

2010

# Bridging the Gap. New Data on the Relationship between Sicily, the Maltese Archipelago and the Aegean in the Middle Bronze Age

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MARE INTERNUM

ARCHEOLOGIA E CULTURE

DEL MEDITERRANEO

An International, Yearly and Peer-Reviewed Journal

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# MARE INTERNUM

ARCHEOLOGIA E CULTURE  
DEL MEDITERRANEO

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ISSN 2035-0783

ISSN ELETTRONICO 2036-5160

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BRIDGING THE GAP.  
NEW DATA ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SICILY,  
THE MALTESE ARCHIPELAGO AND THE AEGEAN  
IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE\*

DAVIDE TANASI

THE earliest contacts between Sicily and the Maltese archipelago have, over the last few decades, been the subject of many studies that have explained several facets of this complex relationship.<sup>1</sup> This relationship developed over the centuries on account of geographical contiguity and a lack of resources in each of these two insular worlds.<sup>2</sup>

In the Neolithic, the Maltese presence in Sicily is represented by the Ghar Dalam pottery imports found in the territory of Siracusa at Vulpiglia.<sup>3</sup> Imports have not been identified in the Copper and Early Bronze Ages, but the strong influence of Maltese temple architecture, such as pluri-cellularism and megalithism, has been identified in Sicilian funerary architecture in the Iblaean area.<sup>4</sup>

More rare, but still significant, is the presence of Sicilian artefacts in Malta. Lithic materials, such as flint and obsidian, and Sicilian pottery sherds have been found at the Neolithic site of Skorba.<sup>5</sup> Later on, at the beginning of the Bronze Age, a class of incised and impressed pottery, the so called Thermi ware, which has recently been interpreted as being strictly related to the Sicilian pottery of Ognina type,<sup>6</sup> and a bossed bone plaque,<sup>7</sup> an object typical of the Sicilian Early Bronze Age, suggests that the relationship was reciprocal.

The most important moment in the development of this interconnection is, however, represented by the Middle Bronze Age.<sup>8</sup> The intense trans-Mediterranean commercial activities of Cypriote and Mycenaean entrepreneurs, travelling from East to West, is the most important new event of this period.<sup>9</sup> These long distance voyages, which were aimed at acquiring raw materials and exotic objects, had South-Eastern and South-Central Sicily among their destinations, but seemed to exclude the Maltese Archipelago.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of chronology (FIG. 1), the Sicilian Middle Bronze Age, from the middle of the xv<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to the middle of the xiii<sup>th</sup> century B.C., could be divided according to the three phases of the Thapsos culture, which correspond to LH IIIA1 – LH IIIB1 in terms of Aegean chronology.<sup>11</sup> This is, in turn, contemporary to the transitional moment between the two phases of the Maltese Borg-in-Nadur culture.<sup>12</sup>

Studies of the Sicilian and Maltese Middle Bronze Ages have always favoured the aspect of Mycenaean influences on the two separate indigenous cultures, rather than the problem of the cultural exchange between the two island systems themselves, because of an apparent scarcity of data. The aim of this paper is to offer for the first time new data, re-studied and unpublished, that derives from a currently ongoing glob-

- 1500 a.C.	Castelluccio	EBA	Tarxien Cemetery (IIA)
1500-1450 a.C.			
1440/1420-1400/1380 a.C.	Thapsos 1 (TE IIIA1)		Borg-in-Nadur (II B1)
1400/1380-1310/1300 a.C.	Thapsos 2 (TE IIIA2)	MBA	
1310/1300-1270/1250 a.C.	Thapsos 3 (TE IIIB1)		
1270/1250-1150 a.C.	Pantalica I (Pantalica Nord)	LBA	Borg-in-Nadur (II B2)
1150-1050 a.C.	Pantalica II (Pantalica Nord)		
1050-850 a.C.	Pantalica III (Cassibile)	EIA 1	Borg-in-Nadur (II B3) - Bahrija (II C)
850-750 a.C.	Pantalica IV (Pantalica Sud)	EIA 2	

FIG. 1. Chronological comparative chart of the Bronze / Iron Age in Sicily and Malta.

al study of the interrelation between Sicily and the Maltese archipelago from the middle of the second to the beginning of the first millennium B.C.<sup>13</sup> It is, however, necessary to preface this argument with a brief overview of the two separate cultures that were involved in this interrelationship.

The Thapsos culture<sup>14</sup> is well attested throughout Sicily, and in particular on the south-eastern and southern coastlines where the two principal sites are located. Its most important feature is a strong Cypriote and Mycenaean influence on every aspect of local cultural production. The two guide sites, Thapsos in the east and Cannatello in the west, were both fortified maritime emporia that amply demonstrate the characteristics of this period of great commercial openness in Sicily.<sup>15</sup> Thapsos, for example, had a complex urban plan with areas divided into blocks by roads and buildings with elaborate plan and quadrangular rooms, which were used as warehouses and demonstrate the clear influence of Cypriote-Mycenaean culture on the traditional EBA architectural culture of the indigenous peoples.<sup>16</sup>

The most significant archaeological indicator for the Thapsos culture is its pottery production, which is characterised by hand made ware with coarse clay rich in volcanic grits, with a grey or black brownish burnished surface. The decoration is always incised, with simple geometric motifs or, more rarely, zoomorphic figures, or with wavy rope

\* This research started in 2007 within the activities of the K.A.S.A. Project funded by the European Community Interreg IIIA program Italy-Malta (2004-2006) and it is currently ongoing. This publications was realized thanks to a grant of Institute of Aegean Prehistory for the year 2009. I wish to thank dr. Sharon Sultana, Principal Curator of the National Museum of Archaeology of Valletta, for the authorization to study the Maltese Middle and Late Bronze Age pottery groups held at the Museum and prof. Anthony Bonanno, prof. Pietro Militello and dr. Nicholas Vella for their useful advices and dr. Michael Metcalfe and dr. Simona Todaro for their assistance with the revision of the text.

<sup>1</sup> TRUMP 2003; CULTRARO 2008, pp. 5-19; GUZZARDI 2008, pp. 39-48.

<sup>2</sup> BONANNO 2008, pp. 27-37.

