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THE ORIENTED ALTARS OF ROCCA PIZZICATA AND THE ROCKY SITES OF ALCANTARA VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

The Alcantara Valley is one of the most famous natural and archaeological area in Sicily but paradoxically is the least studied and valued. While for the part of nature there is the 'Ente Parco Fluviale Dell'Alcantara', one of the five Sicilian regional parks, on the other, for the archaeological's one, the fact that the river divides the area into two administrative courts, or two provinces, has caused an abandonment of the sites and the complete lack of interest. The project '*the Rock Sites of the Akesines: by the Sicels to the Byzantines*', directed by the Institute of Sicilian Archaeoastronomy in partnership with the Soprintendenza and the University of Catania, plans to map all rock sites of Alcantara Valley and study its astronomical orientations in order to realized, in a later stage, a real tourist itinerary.
One of the most fascinating sites certainly is Rocca Pizzicata, where there are several man-made emergencies, including a rare rock altar facing east. But starting from the eastern side of the Alcantara Valley, near the ancient Naxos, where lie the remains of the first Greek colony in Sicily, these sites are numerous, and among them we must surely be included: Petra Perciata, Rocca Perciata, Rocca Badia, Rocca S. Maria la Scala , Monti Orgali-Cucco, Monte Balsamà, Passo Monte Moio, Serra Cinquonze and Sciare di S. Venera, located in the border's territory that divides the Alcantara Valley from the Simeto Valley. The study of the orientations of the small rocky necropolis will be placed in the larger study produced at the end of the twentieth century from Sebastiano Tusa and Giorgia Foderà Serio.

KEYWORDS: Rocca Pizzicata, Alcantara Valley, Petra Perciata, cromlech, Balze Soprane, Monte Balsamà, rock-cut tombs, Paolo Orsi.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Alcantara river, that marks the natural border between the provinces of Messina (north) and Catania (south), rises in the Nebrodi Mountains (Serra Baratta, about 1400 meters above sea level), flows for about 50 km from East to West, and met the Ionian Sea near Naxos, the first Greek colony in Sicily.

Rocca Pizzicata is a rock formation located at about 700 meters a.s.l. in the Alcantara Valeey, at the border between Roccella Valdemone (ME), Santa Domenica Vittoria (ME) and Randazzo (CT). The geological framework of Rocca Pizzicata consists of rocks of Flysch of Capo d'Orlando (Upper Oligocene-Lower Miocene). The site of Rocca Pizzicata, known in the Middle Ages with the name of Petra Intossicata (Barbieri, 1886), has anthropogenic emergency very interesting, which have been studied by the authors since 2010.

The archaeological complex is very difficult to interpret, especially for the fact that there were no archaeological excavations in the area, and very few reaserches have been realized all over the Alcantara Valley, so we does not own an archaeological-historical complete view. A few kilometers away from the site of Rocca Pizzicata, in territory of Messina, there are two groups of rock-cut tombs (Serra Cinquonze and Monte Passo Moio) whose age is still uncertain, as well as the age of the necropolis of Monti Orgali-Cucco, on the side of Catania, where besides the rock-cut tombs are numerous millstones excavated in the rock, common all over the valley, evidence of an ancient production of wine (Puglisi, 2009).

2. PIZZICATA ROCK

Rocca Pizzicata is rich in human activity. We can see stairs carved into the rock, petroglyphs, a rock-cut tomb (grotticella tomb), a rocky altar and a supposed second incomplete altar (Figure 1). The sandstone rocks, over the millennia, have been subjected to erosion by weathering, mainly wind and water, which have modelled forms, making some of them take special human and animal figures, just like in the not far site of Argimusco (Orlando, 2016).

The scientific inquiry has focused on the archaeo-astronomical analysis of the two rocky altars, which have a well-defined orientation. The whole area of the Rock was first georeferenced with satellite measurements using a Leica GS15 GPS receiver. The size of the sandstone formation are approximately 400 meters (length) and 150 meters (width). It has several levels, connected by passages that often have stairs or support points carved into the rock. The tomb is located near the top of the rock. This is a large elliptical camber, that was found free of evidences but could be dated from the Late Bronze to the Iron age. Some fragments of pottery, and crosses incised inside the camber seem to indicate an Early Medieval reuse of the tomb (Platania and Scaravilli, 2013).

The incomplete altar is located on the top of the Rock and has a southern orientation. This cut of the rock could also be a place to guard the surrounding area. At a lower altitude, close to the eastern base of the Rock, is a more clear altar consisting of a rectangular table, two meters long and 60 centimeters wide, carved into the rock. It is very complicated to date the artefact. It belongs to a type that knows no immediate comparisons in Sicily. Two structures carved into the rock that have some similarities to this altar are located in Caltabellotta, in the province of Agrigento, and Pietraperzia, in the provincial of Enna (Rizzuti, 2009; Tusa and Nicoletti, 2014). The precision of the cut makes we believe that it was made in the historical period, perhaps at the same time of the reuse of the tomb. The altar of Rocca Pizzicata shows an orientation to the east. The azimuth measured is about 90°, thus the altar seems to be oriented to the rise of the Sun at the equinoxes and then it could have a cultic valence.

Figure 1. The rocky altar oriented to the east on the Rocca Pizzicata (authors' photos).

