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VANDALS, OSTROGOTHS AND THE BYZANTINE FOOTPRINTS IN SICILY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL-HISTORICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the review of historical and archeological perspectives on Sicily in the period of Vandals and Ostrogoths invasions, and Byzantine reconquest of the island, and includes new research (excavations and surveys) and archaeological artefacts discovered recently on archaeological sites *Akrai/Acrae* in south-eastern Sicily. Sicily as the largest and centrally-located island on the Mediterranean Sea, rich in natural resources and playing a key role in political shuffles, was a natural crossroad of trading routes, a melting pot of diverse cultures. Therefore for many reasons it was a ring of various historical events, including Late Antiquity. Since end of 430 AD, after the Vandals conquered the lands of North Africa, island reentered the mainstream of history and became a disputed land and the main battlefield for the Vandals, Ostrogoths, and the Byzantine Empire, which did not leave its economy and population untouched. The political reshuffling and military actions were signalled in the literature mostly in the context of coastal towns of islands, but recent studies of material culture, settlement distribution and roads, show that it surely influenced the cultural landscape of the entire island. The paper also draws attention on the need to cross scientific disciplines (history and archaeology) which might be useful in solving elusive ancient problem and issues, in this case thanks to the archaeological material culture filling gaps in historical and written source sources associated with presence of Vandals, Ostrogoths and Byzantine Empire in Sicily, with particular interest of its interior.

KEYWORDS: Sicily, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Byzantium, Akrai/ Acrae excavations

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean and the barbarian world were entangled in complex mutual relations for centuries, and military expeditions of the 'people of the North' repeatedly reached the borders of the Roman Empire (Cracco Ruggini, 1984: 3-51). The first known presence of barbarian troops in Sicily took place under the Probus (276–282), when in 278 AD a Frankish raid from Gallia reached Syracuse and plundered and demolished the city (Pace, 1949: 81; Wilson, 1990: 330). Zosimus writes: 'But the Franks having applied to the emperor, and having a country given to them, a part of them afterwards revolted, and having collected a great number of ships, disturbed all Greece; from whence they proceeded into Sicily, to Syracuse, which they attacked, and killed many people there' (Zosimus, I.71.2).

A symbolic moment, however, was the battle of Adrianople in 378 AD, when the victorious

barbarians trespassed deep into the Empire for good. Simultaneously, the first Roman province, Sicily (Fig. 1), remained far to the south from these events. As the largest and most centrally-positioned island in the Mediterranean Sea, rich in natural resources and playing a key role in political shuffles, it was a natural crossroad of trade routes, a melting pot of diverse cultures, a core of socio-economic development, as well as a 'desired' land, offering what other regions could not provide within hand's reach. Sicily supplied Rome mostly with grain, but also honey, cheese, olives, lead, alum, and salt (Peña, 1999: 57–59, 63–65; Vaccaro, 2013: 267–269; Chowaniec, 2017: 24–26). Thus, there were many reasons why history left its mark on Sicily, including the events of Late Antiquity – a time of turmoil, strife, division, and the fall of the Western Roman Empire (the historical and archaeological background: Cameron, 2012).



Figure 1. Map of Sicily with ancient towns mentioned in the text (based on Google earth, redrawn by R. Chowaniec)

Sicily returned to the arena of events after the founding of Constantinople, when the island became one of Rome's major suppliers of *annona* (Sirks, 1991: 39, 240; Sirago, 1996: 420; Soraci, 2011: 184-197, 202-203; Vaccaro, 2013: 266-267)

since the Egyptian grain that used to feed Rome until then started supplying the new capital (Castellana and McConnel, 1990: 43-44; Vera, 1997-1998: 33-73). Sicily rose in its role as *nutrix* and *granario* after 429 AD (Wilson, 1990: 330),

when the Vandals conquered the lands of North Africa and captured Carthage in 439 AD, which was the final result of centuries of Vandals migrations and numerous transformations of this people (Cracco Ruggini, 1984: 44-45; Merills and Miles, 2010: 54-55, 109-140). In the 5th and 6th century AD the island reentered the mainstream

of history and became a disputed land and the main battlefield for the Vandals, Goths, and the Byzantine Empire, which did not leave its economy and population untouched (Pace, 1949: 81-134; Mazza, 1997-1998: 107-138; Manganaro, 2010-2011: 124-125) (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Vandal and Ostrogothic Kingdoms and Byzantine Empire (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vandal_Kingdom)