<sup>3</sup> GUZZARDI 2008, pp. 39-48.

<sup>5</sup> VELLA 2008, pp. 81-102.

<sup>7</sup> TRUMP 2003.

<sup>9</sup> CULTRARO 2006, pp. 221-241.

<sup>10</sup> BLAKOLMER 2005, pp. 653-661.

<sup>11</sup> ALBERTI 2007, pp. 363-376.

<sup>13</sup> TANASI 2008; TANASI b; TANASI, VELLA in press.

<sup>14</sup> TANASI 2008, pp. 8-13.

<sup>15</sup> MILITELLO 2004, pp. 328-330; MILITELLO 2005, pp. 585-597.

<sup>16</sup> DOONAN 2001, pp. 159-188; TOMASELLO 2004, pp. 197-205.

<sup>4</sup> TERRANOVA 2003.

<sup>6</sup> PALIO 2008, pp. 71-80.

<sup>8</sup> GIANNITRAPANI 1997, pp. 429-443.

<sup>12</sup> TRUMP 1961, pp. 253-262.

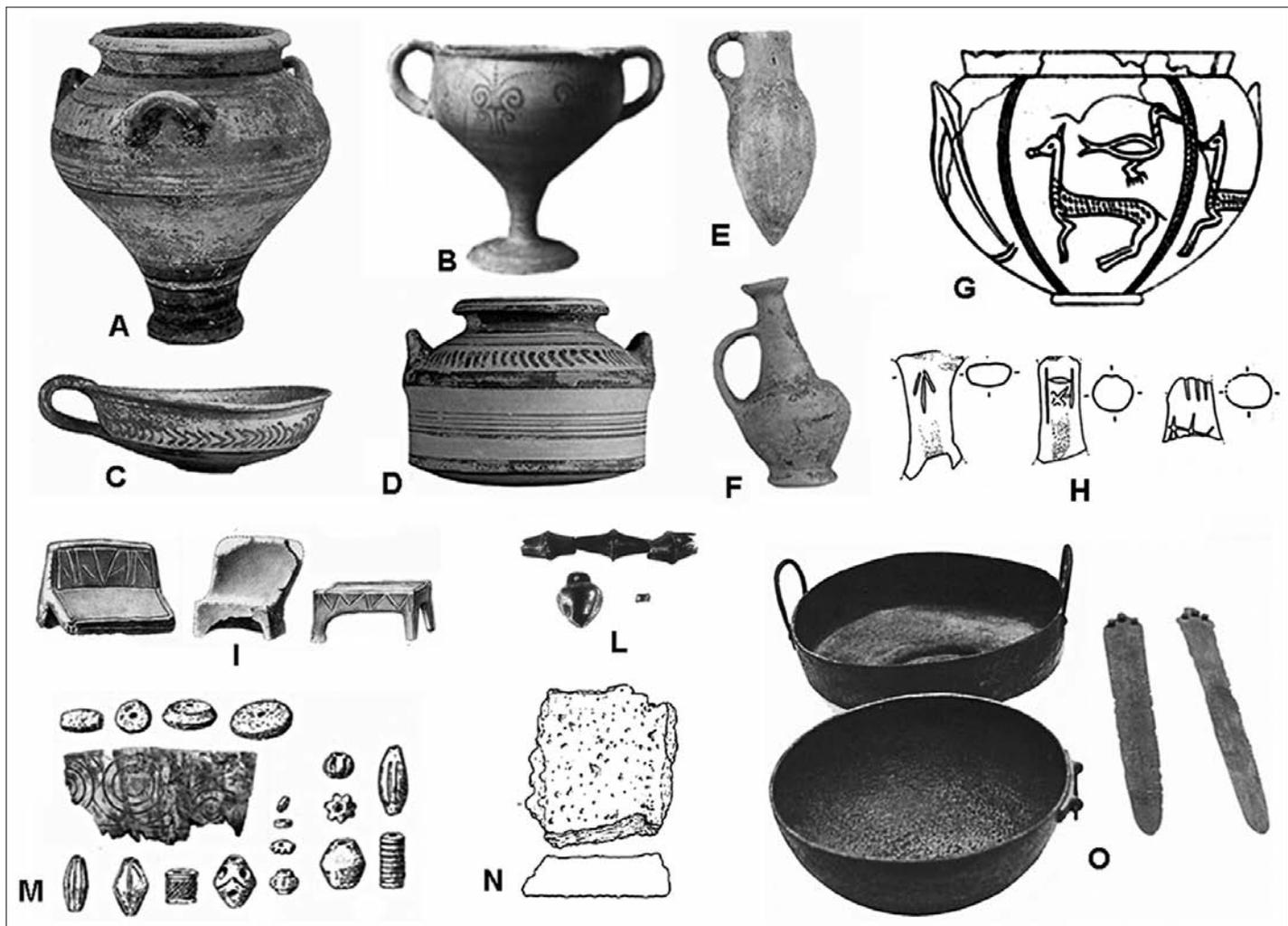


FIG. 2: A-F. Mycenaean and Cypriote pottery imports from south eastern Sicily (VOZA 1973b); G. *Sicano Mycenaean* vessel from Thapsos (VOZA 1973b); H. Sherds with Cypro-Minoan signs from Cannatello (CASTELLANA 2000); I. Clay models of furniture from Thapsos (TANASI 2004); L-M. Jewellery from south eastern Sicily (MILITELLO 2004); N. Fragment of ox-hide ingot piece from Thapsos (ALBERTI 2008); O. Bronze cauldrons and swords from Caldare (CASTELLANA 2000).

bands. The most common shapes are jugs, simple and pedestal cups, and pedestal basins. A large amount of Mycenaean pottery, mostly of the LH IIIA1 period (FIG. 2 A-D), as well as Cypriote pottery of Base Ring and White Shaved type (FIG. 2 E-F), has been found in several funerary contexts in south-eastern Sicily, including Thapsos.<sup>1</sup> The only imports so far identified in a settlement are those from Cannatello, which include large storage jars with incised Cypro-Minoan signs (FIG. 2 H).<sup>2</sup> A well documented feature is the local imitations of Cypriote and Mycenaean wares, which copy not only the shape but also, in some cases, the zoomorphic decorative motifs translated into incised versions. This phenomenon, which is known as the *Sicano-Mycenaean* pottery production (FIG. 2 G), is the most important indicator of the proximity of Mycenaean culture to local artisans,<sup>3</sup> as the case of the Mycenaean amphora locally produced from the t. B of Milena well testifies.<sup>4</sup> There are also a few cases of clay figurines of local manufacture that depict original Mycenaean models (FIG. 2 I).<sup>5</sup>

