

The Use of Animals in Ritual Offerings in Messapian Area: Some Examples from Recent Discoveries

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Introduction

The last years of archaeological research have witnessed a major role of the study on ancient ritual practices in all their aspects, as recently demonstrated by numerous conferences and publications focused on the topic.¹ Modern lines of the research hope for a complete study of ritual context (topography, organization, composition, relationship with other contexts, correlation with written sources) and of all cultural materials.²

One of the most significant moments of ritual practices was the sacrifice of animals. Although it was implemented with different traits in the multiple series of rituals that had to characterize the life of ancient communities (public festivals, natural disasters, propitiatory rituals, particular rituals according to the destined divinity, rites of edification, passing ceremonies, etc.), it had to constitute the heart of every religious and social act, expressing the link between humans and deity and a mutual solidarity among community members.³

The research carried out over the last twenty years in the southern area of Apulia has contributed to the knowledge of the ritual contexts that widespread in the territory corresponding to Messapia. Through an integrated interdisciplinary approach, they have highlighted the existence of a complex system of sanctuaries and cultic places, in which characters closely related to those known for Greece and indigenous distinctive traits seem to be mixed.

In a view of a better contributing to the understanding of ancient ritual practices, then, are here presented the most significant results of the study of animal remains from some places of worship brought to light in southern Apulia.

Oria – M. Papalucio

In ancient Greece the cult of Demeter was an official rite and was celebrated with a well-codified practice. To Demeter piglets were sacrificed into a pit or a cave (or a *megaron*?), to remember the myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades. The myth narrates that the swineherd Eubuleus was with his pigs at the place where Hades dragged Persephone to the underworld; a part of the pig herd was swallowed with the two deities. Numerous sanctuaries are devoted to Demeter, located in Greece and Magna Grecia.⁴ The archaeological excavations brought to light burnt piglet remains,

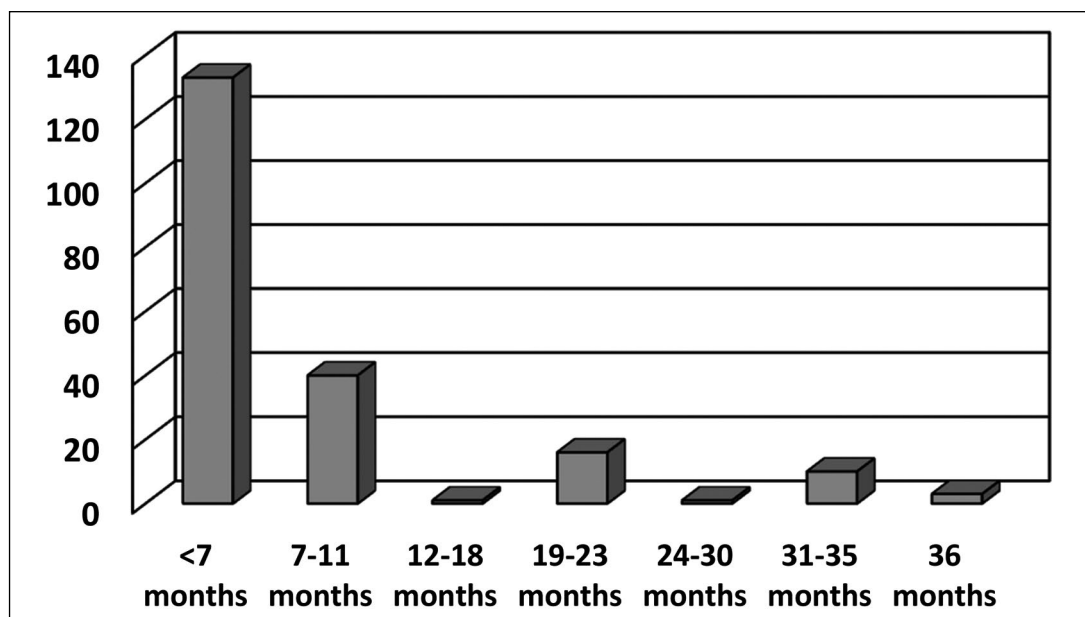


Fig. 1: Oria “M. Papalucio”: mortality data of the pig.

together with pottery and clay figurines in the shape of pig, miniature vases and female figurines bearing a torch and a piglet.⁵

The cult of a female deity probably linked to fertility (who could remind Demeter) seems to be associated with the sanctuary of Oria – Monte Papalucio where Messapian as well as introduced Greek traditions are variably mixed.⁶ The site consists of a number of artificial terraces and a cave, where abundant votive objects, including miniature vases, clay figurines and jewellery as well as charred biscuits and other food offerings were found. There are two main phases of occupation, one spanning the 6th and 5th century BC (Archaic) and the other dating to the 4th and 3rd century BC (Hellenistic). The material is pertaining to votive deposits removed from the original positions for making the terraces that was used to make the terraces. In the Hellenistic period some rooms were built against a large wall located downstream of the terrace for celebrating ritual banquets.