2. SICILY AND VANDALS

Before the Vandals begun their raids on Sicily, the Sicilian inhabitants were already alarmed by the presence of Alaric at Calabria in 410 AD, which is proven by hoards from this time (Wilson, 1990: 330). Three decades later, in June or July 440 AD¹ [1], the Vandals, under their most famous king, Geiseric (428–477) (sometimes named Geiseric, Gaiseric), started the first major incursion in Sicily directly from their new settlements in Africa. It was Emperor Valentinian III's warning against a possible barbarian attack that initiated due preparations in towns and encouraged the island's inhabitants to undertake defensive actions (Caliri, 2015: 991). Despite that,

Geiseric sacked and devastated all of Sicily, and the *remissio tributorum* introduced by Valentinian III to all victims could serve as a testimony to how much the province suffered from the Vandals. But experts still debate whether the tax exemption encompassed all regions of Sicily or only its western part (Caliri, 2014: 127-143).

The initial Vandal attacks were focused on the south-western part of the island, which fully catered to the most vital needs of their African heartland, whereas complete control of the harbour in *Lilybaeum* (modern Marsala) blocked possible Sicilian counterattacks (Aiello, 2015: 988). The Vandals penetrated the island in small raiding parties, performing quick operations and immediate retreats.

¹ B. Pace states that the beginning of rides could take place in the end of 439 AD or first days of 440 AD (Pace, 1949: 86). G. Fasoli argues that the preliminary reconnaissance

expedition took place already in 438 AD (Fasoli, 1980: 98), or perhaps even as early as 437 AD (Merills and Miles, 2010: 130).

In 442 AD, Valentinian III, affected by the conflict on the East, and Geiseric made an agreement with an entirely new political undertone, not only proclaiming the barbarians *foederati*, but also granting them rights to the richest and most fertile lands in *Africa Proconsularis*, *Africa Byzacena*, and the eastern part of Numidia. In return, Rome, which struggled with a variety of difficulties at the time, was to receive supplies of grain from northern Africa and Sicily, and the Vandals were to cease raiding other provinces of the Empire. The new relations between Rome and the barbarians were to be sealed by the wedding of Huneric (477–484), Geiseric's eldest son, and Eudocia, Valentinian's elder daughter (Merills and Miles, 2010: 63–65, 112). However, the emperor Valentinian III did not keep the promise, thus after his death, Geiseric sacked Rome and kidnapped Eudocia, promised to Huneric (Conant, 2012: 20–36).

The years between 442 AD and 455 AD may be considered a rather peaceful time. However, in 455 AD, soon after Valentinian III's death, Geiseric, to an extent relieved of the contract by the emperor's passing, renewed systematic incursions into Calabria and on the island, including its eastern and southern regions, as it seems to emphasise his rights to the island. But the raids took place also in Sardinia, Corsica and the Balearic Islands (Lilliu, 1984: 559). In his descriptions of the Vandal raids, Procopius comments: 'At that time, after the death of Valentinian, Geiseric gained the support of the Moors, and every year at the beginning of spring he made invasions into Sicily and Italy, enslaving some of the cities, razing others to the ground, and plundering everything; and when the land had become destitute of men and of money, he invaded the domain of the emperor of the East' (Procopius, III.5.22).

