

Clues of Bronze Age Processions in the Central Mediterranean

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Introduction

Cult activities, i.e., ceremonies with various functions and meanings, and religious ideology in general, are difficult fields of investigation during the Bronze Age. The identification of places and practices of worship, including possible processions, as well as the interpretation of clear ‘religious’ or ‘mythological’ iconography are especially challenging topics (Hodder 1982; Insoll 2004; Renfrew 1985, 1994).

In the Italian Bronze Age, monumental sites exclusively devoted to cult activities are largely lacking.¹ Several explanations can be put forward for this lack of evidence, starting with the lower degree of social complexity of the local communities in comparison with the palatial societies of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The role of the natural environment in eminent places—such as mountains, caves and gorges, bogs, springs, lakes, and rivers—in framing the performative religious expressions of ancient societies (Bradley 2000, 2017), and the substantial embeddedness of religious behavior in domestic and everyday social life (Bradley 2005) constitute further constraints that make it difficult to unravel religious sites and contexts from other classes of evidence.

Even the close intertwining relationship between pure religious cult and funerary rites complicates the interpretation: early religious cults such as the cult of ancestors, typical of tribal societies and early farmers, seem to have been celebrated at tombs and cemeteries as part of the domain of death and the chthonic world. Evidence of cult in caves and other places with human remains further suggests that cult practices during the Italian Bronze Age cannot be easily separated from the rites of death.

In the following paragraphs, a selection of archaeological contexts will be presented, for which it is possible to propose a link with worship activities or, more generally, ceremonial ones associated with performative activities including processions.

Monumental Sites

One class of evidence, which contrasts with the scantiness of sanctuaries and special religious buildings

in Italian protohistory, are the monumental cult places of the Alpine regions. Founded during the Copper Age, in the 4th–3rd millennia BC, these long-lasting sites—containing cultural expressions that include both funerary and pure religious practices—were still used in some cases during the Early Bronze Age and even later. As the funerary evidence belonged in a few cases to a later or secondary phase, while the evidence referring exclusively to a complex set of ceremonial activities is substantial from their foundation, their definition as ‘sanctuaries’ has been widely accepted (Barfield 1986; Casini and Fossati 2007; Dal Ri and Tecchiati 1994; de Marinis 2013; Poggiani Keller 2006). *Menhir*-like boulders, anthropomorphic stelae, and light wooden structures indicated by evidence of poles or posts characterized these mainland sites, which find parallels in both western and eastern Europe including the northern Aegean (Koukouli-Chrysanthaki 2007, with references).

In the Alpine sanctuaries, performative ceremonial actions including processions are at times identified by the structural and topographic layout providing the alignment for poles/posts or spaced stelae, which, by tracing well-defined trajectories, suggest that ritual mobility formed a substantial part of the religious ceremonies. One of the most representative sites, **S. Martin de Corléans** near Aosta in the western Alps seems to demonstrate this phenomenon (Heyd and Harrison 2007; Mezzena 1997).

At times, true monumental corridors or ‘sacred *allées*’ marked processional ways, which crossed the area running alongside huge stone platforms or cairns. Such an emphasis on paths and routes is widely attested in the eastern Alpine regions, namely in Trentino and Veneto. At the megalithic 4th millennium sanctuary at **Sovizzo**, in Veneto near Vicenza, a double-lane corridor, 22m long and 1.40–2m wide, appears to have directed the visitors in a round-trip procession focused on a stone cairn or tumulus with funerary remains (Bianchin Citton 2004, 2007; Bianchin Citton and Balista 2011). A ceremonial route may also have been included at the monumental site of Velturno-Tanzgasse, Alto-Adige (Dal Ri *et al.* 2004; Tecchiati 2013: 471, 2014; cf. Salzani 2015).

As far as the Bronze Age is concerned, the huge sanctuary of **Cles Campi Neri** in Trentino is particularly relevant because of the long-lasting continuity of ritual activities (Endrizzi *et al.* 2011; Endrizzi and Degasper

¹ In general, on religious evidence in protohistoric Italy, see Guidi 2014, with references; cf. Peroni 2004.

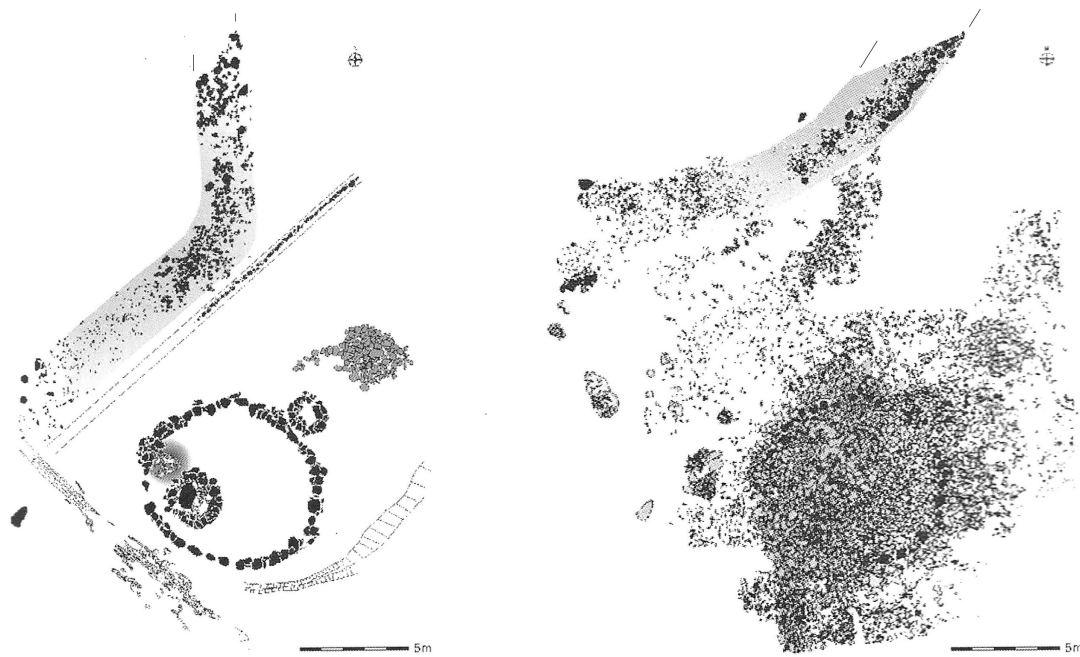


Figure 1. Cles Campi Neri: stone monuments and ceremonial roads belonging respectively to phase 1 and phase 4 (EBA and LBA) (after Endrizzi *et al.* 2011: figs 2 and 5).

2020; Marzatico *et al.* 2019). The wide area, extending c. 7000 sq. m, included tumuli-like structures as well as stone platforms and ritual firing pits, which were served by various formalized routes over an extensive period of time, from the Late Copper Age or 3rd millennium well into the end of the 2nd millennium or final Late Bronze Age and beyond (Figure 1). Roadbeds made with small stones covered with beaten earth formed several pathways, which have been referred to as processional routes, provided with curving stretches and with evidence of faunal and burnt remains pointing to specific ritual actions, such as sacrifice, offering, and possibly purification through the use of fire. The most ancient path thus far discovered dates to the Copper Age/Early Bronze Age transition, or late in the 3rd millennium. It ran along a stone monument, a ring or enclosure that underwent several transformations over time before finally turning into a cairn or platform. At the same site, a more recent route, consisting of a long, curving stretch of road over 200m in length, followed the same direction as the earlier road, thus suggesting a long-term repetition of the same ritual actions near the stone monument, which was a focus of long-term ritual practices at the site. Repetition, redundancy, and maintenance over time, even spreading over several centuries, are features well-suited to ritual and religious activities (Kyriakidis 2007).

On the basis of the widespread association of formalized burials, and/or sparse human remains, with similar structures in the Alpine domain, these suggested ritual

processions could have been part of ceremonial events in honor of the ancestors.

