

ENCOUNTERING ENVIRONMENTS

Natural conditions for subsistence and trade at
Monte Polizzo, Sicily 650-550 BC

Cecilia Sandström

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Abstract

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AUTHOR: Cecilia Sandström

LANGUAGE: English

SUPERVISORS: Ingela Wiman and Tamar Hodos

DEPARTMENT: Department of Historical Studies, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, S E - 4 05 30 Göteborg

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The overall aim of this thesis is to deepen our knowledge about indigenous western Sicilians commonly called the Elymians and, ultimately, to recognise them as independent actors in Sicilian history. A vital part of this endeavour is to assess the Elymian role in regional trade and to evaluate the subsistence challenges they faced. Monte Polizzo, inhabited for just 75 years (625-550 BC), has been considered suitable as a model for discussing these topics. Situated in western Sicily it was strategically situated with an excellent vantage point between the Phoenician settlement of Motya, the Greek settlement of Selinus, and the indigenous settlement of Segesta.

The first step on this path is to balance representations of various ancient peoples and their actions. The theoretical approaches applied bring the focus to how peoples in the region interacted. Greco-centric discourse is bypassed in favour of approaching the archaeological record from the Elymian perspective. In addition, a holistic theory about nature-human interaction and the functions of various subsystems implemented in the settlement structure is applied. An important factor in this work is to understand in full the environmental complexity of the site and its surroundings. The methodology used to address this is compiled available palynological and geomorphological information. In order to understand the significance of and navigational possibilities of the rivers draining Monte Polizzo, a geomorphological river assessment have been commissioned. In a second step, I evaluate imported archaeological material found at the site--with specific regards to faunal and palaeobotanical analyses--as well as imported transport amphorae. The significance of the Monte Polizzo amphorae assemblage is compared in quantity and variety to other indigenous settlements in the region in order to understand the trade network in a wider Mediterranean context. This included gateways through which the Monte Polizzians acquired imported products.

An overall analysis of the archaeological material at Monte Polizzo shows there were different levels of economic resources in different domestic contexts. Nevertheless, the large number of imported transport amphorae from Etruria, Corinth, and Eastern Aegean production centres found in all the domestic and communal contexts suggest that trade was a vital part of this society. The study further shows, that the Monte Polizzians were not limited to trading in the markets of Selinus or Motya. Instead, rivers and estuaries were an important component in how they connected with overseas traders and other various networks.

The inhabitants initially had enough land for the settlements to subsist within a radius of about 5-10 kilometres. Adjoining river valleys were used for agriculture, as pastures, and short distance transhumance. The Monte Polizzians were engaged in a multi-cropping fail-safe system to secure subsistence if environmental changes occurred.

However, the investigation demonstrates that the Monte Polizzians exceeded the settlement's carrying capacity only in 75 years. This is based on the combined results of environmental studies exhibiting considerable ground on which to draw such a conclusion. For example: deforestation due to increasing need for timber, degraded soils due to pastoral activities, and a constant evolution towards marshier landscapes and possibly, consequently, malaria. These factors combined to result in less land for agricultural and pastoral usage. The fire that ruined the settlement in 550 BC might have been just one catastrophe out of many long- and short-term environmental changes that caused the permanent abandonment of the area. If that was in fact the case, then this final blaze was not merely something that happened to the Monte Polizzians but an event that arose - like much else this work has shown - out of a complex of decisions made by an active and engaged people.

KEYWORDS: Ancient Sicily, Western Sicily, Monte Polizzo, Elymian, Indigenous, Iron Age, Archaic, Ancient environment, Archaeology, Geoarchaeology, Landscape Archaeology, Ecology, Geomorphology, Rivers, Ancient navigability, Subsistence, Land use, Trade, Trade routes, Transport amphorae, Connectivity, Household economy, Palynology, Exchange, Selinus, Motya, Segesta