Many luxury objects of Mycenaean style and origin, such as amber necklaces, ivory combs, or gold and faience elements of jewellery, have been found in rich tombs (FIG. 2 L-M).<sup>6</sup>

As for metallurgy, large bronze cauldrons that attest Cypriote influence<sup>7</sup> and long bronze swords that have been

interpreted as a hybrid between two different types of Mycenaean swords, are both attested for the first time (FIG. 2 O).<sup>8</sup> This evidence, together with the discovery of fragmentary ox-hide ingots from Thapsos (FIG. 2 N), Ognina and Cannatello, testifies to the activity of Aegean artisans within the local communities and the arrival and circulation in Sicily of raw materials that are not present in the island.<sup>9</sup>

As with domestic architecture, funerary architecture provides a clear example of Mycenaean influence as seen in the development of chamber tombs with tholoid profile throughout Sicily that directly resemble the hypogeal *tholos* tombs of the Western Peloponnese.<sup>10</sup> One well-known aspect of the Thapsos culture is a funerary ritual documented throughout Sicily. It consists of a feast performed inside the tomb by the relatives of the dead, who symbolically partake in it.<sup>11</sup> The participants sit on the bench and meat based meals are prepared. A pottery set composed of a bowl, a pedestal basin and a jug, is used for the common consumption of the food, and the set is then placed on the centre of the tomb together with the remains of the food. The pottery set in tombs which display a high degree of Mycenaean presence is sometimes replaced with Mycenaean vessels of the same function, a fact which demonstrates the opening of the indigenous culture to foreign influences also in the religious realm.

<sup>1</sup> VAN WIJNGAARDEN 2002, pp. 229-236; VIANELLO 2005, pp. 106-175.

<sup>2</sup> DAY, JOYNER 2005, pp. 309-314.

<sup>3</sup> TANASI 2005, p. 565; ALBERTI 2006, p. 421.

<sup>4</sup> LA ROSA 1986.

<sup>5</sup> TANASI 2004, pp. 21-27.

<sup>6</sup> MILITELLO 2004, pp. 310-311.

<sup>7</sup> CASTELLANA 2000, pp. 212-237.

<sup>8</sup> BETTELLI 2006, pp. 240-245.

<sup>9</sup> ALBERTI 2008.

<sup>10</sup> TOMASELLO 2004, pp. 189-195.

<sup>11</sup> MANISCALCO 1999, pp. 188-189.



