

B A B E S C H

Eleventh BABESCH Byvanck Lecture

Roger J. A. Wilson

*Dining with the dead in early Byzantine Sicily:
Excavations at Punta Secca near Ragusa*



*Tuesday 28 November 2017
at the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden*

The BABESCH Foundation



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Dining with the dead in early Byzantine Sicily

Excavations at Punta Secca near Ragusa

Abstract

Punta Secca (in Ragusa province) on the south coast of Sicily is a late Roman and early Byzantine village, partly excavated in the 1960s and 1970s and identified, not altogether convincingly, as the Kaukana of the ancient sources, where Belisarius set sail for the conquest of Africa in 533 AD. This lecture concerns a more recent excavation, which focused on one building, a house, and examined in detail its building phases and the commercial contacts that its inhabitants enjoyed with other parts of Sicily – and indeed with the wider Mediterranean world. Finds include one of the earliest examples in Europe of a thimble, and what is arguably the earliest depiction anywhere of a backgammon board. The biggest surprise was the discovery of a substantial, built tomb placed in what was probably the yard of the house in the second quarter of the seventh century AD, and of evidence for associated feasting in honour of the deceased. Who was inside the tomb, and why did that person deserve this level of respect? What evidence was there for feasts, and what did they eat? And what was the tomb doing here, in a domestic setting, rather than in the village cemetery, or indeed, since the deceased was Christian, in or near the settlement's church? These and other intriguing questions are addressed in this lecture, and the discovery is set in the context of what else is known about such practices in late Roman and early Byzantine funerary culture.

Punta Secca, in Ragusa province in south-east Sicily (*fig. 1*), is a sleepy former fishing village known to millions of TV viewers around the globe as the home of Inspector Salvo Montalbano, who 'lives' in an attractive house on the seafront. For archaeologists it is the site of a late Roman and early Byzantine village settlement, the existence of which was first noted by the indefatigable founder of modern Sicilian archaeology, Paolo Orsi, at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ It became better known to scholars, however, only in the 1960s and early 1970s, when Punta Secca was beginning to expand, and new seaside homes were being constructed for wealthy Ragusans: ancient remains were uncovered in the process.

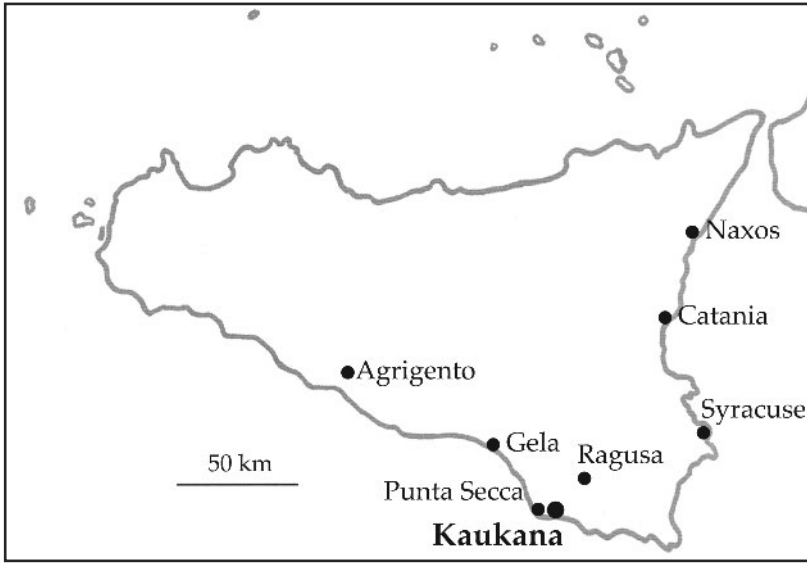


Fig. 1. Map of Sicily showing the location of the excavation ('Kaukana'), on the eastern outskirts of Punta Secca (drawn by Charlotte Wilson).

Dr Paola Pelagatti, from the Syracuse Superintendency of Antiquities, was called upon to intervene.² Some two dozen buildings were identified in whole or in part, haphazardly laid out along the coastal strip (*fig. 2*), in a settlement which Pelagatti estimated, on the basis of the numismatic evidence, had been occupied between the middle of the fourth and the middle of the seventh century AD. Pelagatti's task was above all to identify where ancient houses were situated and where they were not, so that the modern builders could go ahead on plots devoid of ancient structures. Time and restricted funding, however, prevented Pelagatti from doing much more than identify many of the ancient remains on the surface, by exposing the upper parts of walls and so establishing individual ground-plans. Pelagatti did fully excavate what was left of House 1, the rest of which had already fallen into the sea, and she also carried out extensive excavations in a little paleochristian church (no. 18 on *fig. 2*). Some of the structures found were backfilled and left as vacant plots; some were preserved as far as they had been excavated, and left visible within fenced enclosures; and the core of the late antique village, including the church, was incorporated within an archaeological park. Some limited excavation was carried out by Giovanni Di Stefano in selected buildings during the 1980s and 1990s,³ but there the matter rested until a new project, the one to be described tonight, was started by the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 2008. Pelagatti believed that the site was to be identified with the Kaukana of the

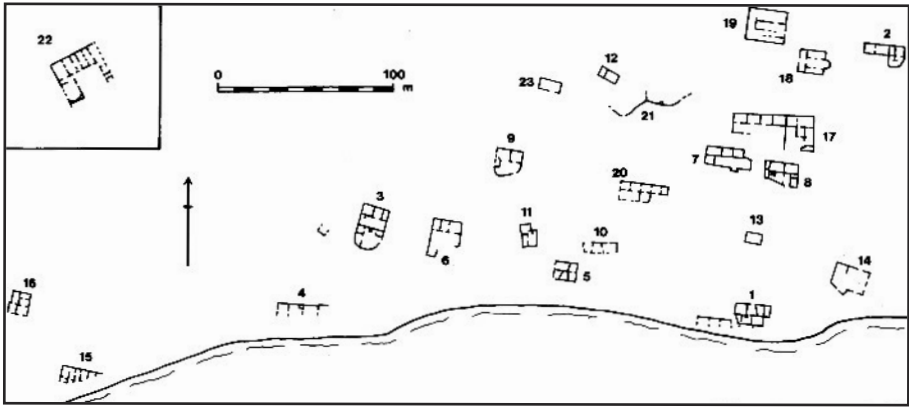


Fig. 2. Plan of the ancient settlement as so far known. Building 22 (inset) lay further to the south-west of the main village. At the time of the drawing of this plan, Building 6 had been incorrectly surveyed (compare Fig. 3) (after Wilson 1990, 230, fig. 185a).

