
ROCK-CUT FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE AND THE SHAPING OF PREHISTORIC LANDSCAPES IN SICILY

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Résumé

Abstract

Rock-cut architecture is a crucial constitutive element of the present-day landscape of Sicily. The diffused presence of steep limestone, sandstone, and flysch outcrops characterises a large part of the island: because of their geomorphological structure, human intervention contributed to modifying most of these outcrops. From prehistory up to very recently, these geological features have been extensively exploited through very simple technologies, producing in this way a vast heritage of ‘negative’ architectures. Artificial cavities have been used as prehistoric burials and, in the following periods, as defence or cult places, spaces for crafts and agricultural productions, housing structures. Their analysis is partly hindered by the difficulty to date accurately these structures. Because of their prolonged use, often these cavities are found without any clear evidence of their original deposits. As said, the technology used for their excavation has been very simple and conservative through the centuries. A GIS-based research project aimed to catalogue, plot, and date the numerous Sicilian rock-cut evidence recently started targeted to overcome these hindrances. A preliminary overview of the project will be presented in the contribution, while the remaining part of the paper will focus on the long-term development of rock-cut prehistoric funerary architecture. In Sicily, hypogeic burials have been in use from the Copper Age. In the previous phases, clear evidence for funerary habits dates to the Upper Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic periods. In the Neolithic, this evidence is extremely scarce, with only a few pit burials exposed in eastern Sicily dating to the Late Neolithic Diana phase. The hypogeic tradition started in Sicily in the Early Copper Age at the end of the 5th millennium BC, with the spread in Western and Southern Sicily of shaft graves where single or double inhumations were deposited together with grave goods composed mainly by incised San Cono-Piano Notaro pottery. It is only at the end of this period (late 3rd millennium BC) that rock-cut graves characterise the whole island. Cemeteries show strict spatial proximity with the villages to emphasise the close relationship that at this stage linked the world of the living with death, as at Roccazzo or Tornambè. A change in funerary rituals also accompanies the passage from shaft to “*grotticella*” tombs. There is now the predominance of collective burials, often marked by secondary depositions, and the appearance of metal objects and personal ornaments in the grave goods. Since the Early Bronze Age and throughout the 2nd millennium BC, the architectural funerary structures remained unvaried, with only a more complex external and internal space organisation. The burials are also accompanied by a progressive rise of grave goods complexity, using exotic prestige items and metal objects. From the Early Bronze

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Age, there is a progressive separation of the living/dead spheres. The necropoleis are bigger and organised on a more extensive territorial range, often placed along the rocky ridges above the villages. This process also continued in the following phases to reach its apex with the monumental necropolis of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, such as Pantalica, with thousands of graves. The contribution will conclude with some preliminary considerations about the cultural, ritual, and economic role of rock-cut architecture for the constitution of prehistoric Sicilian landscapes.

Mots-Clés: Sicil, rock, cut architecture, prehistoric burials, landscape, GIS