1990s, the "luxury goods" and "art" of Messapia have been the object of extensive research which has analysed the contexts of the evidence in search of the right key with which to interpret the finds.[1] In this article I will focus on the aspects of the phenomenon as documented by particularly significant artefacts and contexts dated from the Archaic period to the end of the 4th century BC. The evidence will be examined in such a way as to highlight the economic significance of artistic items and luxury goods among the Messapians and explore how this differentiated them from other non-Hellenic peoples in the ancient world. Interesting data on this theme begin to appear in both residential and cult areas in the late second quarter of the 6th century BC, a time when a hierarchical organisation of settlements was emerging in Messapia. Indeed, albeit with some discontinuities, the villages composed of clusters of huts began to be replaced by more complex forms of settlement.[2] Significant in this regard is the case of Cavallino, where, inside the fortifications, spaces with funerary, religious or craft functions alternated with areas crossed by irregular paved roads with side-walks flanked by dwellings with limestone foundations, stone walls and clay roofs.[3] This period is rich in new developments: together with the advent of writing, some family groups acquired the power necessary to begin to invest resources and the population practised craft activities linked to building and the production of ceramics in addition to livestock rearing and agriculture. The role of these aristocratic groups was also consolidated by means of Greek wine, documented in the settlement by numerous imported amphorae. This was highlighted by Grazia Semeraro, for whom the use of Greek wine – drunk from Laconian kraters and Attic or colonial black-glaze bowls – was regulated by the aristocratic classes who were able to control exchanges and procure the exotic beverage.[4] In this phase of transformation of the settlements, imported wine may have played a strategic role in the mobilisation and recruitment of manual labour. Significant in this respect is the presence, in a very few residential areas, of Attic black-figure kraters. Concerning the function of these vessels, information is provided by the discoveries made in the areas of Castello di Alceste near San Vito dei Normanni (BR), a modest hill with dwellings on the summit that are comparable to those of Cavallino.[5] Prominent among these is the so-called 'large building', a complex of 700 m^2 composed of a number of covered rooms facing onto a courtyard with an

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altar in the centre.[6] The building's floor plan and dimensions, together with the type and quality of the objects discovered there, enabled Grazia Semeraro to identify the structure as the residence of a person – or a family – who held power in the settlement and conducted ceremonial and religious activities there.[7] In a room that yielded ceramics for the consumption of wine at banquets were the fragments of two Attic black-figure vessels dated to the last two decades of the 6th century BC: a volute-krater with a frieze of horsemen and a calyx-krater with a representation of Athena and Herakles.[8] The discovery is exceptional. Indeed, while in the residential contexts of southern Puglia imported ceramics for pouring wine are mostly black-glazed, in San Vito dei Normanni the Attic kraters constitute a prestigious medium for images that recall the world of warriors and Herakles, the hero of Archaic Greek aristocrats.[9] In economic terms, these carefully selected vessels should be considered "luxury goods". Indeed, for the Messapian context, J. Geoffrey Kron's recent hypothesis is not plausible. Resuming the famous theory of Vickers and Gill, Kron ignores the differences between regional situations – with Etruscans, Messapians, Peucetians, Daunians and Campanians alike described as "prodigious consumers of Attic fine pottery" – and sees Attic ceramics as a type of ware with no particular value whose importance today is overestimated because, unlike the true "luxury goods", of which not a trace remains, they are well conserved in archaeological contexts.[10] Given that the value of craft products is not the same in the society that produces them (in this case Athens) as it is in those societies that in various ways come to acquire them, it should be pointed out that throughout the period during which they were imported, figured Attic vases never once constituted objects of everyday use among the Messapians. On the contrary, they represented items that were deliberately acquired for the purpose of highlighting differences of status. In San Vito dei Normanni, the choice of the figured kraters was determined by the aristocrats' need to display in the 'large building' suitable indicators of their social position, which they occupied by virtue of the wellbeing they had achieved. The prestige of figured pottery, which was imported and therefore exotic, derived above all from the images it bore. Indeed, for the aristocrats of Messapia (as also in Daunia but in the 4th century), possession of the knowledge required for interpreting the representations, in particular the Greek myths, represented a tool, with which to consolidate power, enabling them to emphasise their superiority with respect to those who had neither the purchasing power needed to acquire such objects, nor the ability to comprehend their meaning. Contemporary with the specimens of San Vito dei Normanni is an Attic black-figure volute krater with an image of warriors leaving home discovered in Muro Leccese, a site inland from Otranto (fig. 1). Here, researchers from the University of the Salento led by Liliana Giardino and Francesco Meo identified the scattered nuclei of a settlement – one of the most extensive in Messapia – that developed around the mid 6th century BC, with characteristics similar to those of Cavallino, with aristocratic residences comparable to the 'large building' of S. Vito dei Normanni.[11] The Attic volute-krater was found in the Cunella district in a residential complex frequented – as was the funerary space, with