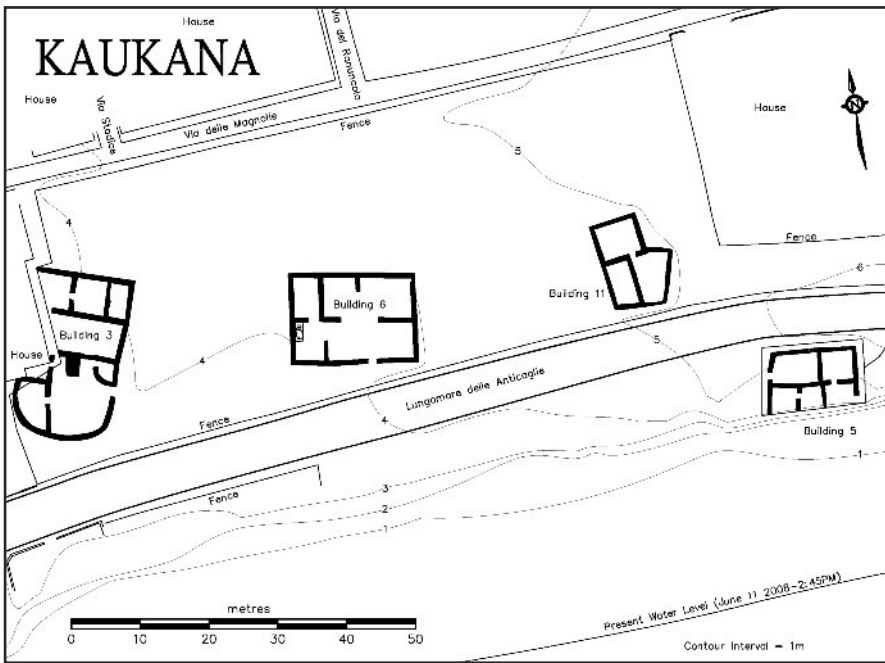


Fig. 3. New plan of the central part of the ancient settlement, showing the position of Buildings 3, 5, 6 and 11 in relationship to modern streets and houses. Part of Building 3 had already been built over by a 1960s house, which prompted the start of archaeological interventions (plan prepared by Professor Alan Weston, British Columbia Institute of Technology, Vancouver).



Fig. 4. View of the excavations in progress in the 2010 season, seen from the east (© R.J.A. Wilson).

ancient sources, the place where Belisarius set sail with his fleet to gain control of Vandal Africa for the Byzantines in AD 533,⁴ but in the absence of a decent harbour at Punta Secca, I am not convinced that the identification is correct.⁵ Nevertheless the name *Kaukana* has stuck, and the modern *frazione* where the ruins lie is called *Caucana* today, the name by which the site is best known.

The purpose of the UBC project was to excavate a single building in this ancient settlement, try and understand its chronology and phasing, and attempt to reconstruct from the artefacts found there its trading relationships, both locally and with other parts of the Mediterranean world. We chose a building, no. 6 in Pelagatti's numbering system (*fig. 3*), that we thought had not been touched in the earlier work. It measures 18.40 m by 13.30 m. All that was visible on the surface when we started work were one or two courses of stonework, and the plan suggested a structure consisting of a large open area or yard with four rooms opening off it. Its similarity to others of the same type elsewhere at Punta Secca made it highly likely that it was planned and built as a domestic dwelling, and nothing found during our work caused us to change this view. Excavation over three sea-

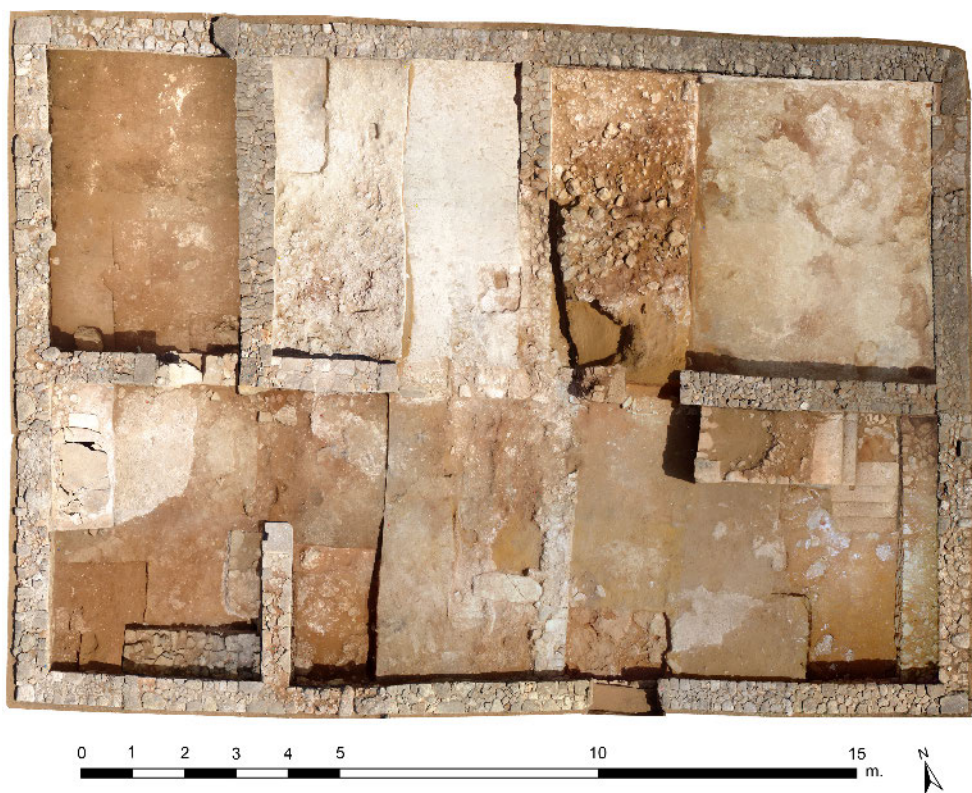


Fig. 5. Aerial view of Building 6 at the conclusion of the excavation in 2010 (© Lorenzo Zurla, Ragusa).

sons (*fig. 4*) showed that one of the ‘rooms’ was in fact an open area partitioned off from the rest of the yard, and also that there was a staircase leading to an upper floor (*fig. 5*). It was also discovered that the centre of the building had been ripped out by a bulldozer in the 1960s, halted in the nick of time before the entire ancient remains were destroyed. The apparently repentant modern builder then reconstructed (quite skilfully!) part of the south wall that had been destroyed, but an internal partition wall in the yard, and the south-east corner of room 1 (and the south-west corner of room 2), were lost to archaeology at this time.

The house

Our excavations in 2008–2010 showed that Building 6 was not erected as part of a single ‘event’, but rather went through a series of alterations within a comparatively short period of time (*fig. 6*).⁶ Before we started out, on the basis of

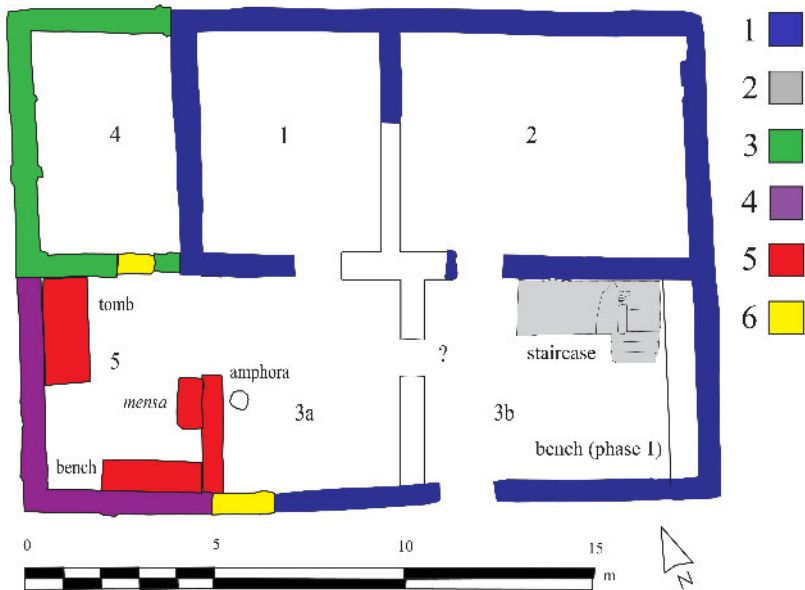


Fig. 6. Plan showing the six different construction phases identified as having taken place during the life of the building (prepared by Carolyn Laferrière).

