

FROM CAVE TO DOLMEN

**Ritual and symbolic aspects in the prehistory
between Sciacca, Sicily and the central
Mediterranean**

Edited by

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FROM CAVE TO DOLMEN. RITUAL AND SYMBOLIC ASPECTS IN THE PREHISTORY BETWEEN SCIACCA, SICILY AND THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN. THE REASONS FOR A VOLUME

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Taking inspiration from a conference organized by the Soprintendenza ai Beni Culturali e Ambientali of Agrigento and by the municipal council of Sciacca in November 2011, attended by a wide and qualified panel of Sicilian and peninsular specialists in prehistory, whose proceedings are currently in preparation, we decided to deepen some of the main themes discussed on that occasion. The title already shows the precise intention to emphasise the relevance of Sciacca's territory, rich in extraordinary natural peculiarities as well as in important archaeological evidence. Ernesto De Miro in the opening paper of the volume, defines Sciacca as '*The city of prodigies*', paraphrasing the title of the famous novel by Edoardo Mendoza '*La ciudad de los prodigios*'. Unlike the Catalan city, a modern European capital, the seductive attraction of Sciacca resides however in more intimate factors, especially its naturalistic phenomena, characterising it in a less visible manner.

Sciacca enjoys a favorable topographic position, located along the coastline between Agrigento, Eraclea Minoa and Selinunte, one of the most beautiful and unspoiled parts of Sicily; its landscape is characterised by the alternation of white limestone (Costabianca, Scala dei Turchi, Capo Bianco) and red (Pergole, Monterosso, Capo Rossello, Timpi Russi). The territory is also marked by peculiar hydrothermal phenomena that, since antiquity, have contributed to define Sciacca as the '*city of thermal baths*'.

The conference has set out the methodological and interpretative basis to tackle the complexity of relevant issues for the prehistory of Sicily, stimulated from the main archaeological evidence of Sciacca, such as the Grotta del Kronio and the numerous dolmens present in the area. The debate has been mainly devoted, therefore, to the use of prehistoric caves together with an accurate analysis of the various aspects involved with the island megalithic architecture, including a review of the history of the discoveries, but also providing a stimulating account of the most up to date and systematic ongoing researches.

Grotta del Kronio is the 'cave' par excellence, the most impressive Sicilian karst system, characterised by obscure and inhospitable depth, enlivened by an interplay of spacious horizontal and vertical tunnels, until the boiling abyss of the Pozzo Trieste, a well invaded by hot airflows coming from a thermal underground basin, that evoke the infernal atmosphere of an 'other' place. The first section of the volume is consequently dedicated to the Grotta del Kronio and, more generally, to the prehistoric occupation of Sicilian caves. Domenica Gullì's paper traces the history of

the studies and of the prehistoric discoveries in the Sciacca territory. For the first time a series of important contexts, such as the Tranchina and San Bartolo necropolis, for which there have been so far only preliminary reports, are here discussed in detail. In the first site the evolution of rock-cut graves is documented, from the Early Copper Age type, accessed through vertical shafts, to the tombs with the front entrance dug in the rocky cliffs, often preceded by an *anticella*, dating to the Late Copper and to the Early Bronze Age. The San Bartolo necropolis, today completely destroyed, have yielded an important complex of materials, now in a private collection including various Bell Beakers found in a chamber tomb associated with painted vases, supporting the chronological dating of the beakers to the Late Copper Age.

The archaeological map of the territory precedes the various contributions dedicated to the Grotta del Kronio, articulated in the two important fields constituting the exceptionality of the site: the environmental-speleological aspect and the archaeological one. Louis Torelli's and Giovanni Badino's paper describes its karst system, traces the history of explorations, and exposes the first results of a study on the internal microclimate, recently carried out with the aid of sonic anemometers. The aim of this research is devoted to understanding the cave's physical structure, an extraordinary ecological niche characterised by extreme environmental conditions, with an internal temperature of 38°C degrees and 100% humidity, which makes it dangerous to stay inside for more than 20/30 minutes. Because of the complexity of the exploration, the Commissione Grotte E. Boegan, who first started the exploration in 1953, elaborated a project together with the Associazione Geografica La Venta, constituting a winning synergy of technical and scientific competences with the aim to complete the physical exploration of the system, together with the monitoring of the environmental conditions and the physiological and microbiological studies through the sampling of minerals.

