



CONTRIBUTI DI ARCHEOLOGIA MEDIEVALE
PREMIO OTTONE D'ASSIA E RICCARDO FRANCOVICH

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Veronica Aniceti

Animals and their roles in the medieval society of Sicily

from Byzantines to Arabs
and from Arabs to Norman/Aragonese
(7th-14th c. AD)



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27th August 2018, Valguarnera (Enna, Sicily). A summer scene in Sicily with sheep and goats.

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*To my friends out there,
looking for a land, sailing into the sea.*

V.A.

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INTRODUCTION

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea; it is located along the southern border of Europe, and it is physically divided from the rest of Italy by the Strait of Messina. However, the proximity between Sicily and the Italian mainland to the north, and the African continent to the south has meant that the history of the island has been closely connected with both these territories. Its varied and productive landscapes and strategic position in the Mediterranean have invariably placed Sicily within the political interests of different powers, from the Phoenicians in the 7th century BC to the northern Italians in the 19th century AD. The island can be seen as a 'stretched arm' protruding in the sea, attracting different cultures that, over time, have affected and shaped the society and culture of the native population. As a result, the cultural identity of Sicily has always been difficult to define. On the one hand, different populations have conquered the island through time but, on the other, it is important to consider that the invaders always merged, to a greater or lesser extent, with the pre-existing population. This situation resulted in the creation of an intriguing, dynamic and complex society. With this context in mind, the present project investigates the development of animal husbandry during the periods of transition between Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, and Swabians in Sicily (6th-13th century AD).

The study of animal bones and teeth recovered from different medieval archaeological sites in Sicily has the potential to provide important indicators of dietary preferences and overall animal exploitation practices. It is well known that food production and consumption are crucial aspects of human communities. However, food does not only represent a vital biological need. Diet is a complex culturally determined characteristic of human communities. Its role is central during celebrations, as it provides comfort beyond one's biological requirements and it offers opportunities to socialise and bond with colleagues, friends, and relatives. For this reason, people's diet can provide essential information about their lives, for example their socio-economic standing, health and cultural background. The use of food in human culture has always represented a valuable source of information for researchers. However, the analysis of animal remains is not only about food; this class of ar-

chaeological material provides additional information about economic specialisation, social status, ethnic identity, ritual, and religious practices characterising past societies, as well as environmental conditions.

THE RESEARCH AIMS

The book has the following aims:

- Contributing to our understanding of the nature and development of animal exploitation in Sicily during the Byzantine, Arab, Norman and Swabian periods. It is reasonable to assume that these four political entities, characterised by different cultural backgrounds, had different impacts on the use of animal resources.
- Investigating, for each historical period, the nature, and main aims of husbandry practices, using available case studies. Imported cultural systems could have been imposed on the native population, or naturally adopted. To clarify these aspects, spatial and temporal patterns will need to be carefully considered.
- Investigating dietary preferences. These latter could have been influenced by a variety of factors, of both economic and non-economic nature. It is likely that non-economic variables, such as religion and cultural traditions, played an important role in food choices. This holds particularly true for the Muslim period, during which food taboos may have prohibited the consumption of specific animal products such as those derived from pig.
- Identifying degrees of specialisation in animal exploitation for each historical period. This latter will be analysed in terms of intensification of husbandry practices, focus on specific products, standardisation of animal management and carcass processing.
- Detecting the potential introduction of new breeds and/or any deliberate attempt of animal improvement through time. An interesting relevant example of animal improvement has been already attested for the Muslim period in Portugal (DAVIS 2008). My dissertation, therefore, will verify whether a similar scenario characterised Muslim Sicily as well.
- Analysing the degree of reliance on wild fauna and fishing during different periods and at different settlement types. Once again, this will provide

information on cultural systems, from an economic and social viewpoint.

– Gaining more information about the environmental conditions surrounding archaeological sites, for which only sparse archaeobotanical evidence is currently available. Large domestic mammals are not ideal environmental indicators, yet the relative proportions of the main domesticates can still produce interesting information on available pastures. Smaller vertebrates may also contribute to clarify what kind of habitats were likely to surround relevant sites.

– Comparing and discussing zooarchaeological studies from different regions belonging to the same historical period. This comparison will allow re-evaluating the role of zooarchaeology in understanding the intertwined roles of religion, economy, and society in the regional patterning of food production and consumption during the Middle Ages.

– Interpreting the results considering the wider historical, socio-political, and religious developments characterising the island. To this end, the integration of zooarchaeological results with other archaeological evidence (such as ceramic), as well as historical sources, will be essential.

– Raising awareness of the role that zooarchaeology can have for the reconstruction of socio-political and economic dynamics. Zooarchaeology is a rather

undeveloped field in Sicily, at least for the medieval period; hitherto only a few reports on medieval faunal assemblages have been published, and much more needs to be done to recognise animal remains as one of the main sources of archaeological information.