Pelagatti's suggested chronology, I thought we might be excavating a house of perhaps the later fourth or fifth century, in use for a couple of hundred years. Rather we found no pottery or coins in Building 6 earlier than the last decade or two of the sixth century, so the house must have been a late arrival in the village, if the first structures elsewhere really do belong to the mid-fourth century. The walls, which stand up to 1.85 m high, show a number of different construction techniques, and these help to identify different building phases, together with the observation of structural abutments ('straight joints', where two walls abut but are not bonded into one another, as they would be if built at the same time). In the first phase, the dwelling consisted of just two rooms (which we have numbered 1 and 2) with a yard (3) and a bench along its east side. In a second phase a staircase was added (*fig. 7*) and two extra rooms were built over 1 and 2 at first-floor level, doubling the house in size. In Phase 3 a further room was added (4), and, soon afterwards, the yard wall was extended to meet it (Phase 4). In Phase 5 the western end of the yard was partitioned off, and a bench and a tomb inserted. The final, minor, building activity (Phase 6) entailed a rebuilding of part of the south wall and the blocking of the doorway into 4. All these changes took place over a very short period of time. We think that phases 1 to 4 occurred between *c.* 580/600 and *c.* 625/630 AD, and that phases 5 and 6 happened between about



Fig. 7. View from the south of the phase-1 bench in the yard (right) and the phase-2 staircase to the upper floor. The entrance from the yard to room 2 can also be seen, at top left. Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).



Fig. 8. Aerial view from the south-west of Building 6, on completion of the excavation in June 2010. Scales: each 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).



Fig. 9. Room 1, view from the north-east, showing the ground floor (left) and the unexcavated half of the slumped upper floor in situ (right). The path taken by the bulldozer in the 1960s which almost destroyed the house can be seen on the left, including the damage done to the south-east corner of room 1's white lime-mortar floor. Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).

625/630 and 640/650 AD at the latest. The whole period of activity in Building 6 at Punta Secca is therefore likely to have been embraced within the span of fifty or sixty years, most of it in the first half of the seventh century. We are, therefore, dealing with a building and artefacts which belong firmly in the early Byzantine period. Sicily at the time was part of the Byzantine Empire, ruled from Constantinople (*fig. 8*).

Although no part of the walling of the upper storey above rooms 1 and 2 survives, the floors of both upper chambers were still present in their entirety, thanks to rather unusual circumstances. In Room 1, for example, the floor at ground level was of good-quality white lime-mortar, and the walls were covered with white plaster (*fig. 9*). The last items used by the occupants before the abandonment of the house lay in a thin occupation level of dirty sand on top of the floor. When the house was deserted, with the door, no doubt, swinging open on its hinges, sand started blowing into the room. The site is right on the edge of the beach,



Fig. 10. Room 1 from the south-east, showing the remaining door jamb of the entrance into room 1 from the yard (left), and the upper floor slumped onto wind-blown sand, which is at its highest nearest the doorway. Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).

and wind-blown sand is a constant problem, today as in antiquity. With nobody to clear it away, the sand built up, especially in the part of the room closest to the open yard. The floor of the upper room was also of lime mortar, presumably supported on a thin timber lath laid between strong floor joists.⁷ When the latter finally rotted the upper floor came crashing down. Or rather it slumped down, and came to rest on the huge bank of sand already blown into the room below. The profile, created by removing a little less than half of the upper floor, shows clearly that as we move further from the yard (which is on the left in *fig. 10*), less and less sand accumulated, so that at one point the upper floor and the ground floor are only 5 cm apart; but the profile of the upper floor rises again towards the far wall, because some wind-blown sand, having got that far, was held up by the north wall of the room and so a small accumulation rested there too. Among the items crushed by the collapse of the upper floor was a large amphora in the north-west corner and a globular pot containing eggs, which had miraculously survived (in part) the fall of the ceiling on top of it. Among other finds here, some pieces of wall plaster with scratched letters and lines on them lay on the floor of



Fig. 11. Room 2, from the north, showing the white lime-mortar floor (of less good quality than that in room 1), and white plaster on the walls. The remains of the unexcavated part of the upper floor (compare Fig. 5, top right) can be seen at the far right. Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).

the upper room. Whether these were just idle jottings, or part of a writing exercise, or a portion of a more systematic piece of cursive writing, the fragmentary nature of the evidence does not allow us to say.

Room 2, which also had a white mortar floor and white plaster on the walls (*fig. 11*), showed a similar pattern of use to Room 1 – occupation debris on the floor, and slumped ceiling/first floor pavement at a higher level, with a lot of sand in between the two. Here, however, after an initial quantity of wind-blown sand had been deposited, the abandoned room had been used as a builder's tip, and pieces of broken up concrete pebble-dash floor, and broken wall plaster with reed backing, had been dumped in the room, presumably from some building site nearby. Of the coins on the floor, the latest is a near-mint issue of the Emperor Heraclius, struck at Catania in AD 620/621 (*fig. 12*). There were five other coins in the same archaeological context, the earliest being worn issues of Maurice Tiberius dating to AD 582/585 (the oldest coins found in the excavations). A rather worn *folles*



Fig. 12. Decanummus, copper alloy coin, of the Emperor Heraclius, struck in AD 620/621: (a) obverse, depicting the head of the Emperor; (b) reverse, showing the year of minting ('ANNO' to the left and 'XI' to the right), the mint (at CAT[ania]), and the denomination (I, standing for ten nummi). Diameter: 14.5 mm (© R.J.A. Wilson).



Fig. 13. Follis of the Emperor Phocas of AD 602/603: (a) obverse, depicting Phocas to the left and his empress Leontia, nimbate, on the right, both holding cruciform sceptres; (b) reverse, showing the year of minting ('ANNO' with a faint 'T' to right, indicating the first year of his reign), the place of minting (KYZ[icus] in the Sea of Marmara, north-west Turkey), and the Greek letter mu, for the denomination (40 nummi). Diameter: 31 mm (© R.J.A. Wilson).

of the Emperor Phocas of AD 602/603 comes from a compacted occupation surface at the west end of the yard (*fig. 13*). Together with the ceramic fine wares, the coins confirm that the construction and first occupation of the house probably did not start much before AD 600, nor are rooms 1 and 2 likely to have continued in use more than a few years after the coin of 620/1 was minted, perhaps until somewhere around AD 625 or 630.

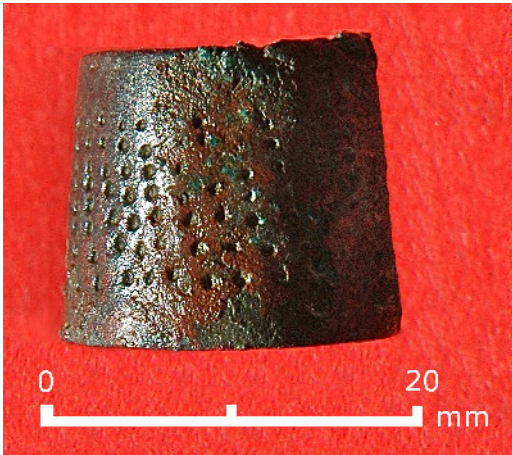


Fig. 14. Copper-alloy thimble, found in the occupation deposit on the floor of room 2; diameter at base: 17 mm; height 16 mm; weight 4.771 grams (© R.J.A. Wilson).