This kind of cult is all the more evident when fragmentary stone structures, at least partially comparable with the structural layout of the Alpine megalithic sanctuaries, are discovered under proper burial tumuli or huge mounds used as monumental markers of tombs of eminent individuals (Borgna and Müller-Celka 2011; Borgna *et al.* 2019). In northeastern Italy—a region where burial tumuli were widespread from the Early Bronze Age—a large mound excavated at **Mereto di Tomba** near Udine during three annual campaigns by the University of Udine (2006–2008) could provide evidence for this close relationship, pointing to a continuous tradition of ritual ceremonies in a communal open-air cult place, with a major shift towards a central focus well-suited for the celebration of single eminent individuals (Figure 2). The earthen mound covered a stone platform, which was the monumental marker of a pit grave where a young man was buried (c. 1750 BC, or late in the Early Bronze Age) with great honors. The grave was dug into the remains of an earlier structured area including a pebble paving, a possible ‘sacred *allée*’ indicated by an alignment of stones, and a couple of post-holes for the foundation of wooden poles or possibly stelae. In the following centuries, or the whole Middle Bronze Age, the burial place was used as a cult place, possibly for the worship of an imaginary common ancestor. The platform, monumentalized through time, then served as a kind of

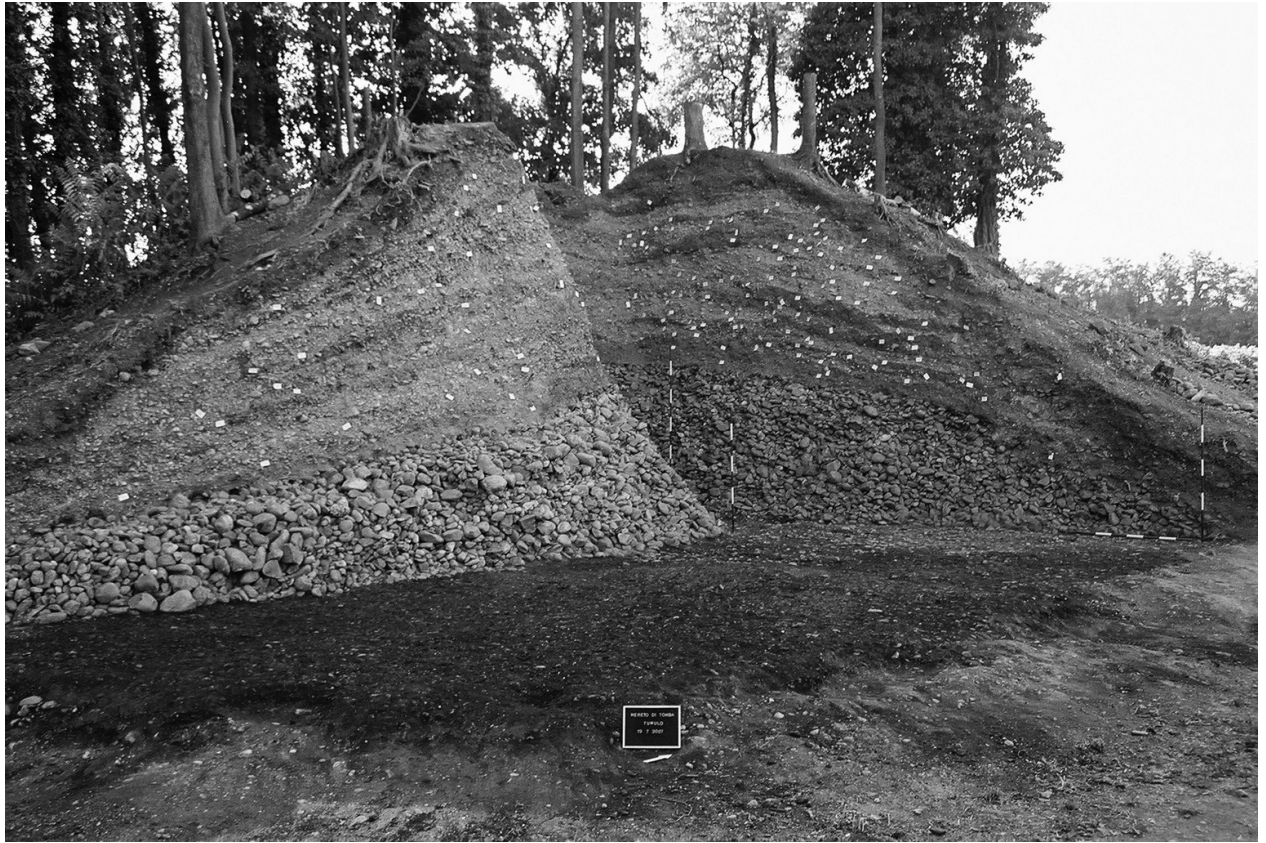


Figure 2. Mereto di Tomba (Udine), burial mound during the excavation (University of Udine, archive of the Laboratory of Prehistory and Protohistory).

altar where people, gathering on special occasions for feasting, discarded the remains of ritual activities, such as pottery, ashes and charcoal, and remains of sacrificed animals, such as a horse and an ox (Borgna 2011; Borgna *et al.* 2019; Borgna and Corazza 2011).

Both monuments, the earlier stone layout including a platform and a pathway and the later funerary cairn, seem to have represented the focus of a structured system of converging ritual routes used by people that moved around in the landscape and, by meeting for the celebration of common ancestors, fueled the perception of a communal identity which would have favored the foundation of larger communities during the Middle Bronze Age.

These later communities are well represented by the numerous fortified settlements or hillforts of the northern Adriatic, including Friuli, Karst, and Istria, namely the very same regions where burial tumuli spread in the Early Bronze Age and were later used as symbolic monumental landmarks, often marking the borders of the territories belonging to single settled communities (Borgna 2020; Borgna *et al.* 2018, 2019). A close cultural relationship linked the new fortified villages to the earlier burial tumuli, even though their life-cycles only partially overlapped. Hillfort

communities recognized in the tumuli significant markers of identities, namely the seat of powerful ancestors. In some cases these were moved and even physically transferred close to the entrance of the villages.

This is the case of some of the most ancient monumental settlements (Borgna *et al.* 2018; Mihovilić 2013), possibly founded at the Early Bronze Age/Middle Bronze Age transition—such as **Sedegliano** in Friuli (Cassola Guida 2011; Corazza and Borgna 2017), **Monkodonja** (Hänsel *et al.* 2015), **Monteorsino/Vrčín** (Battaglia 1958; Buršić-Matjašić 1988–1989; Cupitò *et al.* 2018) and **Brioni** in Istria (Vitasović 2000)—where groups of tombs were housed in the ramparts or circuit walls near the main entrances to the sites. Eminent individuals, possibly the founders of the settlements, were supposed to have guarded and defended the whole community.

The removal of the ancestors from their burial place to the space of the living community is well attested at Monkodonja, in southwestern coastal Istria near Rovinj, in Croatia, where an early built chamber/cist tomb included human remains dating to a period earlier than the foundation of the site, namely well into the 3rd millennium BC (Hänsel *et al.* 2015: 195–229, in particular 203–205; cf. Tessmann 2020). This means

Table 1. Filicudi Anfratti: summary of the main characteristics. *= investigation + previous finds. Pottery: CG=Capo Graziano, MIL=Milazzese, MIN=Miniaturistics, MYC=Mycenaean, CLA=Classical (after Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1991: 57–68)

Area	Anfratto	Orientation	Elevation	Location	Investigation	Size	Entrance	Pottery	Other finds
1	8	West	medium-low	above Casa Conti	1959		wall	3CG, MIN	
	6		low			1.3 x 1.7	wall	9CG, 2MYC, CLA	
	7							CG, CLA	
2	1	South	low	above the beach le	1952*			16CG, MIN	
	2	(South- West)		Punte	1952			19CG, MIN, CLA	
	3					2.5 x 2.5		13CG, MIN	human bones
	4					2 x 0.4		5CG, MIN, CLA	
3	16	East	medium	close to the village	1959*	2.3 x 1.1	stone	1CG, MIN	
4	5	North-East	high	top, close to the	1952*			2CG, MIN	
	9			trenches XIII-XIV	1959	0.5 x ?		1CG, MIN	
	10					1.1 x ?		13CG fragm.	
	11					1.2 x 0.35	stone	13CG, 4MIL	
5	12	North-East	medium	below the trenches	1959		stone	26CG fragm.	
	13			0.6 x ?		stone	29CG fragm.	shells	
	14			1 x 0.6		stone	19CG fragm.		
	15			1 x 0.65			29CG fragm., MIN		

that earlier human remains—treated as ancestors' *reliquiae*—were transferred from a primary site to a new monumental tomb at the entrance of the hillfort, where according to the excavators the most eminent family groups of the community were buried. Needless to say, this kind of event would have been celebrated through the participation of the community accompanying the ancestors to the new seat.

From this perspective, the articulated architectural and topographic layout that characterizes the access systems passing through the tombs located at the main entrances at Monkodonja, as well as in some other hillforts (Hänsel *et al.* 2015: 149–177), could represent a circulatory pattern affected not only by defensive considerations but also by ritual requirements. The complex entrance system at Monkodonja, consisting of a sort of curvilinear bastion with separate corridors serving three openings into the wall and including courts and several small rooms leaning against the built tombs, is supposed to have been built over several chronological phases for a mostly strategic defensive role (Mihovilić *et al.* 2018). The possibility, however, cannot be ruled out that its general layout was also dependent on ritual constraints guiding movements and directions during ritual processions on the basis of exclusive rights of access to the place of ancestors and the inner space (cf. Hänsel *et al.* 2015: 168).