The archaeological study of Grotta del Kronio concerned the complex issue about the prehistoric use of caves, a topic often handled through the application of multidisciplinary approaches. Since the discovery in 1957 of the large Copper Age vases deposited in the upper galleries, the hot and dark depths of Kronio have interested various speleological and archaeological explorations; more specifically, the archaeological excavations carried out in the upper cavities between 1962 and 1986 were able to verify forms and modalities of the cave occupation from the Late Paleolithic to the medieval period. Vincenzo Tinè's contribution discusses

the evidence from the Neolithic levels: starting from the Diana *facies* (level III), through successive phases which yielded incised and excised wares of the Kronio style, also associated in the upper layers with painted ceramics (level IVa). The Neolithic sequence, after a drainage layer, is closed with a level characterised by the archaic Pre-Stentinello impressed wares. The definition of this stratigraphic and chronological sequence is also supported by a series of bio-archaeological and lithic data, which makes the Grotta del Kronio a key site, together with the Grotta dell'Uzzo, for the study of the earliest phases of the Sicilian Neolithic.

Donatella Pian discusses the evidence recovered from the uppermost levels of the Kronio sequence: through the analysis of Classical and Hellenistic wares, she identifies forms and modalities of the cave use during the historical period.

The other important theme of this section is also indissolubly attached to Monte Kronio, that is the presence of the hydrothermal phenomena. Sciacca boasts a high number of medical minerals, hot and sulfurous waters, used for cult and therapeutic purposes. They have produced a complex historical and archaeological stratification in the thermal structures placed both on the coast and on top of the Monte Kronio. To this theme are dedicated two important contributions which deepen the issues: Valentina Caminnecki's paper examines the literary and itinerary sources, approaching the theme of Sciacca's thermal features in the Roman period, including the evidence yielded by recent archaeological research carried out in the territory. The contribution of Bernardo Agrò and Antonino Frenda traces the history of sulphur use in Sicily and its cultural and anthropological meanings.

Tullio Bernabei, producer and film director, highlights the communicative power of the science documentary and its strong emotional impact. In his documentary, the infernal interiors of Monte Kronio offer a unique opportunity to narrate the adventures and discoveries of speleologists, archaeologists and researchers from various disciplines working together to unravel the many mysteries still hidden in the bowels of Monte Kronio.

The following section presents a wide overview of the Sicilian caves, including important insights on the central Mediterranean area (continental Italy and Malta), to bring out the processes of circulation and transmission of information in a crucial period for the Sicilian recent prehistory, characterised by radical social transformations. The evidence is discussed according to a geographical order organized for large areas: south-central, northern and eastern Sicily. The section is opened by Domenico Lo Vetro, Fabio Martini and Zelia Di Giuseppe's contribution which discusses the rich evidence for the ritual meaning of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Sicilian caves, underlying their use for both funerary and figurative practices. Domenica Gulli's paper presents the preliminary results of a project of caves census with evidence of their prehistoric occupation

from the Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age, adding new data to those already known in literature, such as Grotta Infame Diavolo, Grotta Zubbia, Grotta Ticchiara, Grotta dell'Acqua Fitusa, etc.

The evidence from the site of Serrafferlicchio, a narrow hill placed north of Agrigento, is presented in the report by Ornella Adamo and Domenica Gulli. The excavations here were carried out in 1928 and 1937 by the archeologists Paolo Orsi and Paolo Enrico Arias, who carried out the exploration of a tunnel, of some rock shelters and of a large cave, all recently newly identified, and which yielded a large quantity of painted wares, whose style has been named after the site toponym.

Rosalba Panvini describes some of the most important discoveries in the territory between Gela, southern Imera and the Platani rivers; this is a key area to better understand the forms of settlement and their position in relation to the environment, during the 4th and 3rd millennia BC. She also traces the history of the discovery of the Piano Notaro necropolis, which allowed the definition of the eponymous *facies*, and refers to the most important sites of the Caltanissetta and Gela region, both necropolis and settlements, dating from the Early to the Late Copper Age.