The situation seemed favourable for the barbarians, as for a time Sicily was left without an army, which was busy dealing with conflicts on other borders. Contrary to the common belief

that the Vandal incursions were mainly focused on looting, it seems that their aim was not just to sack the island, but to dominate it politically by destroying crops and spreading terror. Firstly, the Vandals had enough produce in Africa, secondly, in spring the crops were not ready for harvest yet, so the aim could be to destroy them, not to loot them. Thus, they would not serve to feed a potential army which would want to attack Vandal settlements in Africa. V. Aiello (2015: 989) goes on to argue that the aim was destroying a territory in order to impede a military or provisional use of it by one's enemies (Caliri, 2007: 576–577). This, in turn, was intended to help the Vandals in further conquests and ensure control over trade in the Mediterranean. Obviously, the access to agricultural produce and developed craftsmanship was not without meaning as well (Fasoli, 1980: 97). In the end, the Vandals failed to conquer Sicily in its entirety. Even though the island was especially important to them (Merills and Miles, 2010: 129), their status there and rights to the land after 455 AD remain debatable (Fasolo, 1980: 97–98; Caliri, 2015: 993).

At the time, the Eastern Roman Empire was facing its own conflicts and its interest in joining the western conflicts was rather moderate. Admittedly, Theodosius II sent a Byzantine fleet to Sicily in 441 AD with the task of 'securing' the island, however it should be seen as a diversion, since a substantial part of the force was soon moved to the eastern borders, threatened by the Huns (Kaegi, 1968: 28–29; Merills and Miles, 2010: 112–113; Cameron, 2012: 35). After 455 AD, there were several, mostly unsuccessful attempts to make a stand against the Vandals who repeatedly attacked Sicily (Strzelczyk, 1992: 141). Admittedly, exceptions happened as well. For instance, in 456 AD Flavius Ricimer, child of a Suebian-Visigoth marriage (!) and a military leader of the Western Roman Empire, defeated the Vandals in the battle of *Agrigentum* (modern Agrigento) and in 460 AD², 465 AD and 468 AD Marcellinus, the *comes rei militaris* of Dalmatia,

² Marcellinus was sent to Sicily by emperor Majorian, while he planned an offensive against the Vandals in Africa.

Despite the initial successes the emperor had to ask for peace with the Vandals.

made attempts to reintroduce temporary Roman rule on the island (Pace, 1949: 90-91). These minor failures, however, did not threaten Geiseric's stable position.

3. SICILY INTER VANDALOS ET GOTHOS

Even though Emperor Leon I signed an agreement with Geiseric in 461/2 AD (probably also in 470 AD; Pace, 1949: 92), guerrilla warfare continued (Procopius, III.6). It ended only in 472 AD with another peace treaty, which guaranteed safe supply of grain to Rome, but Ricimer was forced to accept Geiseric's terms. The treaty was renewed in 474/475 AD by Zeno and once again in 476 AD (Giunta, 1956: 137; Wolińska, 2005: 25-27).

The same year, following the death of Romulus Augustulus, the last 'Roman' emperor, control over Italy was seized by Odoacer (433-493), a German warrior previously in service of Rome, defined as *rex gentium* of Barbarian tribes in Italy (Giunta, 1984: 54). Various circumstances and inborn political intelligence allowed him to 'assume power' over a great part of Sicily, without Lilybaeum, which he ruled until the end of the 480s AD. Victor of Vita in his 'History of the Vandal Persecution' writes that Geiseric passed Sicily to Odoacer a few months before his death in January 477 AD (Victor of Vita, I.14. The true scope of Odoacer's power remains unknown, as do the conditions of the agreement). Odoacer could own the island based on the conditions of *ius private salvo canone* (Jones 2014: 156), but the Vandals remained its true rulers (Clover, 1999: 237-238; Caliri, 2015: 993). In exchange for a yearly tribute - fixed lease costs - and the south-western part of the island, closest to the Vandal lands in Africa, being left at their disposal, Odoacer could manage (sic!) Sicily since the autumn of 476 AD (Clover, 1999: 237). Certainly, the island remained of interest to the Vandals, and, by such an agreement with Odoacer, Geiseric wanted to provide his successors with a firm connection with the Western Roman Empire (Caliri, 2007: 570-571).