Fig. 1: Attic black-figure volute krater with an image of warriors leaving home from Muro Leccese, Masseria Cunella. Muro Leccese (Le), Museo Diffuso di Borgo Terra.

which it is associated – from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods.[12] The vessel was discovered in a secondary deposit in the area of the burials, having been placed there, suggests Giardino, to affirm the origin of the aristocratic group that held power in the settlement.[13] There are numerous similarities with San Vito dei Normanni and it may be hypothesised that the vessel was originally acquired in order to be placed in the residential complex; it was only in a later period, when the aristocrats' modes of self-representation had changed, that the krater was moved to the funerary area, where – perhaps positioned outside the burials – it would have maintained its symbolic value.

In Archaic Messapia the economic and social overtones of the consumption of luxury are also well documented in places of worship.[14] Particularly interesting is the religious complex, frequented by various strata of the Messapian population, identified on Monte Papalucio, an area investigated by the University of the Salento in Oria, the most extensive settlement in northern Messapia.[15] Inscriptions and ceramics link the cult to divinities identifiable with Demeter and Persephone. The dedication of seeds, fruits

and suckling pigs links the ritual practices to the cycles of nature and fertility. In the sanctuary, the luxury goods include gold items that demonstrate the participation in the cult of aristocrats, who paid the divinities for the wealth derived from the harvest and the multiplication of the livestock in silver coins[16]. As an example of luxury goods, an important role in the sanctuary's Archaic phase was played by Attic ceramics, especially containers of perfumes (*lekythoi*) and vessels for wine, prominent among which is the only known red-figure volute krater in Messapia.[17] Frequent in the ceramic complex of Monte Papalucio are mythological representations: Dionysus and his *thiasos*, Amazons, and characters from the Iliad.[18] According to Francesco D'Andria, in Archaic Messapia, the starting point for the dissemination of the myth was precisely the sanctuary.[19] Here, the aristocrats who held power – the owners of prestigious dwellings such as those of San Vito dei Normanni and Muro Leccese – dedicated or used in the rites ceramics, which, by means of images, told stories of gods and heroes. Thus, the figured Attic vessels were also indicators of power in the sacred context, and their value – which was greater than the object itself – derived from the fact that the images constituted a source of information in rituals controlled by the aristocrats. The sanctuary was thereby transformed into a favoured channel for transmission of the "mythical knowledge" expressed by the Greek vessels. The acquisition of this knowledge in indigenous circles also had an important effect on the local production of artefacts: see for example, the *trozzella* of Copenhagen, a vessel illustrating the combat between Aeneas and Diomedes and the death of Capaneus below the walls of Thebes, struck by a lightning bolt of Zeus.[20] The presence of the figure of Zeus in the *trozzella* of Copenhagen is not a coincidence. A statue of the god hurling a thunderbolt – a masterpiece of Greek bronze-work, probably from Taranto, dated to 530 BC – was indeed venerated within a sacred area surrounded by a perimeter wall on the acropolis of Ugento, the dominant settlement of southern Messapia (fig. 2).[21] The Zeus of Ugento, placed on a column surmounted by a doric capital with an abacus decorated by rosettes, is likely to have been commissioned by aristocratic groups who recognised in the simulacrum the figure of Katabaites, i.e. the divinity who, according to Clearchus, incinerated the inhabitants of Taranto after they committed sacrilege on the occasion of their conquest of the Iapygian city of Càrbina.[22] The acquisition of a simulacrum in precious metal must have required a considerable commitment of economic resources on the part of the Messapians, but the aristocrats had a precise objective: maintaining the stability of power. Indeed, in the site where Zeus was venerated, the god guaranteed respect for the status quo and served as a reminder of the danger threatening those who broke the rules and committed *hybris*.