At Monkodonja, a further structural layout that cannot be fully explained in the functional domain is found in the form of a 70m long corridor lined with rubble walls, starting from the northern entrance and heading northwards, where it ends near to an outer built space, a kind of platform created by cutting into the bedrock and bordering it with stones, just in front of the entrance of an underground cave (Hänsel *et al.* 2015: 179–192) (Figure 3). The plan of the corridor is particularly curious as it is not linear and straight, but characterized by a broken (zig-zag) profile forcing continuous, though slight, changes in direction. A possible processional path would have been part of a structured ritual scenario implying the descent to the liminal place represented by the opening of the cave.

Different Patterns of Funerary Rituals: The Anfratti at Filicudi (Aeolian Islands) and the Terramare Cemetery of Casinalbo (Modena).

The Anfratti

The Aeolian Archipelago, a cluster of seven volcanic islands strategically located in the southern Tyrrhenian Sea, was vibrant during pre-protolithy.

The island of Filicudi, occupied since late Neolithic, has a peculiar morphology. The island mostly comprises a

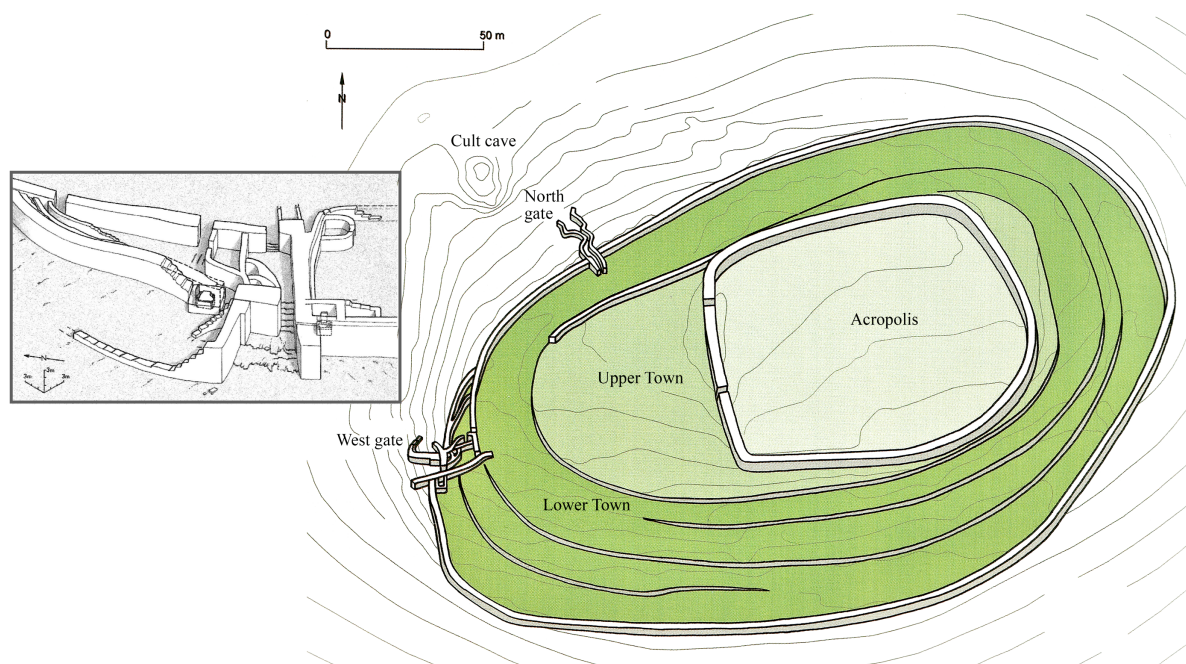


Figure 3. Monkodonja near Rovinj, Istria: schematic plan and detail of the architectural layout of the Western Gate, phase 4 (after Hänsel *et al.* 2015: 66, figs 29 and 102).

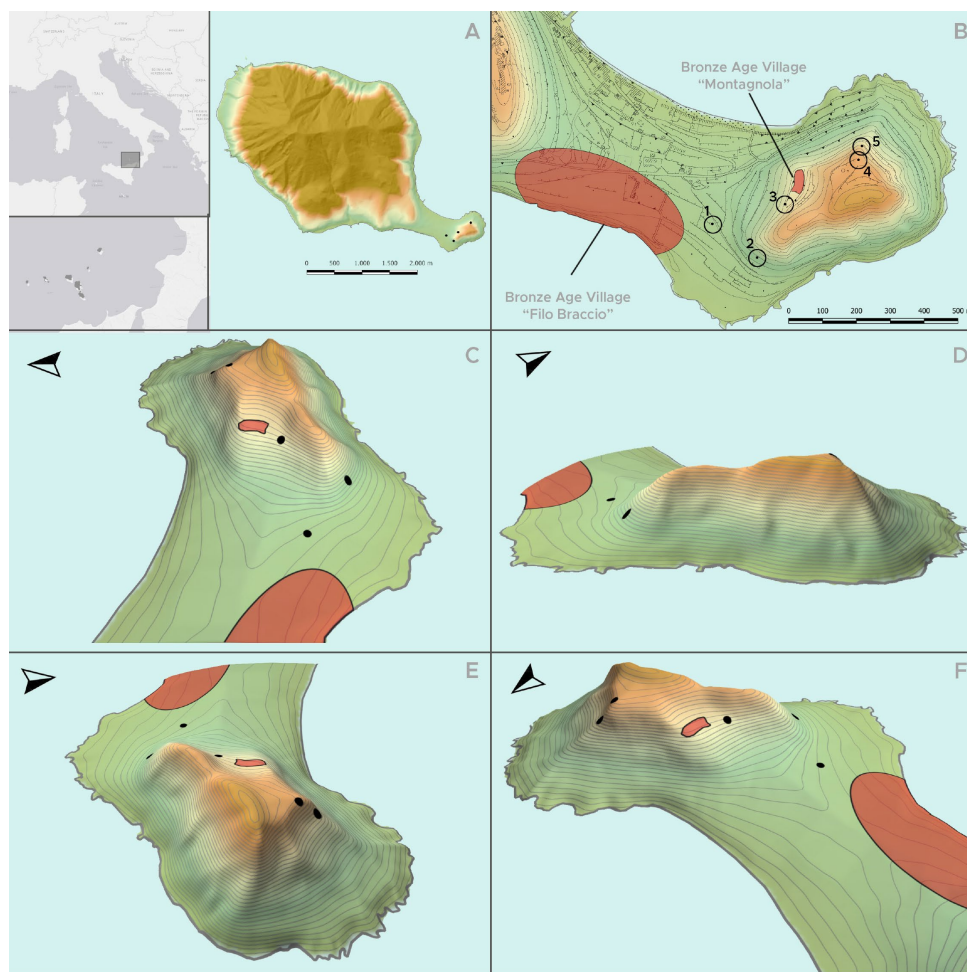


Figure 4. Filicudi: A. the island in the geographic location. B. map with the villages of Filo Braccio and Montagnola and of the five areas with the Anfratti. C-F. 3D various views of the areas with the Anfratti in relationship to the villages (graphic by A. Di Renzoni after Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1991: tavv. XXII, XXXII).

