

Chapter 11

Contrada Pitrazzi

Late Bronze Age reuse of a Late Copper Age chamber tomb in Western Sicily

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INTRODUCTION

The Contrada Pitrazzi archaeological site (henceforth referred as Pitrazzi) is a chambered tomb located on the western slopes of Monte Rose, Trapani region, northwestern Sicily (fig. 1). The site is named after the hillside where it was discovered. The Pitrazzi tomb lies 1.25km to the northeast of the Late Bronze Age archaeological site of Mokarta (see Kolb

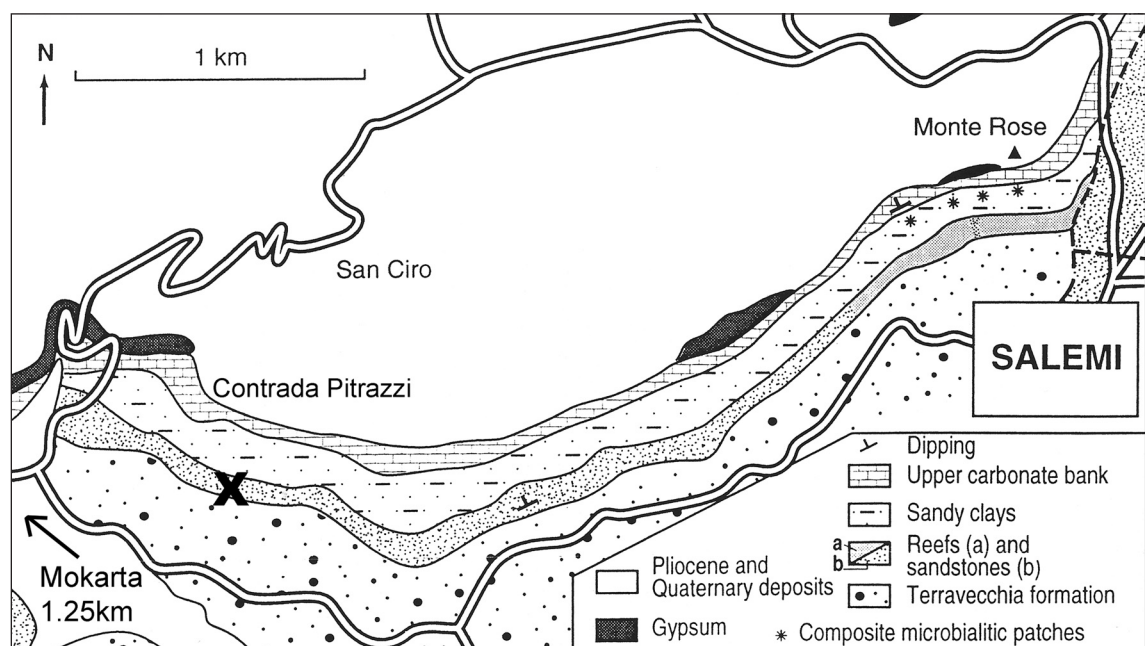


Fig. 1 Geological Map, Contrada Pitrazzi, Trapani District, Sicily

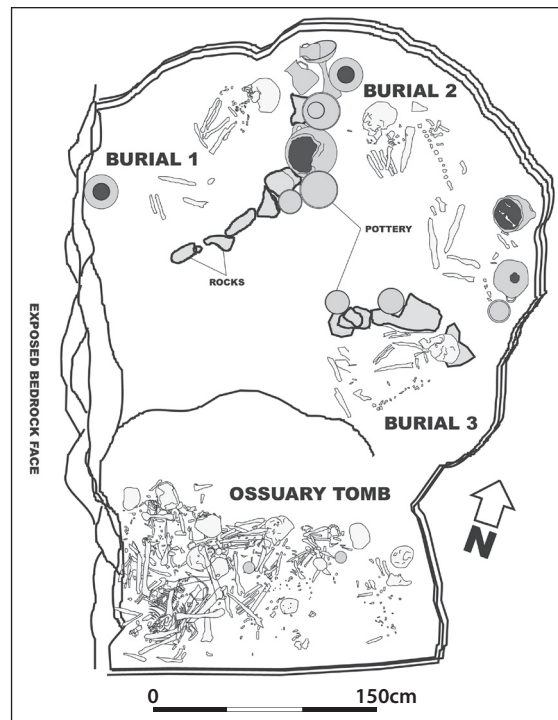


Fig. 2 Site Map, Contrada Pitrazzi, Trapani District, Sicily

this volume, fig. 2). Pitrazzi was discovered after a transverse road cut exposed a ceramic vessel and human long bone fragments in a sandstone cliff face. The site was first identified in 2000.

The Northern Illinois University Field School excavated Pitrazzi during the summers of 2000 and 2001 (Osborn 2002), discovering a chamber tomb with two distinct burial periods and a collapsed roof. The tomb was filled with compressed sand that helped preserve the burials and artifacts *in situ*, as well as prevented looting. Subsequent artefact analysis revealed that the tomb was utilised during different time periods (fig. 2). The southern portion dates to the Malpasso Phase of the Late Copper Age (c.2550–2200 BC), and was an ossuary tomb for at least 24 individuals. The directly adjacent northern portion dates to the Mokarta Phase of the Late Bronze Age (c.1250–950 BC) and included three flexed burials with funeral goods.

The Pitrazzi tomb is significant both for the preservation of *in situ* burials and for the practice of tomb reuse. This paper has two goals: (1) to describe the excavation finds in order to enhance the archaeological record of prehistoric western Sicily; and (2) to examine the reasons behind the tomb's reuse during the Late Bronze Age.

STRATIGRAPHY

Stratigraphy of the Pitrazzi tomb consists of three main periods (fig. 3). Period I of the tomb dates to the Late Copper Age when the original vaulted chamber tomb was carved into the mid-slope position of the Contrada Pitrazzi hillside (fig. 1). This slope consists of a poorly cemented sandstone portion of the Baucina Formation (Heinzel 2004). The excavated portion of the tomb measures 200 by 220cm in size and contained multiple disarticulated skeletons. The original tomb dimensions were probably much larger (up to 350cm in diameter), but a portion of the tomb including the west entrance was destroyed when the road cut was made. Tomb height was estimated to be approximately 150cm.

Period II of the tomb is represented by a Late Bronze Age expansion measuring 250 by 280cm in size in which three flexed skeletons were placed. The tomb was carved out as an expansion of the Late Copper Age ossuary tomb, northward into the bedrock. The three burials are adjacent but do not spatially overlap with the ossuary tomb. They are also some