Among the archaeological evidence in Ugento we find an important indication of the changes in the modes of self-representation of the Messapian aristocracy at the beginning of the 5th century BC. This was on the eve of traumatic events – linked to the deterioration of Messapia's relations with Taranto – that would destabilise the Messapian system and result in the violent disappearance of settlements such as Cavallino and San Vito dei Normanni.[23] We refer here to the tomb in Via Salentina, a burial built of large

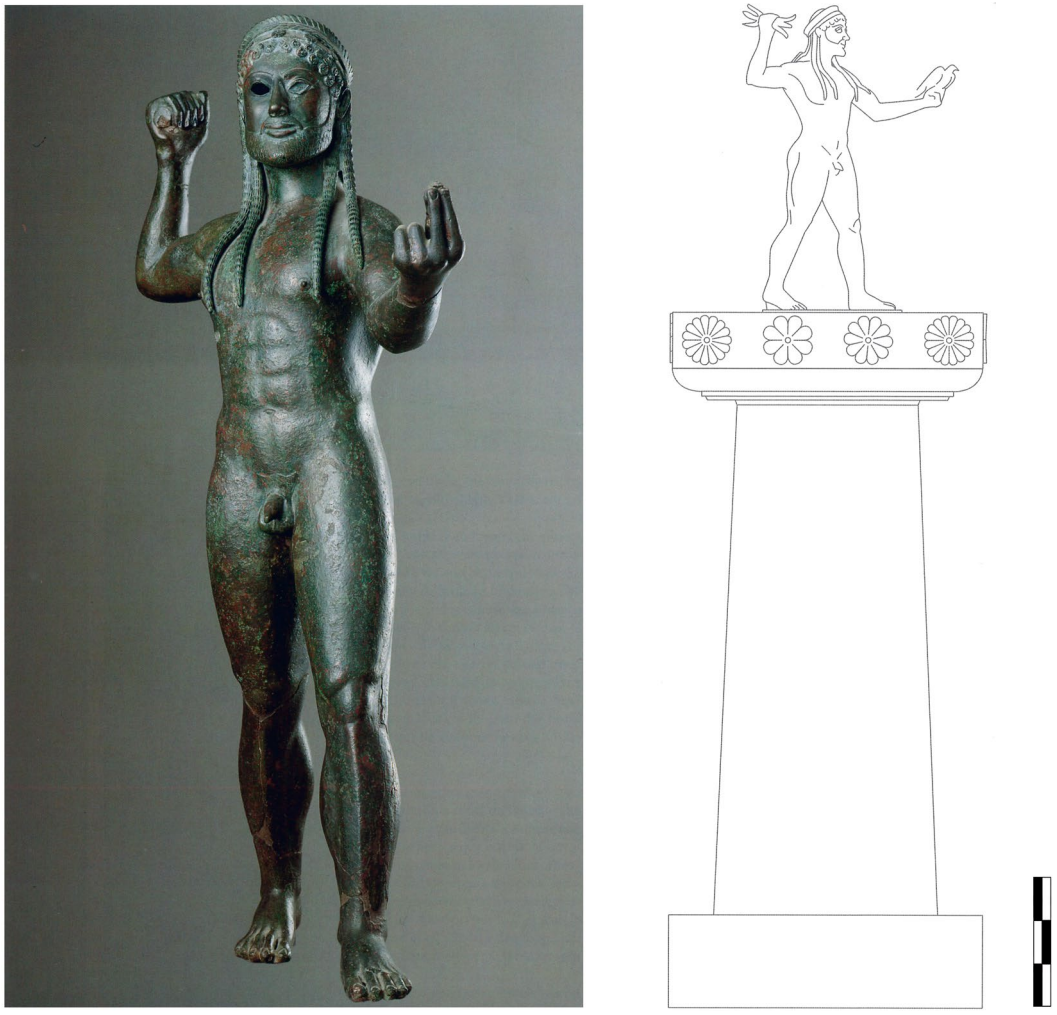

Fig. 2: Bronze statue of Zeus from Ugento. Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. In the reconstruction, the statue of Zeus is on a column surmounted by a Doric capital with an abacus decorated by rosettes.