Another item of interest from the occupation level of Room 2 is a copper alloy thimble (*fig. 14*).⁸ One might think that the finding of such a simple, everyday object would occasion no surprise, but the metal thimble was not around in the Mediterranean area in Greek or Roman times. A catalyst to their first appearance is likely to have been the increasing use in early Byzantine times of steel for needles, partly because of improving technology, but above all because of the increasing fashion for wearing silk garments in the seventh century. These required steel needles for sewing up or mending. The needles had to be thinner and of finer quality than the thick copper-alloy ones used in earlier centuries, because the latter would have wreaked havoc with delicate silk. It is too bold to claim that the appearance of the thimble at Punta Secca necessarily implies the presence of silk garments, because the finds in general do not suggest a high-status lifestyle; but presumably once metal thimbles had been introduced they came to be used for any work which more sensibly could use a better finger protection than a leather guard could do. Our thimble, which was left behind on the floor of Room 2 not later than the end of the first quarter of the seventh century, is one of the earliest closely datable examples found anywhere in the Mediterranean.⁹

Room 4 was added to the original core building in a later period (Phase 3). Its north, west and south walls are built in a completely different style to that of the walls of Phase 1, large rounded river boulders being split in half and set in place, with small stones in the interstices (*fig. 15*). No plaster was ever applied to the walls here, and the floor was never more than a rough stone one. The room may have been intended as a store, but if so it had been largely emptied of its contents before the last phase of the building's life, when the doorway to Area 5 to the south



Fig. 15. Room 4 from the north. The wall on the left formed the western external side of the Phase-1 house. Part of the blocking wall which eventually closed off access to this room is still visible in the doorway. Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).

was blocked up, and room 4 therefore effectively sealed off. Unlike in rooms 1 and 2, which presented plentiful evidence of roofing tiles, none were found in room 4, and it may therefore have had a flat timber roof. On top of it stood a small stone basin, perhaps to collect rainwater. When the roof timbers gave way the basin fell too, and, as with the collapse of the upper floors of rooms 1 and 2, it came to rest on a bank of sand which by then had already half-filled the interior of room 4.

The tomb

It was in the southern-west side of the house, in an open yard that we designated Area 5, that the most extraordinary discovery of our excavations at Punta Secca was made. An imposing tomb, not sunk into the ground but built up from floor level, had been constructed: aligned north–south, it measured 2.77 m by 1.20 m and stood 0.84 m high (*fig. 16*). The cover slabs of the tomb formed a motley



Fig. 16. Area 5, the tomb on completion of the excavation, seen from the south-east. Scale: 1 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).



Fig. 17. The tomb with its cover slabs in situ as first found, before the removal of the sand around it, seen from the east. The position of a libation hole at the left-hand end of the large slab is marked by a small stone set on edge which is plugging it. The cracked slab on the right with white mortar on it is the one that later was found to have an inscription on its underside (see Fig. 30). Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).



Fig. 18. The crania seen (from the north) emerging during the excavation, together with large quantities of calcite and a few big stones, here still in situ. Scale: 20 cm (© R.J.A. Wilson).

collection, principally one massively thick and heavy stone and two much smaller ones, of which one, liberally coated with plaster, was already cracked into four pieces (*fig. 17*). The latter stone proved later to be of exceptional interest because of what lay on its other side (see below). The large slab was also of significance, because it had a circular hole 10 cm in diameter, still blocked by a small stone. This was a libation hole, proving that a time-honoured tradition known to stretch right back to the Chalcolithic period in the third millennium BC, that of making offerings to the dead, was still continuing in Sicily in the seventh century AD.

The tomb was soon found to have contained more than a single body, as two crania appeared after the uppermost deposits of sand had been removed. They were accompanied by a great quantity of calcite (calcium carbonate), and some large stones were also set on top of the calcite, perhaps in a ritual act to prevent the bodies from ‘escaping’ (*fig. 18*). One skeleton was that of an adult woman,



Fig. 19. The skeletons in situ (south is at the top). Note how the woman's left hip- and thigh-bones have been pushed to the right during the second interment, so that they touch the wall of the tomb, in order to make space for the child's body. Scale: 50 cm (© R.J.A. Wilson).

between about 22 and 25 years old, and the other was of a child, aged about 4 (*fig. 19*). DNA analysis carried out on a tooth from each individual demonstrated that the child was female and that the two were consanguineous – in other words, that they were almost certainly mother and daughter.¹⁰ It was clear that the daughter was inserted into the tomb at a secondary period, not only because the plaster sealing on the tomb can be seen to have been broken for that event, but also because part of the skeleton of the already defleshed woman had been pushed to one side to make room for the child. The woman was about 1.56 m tall (five feet one and a half inches), slightly above average for females in the early medieval period.¹¹ There were no grave goods. If there had been any at the time of the two burials, they were removed subsequently when the tomb was rifled, since at some stage after the burial of the little girl, the tomb was broken into again. In the subsequent tidying up, presumably by the family, some of the child's smaller bones had ended up inside the woman's cranium, which had been used as a kind of im-



Fig. 20. Area 5 from the west, showing the mensa (offering table) (centre) and bench (right). Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).

promptu trash-bin. It was then that the great quantity of calcite was emptied into the tomb, including some pieces of plaster that were placed underneath each cranium as ‘pillows’. A very large and heavy cover slab was also prepared, in order to seal the tomb, in the hope that its two occupants could henceforth rest in peace, and some assorted other stones were placed or replaced alongside it. There was, however, no covering of plaster over the top of the horizontal grave slabs in this final stage of sealing the burials, as there had been each time when the original inhumations were made. Nevertheless, the family clearly did not intend the tomb to be disturbed again, and it was not, until our arrival in 2008.¹²

At the same time as the tomb was constructed, a cross-wall was built to partition off from the rest of the yard the area where the tomb lay. A bench was also provided against the south wall, and a low offering table (*mensa*) along the newly-erected east wall (*fig. 20*). It is clear, especially from the quantity of pottery and amphorae found in and around this area, that there were periodic visitations to the tomb after the woman had been buried, and that meals had been held at her graveside. On the ledge at the north end of the tomb was a Sicilian wine amphora;



Fig. 21. African white-slipped amphora in situ, upside down, in the south-west corner of Area 5. Scale: 1 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).



Fig. 22. Part of another African amphora (top) and a Sicilian wine amphora (foreground), found immediately below that shown in Fig. 21. Scale: 20 cm (© R.J.A. Wilson).