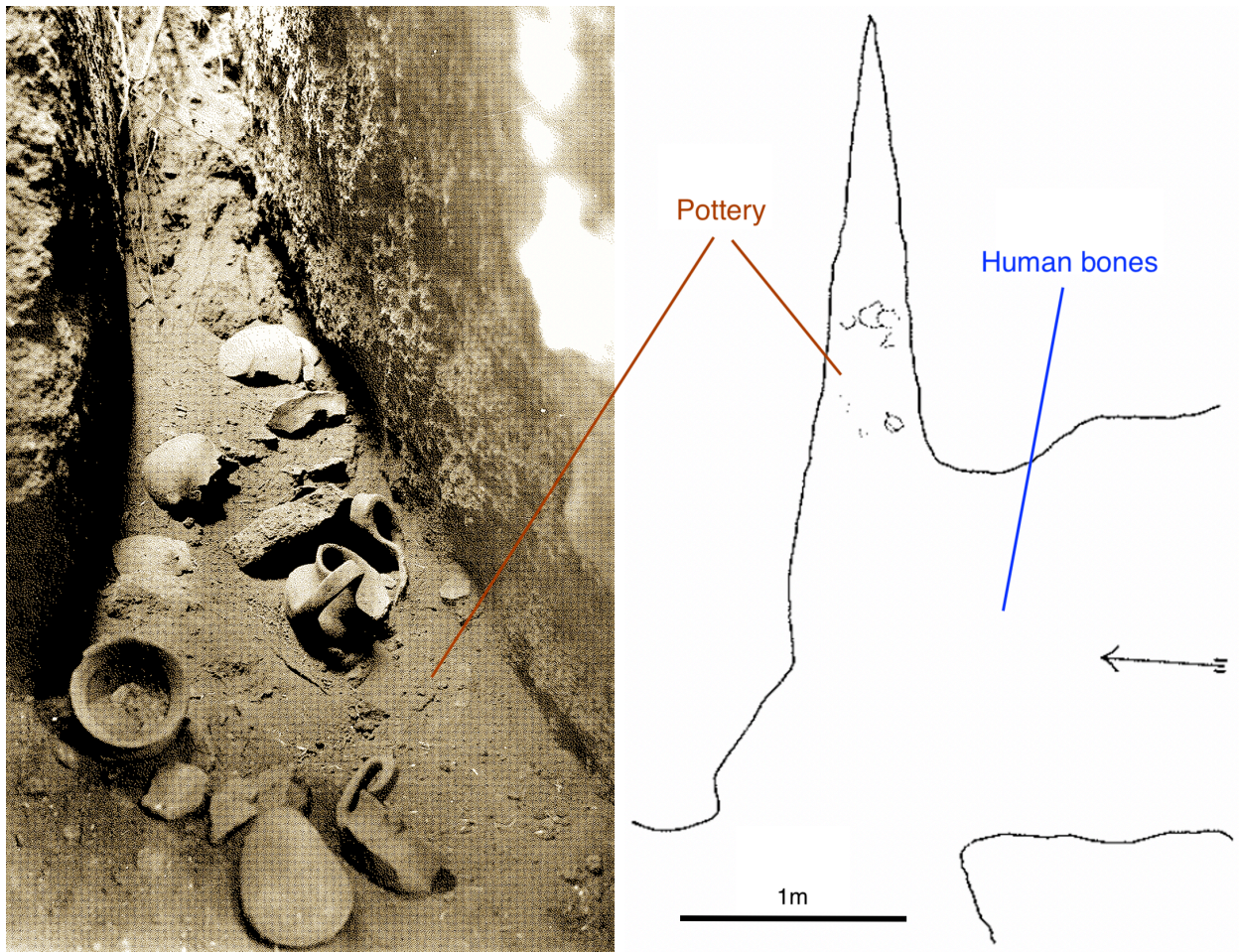


Figure 5. Filicudi, Anfratto 3: photo and plan (after Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1991: fig. 21, tav. XXIII).

plain and a small hill, the Montagnola (Martinelli *et al.* 2021: fig. 8). The Montagnola's morphology resembles a cone with a base of c. 0.5km in diameter and a height of 170m asl with a slope of >30 (Di Renzoni *et al.* 2021: fig. 2).

The island shows a complex occupation pattern during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, corresponding to the Capo Graziano and Milazzese facies, c. 2200–1300 BC. Filicudi is home to three main archaeological remains. The *Filo Braccio* village, dating back to the earliest phases of the Bronze Age, is located in the plain. The *Montagnola* village, dating back to the Middle Bronze Age, is located at a medium elevation and faces the rest of the island. The Montagnola's *Anfratti*, interpreted as graves, is a series of small natural cavities found in the rocky slopes of the island between large rocks that had fallen down the sides of the hill (Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1991; Martinelli 2020; Martinelli *et al.* 2010).

We focus here on the *Anfratti*, a relatively neglected archaeological record, partly due to their poor preservation. 16 *Anfratti* were discovered with different orientations and altitudes during the systematic

investigations of 1952 and 1959. Although the precise location of the *Anfratti* is difficult to define, at least five main areas can be identified (Table 1, Figure 4): 1) Above the ruins of *Casa Conti*, facing west, low or medium low elevation. 2) Close to the beach *le Punte*, facing south (southwest), low elevation. 3) Close to the southern edge of the *Montagnola* village, facing east, medium elevation. 4) Close to the top near trenches XIX–XIV, facing northeast. 5) Below trenches XIX–XIV, facing northeast, medium elevation.

The rock shelters were small, the largest measuring 2.5x2.5m, with walls or large stones located at the entrance. Most of the artifacts inside the shelters, primarily funerary/ritual miniature vessels, belonged to the local *Impasto* handmade pottery (Capo Graziano and Milazzese facies). Fragments of two Mycenaean closed vessels, of uncertain chronology, were found in *Anfratto 6* (Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1991: 65; Vagnetti 1991: 279, fig. 6k, pl. IX 1–3, 6).

The acidic volcanic soil and other post-depositional processes appear to have affected the preservation of

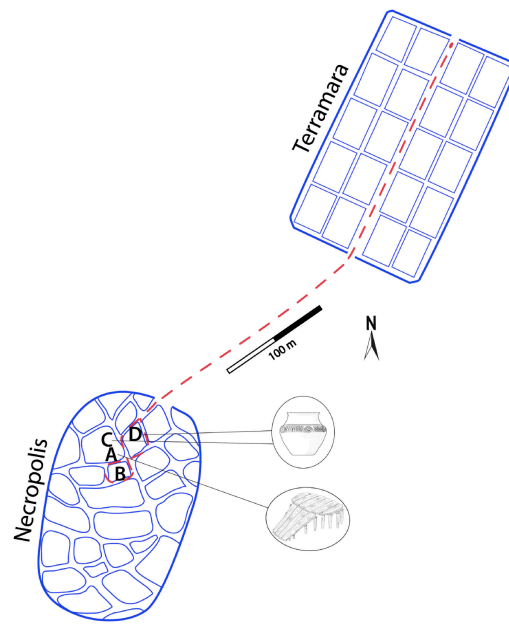


Figure 6. Casinalbo: the necropolis and the village (Terramara). A. wooden platform. B. cremation area. C-D. ceremonial areas with pithoi. For the unexcavated areas the topography is hypothetical (drawn by P. Vertuani after Cardarelli 2014: figs 24, 25, 39, 41, 58).

the burials: poorly preserved human bones have been discovered only in *Anfratto* 3 (Figure 5).

An assemblage of mollusks was found in *Anfratto* 13, where at least 26 *Patellae* and 21 *Monodonta* have been collected (Bernabò Brea and Cavalier 1991: 66, pl. XXVII.4; Vidale *et al.* 2018: fig. 14). It is possible that the consumption of seashells played a role in the funerary ritual. The use of mollusks as the main dish during a communal meal, probably of ceremonial nature, has also been identified in another Aeolian context: a seashell dump dated 1730–1625 BC Cal. In the village of San Vincenzo on Stromboli. A large pit, filled almost exclusively with marine shells, was found near one large stone cornering a rectangular enclosure system. Radiometric, stratigraphic, typological, and archaeometric data indicate that the meal was consumed contemporaneously with the beginning of interactions with the Mycenaeans and was discharged in a specific location, possibly marking a major topographical transformation (Vidale *et al.* 2018).

The *Anfratti* are not intact, the majority were reused during the Classical occupation of the island and/or more recently looted. Nevertheless, the location and nature of the evidence can give us a rare glimpse into the funerary and ritual practices, as well as the use of the landscape.

The *Anfratti* were probably used for multiple burials and, in some cases, for a long time. The inhabitants used the entire surface of the Montagnola, even the slopes facing the sea.

It is plausible to imagine that the inhabitants of Filicudi used the steep paths between the villages and the burials, measuring a few hundred meters, as recurring ceremonial routes for a long period of time.

Casinalbo

Near Modena, the necropolis of Casinalbo gives us a deep insight into cultural practices of the Bronze Age *Terramare* culture (Bernabò Brea *et al.* 1997, 2018), thanks to large and meticulous excavations and publications (Cardarelli 2014). It is therefore possible to reconstruct the topographic structure of the Necropolis and identify specific customs and rituals (Figure 6).

The topography is characterized by clusters of graves, classified as small (3–15), medium (19–34) or large (up to 86). The clusters have been interpreted as a reflection of kinship links and the tombs were usually marked by fluvial pebbles arranged vertically. More than 600 graves, dating from Middle Bronze Age II to the Late Bronze Age, have been investigated during several phases of excavation (1880, 1937–50, 1975–77, 1994–

2009). The necropolis was c. 12,000 sq. m; approximately 1/6 has been excavated.

Some noticeable features have been recognized in the necropolis and interpreted as part of a complex funerary ritual: a platform, the cremation area, and two ceremonial areas. The ceremonial areas are probably linked to libations, with large pithoi, fragmented bones, ornaments, and weapons with traces of burning.

The groups of burials were delimited by orthogonal streets about two meters wide. Some of these streets connected the necropolis to the village. The necropolis is approximately 200m southwest of the village (Terramara). The Terramara is poorly preserved but has the usual rectangular shape covering an area of three to four hectares. Funerary processions walked the street from the village to the necropolis and then along the road, where various stopping points delimited the phases of the ceremony.