blocks decorated with painted sashes and objects – an aryballos, a *trozzella*, a cock, a dove – used for the deposition of a male adult accompanied by a service of bronze vessels for wine and a pair of strigils, a clear reference to the world of the *palaestra* and the *paideia*.[24] Around 490 BC then, we see luxury being introduced into the grave goods and this new development, which is also seen in other rare burials of the same period, reveals the need on the part of certain powerful groups to differentiate themselves from other aristocratic elements. The affirmation of superiority is seen in the display of a number of indicators: the construction of carefully built tombs that required the use of specialised manual labour and a considerable economic investment; the ostentation of imported prestige metal objects with a high intrinsic value that recall, on the ideological level, Greek culture; and the introduction of figured Attic pottery – see for

Fig. 3: Attic red-figure bell-krater from Egnazia, attributed to the Menelaos Painter. Main side: Menelaos pursuing Helen. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

example Tomb 1 in Via Regina Margherita at Cavallino – which had previously been documented exclusively in residential and sacred contexts.[25] The grave goods, small in number and carefully selected, omitting weapons, have complementary functions: the metal tableware was used for drawing, pouring and filtering wine, while for mixing and drinking the wine, figured ceramics were used.[26] The latter included especially kraters, which, as the main marker of the tombs of male adults from this time onwards, played a key role on the symbolic level by means of their images.[27] At the beginning of the 5th century BC, burials with figured vessels were still extremely rare, given that such images were initially restricted to a very narrow elite. In subsequent decades, the importation of pottery from Attica (fig. 3) and, from the third quarter of the 5th century BC onwards, from the Italiote colonies (fig. 4), grew considerably.[28] However, figured vessels remained the preserve of the aristocrats, for whom they represented – together with writing – a symbol of their status[29]. The images on the vessels served to strengthen or complete the meaning of the grave goods, both male and female, and were now used as elements of a common language that enabled members of the aristocratic groups to effectively represent themselves by transmitting – partly via the selection of specific ceramic forms – precise messages.[30] These messages concerned in some cases the training and social life of male adults and in other cases wine and relative practices of collective consumption; the representations with figures and episodes from Greek mythology may have had the ambitious aim of assimilating the deceased to the

Fig. 4: Proto-Lucanian bell-krater from Manduria, attributed to the Amykos Painter. Main side: a maenad between two silens. Castro (Le), Archaeological Museum 'A. Lazzari'.

heroes of the sagas.[31] The luxury items among the grave goods in this phase thus served to emphasise the status and prerogatives of the male adults, who only exceptionally reveal their rank by deposing a spur in the burial, as in the case of the aristocrat buried with an Attic krater and a rare Etruscan *podaniptèr* in the 'tomb of the horseman' in the Melliche necropolis in Vaste (fig. 5).[32] Arranged around this burial, the only one not reused for subsequent depositions, are other tombs, all covered by a tumulus that has yielded figured Attic and Italiote fragments of *semata* and the containers that the aristocrats used – together with *skyphoi* with perforated bottoms – in funerary rites.[33] These rites, celebrated to affirm group identity and strengthen their possession of the territory, were practised around the tomb of a personage – the 'horseman' – who, as the fulcrum of the family, was probably venerated as an ancestor-hero.[34]

Fig. 5: Vaste, Melliche necropolis. The 'tomb of the horseman'. Grave goods: Attic red-figure bell-krater by the Painter of the Louvre Centauromachy, Etruscan bronze *podaniptèr*, bronze spur. Vaste (Le), Archaeological Museum.

Discovered in Vaste was the most prestigious artistic craft item of all the finds from Messapia in the Classical period: a bronze krater – today in Boston – with volute handles decorated with plant whorls and protomes of swans (fig. 6a), probably produced in Magna Graecia in the late 5th century BC.[35] In the same class as the Boston krater are about ten vessels distributed across an area that includes Macedonia, Dodona, Sicily and Magna Graecia. In Messapia this krater represents a unique case, clearly a status symbol, as suggested by the discovery in an aristocratic tomb in Mesagne – in association with a bronze cista and a proto-Lucanian krater – of a perfect reproduction in silvered clay (fig. 6b).[36] The imitation – probably attributable, like the original, to a workshop in Taranto – is a demonstration of the 'symbolic value' that luxury goods had among the

Fig. 6: A) bronze volute-krater from Vaste. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; b) volute-krater in silvered clay from Mesagne. Mesagne, 'U. Granafei' Museum.