It will be seen that this research has broken new ground in more ways than one: firstly, it has set out to examine changes in animal husbandry in the central Mediterranean over a long and often turbulent period, 6th-13th centuries AD; secondly, due to the undeveloped nature of zooarchaeology on the island, the basic data for the study had largely to be collected and organised from scratch. Logistic challenges included the location and access of faunal assemblages from excavation projects, which were in some cases still unpublished. Additionally, in most cases the bones had to be cleaned for analysis – a time consuming job. Having confronted these challenges, a substantial number of zooarchaeological remains from different medieval sites in Sicily have been analysed, producing a large dataset. This represents the first truly significant comparative study for the zooarchaeology of medieval Sicily, which contributes substantially to the characterisation and reconstruction of the economic and social history of Sicily during the Middle Ages.

1. AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MEDIEVAL SICILY

«Atlases show Sicily as an island, and this fact could be true since atlases are reliable books. However, we can doubt about this definition, especially when you see such a concept relating an island to a defined set of racial and moral values. By contrast, in Sicily everything is ambiguous and mixed, as in the most hybrid of continents [...]. The truth is that there are several Sicilies, and it would be impossible to count them all [...]. Hence, why so many Sicilies? Because through the centuries Sicily was fortunate enough to become a hinge between the great western cultures and the temptations of the desert and the sun.» BUFALINO 2008 (translated by the author from the original Italian version)

In the following sub-chapters, an historical overview of the major social and political dynamics affecting Sicily from Byzantine to Norman/Swabian times is presented. Since most faunal assemblages analysed in this research are dated to the Arab period, much attention is paid to this chronological phase; at the same time, the Byzantine and the Norman/Swabian periods will be also described, although in a more concise way.

The centrality of Sicily within the economic and political dynamics of the Mediterranean during medieval times has been the subject of several recent studies (MOLINARI 2004; ARCIFA 2008; CONGIU *et al.* 2009; MOLINARI 2009; ARCIFA *et al.* 2012; NEF, ARDIZZONE 2014; MANDALÀ 2016; CARVER *et al.* 2018; CARVER *et al.* 2019). Due to its geographical position, Sicily has always been considered a borderland, a gateway with the key potential of connecting the north with the south, as well as the east with the west of the Mediterranean (TRAMONTANA 2014).

However, the centrality of a region does not only depend upon its geographical position. As NEF, PRIGENT (2010) pointed out, other variables should also be considered to define an area as 'central'.

First, the role played by the region in the macro-political system to which it belongs has to be considered; in other words, it is important to characterise its economic and political capacity. The second factor, which could be seen as a corollary of the first point, concerns the level of political control exercised on dominated lands. This latter point can be complemented by the degree of involvement of the analysed area within commercial exchanges.

Taking into consideration the political weight of the island in the central Mediterranean area, it could be affirmed that, from the Byzantine to the Arab periods, Sicily has occupied a rather peripheral position in relation to the main powers that ruled the

island. However, from the 6th to the second half of the 13th century AD other interdependent variables, which include its strategic geographical position and economic and cultural developments, implied that Sicily was always considered central and of major interest to different political systems. We will now try to investigate, from an historical point of view, the role played by Sicily from the Byzantine to the Norman/Swabian periods.

1.1 SICILY FROM THE ROMANS TO THE BYZANTINES

«[...] and for what concerns grain, honey, saffron, and certain other products, one might call Sicily even superior. There is, furthermore, its vicinity; for the island is a part of Italy, and readily and without great labour supplies Rome with everything it has, as though from the fields of Italy. And indeed, it is called the storehouse of Rome.» STRABO VI.2.7 (translated by the author from the original Latin version)

The Romans conquered Sicily in 241 BC, during the final battle of the first Punic war against the Carthaginians. The island became the first *provincia* (the largest administrative unit under the Romans) of the Roman State (CRACCO RUGGINI 1980). The strategic position occupied by the island in the Mediterranean basin was one of the main interests of the conquerors. In addition, the fertile and wealthy countryside characterising Sicily at that time would have represented another important economic resource for the Romans. As the Greek historian STRABO in his '*Geographica*' highlighted (see above), these latter aspects were well known by Roman authors, who often celebrated in their works the remarkable wheat production capacity of the Sicilian countryside (CICERO, II.2.2, STRABO, VI.2.7). Sicily, therefore, became a major supplier of grain for the capital and its armies. A governor and two magistrates (*quaestores*) administered the island and collected taxes, which were mainly in tithes of grain. The Romans did not alter the costumes of the local population, who continued to speak Greek throughout the entire period of Roman occupation (WILSON 1990; CONGIU *et al.* 2009).

After the fall of the Roman Empire (AD 476) and even earlier, when the centre of power moved east to Constantinople, Sicily was left in a vulnerable condi-