Inscriptions, pottery decorated with the cross torch, figurines seated on a throne with *pomos* or veiled, female protomes and *kourotrophoi*, and male ithyphallic grotesque figurines suggest they were associated to the cult of a native form of Demeter, which was called *Mátar*.

The animal bones and teeth mainly belong to pigs (over 80%), while remains of caprines and cattle are less represented.⁷ The majority of pig remains belonged to very young animals killed in the first year of their lives (fig. 1). The remains of pigs killed between the first and the second year of age and after the second year are very few.



Fig. 2: Muro Leccese “loc. Cunella”: the particular deposition of the sheep skeleton in pit 1.

Muro Leccese (Cunella)

Other ritual evidence is documented in the Messapian town of Muro Leccese, Cunella.⁸ Under a feature made by tuff, two small pits dated to the beginning of the 5th century BC could be found. The animal remains belonged to caprines.

In pit 1 a sheep was buried, roughly in the first quarter of the 5th century BC, along the perimeter of the small hole and according to a specified order. Fig. 2 shows the particular deposition of the skeleton; starting from the top and proceeding clockwise, fragments of skull, maxilla and mandibles can be noted, followed by a small group formed by a pair of vertebrae, another group consisting of scapulae and most of the anatomical elements of fore and hind limbs, excluding metatarsals, and finally a group of vertebrae, some of them still articulated, and a group formed by some ribs and pelvis. Together with the remains of this adult sheep, were buried those of a neonatal (or more likely a foetal) individual. They can be easily interpreted as the refuse of mutton that was firstly consumed by the participants in the ritual; then, the majority of bones were



Fig. 3: Muro Leccese “loc. Cunella”: some anatomical parts of sheep still articulated in pit 2.

tidily arranged into the pit. In fact, only some vertebrae were still articulated, suggesting that they may have been buried with meat and ligaments that joined them to each other.

In pit 2, instead, three young individuals that were killed between two and twelve months of age were buried not neatly like in the previous pit but with some anatomical parts still articulated (fig. 3).

All rites can be interpreted as building rites or *piacula* for the abandonment of sacred features. They are all characterized by the sacrifice and a subsequent burial of caprines according to well-defined rules.

Vaste fondo Melliche

A religious complex made by an enclosure with square block walls, a cistern and several holes was discovered immediately north of Vaste, in the locality of Fondo Melliche, and dated to the 4th–3rd century BC (fig. 4).⁹ All features are interpreted as belonging to a sanctuary devoted to the cult of fertility and chthonic deities. One of the holes was filled



Fig. 4: Vaste “Melliche”: the religious with square block walls and several holes (4th–3rd century BC).

by ash, black ware pottery, miniature vases, and iron tools (sickles, knives, a sword). Other votive material from the complex includes *louteria*, a small *lekàne*, an upturned bowl, and a clay disk.

Not so far away, another hole was filled by a huge quantity of animal remains. The animal remains mainly belonged to sheep; very few remains were of pigs and cattle.¹⁰ Caprine remains belonged to seventy-eight individuals. They were mainly killed as adults. Metapodial measurements suggest the presence of all sex groups. Of particular interest are the burning marks that characterize several bones and recur on the same part of bones, such as those on the occipital part of skull, on the lower part of mandible, on the proximal part of metacarpals and metatarsals (fig. 5). It is likely that the extremities of bones were exposed to fire after the disarticulation of skeletons during cooking.

Bothroi of Vaste

Another important sanctuary of Vaste was located in the centre of the Messapian town, in the area now corresponding with the modern Piazza Dante.¹¹ The building was formed by an enclosure divided into rooms separated by walls of square blocks and



Fig. 5: Vaste “Melliche”: burning marks on the same proximal part of metatarsals.

with fireplaces on the floor. Close to the enclosure, three artificial caves (*bothroi*) that were dug in the bedrock (fig. 6) were identified. The occurrence of miniature vases, jugs, cups, *lekythoi*, *kantharoi*, oinochoi, remains of grapes, olives, cereal and legumes, and pomegranates suggest that the sanctuary was used for a cult connected to fertility and the passage between the world of living and the underworld.



Fig. 6: Vaste “piazza Dante”: the enclosure and the three artificial caves (*bothroi*).