Fig. 23. The surviving part of an Egyptian wine amphora from the Nile Valley (Late Roman 7). Scale: 5 cm (© R.J.A. Wilson).

a globular amphora, also of regional type, lay on the tomb itself; three superimposed amphorae, two African containers probably containing oil and a further Sicilian wine amphora, were found upside down in the south-west corner of the area (*figs. 21-22*); and two casseroles were found nearby, also upside down, and with their bottoms smashed in. All around were dishes and plates of African red slip ware and African lamps, while an amphora that brought wine all the way from Egypt (*fig. 23*) lay just outside in the adjacent main yard.¹³ Among other imported eastern containers, Late Roman amphora type 1 (from eastern Cilicia in southern Turkey) and the one-handled Late Roman 3 type from south-western Turkey are also attested in our excavations. One of the lamps has a unique design on the discus (*fig. 24*), which might just be the earliest representation of a backgammon board: at any rate we know that a version of the game was already being played in the fifth century AD, and that the ‘points’ that are still a familiar feature of the backgammon board today had already appeared at least by the early medieval period.¹⁴ Another unparalleled find from this area is a ceramic scoop, provided with holes near the bottom, possibly to drain out the liquid in which



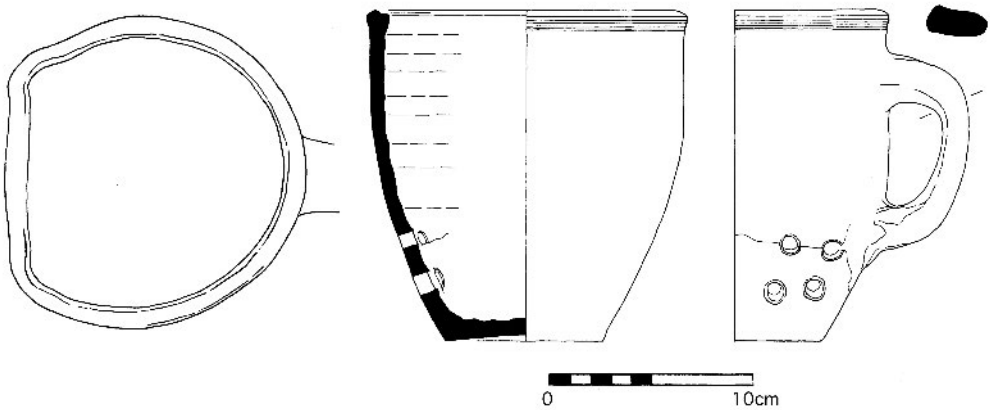
Fig. 24. African red slip lamp with unique decoration on the discus (a backgammon board?). Scale: 5 cm (© R.J.A. Wilson).

olives or some other fruit were preserved (*fig. 25*).¹⁵ Ceramic scoops have been found at two sites in northern Tunisia, but neither of those were provided with drainage holes.¹⁶ Ours at Punta Secca is a unique find.

Initially food for the graveside feasting was cooked in simple hearths in Area 3. Then, a little later, the bottom of a broken amphora was set in a new surface there and filled with charcoal to provide a fire, while a cooking vessel was suspended above it from a horizontal wooden arm, inserted into a hole that still remains in the adjacent wall. But the friends and family that came to party at the tomb faced a continual problem: the menace of wind-blown sand, which continued its relentless invasion of the site in the intervals between their visits. Rather than clear away the sand on each occasion, they merely partied on top of it. A section through the deposits in the tomb area shows a succession of layers of clean sand, dirty sand, clean sand and dirty sand, showing that frequentation of the tomb



Fig. 25. A ceramic scoop with holes for drainage: (a) photograph by the author (scale: 5 cm); (b) drawings by Sally Cann, Matrice, CB.



was periodic. One visitor lost a ring in front of the tomb (*fig. 26*). One can image his or her frustration as its owner kicked around in the sand looking for it, all to no avail: we found it 1400 years later, with its rather perfunctory engraved design on the bezel depicting a roaring lion below a crescent moon.¹⁷

Eventually the sand became so deep that the tomb was in danger of being entirely enveloped. At this stage the offering table (*mensa*) was already buried, and the bench was no longer serviceable for sitting on. Its originally smooth upper surface was robbed and a hearth was built on top of it, in the angle with the south and east walls of Area 5 (*fig. 27*). The burnt food remains in the hearth itself, and

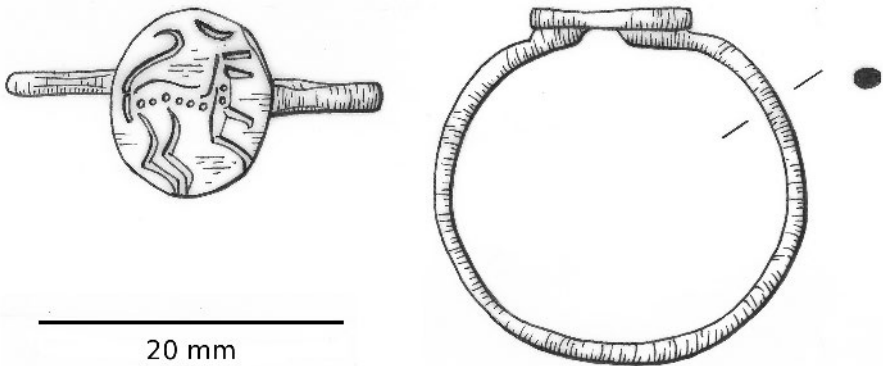


Fig. 26. A copper-alloy ring lost in front of the tomb, with the design of a roaring lion on the bezel below a crescent moon. Length of bezel (top to bottom): 12 mm. (a) photograph by the author; (b) drawing by Sally Cann, Matrice, CB.

especially in the rake-out immediately in front of it, suggest that they were primarily cooking cereals (bread wheat, barley and millet are present) and also vegetables (lentils and chickpea), but the absence of heavily burnt animal bones (only a few slightly charred ones, tossed as garbage into the dying embers) suggests that ready-prepared meats were brought to the site, either pre-cooked, salted or smoked. Among the bones found in the area around the tomb, pig and sheep/goat were present in roughly equal numbers, with a smaller percentage of chicken bones. Also likely to have been consumed here were fish (limpets and cuttlefish)



Fig. 27. Area 5 from the west during excavation (compare Fig. 20), showing burnt deposits (centre) raked out from a makeshift oven (top right) erected in the corner on top of what had been a bench (right). The stones of the mensa are just beginning to emerge (top left), and a smashed jug can be seen at bottom right beside the bench. Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).

and some fruit and nuts: figs, peach and almonds are attested, although only in small quantities.¹⁸ Because the top of the tomb was still visible at this time, it seems very likely that this last meal was still intended to honour the deceased.

No precise dating evidence came from the excavation around the burials (there were, for example, no coins), so we cannot be certain about precisely when the tomb was built and for how long visits to it went on. We have seen that occupation of the house is likely to have been discontinued sometime after the latest coins found in room 2 were minted, probably around 625 or 630. It seems inconceivable that the tomb can have been placed in the yard in a still-occupied house, because co-habitation of the living and the dead in the same dwelling space does not occur in antiquity except in the context of a monastery, and there is nothing to suggest that our house was ever used for anything other than domestic life. It seems therefore highly probable that when the woman died, and when a



Fig. 28. Area 5 from the north-west at the close of excavation, showing the tomb (foreground), the mensa (left) and the bench. The upper block of the entrance jamb (far left) is a re-used weight-stone from an olive press. Scale: 2 m (© R.J.A. Wilson).

Fig. 29. The graffito on the neck of the amphora shown in Fig. 21, a monogram of the letters NAEV(ii) (?) or AEL(ii) (?), in the genitive case, meaning 'belonging to Naeivius' or 'Aelius', with a small A and a small O incised above and below. Scale: 5 cm (© R.J.A. Wilson).



decision was taken to bury her in the yard of what was surely her own house, the rest of it was given up and the sand was left to build up undisturbed in rooms 1 and 2. The process of the sanding up of Area 5 may have taken a few years, perhaps as much as a decade, but we do not really know.