A funerary road inside a necropolis was also attested at **Olmo di Nogara** near Verona (Salzani 2005). The necropolis has over 500 tombs dating from Middle Bronze Age II to the Late Bronze Age and is characterized by rich sets of weapons and jewelry. Almost 90% of the burials are inhumations while the remainder are cremations. The necropolis is located about 100m west of the Terramara and extends in a north-south direction along a hump about 380m wide. A path and a palisade, which has been interpreted as a funerary road, border the necropolis for a few hundred meters.

Another example in the Verona area of a funerary road connecting the town and the necropolis is the Necropolis of **Scalvinetto**. The necropolis is related to the large settlement of Fondo Paviani, located 400m to the southeast (Salzani 1994b, 2004, 2020). Scalvinetto is one the largest bi-ritual cemeteries of the *Terramare* culture, with more than 700 burials, 60% cremations and 40% inhumations. All these events took place from Middle Bronze Age III to the Final Bronze Age. A *paleodoss*, a ceremonial path, connects the necropolis to the *Terramara*.

Ritual Hoarding

As is well known, bronze deposits offer an insightful perspective on prehistoric societies and in particular on a full range of ritual activities practiced through offering, sacrifice and ultimately the destruction of wealth (Bradley 2013, 2017, with references; Hansen 2013, 2016; Hansen *et al.* 2012, 2016), though the archaeological explanation of hoards is at times highly controversial. By questioning the overarching votive explanation, some scholars claim that the phenomenon of hoarding is by no means univocal and includes a multifarious range of social and even economic

behaviors, such that the interpretation of function and significance of metal deposition could vary depending on a number of analytical features, such as the context of deposition, composition, treatment and state of preservation of the materials, and finally the chronological range of the assemblages forming each single hoard.²

Regardless of differing approaches, one of the main points outlined by the most recent debate suggests an intimate relationship between hoards and their place of deposition, which is rarely random or occasional. Many hoards are to be interpreted as deliberate depositions aimed at establishing an exclusive relationship with the environment in the process of socialization of the landscape (Hansen 2012; Hansen *et al.* 2012). Within this perspective, some studies have focused on the spatial distribution of hoards on a regional scale, a distribution that permits the recognition of an integrated system of synchronous sites where deposition took place, mostly marked by eminent features, such as peaks, gorges, springs or river courses and at times even linked by intervisibility. By exploring the geography of hoards and focusing on landscapes of depositions, integrated highly symbolic maps can be outlined, which offer an insight into the perception and interpretation of the cultural landscape by the ancient inhabitants (Bradley 2017; cf., e.g., Gauthier and Piningre 2017; Windolz Konrad 2012). These maps might have functioned as structured roadmaps provided with meaningful stop-overs for journeys and routes including ritual mobility and true processions. Deposits could have functioned as markers, namely mnemonic records of communal events—including social and even economic exchange—celebrated through embodied or incorporated memory (Bradley 2002; Chapman 2009; Connerton 1989; Hamilakis 2010, 2014) along structured pathways.

While stray finds and contexts of single depositions, well exemplified by the phenomenon of swords in rivers and on mountain peaks (Cardarelli 2012; Guidi 2014), mainly point to individual offerings, communal participation can be implied in the evidence of larger deposits, a phenomenon that prompts us to attribute a possible role to processions in the making of complex ritual scenarios.

An exceptional case where the evidence of a large prehistoric trackway has been identified through remote sensing instruments is represented by the large group of bronzes, mostly weapons and parts of personal equipment, which was retrieved at **Corte Lazise**, from an ancient riverbed of the Adige River near Verona, in Veneto. A group of ten swords, a number of knives, daggers, spearheads, ornaments, and personal items

² For a critical history of the research, see, e.g., Borgna forthcoming; Bradley 2013; Hansen 2012.

such as pins, fibulae, tweezers, and buttons seem to have been subject to repeated gestures of disposal in water for an extended period of time during the whole Late Bronze Age (Bettelli 1997; Bietti Sestieri 2010: 56–57; Bietti Sestieri *et al.* 2013; Salzani 1994a, 2006). The trackway possibly connected the riverbank of the ancient river to the large fortified settlement of **Fondo Paviani**, at the core of a regional polity founded on a highly hierarchical settlement system. A complex system of connectivity, made of roads, channels, and estate boundaries also included ceremonial routes (De Guio *et al.* 2015: 313), used for specialized exclusive ritual activities, possibly even processions.

During the Italian Final Bronze Age, c. 12th–10th centuries, a relevant number of hoards (Bietti Sestieri 1973; Borgna forthcoming; Carancini 1979; Carancini and Peroni 1999) seem to match the definition of ‘community hoards,’ according to a terminology put

forward in the domain of the central European Bronze Age (Vachta 2016), namely large deposits of mixed composition, where the participation of a multiple number of agents is suggested by several aspects concerning the association and treatments of the hoarded materials. The contents are mostly represented by ornaments and parts of personal equipment, including sheet metal objects such as vessels, together with weapons such as swords, daggers, and spearheads, namely objects well suited for representing personal identities and roles (Jennings 2014; Vachta 2016). Classes of materials are often represented by multiple examples and some materials clearly form distinct groups as the objects were physically joined in several ways, evidence which could refer to groups of individuals or small communities participating in more crowded depositional events (Dietrich 2014). The multifarious evidence of small tools, such as chisels, awls, saws, and small shovels pointing to craft activities well integrated

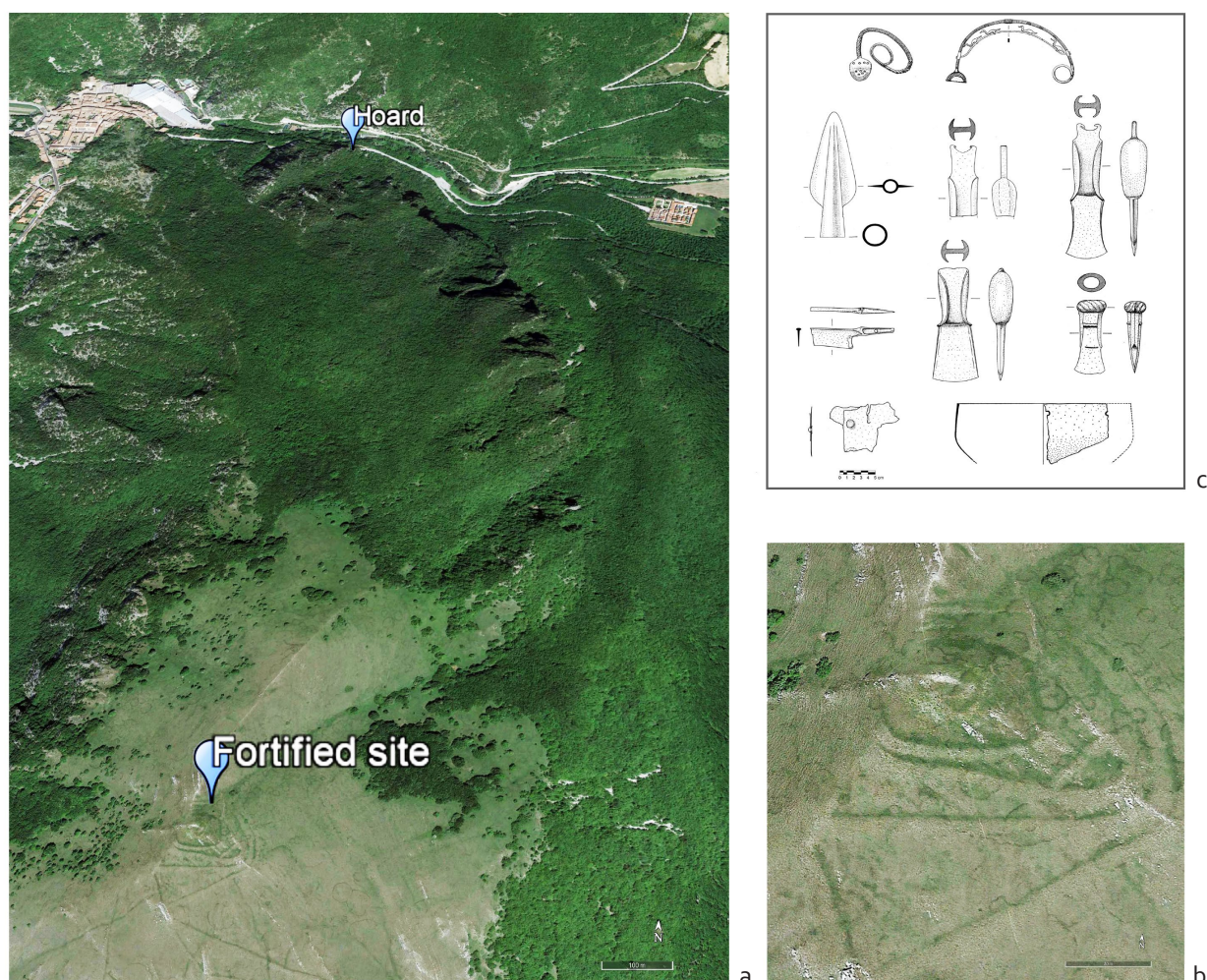


Figure 7. Monte Primo: a. view of the area with indication of both the fortified sites on the summit and the hoard at the northern foot of the mountain (after Google Earth © 25/5/2020); b. Detail of the summit area with the enclosing walls of the site (after Google Earth © 25/5/2020); c. Selected materials from the hoard of Monte Primo (drawn by G. Merlatti after Pignocchi and Toune 2015).

within the layouts of the Late Bronze Age settlements, also fits the definition of community hoards. The ritual nature of some deposits is often further emphasized by the extreme fragmentation of the materials, which was clearly deliberate and included special practices of manipulation such as violent breakage, multiple bending and folding, deformation, and the use of fire, evidence which contributes to the recognition of a performative scenario characterizing the ritual behavior before deposition (Nebelsick 1997, 2000; cf. Brandherm 2018).