Everything points to the fact that the successors of Geiseric did not honour this agreement,

as the Vandals manifested their rights to the island ever bolder. When in 489 AD Theodoric the Great, Ostrogothic leader, began his conquest of Italy (Burns, 1980: 57-126), the Vandal king, Gunthamund (484-496), nephew of Huneric, the eldest son of Geiseric, launched new military incursions in Sicily. These turned out to be a failure and were put to an end by the signing of a rather unknown peace treaty in 491 AD (Halsall, 2007: 294), which resulted in Odoacer formally gaining control over the island without its south-western part (?). Almost two years later, Odoacer was murdered as a result of his ongoing conflict with Theodoric, and full power with the lands passed on to his rival. Theodoric created an Ostrogoth state in Italy, at first recognising the authority of the Eastern Roman Empire, and proclaiming himself a sovereign ruler in 498 AD. He also tried to stabilise the relations between the Vandals and the Ostrogoths (*finis inter Vandalos et Gothos*) with the marriage of his sister, Amalafriada, with Thrasamund (496-523), king of the Vandals and the Alans in 500 AD. It seems, however, as is emphasised by G. Halsall (2007: 295), that it was designed to subordinate the Gothic king Thrasamund. The wedding gift Theodoric gave his sister is worth mentioning. Except 'a thousand of the notable Goths as a bodyguard, who were followed by a host of attendants amounting to above five thousand fighting men' (Procopius, III.8.12-13), these were Sicilian holdings in *Lilybaeum* (Procopius, III.8.13-14), the same ones that were mentioned in the treaty of 491 AD and that were thus to remain with the Vandals (Conant, 2012: 38-39).

As Procopius refers it took place in the period: 'the Vandals suffered a disaster at the hands of the Moors such as had never befallen them before that time' (Procopius, III.8.14). In fact, there are no Gothic archaeological finds so far observed in Sicily. But 'The doubtless numerous barbarian troops in Italy during the fifth century had not chosen to display their ethnic identity through material culture', (Halsall, 2007: 336-337, map 23). Also in case of Vandals in North Africa it is very difficult to distinguish Roman and non-Roman society and material culture,

because, as is claimed by G. Halsall, (2007: 405) the Vandals showed limited interest in presenting their own power and identity.

4. BYZANTINE FOOTPRINTS IN SICILY

Byzantine influence over the island was not restored until Emperor Justinian I, who first forced the Vandals out of *Lilybaeum* with the help of his commander Flavius Belisarius the hospitality of the Ostrogoth queen, Amalasantha, daughter of Theodoric the Great (Procopius, III.5.14–15).

Belisarius first gathered supplies for further fighting (Clover, 1999: 242), then landed on the eastern shores of the island in 533 AD, and defeated the Ostrogoths themselves. His base of choice was most probably the harbour in Catania (Strzelczyk, 1992: 173; Cameron, 2012: 107–111; also Procopius, V.5.12 'he took [also] over Syracuse and the other cities by surrender without any trouble'), which served as a vantage point for his raids on Vandal Africa (Heydemann, 2016: 35–36). Sicily had to be his tactical foothold for the later intervention in Italy. The antagonisms between the Goths and the Byzantines found their military conclusion when 'Belisarius was sent by Emperor Justinian against Theodat and the Gothic people. He sailed to Sicily and conquered it with ease' (Procopius, IV.14.1). The whole conflict was finished before the end of 535 AD (as a result of this the emperor held all Sicily subject and tributary of himself, Procopius, V.5.17–18; see also Strzelczyk, 1992: 185, 187), and Belisarius' success is to be attributed both to greater numbers and the naturally supportive approach of the island's inhabitants, especially in its eastern part, stemming from strong

Byzantine traditions in the region. 'For, having received the dignity of the whole consulship because of his victory over the Vandals, while he was still holding this honour, and after he had won the whole of Sicily, on the last day of his consulship, he marched into Syracuse, loudly applauded by the army and by the Sicilians and throwing golden coins to all' (Procopius V.5.18). T. Burns (1980: 116), describing the *comes Gothorum*, also mentioned the *comes* of Syracuse as a special case, not only the official representation but also the commander of the Gothic garrison stationed here, because his soldiers plundered the farms, which was probably unacceptable for the local communities. In 536 AD, Belisarius left two *presidii* on the island, including one in the Syracuse province which was a part of the Italian diocese. The Ostrogoths did not surrender without a fight and tried to torment Sicily with raids in 550 AD and 551 AD (Cameron, 2012: 115–116).