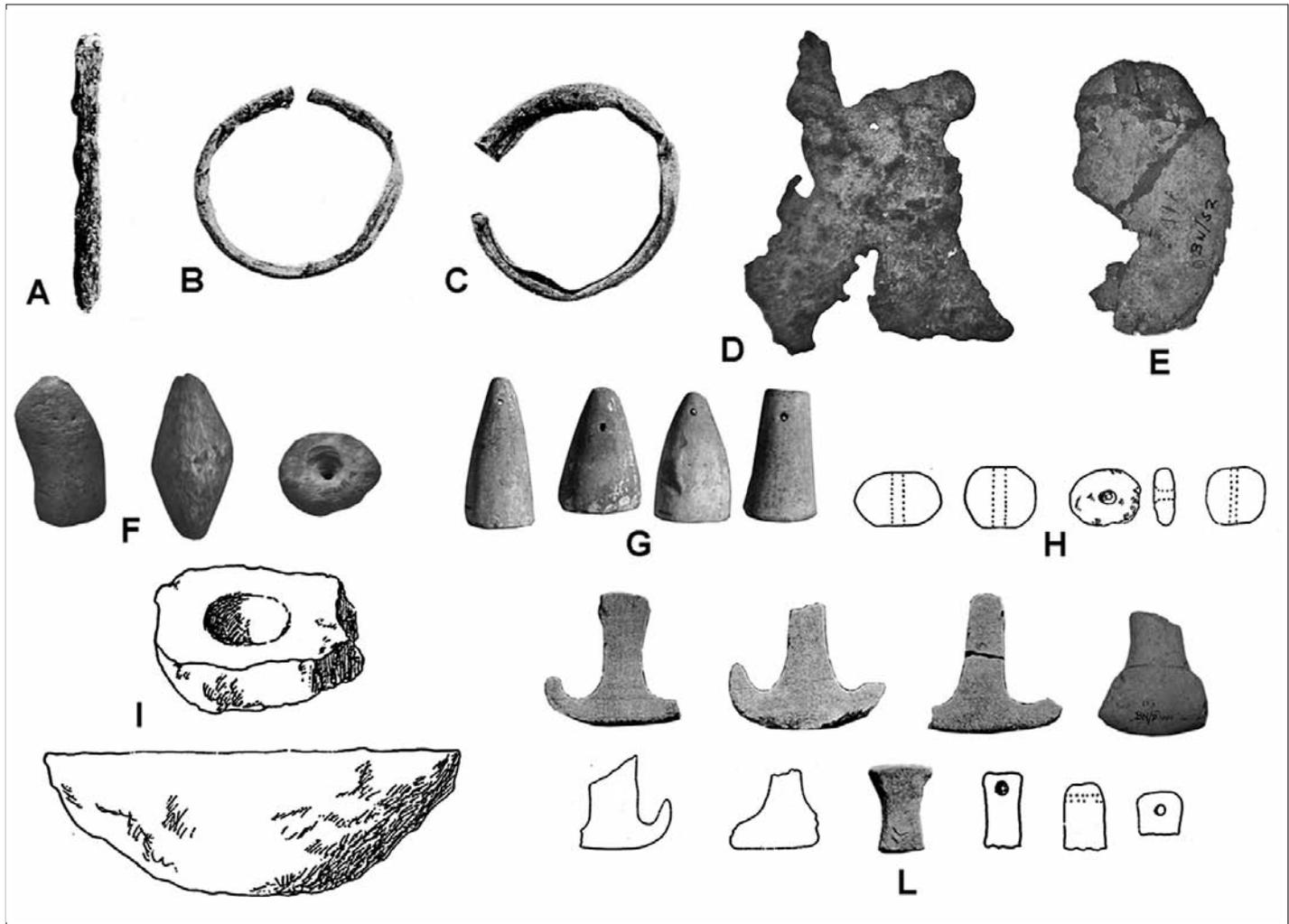


FIG. 5. Borg in-Nadur Temple: A-C. Bronze rod and bronze bracers (MURRAY 1929); D-E. Bronze and lead slag (original picture); F. Stone idol and weights (original picture); G. Clay loom weights (TRUMP 1999); H. Clay spindle whorls (MURRAY 1929); I. Stone vessels (MURRAY 1923); L. Clay anchor models (MURRAY 1929; TRUMP 1962).

A typical feature of many settlements of the Borg in-Nadur phase is the presence of groups of pits carved into the rock that have been interpreted as dying vats used in large scale textile production.<sup>1</sup> The most important example is that of Borg in-Nadur, where a complex system of vats on the slope of the hill, close to the bay, might suggest the presence of an industrial district of the settlement itself. In many cases, these vats are related to the so-called cart ruts, paired grooves in the bare rock that were made by heavily-laden wagons that moved throughout Maltese territory.<sup>2</sup> This could indicate the presence of principal centres of textile production that were connected to each other or with other villages by a web of wagon roads used for the circulation of products. If this interpretation is correct, we should wonder about the destination of the lavish amount of textiles which these facilities may have produced.

Regarding the funerary costumes of the Borg in-Nadur culture, the documentation is unfortunately very scarce. But, from the evidence of the few controversial cases so far known it seem likely that the Borg in-Nadur peoples performed inhumation rituals inside hypogeal tombs.<sup>3</sup>

The most well known aspect of this culture, based on the finds at the Borg in-Nadur site, remains its pottery production.<sup>4</sup> The first classification of the pottery repertoire was made in the mid '50s by Evans, in his reassessment of the Maltese cultural sequence.<sup>5</sup> That scheme was completed, after ten years, by Trump's complete study of the internal evo-

lution of production.<sup>6</sup> The Borg in-Nadur pottery is both hand made, and wheel fashioned and wheel thrown, and has a coarse clay very rich in sandy grits. The principal feature is its red or brown burnished surface, and its linear incised decoration filled with white paste. The most prominent shapes are bowls, pedestal basins, cups, jugs and rectangular basins with central septum.

Regarding other forms of production, bronze objects, sometimes with gold girdling, bronze, raw lead ingots and a stone mould have all been found at the Borg in-Nadur site, thus testifying to the presence of metallurgical activities based on raw materials arriving from outside the archipelago. The presence of a flourishing textile production is attested by large amounts of loom weights and spindle whorls, and strange objects resembling clay models of anchors probably used for weaving.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the discovery of several stone mortars and stone vases indicates agricultural activities (FIG. 5).

The first stage in this research was to quantify the impact of Borg in-Nadur pottery imports on the Thapsos culture through a full review of earlier publications and analysis of the unpublished materials in museum collections. As a result, 66 pottery imports were identified in 10 sites of south-eastern Sicily, set along the coastline of the province of Siracusa, both funerary and domestic contexts, plus 1 of unknown provenience, held at the Palermo Museum and now lost.<sup>8</sup> Few Borg in-Nadur pottery sherds seem to have been found

<sup>1</sup> SAGONA 1999, pp. 23-60.

<sup>2</sup> EVANS 1971, pp. 202-204.

<sup>5</sup> EVANS 1953, pp. 69-73.

<sup>6</sup> TRUMP 1961, pp. 253-262.

<sup>3</sup> TRUMP 2002, pp. 261-262.

<sup>4</sup> MURRAY 1934.

<sup>7</sup> TRUMP 1962, pp. 224-225.

<sup>8</sup> TANASI 2008, pp. 33-53.

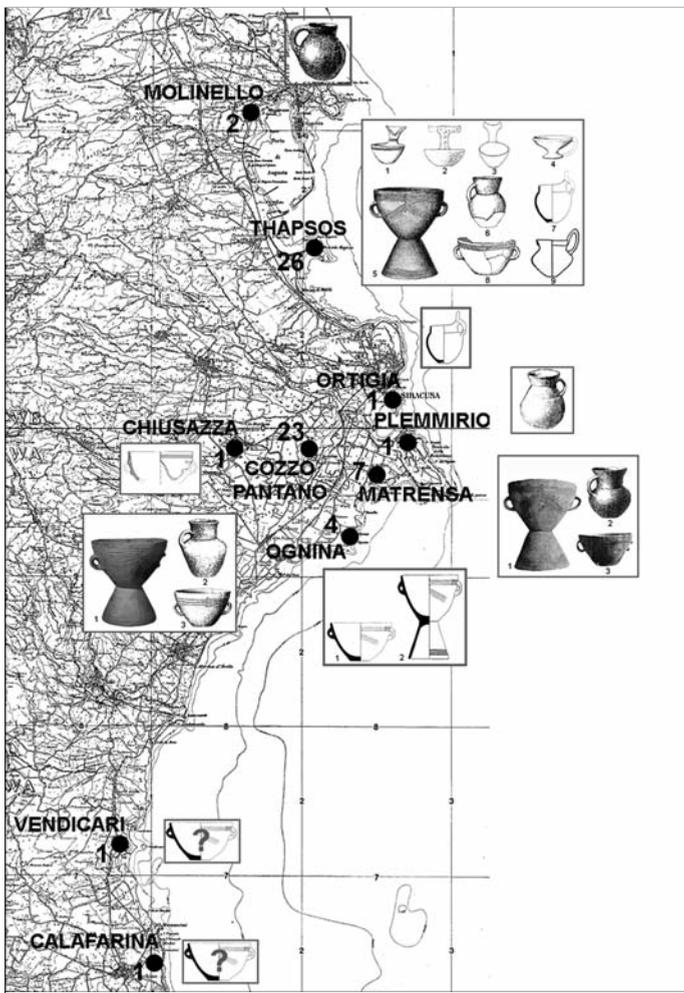


FIG. 6. Map of distribution of Borg in-Nadur pottery imports in south eastern Sicily (TANASI 2008).

also in the excavation of the settlement of Cannatello,<sup>1</sup> near Agrigento, but the impossibility to approach to the unpublished data induce us to leave aside this evidence from the present discussion. Based upon the available data, no other traces of Maltese pottery or cultural influences have been identified in any other part of Sicily.