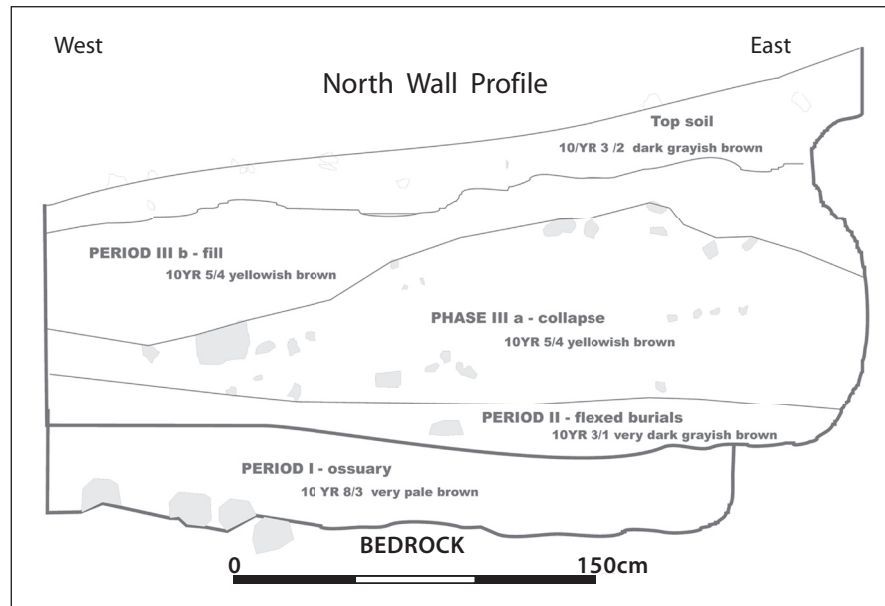


Fig. 3 Stratigraphic Profile, North Wall, Contrada Pitrazzi, Trapani District, Sicily

20cm higher than the Late Copper Age materials. The lateral absence of original bedrock between Period I and II suggests that the chamber tomb was reused in the Late Bronze Age rather than carved out separately.

Period III represents abandonment of the tomb and subsequent infilling of the tomb cavity. This infilling took place slowly thus assuring the preservation of the burials and artefacts *in situ*. Mass wasting (slump and creep) processes aided in the collapse and subsequent filling of the tomb with quartz sand and a trace amount of organic material. Individual sand particles from the tomb and infilling sand covered the tomb's contents. As the tomb walls eroded, the bedrock walls and tomb ceiling slowly collapsed placing large sandstone boulders within the sandy fill of Phase III. The lateral continuity of the Period III strata also indicates that the Period I/II burials shared the same tomb. The tomb fill was originally porous allowing precipitation to enter. The sand fill has since lithified through gypsum/calcite cementation and weak compaction making the new stone slightly less compact/hard than the surrounding original bedrock. The post-collapse stone still required a tremendous amount of effort to excavate and required the use of pick axes, hand picks, and trowels.

THE LATE COPPER AGE OSSUARY TOMB

The excavated portion of the Late Copper Age ossuary tomb measured 200 by 220cm in size and contained multiple disarticulated skeletons. Bone preservation was poor due to the fragmentary condition of the human remains and the compressed nature of the sand fill. Nonetheless, a total of 24 relatively complete crania were recovered.

A number of grave goods were recovered from the ossuary tomb, including two ceramic vessels, stone beads, and stone lithic flakes (fig. 4). The first of the two vessels, a small handled dipper, has been identified as belonging to the Late Copper Age, but not to a specific cultural phase. The second vessel is a Malpasso Culture pixis complete with handled lid. The vessel is quite small, is nearly perfectly round, and has the characteristic Malpasso orange-red color which aided in its identification as a Late Copper Age ware dating to 2550–2200 BC (Bernabo Brea 1957: 73; Albanese Procelli 1988-89).

By far the most prevalent grave goods in the ossuary tomb were stone beads. A total of 121 beads were recovered and consist of three types: 78 small round calcite beads, 29 large cylindrical calcite beads, and 14 large cylindrical haematite beads. The small calcite beads