Enrico Giannitrapani presents the preliminary results of recent excavations carried at the Riparo 1 di Contrada San Tommaso near Enna, together with a detailed analysis of the evidence about the caves and rock-shelters bearing archaeological deposits known within the Erei, whose relevance is discussed within the long term dynamics of prehistoric human occupation of central Sicily.

Moving to the northern part of the island, the following papers illustrate the key role of the Palermo area for the history of prehistoric research since 19th century, especially with the excavations of numerous cave deposits, contributing in this way to define the beginning of modern archaeological research in Sicily. Giuseppina Battaglia discusses the results of the research project '*XXI Progetto Grotte*', whose main purpose is to contextualize the vast quantity of caves present in the archaeological territory of the Palermo province: here, in fact, more than 400 caves, of which 120 have yielded palaeontological and archaeological evidence, have been catalogued so far.

One of the most well known of these caves, the Grotta del Vecchiuzzo, dug in the 1940s by Jole Bovio Marconi, is presented by Massimo Cultraro, who proposes a new interpretation of its complex stratigraphic sequence, discussed within the context of the Madonie prehistoric sequence.

Maria Clara Martinelli and Gabriella Mangano present the most known caves of the Tyrrhenian coast in the province of Messina: particular attention is devoted to the Grotta di San Teodoro, where the oldest Sicilian burials

are documented. In the other caves the human presence is attested from the upper Paleolithic to the Copper Age.

The papers by Francesco Privitera and Orazio Palio discuss various issues related to the use of caves in the Etna area. Francesco Privitera analyzes the relationship between caves and territory, identifying along the Etna slopes a real 'cave district', connecting the occupation of these caves, in an area marked by very cold winters, with seasonal patterns related to a pastoral way of life. Orazio Palio focuses on the presence of children in prehistoric burials, considering the evidence from Grotta Petralia as a study case. The issue of child burials has never been fully addressed because their bones waste away faster than those of adults: therefore, their presence has always been underestimated. The renewed attention to this particular aspect of the funerary ritual is developed through the analysis of the ritual treatment reserved to children after death, providing also important clues about their social role within the community. Laura Maniscalco presents the evidence from Rocchicella, a site placed in the Catania plain, occupied in the Hellenistic period by the monumental structures of the Palici sanctuary, also including a large cave opening of a small lake once characterised by the presence of boiling volcanic waters. Recent excavations carried out at the site, firstly discovered by Luigi Bernabò Brea, exposed occupation layers dating from the Mesolithic to the Copper Age: in this latter phase the site probably had already a ritual meaning, as evidenced by the presence of numerous pits filled up with votive offerings.

Anita Crispino and Massimo Cultraro present for the first time a complete list of caves located in the Syracuse district, with a catalogue of about 30 caves which yielded archaeological materials, including caves both already known, such as the Grotta Chiusazza and Grotta del Conzo, as well as many others still unpublished. Lorenzo Guzzardi examines the natural caves of the Hyblaean area used as both settlements and funerary spaces between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. Similarly, Dalma Cultrera presents the preliminary results of a project that, filling at last a gap in the archaeological documentation available for the Hyblaean area, allowed development of an updated database of the prehistoric caves and rock shelters known in south-eastern Sicily, including comprehensive technical data sheets for each site.

This long section is concluded with three important reports focusing on the Mediterranean connections of prehistoric Sicily. In the first paper, in fact, Enrico Procelli examines the relevant evidence for cultural and social interconnections and the transmission of ideas and materials between the Sicilian Copper and Bronze Ages and both the western and eastern Mediterranean regions. Daniela Cocchi Genick describes some of the most important discoveries of the various peninsular regions, showing that the caves, because of the continuity of human presence, perfectly reflect the major changes marking the different prehistoric phases from the Palaeolithic to the Bronze Age. Davide

Tanasi presents a preliminary report on Ghar Mirdum, a prehistoric cave placed in south-western Malta, explored in 1964-1965 by a group of amateurs. The material recovered dates mainly to the Bronze Age: the evidence yielded from the cave complex, currently unpublished, has the potential to illuminate many unknown features of the use of caves in Maltese prehistory.