Ten sites are set along the coastline of the province of Siracusa (FIG. 6):<sup>2</sup> Thapsos, Cozzo del Pantano,<sup>3</sup> Plemmirio,<sup>4</sup> Matrensa,<sup>5</sup> Molinello,<sup>6</sup> Ognina,<sup>7</sup> Calafarina,<sup>8</sup> Vendicari,<sup>9</sup> Chiusazza,<sup>10</sup> Ortigia.<sup>11</sup> To this group, another site, Monte San Paolillo,<sup>12</sup> located in the northern suburban area of Catania, can be added. In this site, for the first time in the Aetnean area, during a recent study,<sup>13</sup> two LH IIIA1-A2 Mycenaean imported sherds and a Baltic amber bead were identified as well as 2 specimens of indisputable Borg in-Nadur vessels, produced with local techniques, were found. These two example that could demonstrate the first case of local imitation in Sicily of Borg in-Nadur pottery have to be verified with specific petrographical and geochemical analyses that were just disposed. Within the group of sites of siracusan hinterland, the most significant evidence comes from the centres of Thapsos on the Magnisi peninsula and Cozzo del Pantano by the source of Ciane river, two commercial hubs strategically positioned for incoming maritime commercial activities and redistribution performance.

About the variety of Maltese pottery shapes identifiable, a repertoire of 17 shapes of Borg in-Nadur pottery present in

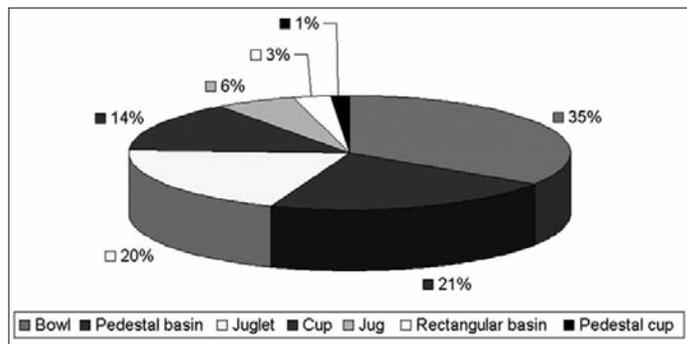


FIG. 7. Flowchart indicating the percentile presence of the shapes within the group of Borg in-Nadur pottery imports in Sicily.

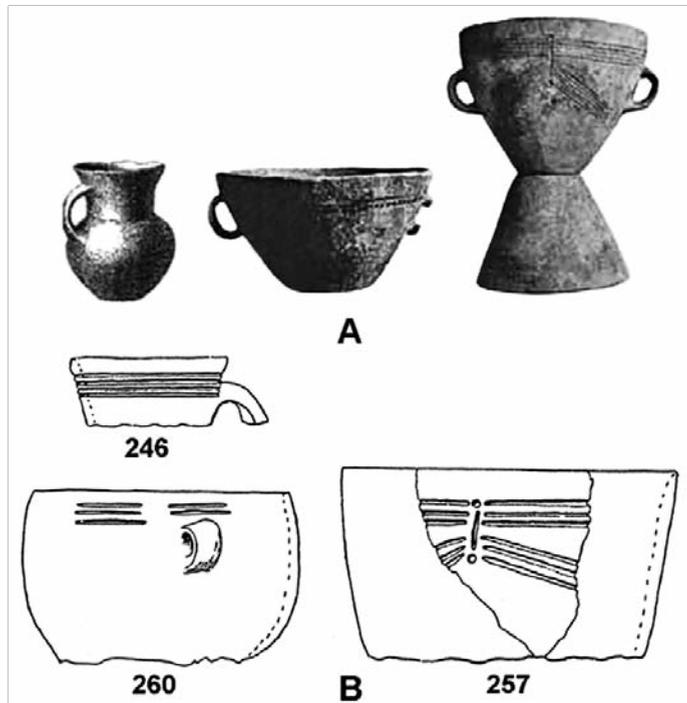


FIG. 8: A. Borg in-Nadur pottery set from t. 6 of Matrensa (ORSI 1903); B. Pottery set from the Double Chapel of Borg in-Nadur temple (MURRAY 1929).

Sicily can be found, with bowls, pedestal basins, and juglets being in prominent position (FIG. 7). In particular 5 types of bowls, 3 of basins, 4 of dipper cups, 1 of cups, 2 of jugs, 7 of juglets can be identified. All the 22 Maltese shapes find comparison with original samples from Borg in-Nadur layers in Borg in-Nadur, Bahrija, Tarxien, Ghar Dalam, Tas-Silg and Mtarfa, that are the well known Bronze Age Maltese sites.<sup>14</sup>

By specifically analysing the distribution of Maltese pottery in some well preserved tombs that were rich in Cypriote or Mycenaean objects, it is possible to identify, in tomb 23 of Cozzo del Pantano<sup>15</sup> and 6 of Matrensa (FIG. 8 A),<sup>16</sup> the recurrence of a pottery set composed of bowl, pedestal basin and juglet. This bowl/pedestal basin and bowl/juglet combination is also attested in another two disturbed tombs of Thapsos, 22<sup>17</sup> and E.<sup>18</sup> The absence of the third shape is probably due to the illegal excavations. In the same way, the sherds of a Borg in-Nadur bowl and juglet found in a hut of the Thapsos settlement<sup>19</sup> could also indicate the presence of the set in a domestic context. The discovery of the same pottery set in an area of the Double Chapel of Borg in-Nadur<sup>20</sup>

<sup>1</sup> LEVI 2004, p. 237, n. 23.