Messapians. The key to its interpretation is provided by a 4th-century Attic relief squat *lekythos* discovered in Monte Papalucio that shows an athlete holding a *halter* standing next to a tripod (fig. 7).[37] The *lekythos* is a further sign of the participation of emergent groups in the rites of the sanctuary. It proclaims the significance, in the training of the aristocrats, of athletics and the *paideia*, whose importance is proportional to the value of the prize awarded to the winner of the *agones*, as seen in the representation: a valuable metal volute krater on a support.[38]

At the end of the 5th century, in some 'emergent' Messapian grave goods, a new element is introduced in the form of an item of clothing associated with the warrior figure: the bronze belt. The rarity of specimens until the mid 4th century BC indicates that in this phase, the belt accompanied the deceased as a 'valuable item', and thus served as an indicator of rank rather than of role.[39] In the grave goods of the 4th century, figured vessels were still of central importance. Now however it was products from the Italiote workshops that dominated the market.[40] Attic vessels transported by ships heading to Spina still reached, albeit sporadically, settlements on the Adriatic coast of Messapia.[41]

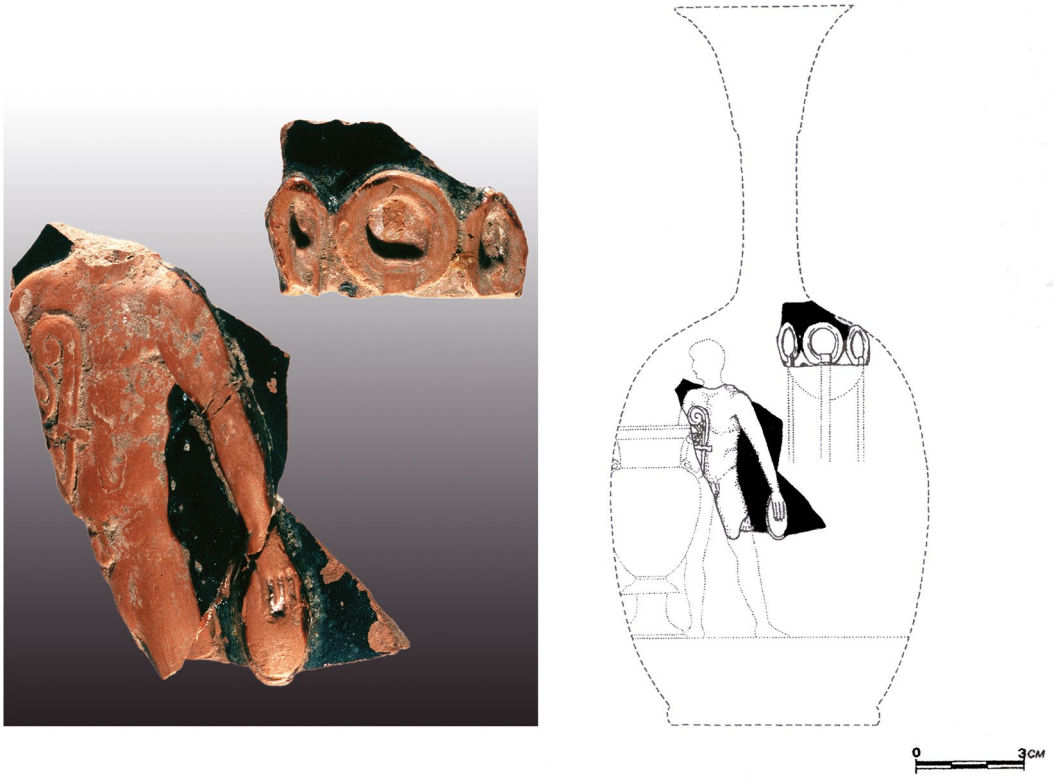

Fig. 7: Attic relief squat *lekythos* from Oria, sanctuary of Monte Papalucio. An athlete holding a *halter* standing next to a tripod and a metal volute-krater on a support in front of him. Lecce, Dip. of Beni Culturali, University of Salento.

