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Editorial

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Editorial

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The papers in this special section of *Open Archaeology* are a selection from the International Obsidian Conference held on the island of Lipari, Italy, in June 2016. With the permission of the Regione Siciliana Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana, and thanks to its director in 2016, Maria Amalia Mastelloni, the IOC was hosted at the Museo Luigi Bernabò Brea (Regional Pole of the Aeolian islands for cultural sites, archaeological park and Regional Archaeological Museum “Luigi Bernabò Brea”). Today, we thank the director Rosario Vilardo for adhering to the publication of the conference proceedings.

Lipari is located in the center of the Mediterranean, and its own geological obsidian was widely utilized and distributed during prehistory.

Obsidian is a volcanic glass that occurs only in certain geological localities around the world, and starting in the 1960s successful chemical studies have been done to identify the sources of obsidian artifacts and reconstruct distribution and trade patterns. The papers included here represent recent studies on the Mediterranean, Africa, Near East, East Asia, and South America.



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The Regional Archaeological Museum “Luigi Bernabò Brea” in Lipari

The museum focuses on the seven small Aeolian Islands, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2000, and all of volcanic origin. Geological obsidian was formed mainly on Lipari, with some on Volcano due to an 18th century AD eruption, while none has been produced on Stromboli. Archaeological obsidian has been found at prehistoric sites on several of the Aeolian Islands. The Lipari museum is located inside the Castle, a complex monument built in different stages, primarily from the Norman Age until the sixteenth century. The area itself was built up already during the Neolithic, Copper Age and Bronze Age, and reused in Greek and Roman times. Bronze Age huts, with four different stratigraphic layers, are still visible today.

The museum is divided in different sections, including offices, library, storage rooms and research spaces, which use various buildings across the acropolis on which the castle is located. Its main sections open to the public are the Prehistoric Section, the Epigraphical Section, the Section of the Minor Islands, the Greek and Roman Section, the Vulcanological Section, and the Section of Contemporary Art. The exhibitions are renovated as new discoveries and research on the excavated materials progresses. There are also exhibits on the islands of Filicudi and Panarea.

This interdisciplinary museum is a rarity, since it contains vast collections representing a fairly small territory, and it takes the approach of linking the geography of the islands, which changed frequently because of volcanic and erosive forces, with the very complex human history of the islands. Nearly every culture and civilization that crossed this slice of sea at the heart of the Mediterranean left remarkable and long-lasting signs on the islands and their peculiar culture, not too different from those of the nearby regions of Sicily and Calabria, and yet always distinctive. It is obvious that the location and easiness in accessing volcanic materials (obsidian in prehistory, pumice until recently, etc.) has characterized this area: volcanoes not only shaped the islands, they shaped their history as well.

This conference on obsidian held in Lipari has provided an excellent example of this relationship, focusing on the earliest times, and it attracted local interest with several local people attending. Most importantly, the conference provided a glimpse of the importance of obsidian and its studies across the world, helping local residents and authorities to appreciate the heritage that in most cases is next door to them, and depends on their vigilance and appreciation to be preserved for future generations.

The conference participants benefited from free entry to the museum during the conference, as well as having a guided tour led by Dr. Maria Clara Martinelli, with additional detail on the significant lithic collections.

The Tour of the Island of Lipari

The participants to the conference were given a short tour of the island of Lipari. In particular, the obsidian sources of Canneto Dentro and Gabelotto Gorge (used during prehistoric times) were visited. The site of Canneto Dentro appeared being heavily built over by recent developments, resulting in slopes with obsidian and pumice becoming few and relatively difficult to approach. Gabelotto Gorge is instead threatened by natural erosion. There are no visible traces of ancient mining of obsidian. Lava flows after Roman times provide larger and more easily accessible chunks of obsidian elsewhere on the same island, and avoid most effects by mass tourism. The tour participants could see how these locations are threatened, and how the constant changes, both geological and related to human developments make it difficult to read the ancient landscape. It was still possible on this occasion to walk through a path leading from the obsidian fields of Gabelotto Gorge, higher in altitude, to the beach of Canneto. At the beach, a dried stream that once produced the gorge now marks one end of the modern beach.

The guided tour also included the San Calogero ancient thermal spa. Most of the area appears Roman, but one building in particular dates to prehistoric times and was used until the nineteenth century; it has been repaired in Roman times. Inside, a volcanic spring is still active. Its water is not potable, due to the high levels of chemicals in it, and may have been warmer in antiquity since the conical building was recycled by

the Romans as a thermal bath. Thermal springs reaching the temperature of 50° C are still present nearby. The Bronze Age building, unique for its architecture locally, has been compared to Aegean rock-cut tombs. The area is now called the “EcoMuseum of Memories”, and it uses the spaces of the ancient spa with the soothing sound of the running water to present many facets of local culture to anyone interested, with particular focus on the millenary history of pumice mining and use. Obsidian, thermal waters, pumice and other products from the fertile soils like capers are all the result of volcanic activity, directly or indirectly.

The tour was a good reminder to all participants that obsidian, like most other volcanic products, can create a rich and yet insulated world where it is gathered, normally in secluded or marginal areas due to the volcanic activity. The local culture established in these conditions can be very impressive, and the economy associated vastly out of scale. There are also the studies of typology and the impact of obsidian as a product on regions often very far from its provenance. In this case, “production” and “consumption” can be quite different, and produce separate narratives.

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