Central Mediterranean Submerged Prehistory,

The Mesolithic - Neolithic passage in Sicily through Island, Seaways and Maritime Connectivity

ALBA MAZZA alba.mazza@gmail.com
Researcher - external consultant Soprintendenza del Mare

Introduction

Since antiquities studies and later on archaeological research was carried on in Sicily, investigations were mostly focused in the classical antiquities and mythological world. The investigations were generally carried on in a small focused horizon, try to understand the material culture and the site itself, and poorly connected the archaeological evidence to the surrounding landscape. Each site become a “virtual island” isolated in space and time and not connected to a general understanding of the evolution of the landscape. Nowadays, studying paleolandscape in relation to coastline sites in Sicily and Sicilian Archipelagos has the potential to make a crucial contribution to our understanding of the occupation dynamics of Mesolithic/Neolithic transition.

Archaeological background


C.N.R.S. - Paris, 209-214


Brebbia C.& Gambin T. (Eds.)

level change.

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During Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age the geography of central Mediterranean saw much more different than today. The complete different shape of Europe during the last human civilizations is an important factor of knowledge that cannot be forgotten like it was till now. Eustatic movements during glacial cycles have meant that most prehistoric coastlines are now underwater. During the last phase of maximum glacial extension between 75,000 and 10,000 years BP the outline of Sicily was deeply different from nowadays. Eustatic fall reached the constant quote of – m 130 of sea level compared with today exposing up to 3.2 million square kilometers of the European continental shelf (about 40% more than the present landmass). It means that mainly on the southern part of Sicily coastal plains were much more extended and on the south-eastern part Sicily it was connected with Maltese archipelago whereas on the western part the Egadi islands were tied to the mainland. Than, Sicily Trench between Mazara del Vallo and Cape Bon was, at that period, a narrow sea strait wide few km

This geographic situation lasted till the end of the last big glacial phase of Wurm dated back to about 10,000 years BP. Between the first millennia of the Postglacial period (Mesolithic and early Neolithic (10,000 and 6000 years ago), the level of the sea deeply collapsed reaching more or less the actual value. Furthermore, geodynamic evolution caused local phenomena of land uprising interacting with the eustatic and sea variations. The complex relationship between eustatic (global sea-level) and astatic (local elevation of the earth crust) factors makes understanding the occupation patterns of Mesolithic-Neolithic transition more difficult. However is possible to state that lands were closer and communications easier.

Conclusion

It is still without any doubt that spreading of Neolithic was deeply favoured by the closeness between regions nowadays much more distant each other. Taking into consideration such geographical factor we can easily understand why certain phenomena of transfer by sea of technological know-how, seeds and domesticated animals from the Balkans towards the southern Italian peninsula were so intense. Similarly we cannot pre-emptively discard the hypothesis that some domesticated elements may have been introduced from other areas like North Africa. Particularly this might be the case of the “Pearl Sheep” (Ammotragus lervia) introduction to Sicily. There is evidence that can be easily explained only if we take into consideration the totally different geographical situation mainly south of Sicily. As it is widely known during Neolithic obsidian was traded from the native places, such the Lipari, Sardinia, Pantelleria and Palmarola (limiting to central Mediterranean and excluding Aegean sources) and reached almost all the settlements of Sicily, Malta and southern Italy. If it is easily explainable how Lipari’s obsidian could have reached Sicily and southern Italy, but it becomes difficult to imagine how obsidian from Lipari and Pantelleria could have reached Malta and Lampedusa. If Malta and Pantelleria are rarely visible from Sicily , Lampedusa is absolutely invisible from any surrounding land. Again the presence of obsidian in Lampedusa, from Sicily and Pantelleria, but also from Pantelleria to Sicily and Malta could be easily explained if we take in mind the distance between those islands and Sicily was much less that today. It means that when we deal with island colonisation during prehistory we have to take into consideration that the geographic situation at that period was totally different.

Selected bibliography


It is highly possible that the transition from hunter-gatherer to farming was favoured by the presence of wider coastal plains in front of those caves, such as Uzzo and others in western and northern coasts of Sicily where we got the traces and the evidence of such change. It is widely proved, using the value of postglacial marine transgression, that till the period of Mesolithic - Neolithic transition coastal plains in front of those caves were much more extended favouring farming and herding activities. The facility of sea approach, thank to those wide coastal plains, still identifiable some meters below actual seal level, made easy the “discovery” of sea by the Mesolithic hunters and gatherers. Mesolithic stratified deposits are, in fact, filled with valves of sea moluscs, so a first timid approach toward the most accessible parts of the sea, where from the land it was possible to gather limpets, clams, francis, patola and other molluscs. This first happy contact between man and sea constitutes the prologue to what happened, not only in Sicily but also in the other areas of the Mediterranean starting since the 7th millennium BC. Mesolithic Mediterranean Sea was discovered through fishing, but suddenly it became, through seafaring, also the greatest opportunity of cultural, ethnic and economic interrelations.

Pantellerian map of Earth Archipelago when Levanzo and Giglio were connected by Sicily, at the same time of the gulf of Policastro enlargement at Genovese Cave.