



# One Pot's tale: reconstructing the movement of people, materials and knowledge in Early Bronze Age Sicily through the microhistory of a vessel



Roberta Mentesana<sup>a,\*</sup>, Giuseppe De Benedetto<sup>b</sup>, Girolamo Fiorentino<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Scuola di Specializzazione in Beni Archeologici "Dinu Adamesteanu", Dipartimento Beni Culturali, Università del Salento, via D. Birago 64, 73100 Lecce, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Laboratorio di Analisi Chimiche per l'Ambiente e i Beni Culturali, Università del Salento, Centro Ecotekne Pal. M - S.P. 6, Lecce – Monteroni, Italy

<sup>c</sup> Laboratorio di Archeobotanica e Paleoecologia, Dipartimento Beni Culturali, Università del Salento, via D. Birago 64, 73100 Lecce, Italy

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Castelluccio facies  
Archaeobotany  
Birch bark tar  
Ceramics  
Ceramic petrography  
GC–MS  
Cultural biography

## ABSTRACT

This study presents the integration of different analytical techniques and disciplines to trace the biography and microhistory of a vessel from its production to its consumption, restoration and re-use. This integrated approach allows us to discuss the movement of people, materials and knowledge in Early Bronze Age Sicily on a different perspective than the ones previously used. The vessel found at the Early Bronze Age site of Coste di Santa Febronia, in southeast Sicily (Catania), preserves a black resinous substance on the handle and wall fractures. Indeed, the substance was used to repair the vessel after it was broken. Chemical characterization of the substance by GC–MS suggests the use of a heated mixture of birch bark tar and other plants to produce this glue-like material. However, the archaeobotanical study of charcoal samples from the site and paleoenvironmental reconstruction for the region indicate that in the Early Bronze Age birch trees appeared only in marginal areas, such as Mount Etna, where the tree species is still present today. Mount Etna is ca. 70 km from the site of Coste di Santa Febronia, posing the question of whether the vessel or the birch bark tar was exchanged. Petrographic examination of the vessel suggests that the jar was manufactured in the areas nearby Coste di Santa Febronia and, therefore, the birch bark tar was gathered near Mount Etna or swapped amongst communities living between the north Hyblaean and the Mount Etna areas. The tale narrated here through an interdisciplinary approach reinforces the idea that Sicilian Early Bronze Age communities had a deep knowledge of their landscape and raw materials available. More specifically, this study enables us to shed light on the network of people, knowledge and materials between the north Hyblaean and the Mount Etna communities.

## 1. Introduction

The Early Bronze Age (=EBA) in Sicily is a long-lasting phase (ca 2200–1450 BCE) characterised by the remarkable share of some material culture features through the island, such as the distinctive black-on-red painted ware (*Castelluccio* ware), and by an extensive and diversified occupation of the Sicilian landscape such as on hilltops controlling main communication routes, on coastal territories or on caves (Tusa, 1983; Leighton, 1999, 2005; Doonan, 2001). These two features, extensive occupation and similar material culture, have always been taken as the result of a significant mobility amongst these communities (Bernabò Brea, 1953–1954; Tusa, 1983; Cultraro, 1996, 1997; Copat et al., 2017). However, the implications of this supposed mobility in terms of knowledge sharing and materials movement have not been extensively tackled by the literature. In terms of ceramics, Copat et al. (2017), for example, have tracked the distribution of decorative patterns in Castelluccio black-on-red ware across central-southern Sicily,