Though the suggestion that people stopped during their processional journeys at relevant places where recurring ritual practices were performed remains in most cases theoretical and mainly speculative, in our opinion a few cases can be mentioned, where more concrete evidence allows for the inference of a main role of collective ritual mobility or true processions.

This applies in particular to central Italy at the very end of the Late Bronze Age, where growing evidence of ritual activities is available suggesting that religious ideology played a central role in social evolution and change. We are referring to the foundation of regional sanctuaries, namely cult places, located on the most relevant mountain peaks and representing the religious approach of several small communities which, settled in the territory according to a dispersed pattern, began to aggregate and shape a common identity through communal participation in cult and ritual practices. The peak of **Monte Cimino**, 1053m high in the area of Viterbo (Lazio), constitutes one of the most relevant examples (Barbaro *et al.* 2013; Cardarelli 2013: 33–34). Founded early in the Late Bronze Age, according to the most recent excavations by the University of Rome and the regional Soprintendenza, during the Final Bronze Age or c. 11th century, the site was provided with a new imposing inner circuit wall, which surrounded an area devoted to ritual practices, attested by thick layers of ashes, charcoal and animal bones deriving from ritual burning, sacrifice and cult meals. Though Monte Cimino offers only scant evidence of bronze consumption during the Bronze Age, comparable sites such as **Monte Ingino** and **Monte Ansciano** near Gubbio, in Umbria, included a discrete amount of ritually discarded bronze ornaments such as pins (Malone and Stoddart 1994).

A particular case can be made at the site of **Monte Primo**, a 1300m peak overlooking a strategic river route, a natural road connecting the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian side of the Apennines in the inner mountain area of the Marche region. The peak, explored in past years, revealed a series of at least four imposing circuit walls surrounding as many terraces. The innermost area, elliptical in shape c. 60x20m, has shown several hints of cult activities prompting its interpretation

as a sanctuary, which seems to be reinforced by the evidence of long-term continuity of offerings well into the Iron Age (Cardarelli 2013: 34–35; Lollini 1979; Peroni 1996: 334; Pignocchi 2014; Ritrecina 2013) (Figure 7). It is highly probable that the bronze hoard discovered at the northern foot of the mountain, inside a cave overlooking the river course and coinciding with a clear passageway, was somehow related to the site on top (Peroni 1963; Pignocchi and Toune 2015). The cave site may have marked the beginning of the ascent towards the summit area making it possible to infer the existence of a kind of ritual map, implying separate locations for respectively collecting and hoarding valuables and for consuming them during religious activities. The two sites, the cave and the peak, could therefore have been joined by a ceremonial route. The hoard, including c. 10kg of bronze in a ceramic vessel within a structure made of stone slabs, consisted of a combination of ornaments, weapons, and tools along with some fragments of sheet metal vessels (Figure 7c). The materials seem to have been collected over a long time span within the Final Bronze Age, possibly in parallel with the life cycle of the upland sanctuary. During this time, the hoard was re-opened and manipulated, possibly according to dynamics and strategies dependent upon regulation of access, which could even explain the high rate of fragmentation: bronze pieces could have served as tokens of access and/or individual contribution to exclusive ceremonies well suited to reinforce group cohesion and identity (Borgna forthcoming).

Bronze stockpiling for ritual consumption is paralleled elsewhere in mountain areas, particularly in the Alpine regions, where the well-known phenomenon of the *Brandopferplätze* seems to have been well rooted during the Late Bronze Age and even earlier (cf. Borgna 2018: 329–330; Cardarelli 2012 in particular for northern Italy; Gleirscher 2002; cf. Salzani 1997; Steiner 2007, 2010; Zemmer-Planck 2002). In these cult places, huge bonfires were lit and vegetal and animal resources were offered, sacrificed and consumed, at times together with the deposition of valuables such as bronze objects. A parallel for the hoard of Monte Primo could be represented by the huge bronze deposit of Moosbruckschrofen am Piller in Fliess, Nordtirol. The deposit, including objects dating from the Middle Bronze Age well into the Late Bronze Age, was hidden under a stone slab in a rocky recess near to a cult area, and could be interpreted in the context of ritual consumption as provision for communal religious events (cf. Hansen 2016: 195; 2019: 202; Tomedi 2004, 2007, 2012).

A connection between early Alpine *Brandopferplätze* and the peak sanctuaries of central Italy is more clearly outlined by a N-S route passing through the

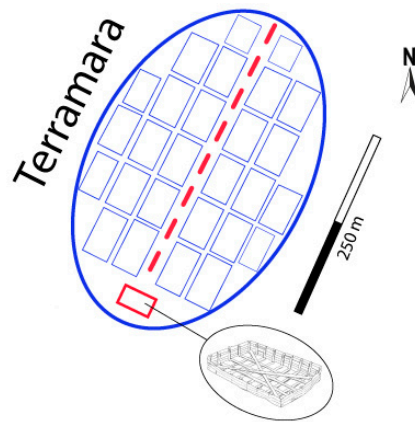


Figure 8. Noceto: the votive tank and the village (Terramara). For the unexcavated areas the topography is hypothetical (drawn by P. Vertuani after Bernabò Brea and Cremaschi 2009: figs 4.8, 6).

coastal regions of Emilia Romagna and the ridges of the Apennine chain, on its Adriatic side.³ This route is emphasized by a linear sequence of sites including numerous hoards and peak sites with evidence of manipulation and destruction of bronze objects. At Monte Battaglia near Ravenna, a group of bronzes was found in association with an anthropogenic deposit including pottery, burnt remains, and possible evidence of metallurgical activities, attesting to a period ranging from the Late Bronze Age well into the Iron Age (Bermond Montanari *et al.* 1996; Bietti Sestieri 2010: 210). At **Monte Titano** in the S. Marino Republic, a 700m hill overlooking the coast near Rimini, many fragmented and severely damaged bronzes were collected from a secondary deposition including ornaments with lots of pins, small tools, and some weapons (Bietti Sestieri 2010; Bottazzi and Bigi 2008), contents that would fit a Final Bronze Age community hoard and possibly derived from ritual actions performed by people moving from their settlements according to structured ritual rules and routes.

The widespread diffusion of peak cults containing evidence of communal activities helps to outline a general pattern of ascending ritual mobility which may have emphasized a centripetal circulation through multiple circuit walls at different terraced levels, as it seems possible to infer in particular at Monte Primo (Figure 7). Such ritual mobility may have included, at precise calendar dates or at regular intervals on a seasonal basis, true religious processions.

³ Cardarelli 2012: 42–43; see in part. the site of Alpe S. Giulia in the Apennines of Emilia (Modena); Cardarelli and Pellacani 2018.

A Stone in the Pond: The Votive Tank of Noceto (Parma)

In the context of the *Terramare* culture, a complex work of engineering interpreted as a votive tank has been discovered in Noceto, close to Parma (Bernabò Brea and Cremaschi 2009).

It is a well-preserved wooden (primarily oak) plank-lined rectangular tank measuring 12x7m and about 3m deep. The structure is composed of two super-imposed tanks, therefore indicating a reconstruction. According to dendrochronology and radiocarbon ‘wiggles-matching,’ the lower tank was constructed c.1444±4 BC, and the upper one c.1432±4 BC (Cremaschi *et al.* 2021).

The tank was probably used in a ritual involving water. Thin layers of silts—sandy silts, peat and gyttja (mud formed from the partial decay of peat) with direct gradation, sometimes interspersed with beds of diatoms—all indicate sedimentation in water.