This is the case with Rocavecchia, where, however, the most conspicuous evidence from this phase is composed of figured ceramics produced in Taranto, as attested by the discoveries made by Cosimo Pagliara (University of Salento) in the Zona Castello in 2003 and 2008 in an area to south of Grotta Poesia.[42] In addition to Attic and Italiote ceramics, among the 4th-century grave goods discovered in southern Puglia are also products from the workshops of the Peloponnese and western Greece, as shown by the Agrinion Group vases discovered in Vaste and the Elean red-figure kraters discovered in Rudiae, demonstrating that Messapia, unlike other parts of Puglia, was active in a number of commercial networks.[43]

In conclusion, I would like to point out that the economic investment by Messapian aristocracies in funerary spaces is even more evident in the underground chambers built at the end of the 4th century. The aristocrats continued to exalt their status with modes of self-representation that now find a model in the ideals of the Macedonian world, seen in Rudiae and in Egnazia in the form of inscriptions and pictorial representations of hanging weapons, and in Lecce – in the Palmieri chamber – in a frieze sculpted with foot soldiers and horsemen in combat.[44] By combining luxury items and art in a single

Fig. 8: Vaste (Le), the Hypogeum of the Caryatids: the façade of the monument.

monument, the Messapians used their final resting places to exalt their status: in the Hypogeum of the Caryatids in Vaste, the journey to the Next World is represented in the *dromos* by friezes with felines pulling carts driven by erotes; on the façade of the tomb, the doors granting access to the funerary chambers are protected by funerary Genii called on to watch over the sepulchre of mortal beings who aspire to become, like the protagonists of Greek myths, true heroes (fig. 8).[45]

Notes

[1] D'Andria 1988; 1991; Semeraro 1997.

[2] D'Andria 1991.

[3] D'Andria 2005.

[4] Semeraro 1997, 347–357.

[5] Semeraro 2009, 495–496; Semeraro – Monastero 2011.

[6] Semeraro 2009, 496.

[7] Semeraro 2009, 497 f.

[8] Semeraro 2009, 497–502.

[9] Semeraro 2009, 497 f.; Mannino 2014, 202.
[10] Vickers, Gill 1994; Kron 2016, 366.
[11] Giardino – Meo 2008; 2011; 2016.
[12] Giardino 2014; 2016.
[13] Giardino 2014, 219 f.
[14] Mastronuzzi 2005, 156–166.
[15] D'Andria 1990, 237–306; Mastronuzzi 2013.
[16] D'Andria 1990, 274–285; Mastronuzzi 2013, 208–213.
[17] D'Andria 1990, 254–256; Semeraro 1997, 176–200; Mastronuzzi 2013, 251 f.; Mannino 2014, 204.
[18] Semeraro 2006, 169.
[19] D'Andria 1988; 1999; Semeraro 2006.
[20] D'Andria 2002; Semeraro 2006, 171 f.; Lombardo 2013.
[21] Rolley 1996, 385; D'Andria – Dell'Aglio 2002.
[22] Lombardo 2002.
[23] D'Andria 1988, 667; 1991, 437; Semeraro 2009, 496.
[24] D'Andria 1988, 666; Giannotta 2012.
[25] Semeraro 1997, 358–360; 2005, 64 f.
[26] Mannino 2006, 256.
[27] Semeraro 1996, 359; Mannino 2006, 256 f.
[28] Mannino 2006, 255–267; 2016.
[29] Mannino 2006, 255–267; on writing and literacy in Messapia, see Lomas 2011.
[30] Mannino 2006, 260.
[31] Mannino 2006, 257.
[32] D'Andria 1990, 86–90; Mannino 2006, 260.
[33] Mannino 2006, 265 f.; Mannino 2009.
[34] Mannino 2009.
[35] Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 99483: Rolley 1991, 199–201; Tarditi 1996, 57 f. no. 107; Rolley 2002, 55; Barr-Sharrar 2008, 49 no. 5; Mannino 2014, 205 f.
[36] Mannino 2014, 206–208.
[37] Mannino – Roubis 2000, 71 f.; Mannino 2006, 113 f. no. 111; 2014, 205.
[38] Mannino 2014, 205.
[39] Mannino 2004, 701–705.
[40] Giannotta 2014.
[41] Mannino 2006, 223–226.
[42] The vessels come from burials that have been subject to anthropological excavation, the results of which are in print: Viva et al., in press. The grave goods are currently being studied by M.T. Giannotta. The study of the Italiote pottery was entrusted to the present author by Professor Cosimo Pagliara – who conducted research into Roca with much energy and passion – and by my colleague Riccardo Guglielmino.
[43] Mannino – Roubis 2000, 74; Mannino 2006, 225 f.
[44] D'Andria 1988, 710 f.; Lamboley 1996, 366–373; Mannino 2004, 713–716.
[45] Mannino 2015; D'Andria 2020, 122–114.

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