Within the framework defined with all the contributions presented in this section, it is now possible to lay the basis for an integrated analysis of the factors determining the occupation and use of the caves in prehistory, but *Usque ad inferos, usque ad sidera*: from the caves, place for hidden, secret, cult and funerary activities, to rituals celebrated in open spaces, such as the rock-cut necropolis and dolmens. From this point of view, those elements related to recurring rituals, such as large stone altars, play a very important role to unveil the ideological use of the ancestor cult, also implying occupation and 'political' control of the territory.

In the concluding section, therefore, starting from the Sciacca's evidence, relevant issues for the prehistory of Sicily emerge. In Sicily, the 'megalithic phenomenon' only recently reached a definition less blurred than in the past. Up to the first half of the 20th century, in fact, only a single dolmen was known, Mura Pregne at Termini Imerese, here discussed in the Stefano Vassallo contribution, which also present the available evidence about an imposing megalithic structure, a wall 24 m long builded with large calcareous blocks. The wall, now dated to the Bronze Age, had probably a defensive function and it has to be considered in relation to other stretches of similar walls located in other parts of the area. Only in the second half of the last century new discoveries have contributed to better define forms and types of the megalithic architecture within prehistoric Sicily, even if the archaeological record related to 'megalithic phenomenon' is still scarce.

The known megalithic tombs have been created using boulders and rocky outcrop, often modified with adaptations and integrations of the rock: Sebastiano Tusa uses for this evidence the term of 'reduced megalithism', because of the relatively small size of these monuments. His report focuses on the Sicilian megalithic monuments studied in relation with the Bell Beaker culture, highlighting the coexistence of traditional local underground aspects, such as the rock-cut graves, together with imported continental elements. Finally, he describes the funerary megalithic tumuli of Pantelleria, called 'Sesi', and a newly discovered *menhir* alignment, located in the internal part of the small island placed at the center of the Sicilian Channel, a cult feature so far unknown in Sicily. Primo Veneroso presents some megalithic monuments of the territory of Sciacca and compares the style of decorative paintings of Sant'Ippolito ware with similar patterns of the Bell Beaker. Maltese suggestions are finally invoked by Giovanni Di Stefano for the funerary architectures of Contrada Paolina, Monte Racello and Contrada Biddini, in particular for those tombs

decorated with external facades with sculpted pilasters or with long corridors defined by orthostats. The stimulating confrontation with all these qualified speakers was an invaluable opportunity to share the state of the research on important issues such as the role of the prehistoric caves and the megalithic architecture in Sicily. The volume deepens some of the issues discussed in the Sciacca meeting: it widens the geographic context, providing new analytical elements but also updates interpretative perspectives, a framework on which it is now possible to start up an integrated analysis of the data.

I wish to thank all the researchers contributing to this volume and my colleagues and friends Valentina Caminneci, Manola Cotroneo, Vincenzo Cucchiara, Marina Scibona. Thanks also to Michele Termine for his many precious indications about the numerous prehistoric sites of Sciacca. My special thanks goes to Enrico Giannitrapani that in this volume is much more than a simple author: he revised as much as possible the English texts, discussed with me

many of the interesting questions addressed in the book, reinforcing in this way the spirit of friendship that binds us since many years.

For each of us there are special places and Monte Kronio, with its magical and fascinating atmospheres, that is certainly for me! For this reason, I want to thank the wonderful team of the Commissione Grotte Eugenio Boegan and the Associazione La Venta, which took me by the hand and accompanied me on the wonderful journey within the hot womb of the Earth.

The volume is dedicated to the modern-day ‘caveman’ who is able to see the colors of the dark and to listen the silence of the Cave, and to Santo Tiné who, in the 1960s, as a young explorer, first descended in the depths of Kronio, a very strong experience which marked his vocation as field archeologist and as a cave specialist, linking him inextricably to the wonders of the *city of prodigies*.