The tank was filled with artifacts. According to ¹⁴C dates and the typo-chronology of the artifacts, the tank was used for about a century during the Middle Bronze Age II–III. These depositions include ceramics (about 150 whole vases, 25 miniature vessels, and 7 clay figurines), about 800 objects made with wood and other vegetal tissue (baskets, handles or bands, spindles, shovels, plows, woods deriving from harvest in forest areas), exotic pebbles, and more than 1000 faunal remains. Faunal remains belong to cattle (10 individuals), pigs (19), sheep/goats (11) and wild animals such as deer and roe deer. Compared to usual *Terramare* findings,

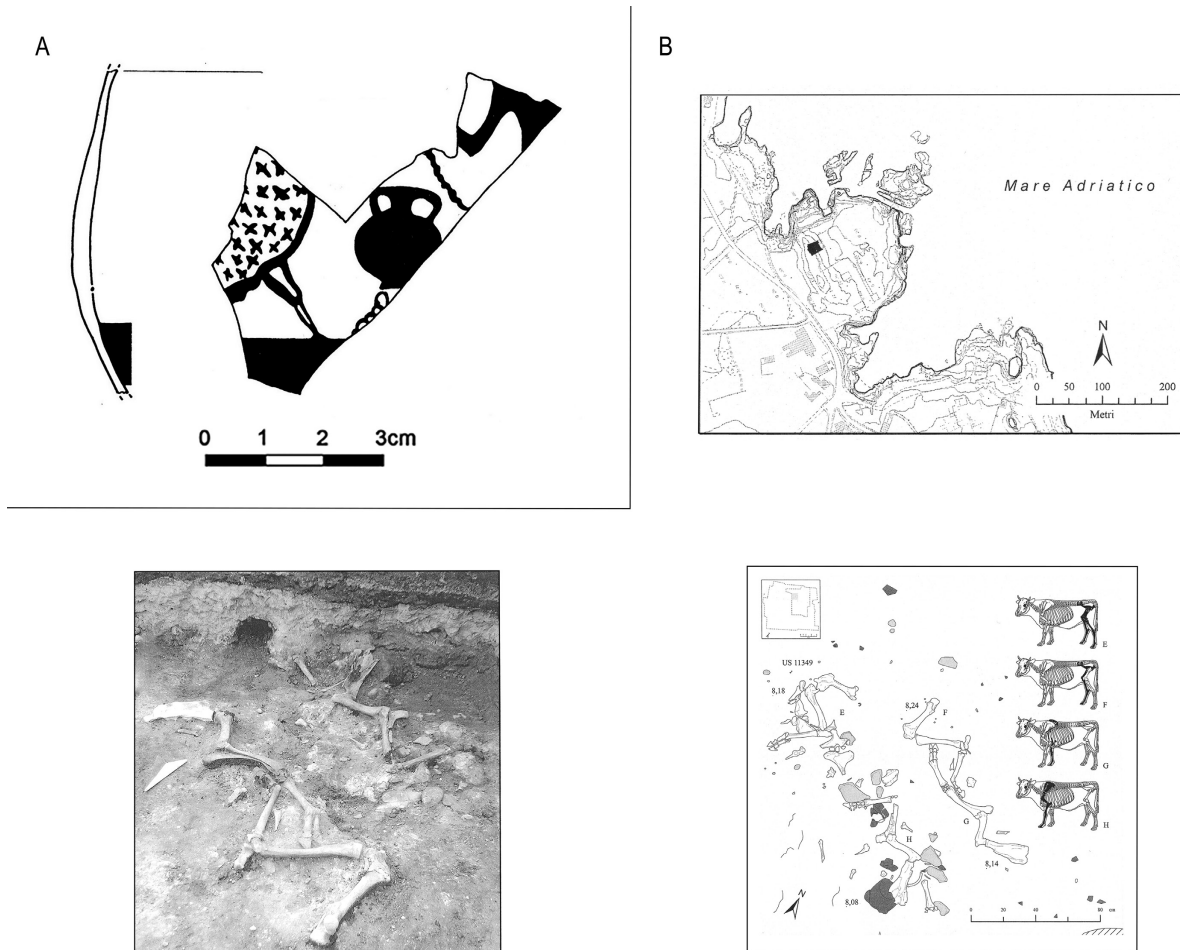


Figure 9. A. Italo-Mycenaean pictorial deep-bowl from Termitito (drawing L. Vagnetti. After Jones *et al.* 2014: fig. 4.61, T39, with the permission of CNR-ISPC). B. Rocavecchia: the site with the location of the 2005–2006 excavation area and the remains of adult bovines discovered (after Pagliara *et al.* 2008: figs 1B, 18, 20).

cattle are overrepresented, thus pointing to a deliberate selection. The taphonomic analysis revealed traces of gnawing, stripping, and exposure to fire, suggesting banquets in the vicinity of the tank.

Archaeological items in stone, wood, and ceramic were placed voluntarily in several separate episodes. These items were lowered to the bottom of the tank full of water and then slowly buried by the progress of sedimentation.

There are two main hypotheses on how the deposition took place: through piers (as some pole holes would indicate) or by immersion swimmers. At the bottom, there are at least four different clusters of vessels close to the walls whilst wooden objects and bones are located at the center. This deposition could have been made before filling the tank with water.

It is worth noting the absence of metal objects compared to the usual ritual depositions found in other Bronze age contexts.

It is possible that the tank was built following a sudden dryness that would have destabilized the economy. We can also recall that during the 12th century BC, a few centuries after the construction and use of the Noceto tanks, the increasingly drier climate is considered a major cause in the collapse of the *Terramare* culture (Cardarelli 2009; Cremaschi *et al.* 2016).

The position of the tank in relationship to the nearby *Terramara* is difficult to establish due to the poor preservation of the village. We know that the topography of *Terramare* villages follows a precise scheme with an orthogonal grid and main streets at the center.

At Noceto, the tank was probably located at the edge of the village at the southern end of the main central path (Bernabò Brea and Cremaschi 2009: fig. 4.8) (Figure 8). In this perspective, we suggest the existence of processions along the entire village leading to the tank, with communal ritual banquets and offerings.

Iconography and Archaeology of Animal Sacrifice in Bronze Age Italy: Some Case Studies

As mentioned above, the lack of appropriate iconographic evidence during Italian protohistory makes the reconstruction of rituals and ceremonies related to cult activities, including processions, difficult. One lucky exception is a fragmentary Italo-Mycenaean open shape, probably a large deep bowl possibly dating to Late Helladic IIIB, from **Termitito**, an important Bronze Age settlement in Ionian Basilicata not far from Matera⁴ (Vagnetti 2000–2001: 108–109, fig. 3; Jones and Levi 2014: 165, T39; fig. 4.61, T39). In this area of the Italian peninsula, a well-rooted tradition of wheel-thrown, painted Aegean-style pottery was established in the course of the local Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Termitito was one of the centers in which this pottery making tradition developed with local characteristics in terms of shapes and decorations. One of the distinctive features of Italo-Mycenaean pottery at Termitito is the presence of vessels with pictorial decoration, among which one can detect the work of a single painter, as several authors have proposed (Croft 2021–2022; Jung 2018; Vagnetti 2000–2001).

Regarding our discussion here, the above-mentioned deep bowl is particularly intriguing. The painted decoration consists of a partially preserved scene which shows a male figure leading a bull to a sort of rubble pile, atop which a vessel is placed (Figure 9A). The type of vessel depicted is unclear; it could be an amphora or, less probably, a stirrup jar. Until recent years, this sherd had not attracted much scholarly attention, apart from its peculiar stylistic features combined with its local production. The interpretation of the scene has already been proposed in general terms (Vagnetti 2000–2001), but it has not been sufficiently highlighted considering the scarcity of iconographic evidence in this period. The image can be interpreted as a man pulling a large quadruped, probably a bull, to the place of sacrifice. This is represented by what is probably a rubble altar (Croft 2021–2022) on which an amphora is placed;⁵ the

blood of the sacrificed animal would be collected in this vessel, after which it would probably be poured elsewhere.

For multiple reasons, the best iconographic comparison for this scene is the narrative decoration of the Haghia Triada sarcophagus (Long 1974; Marinatos 1993). The scenes painted on the sarcophagus's long sides depict a complex ceremony possibly being performed at the funeral of some important figures. This ritual consists of a bull sacrifice, with the animal's blood being collected in a bucket as it drips off the surface of the altar. On the opposite long side of the sarcophagus there are scenes that may be linked to those just mentioned; in particular, in one section of the narrative scheme, a female figure, possibly a priestess, empties a decorated bucket—similar to the one in which the blood of the sacrificed bull was collected—into a large open vessel raised off the ground atop an object of unclear identification (perhaps a small table or a small tripod?), between two poles surmounted by religious symbols. In the narrative composition of the Haghia Triada sarcophagus, the performance of processions as important moments within the represented ritual is quite clear; this is not the case with the Termitito vessel, although some further elements of comparison with other Bronze Age Italian contexts may offer important and relevant insights.