The absence of coins from the Syracuse mint, which started up around 650, and the absence also of a particular type of lamp made in Syracuse from around the middle of the seventh century, both finds which are ubiquitous in sites in south-east Sicily in the second half of the seventh century, suggest that by about 640 or at most by 650, the continual war against the invading sand was given up, and the tomb became invisible below it, after which it remained concealed and forgotten until our excavations began in 2008.

Context

For a 'monumental' tomb, what is called in French a *tombe privilégiée*, i.e. one built up prominently from the floor, to be found inside what seems to have been an ordinary house is an extraordinary discovery (*fig. 28*). In antiquity, burials are normally found in cemeteries located outside the area of the living, or else, from the early Christian period, in and around the local church, if the deceased was a Christian and could afford the cost of a privileged burial place in or near the church.¹⁹ Punta Secca is no exception. Even in this tiny community of two dozen houses, some Christians were buried close to the apse of the little church, just 200 m away from our house, and others were laid to rest inside its narthex, as the excavations of Dr Pelagatti in the 1960s and early 1970s so clearly showed. As for the woman buried in our house at Punta Secca, there is no doubt at all that she was a Christian. There is a cross engraved on one of the grave slabs; some of the African lamps found bear the Christian Chi-Rho monogram; there are crosses scratched on jugs used in the funerary feasting; and one of the amphorae found upside down in the south-west corner of Area 5 has a graffito on its shoulder, accompanied by an *alpha* and an *omega*, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet (*fig. 29*).²⁰ This is a well-known Christian slogan referring to Jesus' description of himself as being the first and the last, the *alpha* and the *omega*, the beginning and the end.²¹ Even more telling as evidence that the tomb is Christian is provided by the stone grave slab found on top of the tomb, reused upside down in the final sealing, but no doubt originally set the other way up so that its inscribed upper surface would have been clearly visible. The slab has incised on it an extraordinary abstract design with four looped 'fingers' with circles at the end

of each, and circles also on the outside at the points where the line changes direction; and in the centre, in a rectangular panel, is a simple three-line inscription (fig. 30). It reads *hagios hagios hagios*, 'holy, holy, holy', in Greek, inscribed backwards. This is part of the 'Thrice-Holy' hymn, known as the Sanctus or the Tersanctus, and is an abbreviated reference to a passage in the *Book of Isaiah*.²² It forms part of the Anaphora ('Offering'), a preparatory prayer before the taking of the bread and the wine at the Eucharist. The surrounding design is unique in paleochristian archaeology but seems to be one with a long history, because the motif is essentially the same as that used on some wooden objects in Bronze Age Mycenae and also in Iron Age rock-art in the Valcamonica in northern Italy (the 'Camunian rose') and elsewhere.²³ How it came to be depicted on a stone in Sicily, nearly a thousand years after its previous appearance, is baffling, but it seems certain that it was chosen for its magical properties, and the script written backwards was also done to increase magical efficacy. In the context of the tomb, the inscription and its design were clearly intended to protect the burial(s) from harm.

As for the graveside meals, this custom, for long part of Roman pagan funerary ritual, is known from plentiful evidence, both literary and archaeological, to have continued well into the early Christian period. It was not a practice of which the early Church Fathers approved. Tertullian in the third century deplored the drunkenness that occurred at such gatherings, and Bishop Ambrose in fourth-century Milan rebuked his mother for taking food offerings to martyr shrines.²⁴ Basil of Caesarea, also in the fourth century, disapproved of men and women mingling together at graves, and abandoning 'their souls to the demon of wine, wounding each other with the stings of passion, laughter on both sides, lewd songs and obscene gestures that excite shameless desire'.²⁵ The popularity of having meals when visiting graves is attested by the amount of pottery found outside and around tombs in paleochristian cemeteries, and above all by the provision of elaborate dining facilities, including couches in the preferred late Roman shape, the semicircular *stibadia*, in places such as Tipasa in Algeria, Sabratha in Libya, Tarragona and Cartagena in Spain, and in the Maltese catacombs.²⁶

The libation hole, another 'pagan' feature also present, as we have seen, in the Punta Secca tomb, is paralleled in Christian contexts elsewhere in Sicily, in the Catacombs of S. Giovanni at Syracuse, as well as in tombs behind the church at Punta Secca itself.²⁷ In addition to making possible the offer of food or especially a liquid (normally wine) to the dead, the holes also served in Christian times to facilitate the practice of lowering a piece of cloth or some other personal item

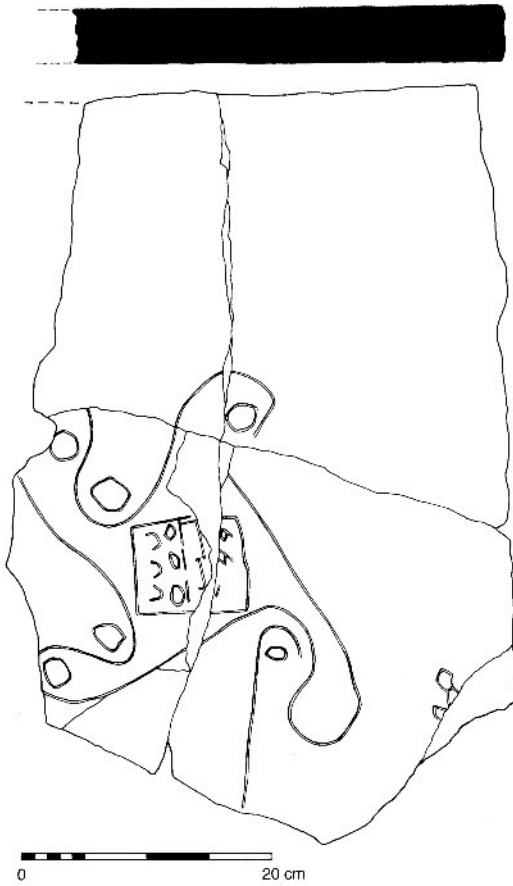


Fig. 30. The grave slab from the tomb inscribed with a magical design enclosing a rectangular panel inscribed hagios hagios hagios ('holy, holy, holy'), written backwards (drawing by Sally Cann, Matrice, CB).

into the grave in order to sanctify it, just by making contact with the body, or at least with the sarcophagus, of the holy deceased.²⁸ Such openings in Christian tombs are attested, for example, at S. Paolo fuori le Mura in Rome at St Paul's tomb, at Cimitile in Campania at the shrine of St Felix, at Athens in Bishop Klematios' grave-slab, and in the so-called Donatist church at Timgad in Algeria.²⁹ Occasionally more elaborate arrangements are provided in order to sanctify a liquid, such as water and especially olive oil, and to collect it afterwards, a practice that we hear about in the ancient sources, and which is attested archaeologically at Marseilles in the south of France and at Ras el-Bassit in north-western Syria.³⁰ All of these, however, except possibly for the last (believed to be around the start of the seventh century), are earlier than the libation hole at Punta Secca: our example certainly demonstrates that such features continued in early Christian funerary practice into the second quarter of the seventh century, over 300 years after the Toleration of Christianity.



Fig. 31. Detail of the cranium of the woman from the rear, showing the small natural hole at the base of a slight depression, and the wormian plates around (© R.J.A. Wilson).