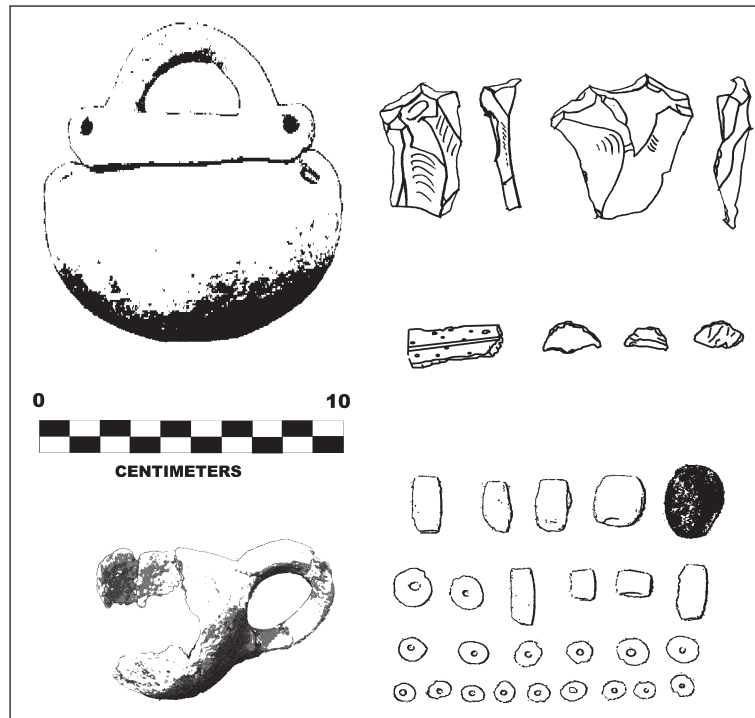


Fig. 4 Late Copper Age Malpasso Phase artifacts from Contrada Pitrazzi, Trapani District, Sicily

are quite soft, and the carving of these beads would have required little labour investment. In contrast, the large cylindrical calcite beads were carved from a much harder form of the stone. In general, the beads were found jumbled amongst the disarticulated human remains, making it impossible to associate the beads with any one particular burial. However, when the bottom of the tomb was reached, a partially articulated skeleton was found with a large number of stone beads around the cranium (fig. 5).

Seven lithic flakes were also recovered. Four of the lithic flakes are quite small and have no evidence of retouching. Two of the flakes are significantly larger than the others and appear to have been retouched. Both flakes are fairly light gray in color and have a slight purplish color. The most interesting lithic found is an obsidian blade. The blade is made from transparent, rather poor quality obsidian with a large number of air bubbles. It appears to have been retouched on both edges. All of the lithic remains, with the exception of the obsidian blade, appear to be made of chert. Based on regional survey it appears that the chert types were available from local sources, and therefore do not represent trade items like the obsidian.

THE LATE BRONZE AGE TOMB

The Late Bronze Age tomb measured 250 by 280cm in size and contained three flexed skeletons. The tomb was carved out as an expansion of the Late Copper Age ossuary tomb, northward into bedrock. The three burials are adjacent but do not spatially overlap with the ossuary tomb. They are also some 20cm higher than the Late Copper Age materials. All three individuals (Burials 1–3) were laid on their right side with their arms and legs flexed. They all face west in varying degrees. Two alignments of imported limestone cobbles demark the three burials. One semi-circular alignment separates Burial 1 from Burial 2, and another separates Burial 3 from Burial 2. This suggests that Burial 2 was probably placed first.

Bone preservation of all three skeletons was extremely poor because of soil compression and acidity. Most of the long bones and crania were fragmentary and incomplete. The friable nature of the bones necessitated measurements to be undertaken while the bones were



Fig. 5 Late Copper Age ossuary remains from Contrada Pitrazzi, Trapani District, Sicily

in situ. No evidence of pathology was observed on any of the flexed skeletal remains. Dental caries and enamel hypoplasias were absent. Sex estimation of the postcranial remains and the femur mid-shaft circumference of Burial 2 (measured at 93mm, see DiBennardo and Taylor 1979) indicate that all three were male. Age estimates proved difficult but skeletal maturity suggests all three individuals were adult. Stature calculation (Steele 1970) using the well-preserved right tibia of Burial 2 indicate this individual stood $176.5 \pm 5.23\text{cm}$ or $5\text{ ft } 9 \pm 2\text{in}$.

A total of 15 ceramic vessels were intentionally placed in standing positions throughout the tomb (fig. 6). They consist of five main vessel types – bowls, chalices, amphora storage vessels, stemmed dishes, and jugs. They are identical in style and size to those found at the nearby necropolis of Mokarta and date to c.1250–950 BC (Mannino and Spatafora 1995). Ten vessels are associated with Burial 1, three with Burial 2, and two with Burial 3. These vessels obviously represent funerary assemblages used to store, prepare, and imbibe food and drink either during burial or for the deceased in the afterlife.