To best investigate this aspect, we must turn our attention to some recent discoveries at **Rocavecchia**, in southern Apulia, close to Lecce. Here, in a relatively small area of the settlement behind the walls, a huge amount of Aegean and Aegean-like pottery was unearthed (Iacono 2015; Pagliara *et al.* 2008), dating to roughly the same chronological horizon as the Termitito sherd or immediately thereafter. Most of the 'exotic' ceramic assemblage consists of tableware: mainly a combination of craters and deep bowls (Iacono 2015: 268). The top of the layer where this pottery was found also contained evidence of a contemporary deposition of animal remains, including large portions of cattle, pigs, and sheep/goats (Figure 9B). Observations made during the excavation of the bones indicate that these remains were deposited intact and that their meat had not been consumed (Coluccia 2018; Iacono 2015: 269; Pagliara *et al.* 2008: 270); it is important to note that the remains of three adult *Bos Taurus* were deposited here at the same time. Iacono states that both the particular ceramic assemblage and the peculiar type of deposition of animal remains (including those of adult male bovines) indicate that this archaeological deposit, which had formed over a period of time, can

⁴ The site is located on a plateau between the former Siris-Heraclea and Metaponto, to the west of the Cavone River.

⁵ It is worth noting that a peculiar vessel in a similar elevated position was recently discovered at Tiryns in a LH IIIC early house from the lower town (Maran and Stockhammer 2020). According to the authors, it is a ceramic emulation of a bronze bucket of the Kurd type, never before attested in Mycenaean Greece but commonly found in Late Bronze Age north-eastern Italy, both in bronze and in ceramic imitations. This vase was discovered fixed on a slightly raised clay platform in the house's courtyard, immediately in front of wall.

The authors suggest that the bucket's elevated position and exotic appearance mean that it was the central container and focal point of the social practices which must have taken place in that area, possibly feasting rituals.

be interpreted as the remains of feasting activities in which participants shared food and drink in a ritualized way. On the basis of the animal remains, it is possible to suggest that the ritual killing of specific animals was part of these ceremonies, and that adult male bovines played an important role therein. Large portions of the animals were eaten while other portions were ritually deposited. Moreover, on the basis of the estimated quantity of meat consumed during such a feasting event, scholars propose that a considerable part of the site's inhabitants were involved in the ceremony (Iacono 2015: 271). To sum up, at the Bronze Age site of Rocavecchia, we have an archaeologically well-attested case of a sort of public ritual in which several adult male bovines were killed, partially consumed in shared meals, and partially deposited along with the vessels from which beverages (possibly alcoholic) had been drunk. These events clearly only occurred on certain occasions and were possibly managed by the local elites negotiating social relationships with their Aegean counterparts (Iacono 2015, 2016).

The excavation report does not make it sufficiently clear whether the investigated area—a large depression in the ground—corresponds to the site where the above-described rituals were performed or to that where the pottery and animal remains were ritually discarded (Pagliara *et al.* 2008).⁶ In the first case, we can imagine that the large number of inhabitants involved in the feasting had to reach this area of the settlement, close to the walls, from their dwellings. In the second case, only the ritual's officiants would have come to the site of the ceremonial paraphernalia's final deposition. In both cases, one can guess that these movements of people within the settlement during a ceremonial event would have happened in an organized or ritualized way. If this was in fact the case, the performance of processions can be plausibly imagined.

To further strengthen the proposed connection between the Termitito pictorial sherd and the feasting rituals at Rocavecchia, it must be also highlighted that in the shape and decoration of the former, the main structural elements of the latter are represented: the type of drinking vessel (deep bowl) and the sacrifice of adult male bovines. Therefore, we can see how the former object contains an emblematic synthesis of the complex rituals possibly performed by contemporary communities living not too far away in southeastern Italy. The manifold implications that these cultural behaviors have with regards to the important and long-lasting phenomenon of the relationships between

the Aegean and the central Mediterranean cannot be treated here. It is sufficient to highlight the fact that both the above-mentioned sites were firmly involved in these relationships, albeit not at the same scale; this is shown, for instance, by the different distribution of imports and local products in the field of Aegean pottery attested.

Even though the ritual killing of a bull is a well-known element in Aegean art and cult activities (Halstead and Isaakidou 2004; Louloupis 1979; Stocker and Davis 2004), it is dangerous to interpret this practice in Italy as necessarily of Aegean derivation. It must be remembered, indeed, that there are several examples of sacrifices of adult male bovines in different contexts of the Italian Bronze Age (Cipolloni Sampò 1999; Salzani 2005: 211, 267, 295, 298), as is also the case of the Mereto tumulus in Friuli, described in a previous paragraph.

Starting from an area not so far away from Rocavecchia and especially Termitito, the animal offerings in the funerary hypogeum of **Lavello La Speranza** in the Basilicata region must be mentioned (Cipolloni Sampò 1999). In particular, an entire bovine thigh bone was found in a Middle Bronze Age burial level. Moreover, a well-preserved portion of a bovine humerus came from subsequent Final Bronze Age burials. Neither of the two bovine remains, which, according to scholars, must have originally been much bigger (Wilkins 2000), showed signs of slaughter, as is the case in Rocavecchia, discussed above. They were probably buried as portions of meat offered to the dead. On the other hand, the custom of burying entire sacrificed animals, or portions thereof, is well attested in eastern Basilicata and northern Apulia, in the area of the Ofanto river, during the Middle Bronze Age. This ritual practice is a typical feature of the so-called cultic hypogeism, a form of worship carried out in artificial underground spaces (Tunzi Sisto 1999, 2005).

Particularly intriguing are also two depositions of adult male bovines in the Middle and Late Bronze Age cemetery of Olmo di Nogara (Verona). These peculiar interments were discovered very close to one another, significantly along the funerary road which crossed the cemetery (Salzani 2005: 292–293). The excavators interpreted this important piece of evidence as the interments of the oxen which may have pulled the funerary chariot of an important figure: they were ritually killed after having accompanied the deceased to their final resting place (Salzani 2005: 295, 298). Returning to the topic of our discussion, it is probable that this type of funeral involved a train of mourners performing a procession down the funerary road. This specific cultural habit was shared with other communities of the *Terramare* area, as is the case of the cemetery of Casinalbo discussed above.

⁶ According to L. Coluccia (2018), the archaeological deposit would have originated from a single ceremonial event which took place for the foundation of the settlement's Late Bronze Age walls. F. Iacono (2015, 2016), instead, suggests that the peculiar faunal and ceramic assemblage must have been caused by a series of feasting rituals repeated over time.

Of course we cannot connect the sacrifice of bulls or oxen exclusively to funerary rituals, at least in the central Mediterranean. On the contrary, the above-discussed examples of Rocavecchia and Termito suggest that this type of ritual killing may have also happened as part of feasting ceremonies performed inside settlements.⁷ As we have tried to highlight in both cases, processions may well have occurred, regardless of the number and the role of the people involved in each ritual.

Concluding Remarks

Although this short overview is far from exhaustive, it is possible to highlight some important points regarding cult activities and ceremonial practices involving different Italian Bronze Age communities. As is already known, depositions of bronzes and other categories of objects in water or other liminal places such as peaks or mountains are well attested. Among water depositions, it is useful to separate the objects thrown into rivers from those thrown into lakes or ponds, taking into account the type and combinations of votive offerings. The discovery of the wooden tank of Noceto is part of this picture; it is worth noting that, among the many types of offerings, bronzes are significantly lacking here. Regarding mountains, the various cases of monumental sites are very intriguing, especially concerning the complexity of the rituals attested. It is important to underline that these types of rituals, often characterized by the ceremonial lighting of fire, were shared by communities living both in northern and central Italy.

Besides that, new funerary contexts and new interpretations of old discoveries have recently been added. In particular, the thorough study of the Casinalbo necropolis and other northeastern Italian cemeteries, such as Olmo di Nogara and Scalvinetto, has allowed for the reconstruction of complex rituals in which the different phases of deposition of the dead were articulated.

Moreover, discoveries in recent years concerning animal sacrifices have increased considerably compared to the scarce evidence of the past. It is now possible to appreciate different patterns of ritual killing, both in funerary contexts and related to settlements, possibly connected to feasting rituals.

Although there is no concrete evidence (iconographic attestations are also essentially lacking), the archaeological features of the case studies illustrated above allow us to suggest that ritual mobility of people or true processions formed a substantial part of such

ceremonies. In order to obtain a clearer framework of such a multifarious and rich dataset, the systematic collection of all known evidence and its analysis within different socio-cultural contexts is desirable, a thorough study which lies outside the present contribution.

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⁷ Or even in special places located outside settlements, as suggested by the above-mentioned case of the Noceto tank.

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