So it is beyond reasonable doubt that the woman in the tomb at Punta Secca was a Christian. But why was the tomb placed here, inside a house? Why was she not buried with the rest of the Christian community near the church? And what had the woman done to deserve ritual feasting in her memory? Nitrogen analysis of the rib bones of both her and her daughter have demonstrated that their diet was largely of terrestrial foods (cereals, sheep/goats and milk), with marine dishes not surprisingly forming between 10% and 20% of their diet. Strontium isotope analysis from the woman's teeth shows that she has values that are entirely consistent with having grown up in this region, and that she did not come from abroad, or even from inland or mountainous areas elsewhere in Sicily.³¹ She and her daughter are, therefore, likely to be 'locals'. The import of eastern wines consumed at her tomb after her death might suggest a certain wealth, but Punta Secca was ruled from Constantinople at this time, when trade links with the eastern Aegean and beyond naturally strengthened, and a coastal settlement such as Punta Secca must have had better access to passing sea-borne goods than communities inland. We have seen above that while the thimble might have been invented in



Fig. 32. Side view of the cranium of the adult female, showing abnormal expansion towards the rear (left). Scale: 10 cm (© R.J.A. Wilson).

connection with the finishing of silk garments, metal finger protectors would, once invented, have also soon been used during the sewing of other fabrics such as linen or wool. So the evidence from both the tomb and the house do not in general suggest that she was a lady of high status.

So we return once again to the same question: why was she the focus of so much respect after her death? The answer may just possibly lie in her medical condition. On the median line at the back of her cranium there is a small hole – not a man-made one, the result of some ancient trepanation, but a natural opening that she had had since birth, situated at the bottom of a shallow ‘valley’. It was only about 3 mm in diameter, but enough for part of the lining of the brain, the meninges, to have protruded slightly from it (*fig. 31*). In addition, pressure from a likely abnormality from within her skull resulted in an elongation of her cranium towards the rear (*fig. 32*). The presence of several ‘wormian plates’, nature’s repair mech-

anism when the skull is unnaturally extended, are clearly detectable. Her condition is known as atretic cephalocele, and, most remarkably, this is the only archaeologically attested example of it in any excavation, in the Old World or the New, at any period.³² The pathology of such a condition, based on modern case studies, suggests that the woman would have suffered from headaches for much of her life, and is also likely to have been liable to periodic seizures. In such an epileptic episode, she would have lain as if dead on the floor for a few minutes, only miraculously to rise again, like Jesus Christ. Perhaps such behaviour, at a time when limited medical knowledge meant that her condition was completely misunderstood, was regarded as decidedly scary by the rest of the Christian community at Punta Secca, who rejected her, and branded her as a type of witch; but for her close friends and family, such extraordinary episodes could only mean one thing – that she was a holy woman, deserving of the utmost reverence both in life and in death. The dividing line between sanctity and madness in the Byzantine period is known to have been a fine one,³³ and our woman is a case in point – her behaviour being in all likelihood interpreted in a completely different light by two separate groups of people within the same small community. Atretic cephalocele is not a fatal condition, and we cannot ascertain exactly why she died when she did, although it may well have been from a particularly severe epileptic fit. We do, however, know one extra dimension to the personal tragedy of her family – she was 30 weeks pregnant when she died, as the remains of some fetal bones in her grave clearly show, and her condition might have been a contributory factor to her death.

All this, of course, is speculation. Without the survival of soft tissue, certainty is impossible; but the hypothesis does serve to explain the most extraordinary feature of the Punta Secca excavation – the discovery of a substantial tomb, and of associated feasting, inside what is a perfectly ordinary early Byzantine house. Archaeology is all about reconstructing the lives of ancient people, and at Punta Secca we have been able to recover the particularly poignant story of the lives and premature deaths of a mother and her daughter, on the shores of the Mediterranean some 1400 years ago.

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for all her efficient organization of the necessary arrangements, and for editing this booklet. Archaeology is above all a team effort, and my debt to many friends and collaborators is huge. In Sicily Professor Giovanni Di Stefano could not have been a kinder or more accommodating host, inviting me to treat the time that we spent at Punta Secca as if being 'a casa'. I am also grateful to the Soprintendente dei Beni Culturali at Ragusa, Arch. Vera Greca, for granting us the privilege of being able to excavate at Punta Secca, and for arranging the excavation permit for us with the Regione Siciliana. The encouragement and practical help I received from Professor Paola Pelagatti, the discoverer and principal excavator of the settlement at Punta Secca, was also received with enormous gratitude, as were her annual visits from Rome to our excavation. My debt to my supervisors, especially Lesley Dunwoodie and Dan Waterfall (and also in 2010 Christoph Rummel) is vast: it is thanks to their supreme technical skill and to their meticulous recording that we extracted so much fascinating information from this excavation. Charlotte Westbrook Wilson provided invaluable logistical support throughout. The project would not have been possible without the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, to which body I express my profound gratitude. Of my many other collaborators (some are thanked individually in the Notes), I must single out for especial mention Jennifer Ramsay (seeds), Tomoo Mukai (pottery), Martin Goalen (architectural recording), Michael MacKinnon (animal bones), Michael Richards (scientific analysis), Steve Daniel (geophysics), Sally Cann, who drew all the finds with such skill and good humour, and Carrie Sulosky Weaver, whose meticulous study of the skeletal material has been so essential to our interpretation of the results. It has been a joy to work with all of these colleagues, who gave so much of their time, expertise and energy on behalf of the project, as did also Lorenzo Zurla, whose aerial photographs are simply amazing, and Emanuele and Filippo Paresi, who worked wonders in conserving our copper alloy finds. Last but far from least, I thank my students who provided the workforce. Without their tireless labours, shifting what seemed like endless quantities of sand, not only would Building 6 not have yielded up its secrets, but also I would not have had a lecture to give you here tonight.

Notes:

¹ Orsi did not publish his discovery, but the observations recorded in his notebooks were presented in Pelagatti 2006.

² Pelagatti 1966; 1968–1969; 1972a, b; 2005; Pelagatti/Di Stefano 1999. Numismatic evidence: Guzzetta 2005. The pottery and metal objects from the excavations were listed by Fallico 2005, but, unhelpfully, not illustrated.