revealing that some decorative patterns are shared between distant areas and, therefore, a degree of circulation and exchange of information existed (see also Copat et al., 2008). In the same direction points the work of Mckendry (2015) who analysed some EBA ceramics from the southeast of the island. Some sites, such as Petraro (Voza, 1968) and Monte Racello (Orsi, 1898), may suggest some form of site specialization linked to manufacturing activity (Doonan, 2001; Di Stefano, 2008). Other sites, such as Monte Grande (Castellana, 1998) and La Muculufa (Holloway et al., 1990; McConnell, 1995), were instead considered to function as gathering places for the neighbouring communities in occasion of religious festivities (Cultraro, 2004). In the last twenty years, survey campaigns have increased our knowledge of site distribution in central-eastern Sicily for this phase (Thompson, 1999; Malone et al., 2001; Ayala, 2004; Pluciennik et al., 2004; Albanese Procelli et al., 2007; Ianni, 2007; Leone et al., 2007; Biondi, 2012; Giannitrapani, 2015), but only a few have tried to interpret the data in terms of past human activities (see also discussion in Leighton, 2005; Ayala, 2012). It

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield, Minalloy House, 10-16, Regent Street, Sheffield S1 3NJ, United Kingdom.

E-mail addresses: [rb.mentesana@gmail.com](mailto:rb.mentesana@gmail.com) (R. Mentesana), [giuseppe.debenedetto@unisalento.it](mailto:giuseppe.debenedetto@unisalento.it) (G. De Benedetto), [girolamo.fiorentino@unisalento.it](mailto:girolamo.fiorentino@unisalento.it) (G. Fiorentino).

must be stressed that the long-time span of the EBA in Sicily and the scarcity of well-dated archaeological sites for the phase makes it difficult to interpret the nature of this diversified and dense landscape occupation. Therefore, while the data available subtly suggest a correlation between the exploitation of the different landscapes of the island and the movement of people, objects and ideas throughout the territory, we are struggling to get a comprehensive picture from them.

The study of a pot from the Early Bronze Age site of Coste di Santa Febronia (Catania) can contribute in bridging the gap between this macro-historical reconstruction of EBA Sicilian communities and the archaeological data available. During the archaeological study of the ceramic assemblage from the site (Mentasana, 2010), one of the pots attracted immediate attention because a black resinous substance covered the cracks in the vessel walls and handle. Clearly, the substance was used to mend the jar. However, several questions remained about the finding: what was the substance made from? Was it gathered nearby or at a distance from the site? What can this tell us about the choices of the community living at the site? How can this finding fit in the metanarrative of Sicilian EBA community as reconstructed in the literature? From these inquiries, we realised that the investigation of the black resinous substance could also reveal us a network of things and people during the late stage of the Early Bronze Age.

In order to answer these questions, an interdisciplinary approach was developed. This paper follows up on previous research briefly presented elsewhere (Mentasana et al., 2015), the results of which are here integrated with an archaeobotanical study and petrographic examination. The results from the analytical study are finally interpreted with a biographical and microhistorical approach aiming to contribute to the reconstruction of the life of communities in Early Bronze Age Sicily from a *bottom-up* perspective.

### 1.1. Archaeological context

The site of Coste di Santa Febronia is located within the administrative district of the town of Palagonia (Catania, Fig. 1:a). From an altitude of 500 m a.s.l., the site dominates the plain below (Piana di Catania) and the valley to the west, Valle dei Margi, which is crossed by a tributary of the Gornalunga river (Fig. 1:b). Since ancient times the presence of a river-system route has facilitated communication between the east coast, the inland and the south coast of Sicily. It has also provided an environment rich with natural resources: archaeobotanical studies illustrate a thickly wooded countryside, different from that of today which is covered with citrus trees (Castiglioni, 2008).

The archaeological village of Coste di Santa Febronia was discovered in 1995 (Maniscalco, 1997a, 1997b). At the top of the Coste di Santa Febronia hill, the remains of a hut of 4.80 m in diameter were found (Fig. 1:c), with large amounts of stone tools, bones and pottery in situ. The materials retrieved were considered belonging to a middle-late stage of the so-called *Castelluccio facies* of the Early Bronze Age (Maniscalco, 1997b). The site was further studied from an interdisciplinary perspective which coupled the spatial distribution of artefacts and ceramic residue analysis, revealing different functional areas inside the hut (Mentasana, 2010, 2015). In the surroundings of Coste di Santa Febronia, several sites pertaining to the same chronological and cultural context were discovered, such as Monte Catalfaro, Rocchicella and Torricella, to cite few (Albanese Procelli et al., 2007; Maniscalco, 2012).