<sup>3</sup> ORSI 1893.

<sup>5</sup> ORSI 1903.

<sup>7</sup> BERNABÒ BREA 1966.

<sup>9</sup> GUZZARDI 1991-1992.

<sup>2</sup> ORSI 1895; VOZA 1973a; 1973b.

<sup>4</sup> ORSI 1891.

<sup>6</sup> ORSI 1902.

<sup>8</sup> GUZZARDI 1997-1998.

<sup>10</sup> TINÈ 1965.

<sup>11</sup> ORSI 1919.

<sup>13</sup> TANASI a.

<sup>15</sup> ORSI 1893, pp. 19-26.

<sup>17</sup> ORSI 1895, pp. 108-110.

<sup>19</sup> VOZA 1973b, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> PATANÈ 1997-1998, pp. 189-195.

<sup>14</sup> TANASI 2008, pp. 57-67.

<sup>16</sup> ORSI 1903, pp. 146-147.

<sup>18</sup> GENTILI 1951, pp. 215-216.

<sup>20</sup> MURRAY 1929, pl. xxv.

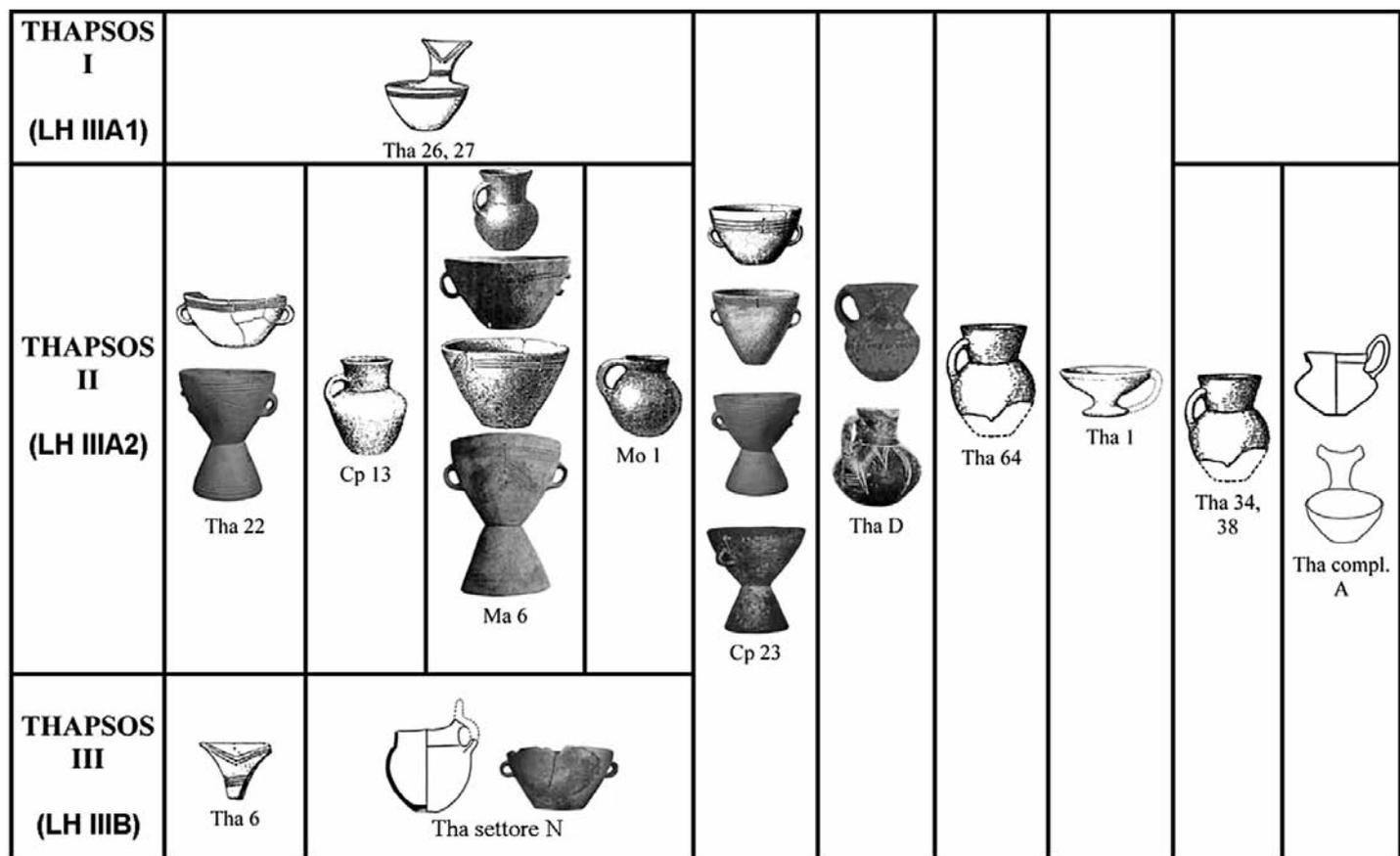


FIG. 9. Chronological sequence of the Sicilian funerary contexts with Borg in-Nadur imports (TANASI 2008).

suggests that this combination of vessels could be considered to be a specific set used in both Malta and Sicily (FIG. 8 B).

One of the most important result of this research is certainly the chronological definition of the Maltese pottery imports within the three phases of the Thapsos period (FIG. 9).<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is possible to observe a slight increase in the Maltese presence in Sicily during the Thapsos I phase. Then, during the Thapsos II phase, corresponding to LH IIIA 2, we see the climax of this Maltese presence, in parallel with the climax of the Mycenaean material. Evidence of foreign presence then lowers drastically in the subsequent Thapsos III phase, and disappears together with the evidence for a possible Mycenaean presence in the subsequent phase. The chronological fit of the Borg in-Nadur pottery attested in Sicily in secure contexts gives for the first time a fundamental starting point for the reassessment of the Borg in-Nadur pottery sequence itself, and for a more precise dating of the typological series.

Until now, the large and complex documentation for a Maltese presence in Sicily has not been compared to traces that might suggest a reciprocal relationship between Sicily and Maltese Archipelago.