The presence and inspiration in Byzantine culture are attested by numerous finds in Sicily, also in the recently excavated archaeological site of *Akrai/Acrae* (modern Palazzolo Acreide). Among the finds are not only Byzantine coins, nearly exclusively of local production of eastern Sicilian mints, predominantly that of Syracuse mint, but also a fragment of a bronze censer, bronze belt buckles, 'half-crescent' shaped electrum earrings, bronze and iron rings and crosses, dated to the 5th–8th centuries AD (Fig. 3) (Chowaniec 2015; 2017; *per analogiam* Orsi, 1942; Pace, 1949: 433–458; Messina and di Stefano, 1997: 116–119; Baldini Lippolis, 2010: 123–132).



Figure 3. Some archaeological finds of Byzantine origin from Akrai/Acrae, south-eastern Sicily (photo Archaeological Mission of Akrai)

5. GENERAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES

The aforementioned political reshuffling and military actions by the Vandals, the Ostrogoths, and the following Byzantine reconquista, so far signalled in the literature mostly in the context of coastal towns – Palermo, Catania, Agrigento, or Syracuse – surely influenced the cultural landscape of the entire island. D. Sami (2013: 27) thus described the fate of Sicilian towns in the 4th and 5th centuries: ‘Ideas such as economical decline caused by Vandal raids, the tyrannical and oppressive fiscal government of Constantinople, the decadence of urban centres and the tendency towards independence from Byzantine control, are only some of the common theories still accepted without critical debate’ (a thorough analysis of the issue has also been presented by Vaccaro, 2013: 272–304).

Without a doubt, the barbarian influence upset the former stability of the Sicilian urban centres (Goltz, 1997–1998: 226), but their complete destruction has to be excluded. V. Aiello (2005: 547–569; 2015: 988) suggests that the Vandals did not block trade routes and the circulation of

goods in the Mediterranean remained dynamic. Thanks to the old and particularly recent excavations, the continuity of Sicilian settlements dated between the Imperial period and the early Medieval period can be confirmed. L. Pfuntner claims that this continuity should be linked with ‘the continuing vitality of the Sicilian economy and the high value of Sicilian grain, which reinforced connections with Italy, Africa, and other parts of the Mediterranean even in times of political and military upheaval, such as the Vandal incursions and the Byzantine re-conquest of Sicily in the sixth century’ (Pfuntner 2013: 29).

The majority of the attacks described in the sources mainly afflicted ports, for obvious reasons, which produced disturbances in the flow of supplies into the interior. However, traces of their presence have been registered inland as well. The excellent examples, from recently done excavations within the ancient town *Akraï/Acrae*, that confirm presence of Vandals in the interior of island are the finds of Vandal iron arrowheads and a shield boss.

Some cities were fortified at the time (for instance, Ortigia in Syracuse was encircled with fortifications), but most probably there was no

coordinated action of erecting defences. In Catania, the fortifications were reinforced only after the Ostrogoth incursions started (Wolińska, 2005: 98). And whenever the barbarian tribes cut off Africa from Italy ships ceased to sail regularly and thus Sicilian ports received less goods (Hallsall, 2007: 330-331). However, overall, the Vandal state in North Africa had a positive effect on the Sicilian economy. This beneficial influence was rooted not only in its vitality and continuous activity of its production centres (Bonifay, 2004; Vaccaro, 2013: 263; Aiello, 2015: 987; Merills and Miles, 2010: 144-151; Conant, 2012: 90-95), but mostly in the dynamic functioning of the sea trade routes (Uggeri, 2008: 63-96). R. J. A. Wilson (1990: 336) suggests that Sicily in the 5th century AD was still flourishing and had vital position in food supply. He also states that the great amount of pottery on the rural settlements justified the opinion of Cassiodorus, governor of Sicily between 490-493 AD, that it was a calm time for the island (Wilson, 1990: 336).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The history and role of towns in Sicily in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Period have not been researched deeply enough, and despite this fact, there is a common yet false assumption that since the second half of the 4th century AD towns were at the verge of collapse and life focused in rural areas (Sami, 2013: 27).