No additional grave goods, such as tools or jewelry, were found other than fragmented animal bones found in a ceramic bowl located near the feet of the individual of Burial 2. A portion of a canine (*Canus familiaris*) mandible was the only identifiable fragment, indicating that a dog was interred with the individual of Burial 2.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

The chamber style of the Pitrazzi tomb is typical of prehistoric Sicily in both the third and second millennium BC (Leighton 1999: 90). They were commonly used as collective

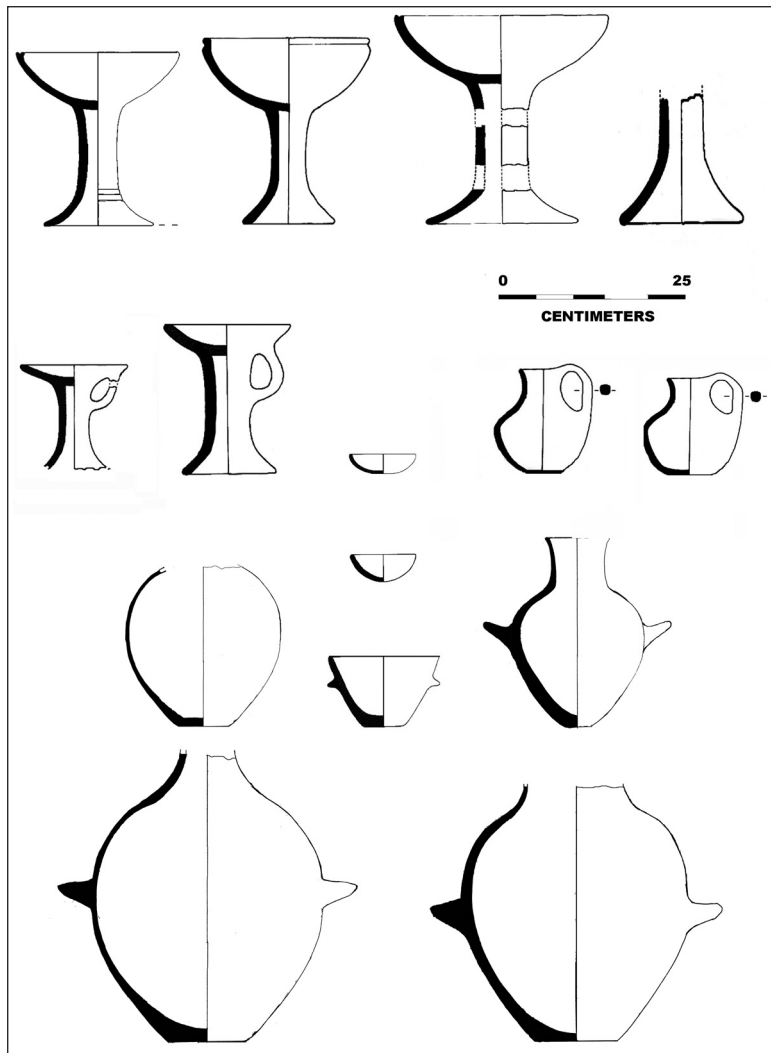


Fig. 6 Late Bronze Age Mokarta ware from Contrada Pitrazzi, Trapani District, Sicily

burials, placed on hillsides near the settlements, and built with short entranceways and multiple rooms. However, natural caves, rock crevices, cremations, and jar inhumations were also used, especially in the south and northeast (Leighton 1999: 170).

This variety in burial styles attests to dramatic changes in the social fabric of Sicily at this time, influenced by foreign contact, migration, expanding trade networks, intensifying subsistence regimens, and the elaboration of new ideologies (La Rosa 1989; Albanese Procelli 1996: 98; Tusa 1998a; Leighton 1999: 147). By 1500 BC, major social and economic transformations characterised indigenous Sicilian settlements, particularly in the eastern part of the island where contact with the Aegean world stimulated local economies, encouraging the emergence of socially stratified communities into large hilltop settlements. Elaborate buildings, sophisticated tombs, and local craft production characterised these larger communities. New techniques were introduced, such as metal sheet working and wheel-thrown pottery, serving to stimulate the indigenous manufacture of imitation utilitarian and ornamental objects.