Fig. 7: Castro “Athenaion”: one of the two pits with animal bones and vessels used for libations.

The animal remains from the caves 1 and 2 were represented by caprines and pigs bones, mainly belonging to young individuals.¹² Caprines were killed at the second year of age; pigs between the first and the second year. Body part frequencies suggest a prevalence of forelegs and hind legs. Numerous bones bared burning and cut marks. As they were associated with vases for eating, they may represent the remains of meals consumed during the rite. Botanical remains suggest that they were offered in autumn to a female deity. The presence of the remains from five dogs in cave 1 is also consistent with the hypothesis of a fertility cult.

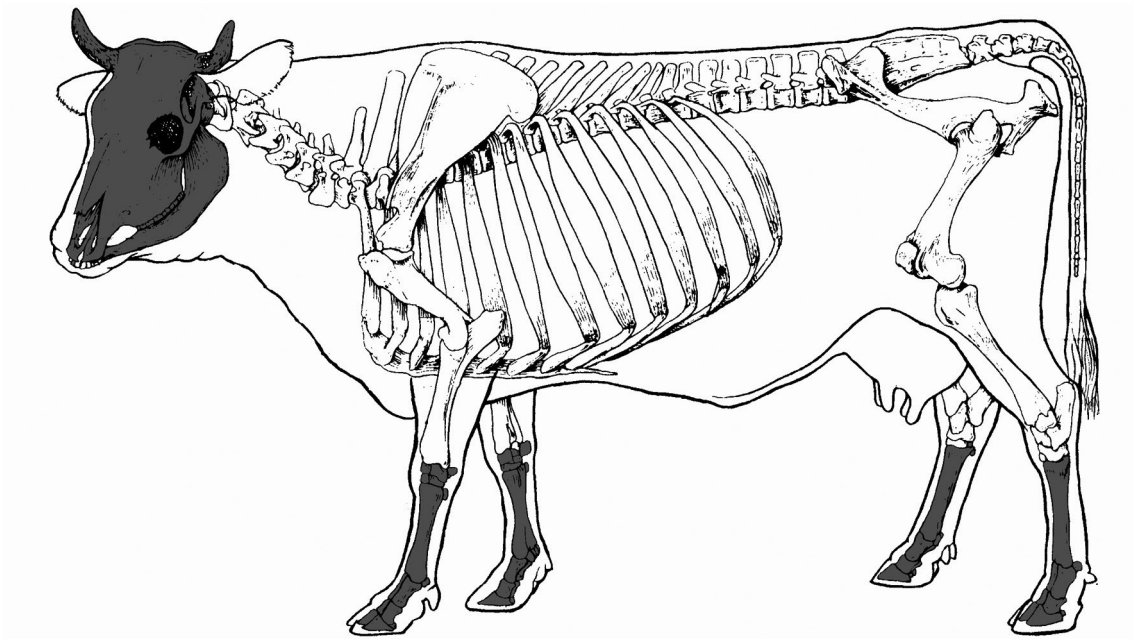


Fig. 8: Castro “Athenaion”: anatomical parts of cattle represented in the pit (in grey).