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Material

Fig. 2 shows fragments of the jar on which the black resinous material was found along the wall cracks and on the handle attachment. The pot was found in the north-east area outside the hut and surrounded by numerous ceramic sherds, belonging to the same vessel and

to other shapes. Unfortunately, it was not possible to reconstruct the entire vessel shape due to the extreme fragmentation of the materials. That typology of a large jar, however, is broadly attested in other Bronze Age Sicilian contexts, allowing us to have an idea of the vessel shape (Barone et al., 2011; Mentasana, 2010; Palio and Privitera, 2015).

### 2.2. Interpretative framework

Since the mid-1980s, it has been acknowledged that past objects encompass technological, cultural, symbolic and economic values; it is the role of the archaeologist to unravel these different meanings (van der Leeuw, 1984). Recently, approaches such as the cultural biography see artefacts as actively participating in human life: through the investigation of production, use and discard of an object, the history of the relation between people and that object can be reconstructed (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Gosden and Marshall, 1999; Jones, 2004). Compared to other approaches, the cultural biography studies have demonstrated that an object's meaning is not static but changes according to its contexts and, therefore, meaning can change during the object "life". By being repaired in antiquity, the jar from Coste di Santa Febronia is suitable to be investigated with the cultural biography approach in order to consider different scenarios of vessel production, consumption, restoration and re-use and its implications in narrating the stories of people doing those activities. In addition, this approach has been successfully applied in the case of ancient vessel repairs as a way to investigate changes in the social meaning of the object (Dooijes and Nieuwenhuyse, 2007; Peche-Quilichini et al., 2017).

This single vessel life can also be approached as a microhistory, in Ginzburg's (1980), Ginzburg et al., (1993) sense. As opposed to global history, the microhistory approach tackles macro historical questions through the study of individual cases, often restricted geographically and socially (Ginzburg, 1980; Ginzburg et al., 1993; Ginzburg and Poni, 1991; Levi, 1991; Muir, 1991). In a more recent revision of this approach, microhistory encompasses a spatial dimension: each case is not considered in isolation but within the network created by the mobility of objects and people through space and time (Trivellato, 2011; De Vito, 2015). The vessel here analysed might be important in questioning EBA materials' collection and use, as well as that supposed extensive movement of Castellucian communities in the island and their sharing of material culture.

These interpretative frameworks can reveal their full potential when coupled with analytical investigation of archaeological materials. In pottery studies, the integration of analytical investigation with anthropological approaches has been discussed by a few scholars (Tite, 1999; Sillar and Tite, 2000; Jones, 2004), revealing the challenges in combining such apparently different interpretative frameworks. Nevertheless, in the last decades case studies have revealed the full potential of this integration, as analytical investigation was able to deepen and in some cases reverse our knowledge of, for example, the exchange of commodities in the Late Bronze Aegean (Haskell et al., 2011) or the use of secondary animal products in Prehistoric Europe (Craig et al., 2003). The analytical investigation of this study encompasses analysis of the resinous substance on the jar, petrographic examination of the jar fabric and archaeobotanical study of the charcoal at the site. The integration of such diversified fields of study is only infrequently adopted in the literature (Urem-Kotsou et al., 2002; Rageot et al., 2016) and it is even then a novelty.

### 2.3. Analysis of the resinous substance

Organic residues analyses in archaeology shed light on vessel use, food habits and ancient manufacturing techniques, often providing scenarios not previously considered (e.g. Craig et al., 2003). Specifically on bituminous materials, the recent advancement of this technique has made it possible to distinguish between distinct chemical markers,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7444667>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7444667>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)