A rather different picture is presented by archaeological material. For instance, an increased inflow of pottery from the Aegean or North Africa between the second quarter of the 5th century AD and the mid-6th century AD was registered within the current excavations at the site of *Akrai/Acrae* (Domzalski, 2015: 288-289). The presence of these pottery in the town localised in the Sicilian interior can suggest that Sicily was not facing any major economic crisis at the time, because since these ceramics supplied this small inner city, it also had to reach to ports such as Catania or, above all, Syracuse. We are observing a

constant inflow of African Red Slip (ARS) wares from ARS A and A/D wares dated from the late 1st century AD until the 3rd century AD through ARS C¹⁻³ wares from the early 3rd century AD until the early 5th century AD; ARS D phase 1 dated from the 4th century AD until the mid-5th century AD; ARS C⁵ from the late 5th century AD; ARS D phase 2 dated from the late 5th century AD until the early 6th century AD, and ARS D phase 3 from the mid-6th century until the mid-7th century AD. The most numerous finds among the ARS ware are the ARS A and A/D, as well as ARS C¹⁻³ from the early 3rd to the early 5th century AD, and ARS D phase 1 pots from the 4th to the mid-5th century AD (Domzalski 2018). Some disturbances were compensated by Late Roman C/Phocian Red Slip wares. The reduction of ARS ware inflow is registered rather from the late 5th to the early 6th century AD, as well as the later in the mid-6th to the mid-7th centuries AD (Domzalski 2018).

Though Valentinian's *remissio tributorum* could suggest that the settlement network suffered to an extent and some lands were deserted, essentially Sicily remained in good condition (Merills and Miles, 2010: 131).

Rather good functioning of the ancient *Akrai/Acrae* and its vicinity is also confirmed by results of recent surveys, showing the distribution of the settlements/farms in the Late Antiquity (Fig. 4) (Chowaniec et al. 2018). Other studies of this region, made as part of studies on the cultural landscape of ancient *Akrai/Acrae*, support this opinion (Lanteri 2018; Cugno, 2018). A particularly interesting picture is presented by R. Lanteri, who has demonstrated a widespread distribution of settlements, especially along the main communication routes. She states that *Akrai* has never forfeit its strategic role to control the routes between Syracuse and both the interior and the coast. In the Late Antiquity and the Byzantine periods, *Akrai* becomes a very important point where these arteries crossed and connected (Lanteri, 2018: 118-119, Fig. 5).