3. ALCANTARA VALLEY

From the few studies carried out in the Valley, it is possible to trace a very ancient history. In the territory of Castiglione di Sicilia (CT) a lava flow cave (Marca cave) was frequented in the Copper Age (facies of Piano Conte and facies of Pellegriti-Marca), also for funerary purposes (Privitera, 1992). In the nearby Malvagna (ME) was found a Late Bronze closet (Giardino, 2005). Between Taormina and Castemola (ME) there is an Iron age necropolis studied by the archaeologist Paolo Orsi (Orsi, 1919).

In addition to the preliminary investigations on the oriented altars of Rocca Pizzicata are presented others rock sites of Alcantara Valley (Petra Perciata, Rocca Perciata, Rocca Badia, Monte Balsamà, Monti

Orgali-Cucco and Rocca di S. Maria La Scala) that have recently been included in the scientific project "the Rock Sites of the Akesines: by the Sicels to the Byzantines", directed by the IAS in partnership with the Soprintendenza and University of Catania. The Alcantara Valley in particular has numerous small necropolis, with rock-cut tombs, mostly to single-cell, of which we are measuring the orientation of the entrances. Some of these necropolis were dated back to Byzantine period (Privitera, 2009), but it is not excluded that they are more ancient.
The campaign of study, started in june 2015 and still ongoing, involves the entire Valley, from the eastern, with the Sicels necropolis of Cocolonazzo di Mola, to the western, over Randazzo, considering the Rocca dei Giganti (Radice, 1926) and the plateau that forms the watershed between the valleys of the Simeto and Alcantara, on the northwestern slope of Etna volcano. In this area, in the so called Sciare di S. Venera, it is very important mention the cromlech of Balze Soprane (Palio and Turco, 2015; Orlando; 2015).

3.1. *Petra Perciata*

Petra Perciata is the first sandstone that meets at the eastern entrance of the Alcantara Valley (Figure 2). On this rocky hill there are 9 rock-cut tombs, irregularly rectangular or sub-circolar in plan, whose age is unknown because they have never been made official archaeological excavations. From comparative analysis with other similar necropolis, like that of the nearby Cocolonazzo of Mola, it seems that we can indicate this site back to the Iron Age.

Figure 2. Petra Perciata from the north-east (authors's photo).

Most of the tombs was made digging hole on the north and west of the small rocky hill; only a tomb has an orientation to the east, while the south side is characterized by a sheer wall that served of course for the defense.

3.2. *Monte Balsamà*

On the territory of Castiglione di Sicilia is situated Monte Balsamà, where there are some sandstone rock emergencies that have been used by humans in ancient times. In particular there are two rock tombs, partly already studied (Privitera, 2009), showing both an orientation to the north (Figure 3), which are directed towards the river Alcantara and just across the Monti Orgali-Cucco.

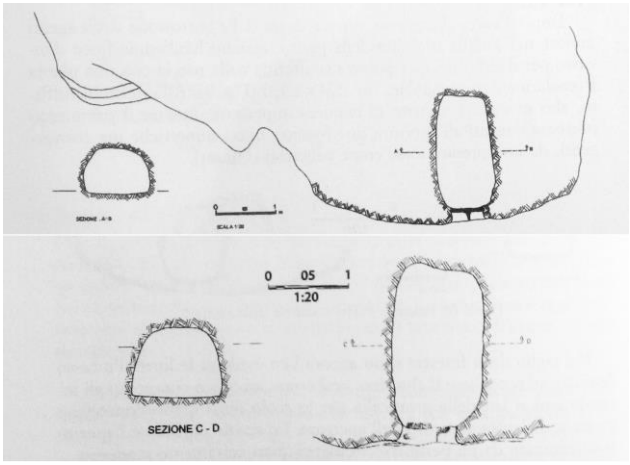

Figure 3. Plans and sections of the rock-cut tomb 1 (on the top) and tomb2 (on the bottom) (from Privitera, 2009).

3.3. *Monti Orgali-Cucco*

The Monti Orgali-Cucco consist of two hills that are on the territory of Francavilla di Sicilia, already in the province of Messina. On these hills are many and particulars rock millstones (Puglisi, 2009) and a small group of 6 rock-cut tombs, irregularly rettangular in plan: 5 are oriented to the South while the other to the South-West. This necropolis is directed towards the river Alcantara, being the mirror image of that of Monte Balsamà.

3.4. *Balze Soprane*

On the western side of the Etna volcano, on the very wavy and monotonous expanse of lava and rope and slabs, known locally as the 'Sciare of St. Venera', was discovered, about a decade ago, a necropolis of the Late Neolithic in the district of Balze Soprane near Bronte (Privitera, 2012). In the immediate vicinity of this necropolis there is a very enigmatic structure, formed by slabs of lava erected that form a small cromlech (Figure 4). Seven basaltic menhir create a spiral structure that is currently very rare in Sicily (Palio and Turco, 2015). The spiral cromlech has an entrance characterized by an equinoctial orientation, especially around the sunset of the Sun at the equinoxes (Orlando, 2015).

Figure 4. The small cromlech of Balze Soprane (authors'photo; from Orlando, 2015).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study in question is very important, because it represents the first project to study the history of the millennial Alcantara Valley through the rock sites and the archaeoastronomy. The Alcantara Valley has a number of rocky sites oriented that in the near future will be entered into an international tourist circuit.

The first step in the research agenda will be a fieldwork already scheduled for late spring 2016, aimed to acquire all the missing technical data and to start comparing them with those already available for the other rocky sites.

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