However, a recent re-analysis, still ongoing, of the material stored at the National Museum of Archaeology of Valletta from Murray's excavations of the temple at Borg in-Nadur, and from Peet's 1909 excavations at Bahrija, has led to the first identification of Thapsos pottery in the Maltese Archipelago. The disparity in quantity and quality between this evidence and that for Maltese frequentation of Sicily is immediately clear, but the diverse territorial extension of the two islands must be taken into account, as must the different levels of archaeological excavations and research that have been devoted to them.

70 sherds of hand made grey brownish burnished pottery (mostly wall sherds) with incised decoration and signs of white paste, presenting a distinctive fabric rich in chamotte and volcanic grits absent in Maltese Archipelago, were recognized among the pottery from Borg in-Nadur and Bahrija, namely 42 from Borg in-Nadur temple and 28 from Bahrija (Peet's excavation). They are handmade and have grey surface, sometimes polished, and incised decoration with chevrons or plastic decoration with waving rope bands.

Due to the better condition of the examples from Bahrija, at least two hemispherical (B/P 101a-c, B/P 101d) and one carinated (B/P 102) cups, uncommon to the Borg in-Nadur repertoire, with black brownish burnished surface and the same fabric with volcanic grits, were identified (FIG. 10). These vessels can be correctly interpreted as pedestal cups of the Thapsos culture. This shape, one of the guide type of the Thapsos culture itself, has a wide diffusion all over Sicilian territory and a large typological variety.

In particular, the specimens B/P 101a-c and B/P 101d, similar but not identical, are comparable with the type of the hemispherical pedestal cup with incurving continuous profile attested in Tomb 9 of Cozzo del Pantano<sup>2</sup> in several sites of central-western Sicily<sup>3</sup> and in the Aeolian Archipelago (FIG. 11 D).<sup>4</sup> As the Tomb 9 of Cozzo del Pantano (FIG. 11 B) can be assigned, according to Alberti,<sup>5</sup> to the Thapsos III phase, the two vessels, B/P 101a-c and B/P 101d, can dated to 1310/1300-1270/1250 B.C.

Regarding to the specimen B/P 102, it can be compared with the type of the carinated pedestal cup with incurving rim and large conical body well attested in the south-eastern Sicily, for example in tomb 2 of Thapsos<sup>6</sup> and in the sites of Grotte di Marineo (FIG. 11 C)<sup>7</sup> and Monte San Paolillo (FIG. 11 A)<sup>8</sup> in territory of Catania, and it is documented also in

<sup>1</sup> ALBERTI 2007.

<sup>2</sup> ORSI 1893, cols. 12-14; ALBERTI 2004, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Vanzetti type: 47/48: see VANZETTI 2004, pp. 324-325, fig. 8.

<sup>4</sup> BERNABÒ BREA, CAVALIER 1980, p. 192, pl. 170, inv. 3063.

<sup>5</sup> ALBERTI 2007.

<sup>6</sup> ORSI 1895, cols. 98-99; ALBERTI 2004, p. 115; ALBERTI 2007, p. 368.

<sup>7</sup> TANASI 2008, p. 66-67, 127, fig. 51.

<sup>8</sup> TANASI a.

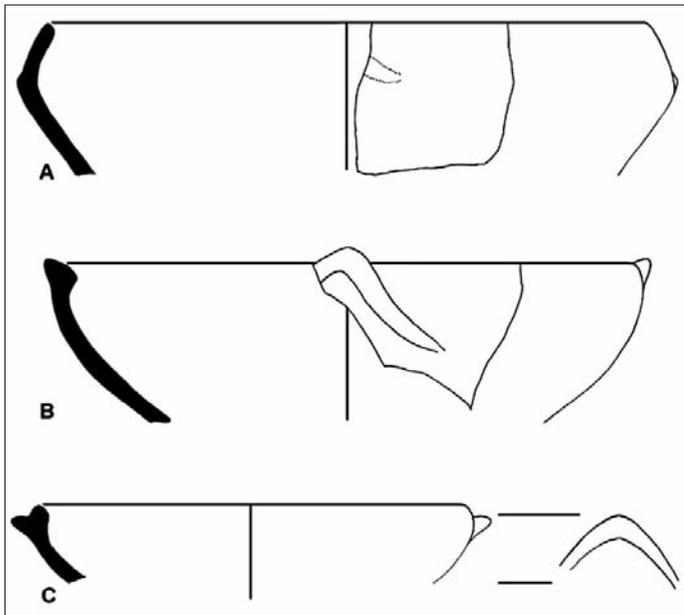


FIG. 10: A. Cup B/P 102 from Bahrija; B. Coppa B/P 101 from Bahrija; C. Coppa B/P 101d from Bahrija (scale 1:4, drawings by D. Cali).

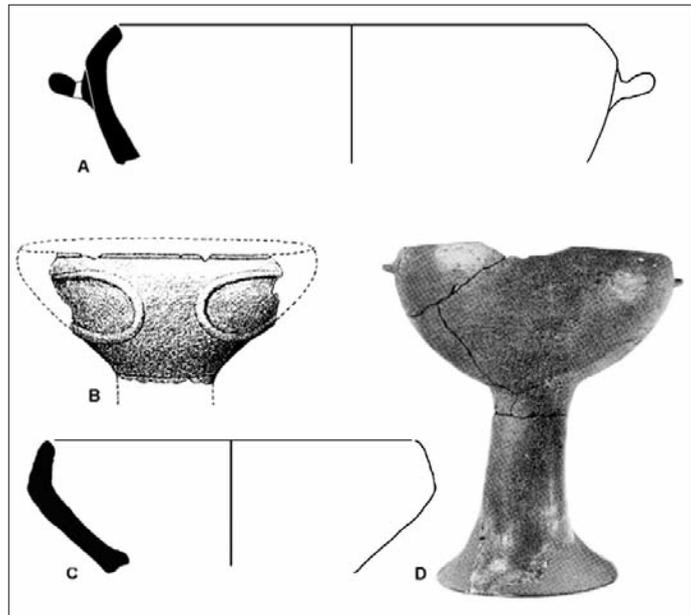


FIG. 11: A. Cup CA/01 from San Paolillo of Catania (scale 1:6, drawing by D. Cali); B. Cup from t. 9 of Cozzo del Pantano (ORSI 1893); C. Cup MA 88/96 from Grotte di Marineo of Licodia Eubea (scale 1:6, drawing by D. Tanasi); D. Cup from hut gamma VIII of Lipari (BERNABÒ BREA, CAVALIER 1980).

central-western Sicily.<sup>1</sup> Due to the chronology of the tomb 2 of Thapsos to the Thapsos II phase,<sup>2</sup> it is possible to define the chronology of the cup B/P 102 to 1400/1380-1310/1300 B.C.