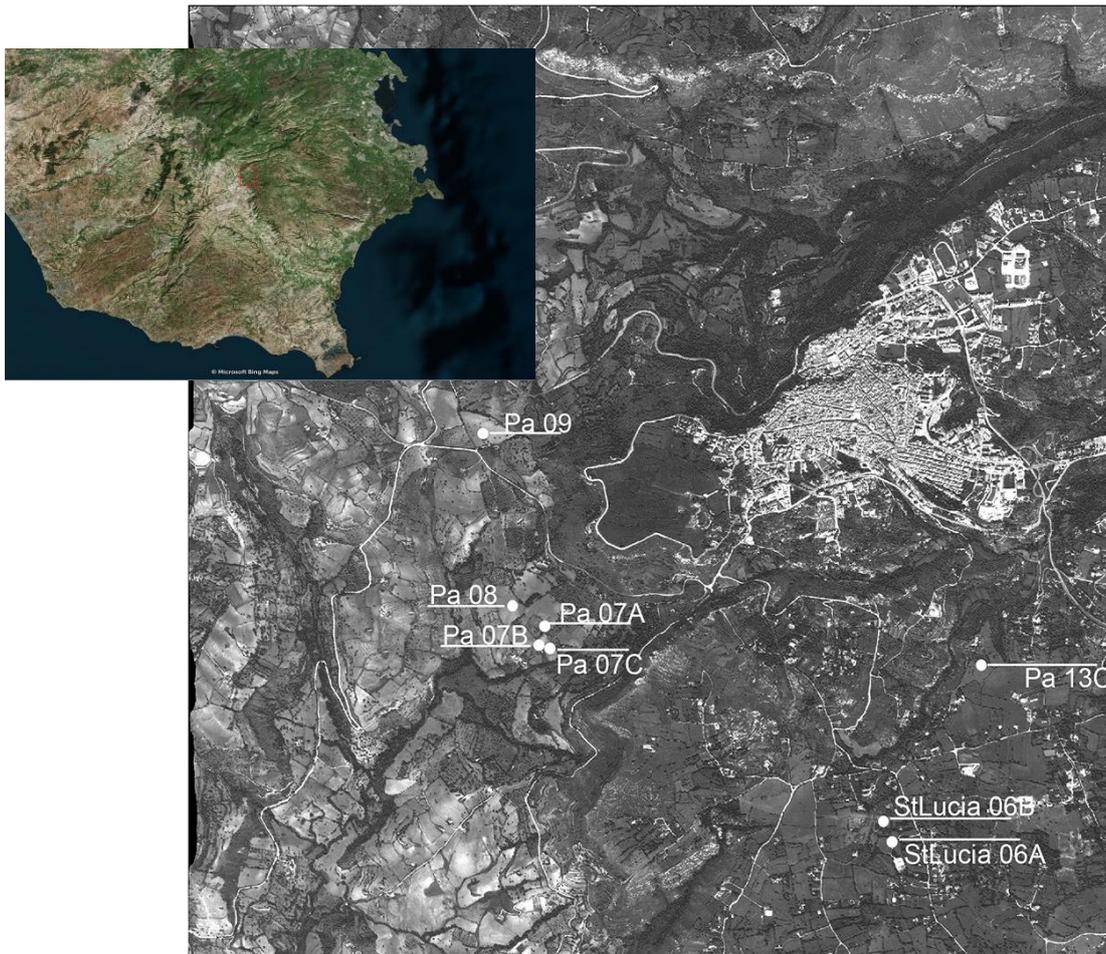


Figure 4. Map showing the distribution of new archaeological sites (PA = Palazzolo and St Lucia = Santa Lucia and order numbers) dated to the Late Antiquity, registered during the survey in 2009-2010 in the vicinity of Akrai/Acrae (source: Chowaniec et al., 2018: fig. 7) and general map with area of survey marked in red (source: Microsoft Bing Maps)

Per analogiam, the Vandal settlements in Africa enjoyed relative peace and stability, and the barbarians themselves quickly learned to use benefits offered by Roman civilisation (Strzelczyk, 2002: 217-221).

Similarly, the times of Odoacer and Theodoric were not especially burdensome for the inhabitants of the island (Squatriti, 2016: 395-397), with Theodoric treating it with due care as the provider of grain, stored in Syracuse, by refraining from locating too many soldiers as settlers there, and thus allowing the locals to live relatively normal lives (Cracco Ruggini, 1995: 298). In general, the exchange flourished as exemplified by

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letter of Theodoric written between 509 AD and 512 AD, to the bishop of Salona with the recommendation of the merchant who provided *sixty vessels of oil to fill the lamps* for the bishop's church (Cassiodorus, *Variae* III.VII.1; see also Barnish, 1992: 51-52).

Also, Jordanes calls Sicily *Getarum nutrix*, as he writes: 'This sagacious general [Belisarius] believed he could not overcome the Gothic nation, unless he should first seize Sicily, their nursing-mother' (Jordanes, LIX.308). This shows how vital the role played by the island was, not only as a provider of goods, but also as a strategic location in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea.

Rosa Lanteri, who demonstrated great dedication and goodwill in supporting the scholarly proceedings of the archaeological mission.

FOOTNOTES

[1] B. Pace states that the beginning of rides could take place in the end of 439 AD or first days of 440 AD (Pace, 1949: 86). G. Fasoli argues that the preliminary reconnaissance expedition took place already in 438 AD (Fasoli, 1980: 98), or perhaps even as early as 437 AD (Merills and Miles, 2010: 130).

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