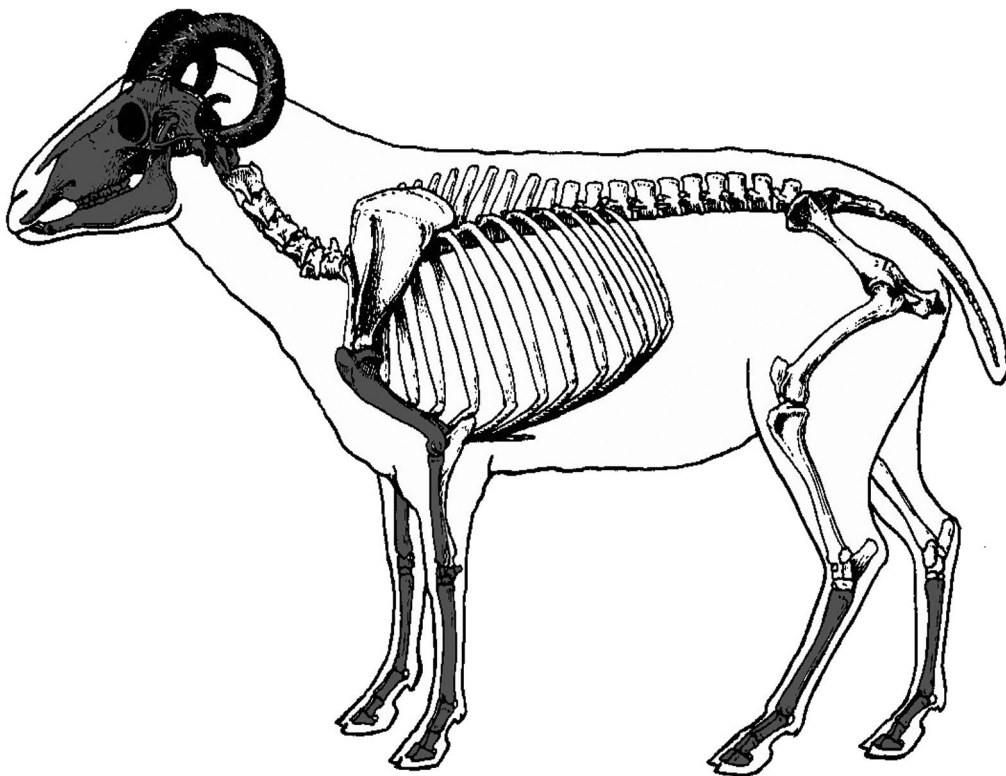


Fig. 9: Castro “Athenaion”: anatomical parts of sheep represented in the pit (in grey).

Anatomical element	Cattle		Sheep	
	NISP	MNI	NISP	MNI
skull	6	3	46	12
maxilla and upper teeth	35	5	76	20
mandible and lower teeth	62	5	111	15
teeth unidentified	2	-	35	-
hyoid	2	2	2	2
axis	-	-	2	2
humerus	-	-	1	1
radius	-	-	1	1
carpal bones	7	2	2	1
metacarpal	18	6	9	-
metatarsal	5	2	5	5
metapodial	8	-	3	3
first phalanx	9	2	24	3
second phalanx	18	3	14	2
third phalanx	12	2	13	2
Total	184		344	

Tab. 1: Identification of anatomical elements from Castro.

The cave 3 is wider than the others and had a slab in local stone with a central hole (*omphalos*) stuck into the floor, probably used for libations. Inside the cave a Triton shell (*Charonia tritonis*), possibly used as a trumpet and a female limestone head were found. All these aspects suggest that cave 3 had a central role during the rites. Fireplaces and pottery for cooking testify that the food was cooked inside the rooms located near the caves. In addition, the presence of the Triton's trumpet suggest a link to a female deity and to a fertility cult, as other specimens have been found in the areas dedicated to the cult of Demeter. The animal remains from cave 3 are represented by caprines and pigs. Pigs particularly were killed very young before reaching the first year of age or around their birth.

Castro

On the promontory of Castro was recently identified a sanctuary devoted to Athena/Minerva (*Athenaion*).¹³ Recent excavations have brought to light the foundations of

an altar used for the ritual actions performed at the time of consecrating the structure in the second half of the 4th century BC. A considerable amount of the remains of sacrificed animals were kept in two pits, together with the vessels used for libations (fig. 7).¹⁴

Preliminary results from the study of animal remains suggest that cattle and sheep are the exclusively represented species. Another important characteristic of the sample is represented by the strong selection of anatomical parts, as skulls, jaws and the bones from the extremities of limbs (carpal, tarsal, metapodials and phalanges) were almost exclusively represented (tab. 1; fig. 8. 9). All the bones that would have been included in the most important cuts of meat, such as scapula, humerus, radius, ulna, pelvis, femur and tibia, are missing. Cattle remains almost all belonged to adults, to females and castrates, according to Nobis.¹⁵ Among sheep remains, mainly cranial elements and the bones of limb extremities were also identified. According to wear stages of mandibular teeth¹⁶, we noted that ca. 27% of sheep were killed between 6 and 12 months of age, while the majority was sacrificed after four years of age.

Notes

¹Rizzo – La Rocca 2012; Camella – Mele 2006.

²O'Day et al. 2004; D'Andria et al. 2008; Ekroth – Wallensten 2013.

³De Grossi Mazzorin – Minniti 2016, 329–339.

⁴Leventi – Mitsopoulou 2005; Mastronuzzi 2008.

⁵Bremmer 2005, 155–165; Clinton 2005, 167–179.

⁶Mastronuzzi 2013.

⁷Albarella et al. in prep.

⁸De Grossi Mazzorin – Perrone 2013, 205–212.

⁹Melissano 2012, 79–92.

¹⁰Minniti 2017.

¹¹Mastronuzzi – Ciuchini 2011, 676–701.

¹²De Grossi Mazzorin – Solinas 2010, 183–192.

¹³D'Andria 2009.

¹⁴De Grossi Mazzorin et al. 2009, 79–88.

¹⁵Nobis 1954, 155–194.

¹⁶Payne 1973, 281–303.

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