- ³ Di Stefano 1984–1985; 1991; 1997–1998; 2002; 2003; 2006; 2014.
- ⁴ Procopius, *De Bello Vandalico* 1.14.4. The only other mention of the place is in Ptolemy, *Geographia* 3.4.3.
- ⁵ Wilson 1990, 393, note 184; 2005.
- ⁶ For a preliminary note, Wilson 2009. The main detailed published reports to date are Wilson 2011a and 2013a. Popular accounts are Wilson 2010a, b; 2015. Special aspects are reported in Wilson 2013b; 2016; Ramsay/Wilson 2014; Sulosky Weaver/Wilson 2014; Mukai/Wilson forthcoming. For Italian readers, Wilson 2011b; 2014a, b; 2017a, b. In German: Wilson 2011c.
- ⁷ A rim sherd of African red slip ware pottery, Hayes 1972, Form 105A (= Bonifay 2004, 183–185, Type 57), datable between 580/600 and the first half of the seventh century, found embedded in the white lime-mortar comprising the upper floor, shows that phase 2 of the house (the building of the upstairs rooms over 1 and 2) cannot be earlier than AD 580 and more probably happened in the early part of the seventh century.
- ⁸ Wilson 2016.
- ⁹ There is one thimble at Ephesus of c. AD 100 which might be a Chinese import (see below). A thimble from Caesarea in Israel might conceivably be a few years earlier than ours, in that the level where it was found included material of the reign of Justinian and so of the mid-sixth century; but the context was not stratigraphically sealed and contained mixed material, so chronological exactitude for that thimble is not possible (information courtesy of Professor Joseph Patrich, Tel Aviv). The oldest thimbles anywhere are much earlier and come from China: they date to the fourth century BC (for full details, see Wilson 2016).
- ¹⁰ Carried out by C. Speller and D. Yang (Simon Fraser University, Vancouver), whom I thank most warmly.
- ¹¹ Giannecchini/Moggi-Cecchi 2008 (the mean for women in the fifth/fifteenth century AD is 15.45 m). I am grateful for this reference, as for many other acute observations deriving from her detailed examination of the skeletal remains, to the expertise of Professor Carrie Sulosky Weaver (University of Pittsburgh, PA). See especially Sulosky Weaver/Wilson 2014.
- ¹² The interior of the tomb is 1.66 m long and varies between 0.46 m and 0.56 m wide. The base is made up of two limestone slabs. When the skeletons were first lifted, a distinctive discolouration, outlining the exact place where the woman had been laid, was still visible on the floor, apparently the result of a chemical interaction between escaping body fluids and the limestone, or else due to some embalming process of the corpse before burial.
- ¹³ Mukai/Wilson forthcoming.
- ¹⁴ Wilson 2013a, 146–147 with fig. 14. Fifth-century ‘backgammon’, called ‘(dice)-table’ (*tabula*), is recorded as being played by the Emperor Zeno (AD 474–491) in a poem by Agathias (*Anthologia Palatina* 9.482). Eleventh-century metal ‘points’ are recorded from a ditch of the castle at Gloucester, UK (Stewart 2007).
- ¹⁵ Wilson 2013a, 149–151 with fig. 18.
- ¹⁶ Nabeul: Bonifay 2004, 301 with fig. 167. Sidi Jdidi: Mukai 2016, 281, fig. 188.
- ¹⁷ Wilson 2013a, 151–152 with fig. 19. The decoration of walking lion and a crescent moon above (probably with magical and/or astrological associations) had been occurring on rings for a thousand years before our example: cf. Marshall 1907, 197, no. 1246 with pl. XXX, a Perso-Greek example of the fifth/fourth century BC.
- ¹⁸ Ramsay/Wilson 2014, especially 85–88 and 92–93. The preliminary notes on his research on the animal bones published there were provided by Professor Michael MacKinnon (University of Winnipeg).

¹⁹ The only other type of intramural burial in late antiquity is when abandoned buildings were used to dump human bodies as a convenient means of waste disposal, a practice widely attested (e.g. Leone 2007 for North Africa; Cantino Wataghin 1999 for Northern Italy). But that is not the case at Punta Secca, where the tomb is a ‘monumental’ one, and money and care has been spent on its creation. On *inhumation privilégiée*, see especially Duval/Picard 1986.

²⁰ The *omega* in the seventh century would normally be written as an ω but in this period, in both South Italy and Sicily, the short o (*omicron*, \omicron) and the long o (*omega*, ω) were frequently regarded as interchangeable, and an o was therefore often used to denote both (for *comparanda*, cf. Wilson 2013b, 166, note 12).

²¹ *Book of Revelation* 22.13.

²² For full discussion, Wilson 2013b, 165–170. *Isaiah* 6.3: ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord, Lord (of) Sabaoth, the whole earth is full of his glory’; cf. also *Book of Revelation* 4.8: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, who is to come’. The other use of the triple *hagios* comes in a processional chant, ‘Holy is God, holy [and] mighty, holy [and] immortal’, of obscure origin (it is not in the Bible), first attested in the mid-fifth century, and in use at Constantinople by the sixth century; whether it was ever sung in the little church at Punta Secca is a moot point.

²³ Full discussion with citations of parallels in Wilson 2013b, 170–174. Mycenae: Schliemann 1878, 261–262 will illustrations on 259. Valcamonica: Farina 1998.

²⁴ Tertullian, *De anima* 4; Augustine, *Confessiones* 6.2.2; cf. *Ep.* 22.3.6; *Enarratio in Psalmum* 48.1.15.

²⁵ *Homilia in Ebresios* 8 (= *Patrologia Graeca* 31.460).

²⁶ Tipasa: Baradez 1969; Bouchenaki 1975. Sabratha: Di Vita 1978; Mentzos 2011, 49, fig. 2. Spain: Barral i Altet 1978. Malta: Buhagiar 1986, 29–34 and 405–409; 2007, 26–28; Becker 2009, 97–103. On funerary dining in general, MacMullen 2009.

²⁷ Syracuse: Orsi 1893, 293; Führer/Scultze 1907, 16 with fig. 1; Sgarlata 2003, 40–44. Another was found in the San Giovanni catacombs in 1894, still with its copper alloy strainer in position; it is now on display in the Museo Archeologico, Syracuse (inv. 14619). Punta Secca: Pelagatti/Di Stefano 1999, pl. 14 (second and fourth tombs from the right).

²⁸ Crook 2000, 18, on the power of the saint’s bones; *ibid.* 25–31 on contact with saints’ relics; and, more generally, on the importance of sanctity by association, Harries 1992, 64–65. Gregory of Tours, writing in the late sixth century, refers to the lowering of cloths into St Peter’s tomb in Rome for the same purpose (*In Gloriam Martyrum* 27 [= *Patrologia Latina* 71]).

²⁹ Rome: Docci 2006, 14–15 (c. AD 390), inscribed PAVLO, with three holes made at different times; APOSTOLO MART[was inscribed on a side panel. A cast of these slabs is displayed in the cathedral museum as though all appeared on the same plane, but this misleading arrangement (as Docci 2006, 14, fig. 4) is merely to save display space. Cimitile (late fourth or fifth century): Brandenburg/Ermini Pani 2003; Lehmann 2004; MacMullen 2009, 91–93. Athens: Konstantios 2010, 99–100, fig. 61; Mentzos 2011, 48, fig. 1 (fifth-century). Timgad (c. AD 400?): Marrou 1949; Duval 1981, 189 with fig. 192; Burns/Jensen 2014, 161 with fig. 92. For other examples, especially in Greece, cf. Sodini 1977, 12–13; Laskaris 2000, 268–269.

³⁰ Marseilles: Moliner 2009. Ras el Bassit: Yasin 2015, 146–148 with figs. 7.10–12. The former is a burial site, the latter a reliquary. Recycling oil which had been ‘touched’ by reliquaries seems to have been a regional specialism of the Antioch area: cf. Kondoleon 2000, 224, no. 114 (another reliquary, from Antioch, now in Dumbarton Oakes, late fifth or sixth century, with a hole in the lid of the casket containing the reliquary, and another hole at the side to collect the sanctified oil). Cf. also Theophylact Simocatta 1.11 on holy oil that ‘issued’ from the bones of the martyr Glyceria at Heraclea (Perinthos).

³¹ For the results of the nitrogen and strontium analyses, I am most grateful to Professor Mike Richards (Simon Fraser University, Vancouver).

³² Sulosky Weaver/Wilson 2014.

³³ E.g. Rotman 2016. On epilepsy (the 'holy illness' of antiquity), see especially Temkin 1972; Schneble 1987; Makris 1995; Wohlers 1999; and Economou/Lascaratos 2005. I am grateful for some of these references to the kindness of Professor Dimiter Angelov (Harvard).

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