Western Sicilian Bronze Age sites were also affected by long-distance trade, migration, and increasing prestige goods, but such changes were much more modest (Tusa 1998a: 173). The region surrounding Pitrazzi lacks any large settlement in the area until the formation of Mokarta in 1250 BC (Spatafora & Mannino 1992; Mannino & Spatafora 1995; Tusa & Nicoletti 2000). The only archaeological sites prior to the Late Bronze Age include two Early Bronze Age tombs at Mokarta (Mannino & Spatafora 1995), and a small Beaker Culture site found in the nearby Chuddia valley (Kolb & Tusa 2001: 503, also see Kolb this volume). Beaker sites are indicative of westward contact beginning around 2500 BC, are

common in western Sicily, and include Uzzo and nearby Segesta. At Mokarta on the nearby hill of Cresta Di Gallo, a total of 61 single-chambered tombs were located down slope from a series of hilltop hamlets. The Mokarta tombs are of the *grotticella* or “little cave” style (Mannino & Spatafora 1995). They are fairly consistent in form: typically rounded single chamber rooms with an entryway, 150cm in diameter, and rock-cut into limestone. Most have been exposed to the effects of erosion and looters for over 3000 years.

The location of Pitrazzi may also follow a common prehistoric pattern: that of being carved into the mid-slope position of a hillside just below a hamlet or other settlement (Leighton 1999: 195). For example, at the contemporaneous Late Copper Age site of Malpasso in eastern Sicily, tombs “are set into the slope beneath the headland on which the settlement was probably located” (Leighton 1999: 98). Moreover, the tombs at Mokarta are likewise situated on the cliffs directly below the hamlets. Interestingly, no prehistoric settlements were identified upon the escarpment above Pitrazzi. Some fragments of prehistoric ceramics were found in the fields directly above Pitrazzi, suggesting that a small hamlet or farmstead was present at one time, but the original steep-sloped hilltop has undergone significant bulldozing/levelling within the last 50 years in order to make it suitable for vineyard cultivation.

DISCUSSION

The combined chamber tomb at Pitrazzi raises an interesting question: why was it reused after a thousand years of inactivity? Was it simply an issue of practicality or were there more pressing social concerns regarding ancestor veneration or social continuity? Tomb reuse for both religious and secular purposes is very common throughout the Mediterranean (e.g. Alcock 1991: note 13, 449; Leighton 1999: 90, 200). The notion of practicality of course makes sense. A sturdy but abandoned chamber tomb would obviously save a family or community labour and effort digging a fresh one, particularly if it was large enough to be considered prestigious. In this way the reuse of Pitrazzi would simply represent a conscious act of convenience. But with the three large Mokarta cemeteries only 1.25km away, why did they choose a burial location that was across the valley and affiliated with a much older tomb made of softer lithified sand rather than limestone?

Another possibility is that tomb reuse represented social continuity whereby the burial practices affiliated with an older tomb would serve as a form of ancestor veneration. Ancestor veneration is defined as any ideological beliefs or ritual practices linked to deceased ancestors (DeLeonardis & Lau 2004; McAnany 1995; Morris 1991), and it has been described and studied in many anthropological and archaeological contexts and along the entire spectrum of social complexity. The principal idea behind ancestor veneration is that deceased kin continue to play an efficacious role in community life and therefore deserve propitiation from the living through rituals such as feasting and other cult activities. The act of reusing an ancient tomb may not itself be ancestor veneration, but by choosing this sacred space for veneration practices (where funeral services for an individual may be used to venerate all the deceased), a community may renew and reify ties to the dead (c.f. Osborn 2002). The deposition of Bronze Age funerary vessels, for example, represents material correlates of specific venerative acts.