In this way, the Thapsos phase II, parallel to the LH IIIA 2, becomes at the same time the climax of the Maltese and Mycenaean presence in Sicily, and the beginning, for the moment, of the Sicilian and Mycenaean presence in Malta.

To sum up preliminarily the most significant results so far achieved we have: the quantification and typologically recognition of the Borg in-Nadur pottery presence in Sicily; the identification of two principal hubs and probable redistribution points, namely Thapsos and Cozzo del Pantano; the identification of a Maltese pottery set used in some Sicilian funerary contexts; the chronological definition of the climax of the Borg in-Nadur pottery presence in Sicily; the identification of the first Thapsos pottery in Malta related to Thapsos phases II-III.

This new data has, however, left unsolved many problems that have a central position in the interpretation process of the dynamics of this interconnection. In fact, the reason for the notable increase in Maltese frequentation of Sicily in the Middle Bronze Age is still unknown as well as the meaning of the Maltese vessels and pottery sets found mostly in the Sicilian funerary contexts.

To focus on these two problems, the sudden appearance in Malta of raw materials that were not locally available, such as bronze and lead, together with the presence of only a few sherds of Mycenaean pottery, and the fact that Mycenaean people seem to have excluded the Maltese archipelago from their routes, suggests that the increasing Maltese presence in Sicily in the Middle Bronze Age might have been directly connected to the commercial activities there of the Mycenaean merchants. It is also important to consider that the Sicilian indigenous elites, controlling the commerce in the emporia,<sup>3</sup> might not have been willing to let the Maltese people have direct contacts with the Mycenaean entrepreneurs to acquire the goods they were looking for. Therefore, it is possible that the indigenous elites took on the role of middlemen in the Maltese-Mycenaean relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the large amount of Maltese pottery in Sicily, it could be suggested that it was offered to the Sicilian local elites to acquire the right to commerce with Mycenaean merchants or to get the Mycenaean merchandise from them, and that the set was used by indigenous elites as an exotic and alternative version of the local set used for the ritual funerary feast, composed of vessels with the same shape and function. It is believable that the Maltese pottery with its strange metal-like surface, so different and technologically well developed, could be considered exotic and worthy by the Sicilian elites controlling the commercial trade. The discovery of Maltese pottery, in some cases huge versions of fine vessels without practical use, inside warehouses A and B of Thapsos could testify to the donation of a symbolic gift of pottery. From this point of view, the presence of Borg in-Nadur pottery in funerary and domestic contexts could be interpreted as exotic objects acquired by local middlemen used together with other rare Aegean goods to enrich their tombs, or stored in the warehouses with other foreign merchandise or used in their houses as every day pots as an alternative to similar local vessels. Furthermore, the hypothesis of a conscious use of the Maltese pottery set could also be confirmed by the practice attested in the Thapsos ritual funerary feast of substituting the local vessels of the set with the Mycenaean version of them so as to display a privileged status for the deceased and his group.<sup>5</sup>

Another suggestion is that the Maltese pottery was the personal pottery of Maltese peoples coming to Sicily and staying to live within the local communities, and the pottery set was consciously used for ritual reasons by the same Maltese peoples, living and dying in Sicily. In a situation in which Maltese merchants were regularly coming to Sicily, it is possible that some peoples could have been chosen to stay permanently in local villages, and that some of them could have died and been buried in Sicily. But, if we can suggest this for the Borg in-Nadur pottery in domestic contexts, we can't easily extend this interpretation to the evidence of the tombs because of our ignorance about contemporary Maltese funerary customs. But, it is possible to hazard the conjecture that

<sup>1</sup> Vanzetti type 17: see VANZETTI 2004, pp. 321, 323, fig. 7; Specimen Sc 88/91 from Scirinda: see CASTELLANA 2000, pp. 192-193.

<sup>2</sup> ALBERTI 2004, pp. 115-116, note 147.

<sup>3</sup> MILITELLO 2004, pp. 328-330.

<sup>4</sup> ALBERTI 2006, pp. 420-422.

<sup>5</sup> TANASI 1999, p. 46.

the Maltese peoples adopted the inhumation practice in hypogeal tombs of the Sicilian peoples and used their ritual pottery set to perform the ceremony that they were used to carrying out.

To sum up, the discovery of Thapsos pottery in Malta indicates either a process of importation of Sicilian goods, or the beginning of a movement of Sicilian peoples to the Maltese Archipelago. This process developed during the Thapsos II phase (LH III A2) when Maltese merchants entered into the commercial network of Sicilian elites and Mycenaean entrepreneurs, who excluded the Maltese Archipelago from their routes. Finally the presence of Borg-in-Nadur pottery in both Sicilian domestic and funerary contexts indicates the existence of a high degree of pervasion between these two indigenous cultures that has never before been suggested.

In conclusion, the fact that Mycenaean frequentation lowers drastically in the Thapsos III phase (LH IIIB 1), together with the Maltese presence, and the fact that the complete absence of Mycenaean commercial exchanges in the subsequent North Pantalica phase (LH IIIB 1-LH IIIC) coincides with the quite total disappearance of Maltese activities, strengthens the argument that the reason for Maltese frequentation of Sicily during the Middle Bronze Age was contact with Mycenaean merchants.

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COMPOSTO IN CARATTERE DANTE MONOTYPE DALLA  
FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE, PISA · ROMA.  
STAMPATO E RILEGATO NELLA  
TIPOGRAFIA DI AGNANO, AGNANO PISANO (PISA).

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*Giugno 2010*

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