However, the idea of direct ancestral or social continuity between the Copper and Bronze Age peoples of the area is problematic. It is highly unlikely that the Late Bronze Age peoples who used Pitrazzi knew anything about those buried there 1000 years previously. It is also unlikely they were even from the same social group, given the social changes of the second millennium BC. It is possible however that the Bronze Age peoples at Pitrazzi implemented a more generalised notion of social continuity; one that was not based upon hereditary ties but rather a consciously created mythological relationship to those already buried there. In this way the Pitrazzi tomb might have become a material manifestation of

Bronze Age social memory, a place to construct and inscribe collective ideas about the past (see Mizoguchi 1993; Van Dyke & Alcock 2003).

What sort of social memories would be relevant for the time? It may have been as simple as a single household wishing to reuse a tomb in order to generate and transmit familial memories regarding land ownership, kinship, ancestry, cyclical social routines, or generational practices. At the supra-family level the Pitrazzi tomb could have been used to juxtapose and reinforce community ancestral lineages. The reuse of an older tomb across the valley from other Mokarta cemeteries would markedly offset one family from the rest, serving as a territorial or social marker (e.g. Cannon 1989; Bietti Sestieri 1992; Mizoguchi 1993; Hallote 2002). Perhaps the Pitrazzi group wanted (or was required) to distinguish itself spatially or socially from other groups within the larger Mokarta polity.

Another possibility is that the Pitrazzi tomb could have been used to help reinforce a more a collective cultural identity at the polity or supra-community level (e.g. Blake 1997, 2003; O'Shea 1996: 10). It is clear that the settlement characteristics of Mokarta are both homogenous and traditionally Middle Bronze Age (see Cooney & Kolb, this volume), including round huts, a large proto-urban layout, and the homogenous usage of chamber tombs. These "traditional" or older settlement traits may have been a conscious attempt to maintain homogeneity in the face of the aforementioned migrations and new ideologies that began encroaching into western Sicily in the thirteenth century BC (Albanese Procelli 1996). New peoples, or even new social or political ideas, may have been regarded as being highly intrusive. In this way the reuse of the Late Copper Age tomb at Pitrazzi would have served to generate and reinforce a more conventional and time-honoured worldview of ancestral ties to the land.

The idea of clashing cultural views is historically described by Thucydides (6.2) who notes that the cultural unity of the Sican tribe (who were the traditional occupants of Sicily) was disrupted by the more recent migrations of Sicels and Elymians (see La Rosa 1989). A cultural clash is also archaeologically validated by the fact that Mokarta was catastrophically destroyed by intruders c.950 BC (Tusa 1998b: 173). In addition to the burning of every house and the abandonment of the tombs, a young woman who had died violently was also found in a house. The perpetrators of this destruction may have been the Elymians, whose precise origins are unknown but who rapidly settled in western Sicily (Tusa 1998a: 285).

CONCLUSIONS

The chambered tomb at Contrada Pitrazzi contributes to our understanding of prehistoric burial in western Sicily. The Malpasso Phase ossuary tomb contained at least 24 individuals, while the directly adjacent Mokarta Phase tomb contained three flexed male individuals complete with funeral goods. The tomb filled with compressed sand after its abandonment in 950 BC.

One of the most significant characteristics of the tomb is the Late Bronze Age reuse of an earlier Late Copper Age burial space after more than 1000 years of disuse. This reuse may have been simply a practical means of recycling an existing burial space, and/or it may have been a powerful way for a social group to maintain its cultural identity despite the important social and economic transformations that Sicily was undergoing in the Bronze Age.

Research continues on Pitrazzi's material remains in order to enhance our understanding of the provenance of individual burials within the tomb. Soil samples, pottery residues, bone analysis, and pottery/stone characterisation are all in process. These data should provide a greater understanding of environmental conditions during the Copper and Bronze Ages, more detail regarding those buried, and clarify any possible ancestral connections between the Malpasso and Mokarta Phase burials.



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