

The Mount Altesina Settlement (Sicily): Diachronic and Topographical Analysis (I)

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to provide a summary of the archaeological evidence on Mount Altesina (Fig. 1; 1,192 m, Nicosia, province of Enna)¹ and to define the site within the territorial context of the first Islamic period in Sicily. In order to achieve this objective, two articles will be presented: in this article the Altesina settlement will be historically contextualized and a first reading of the epigraph in Arabic will be given. In the second article the topographical and territorial data will be analysed in a GIS environment, presented in a preliminary form in this article.

The Altesina settlement was partially and repeatedly investigated in 1986, 1992² and 2007³ by the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali* of Enna; excavations were carried out on the upper part of the site.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES ON THE ALTESINA MOUNTAIN

The archaeological site of Mount Altesina is located 12 km south-west of the town of Nicosia and 12.5 km north-east of Enna and is included within the homonymous “*Riserva naturale orientata*”. The southern and western slopes of the site have been occupied since the Bronze Age, given the presence of several tombs attributable to this period.⁴ The excavations carried out at the top of the mountain have highlighted phases of occupation of the Classical (Archaic and Hellenistic) and Mediaeval age: the structures of the Classical age use the rocky bank as a foundation and the high, in stone and partly cut into the rock, is preserved for about 1.20 - 1.50 m (Fig. 2). The discovery of fragments of clay heads and large *pithoi*, *louteria* and circular *oscilla* has allowed a cultural attribution of the area.⁵ During the excavations of 2007, two trenches were opened in the same area and were brought to light structures whose associated material is dated between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd century BC, among which are preserved elements of clay frontonal decoration.⁶

¹ There are many people who have helped me in the realization of this article. I thank Dr. Maria Sabrina Leone for having pointed out the presence of the epigraph, Dr. Pina La Giusa, Dr. Giovanni D’Urso, Eng. Calogero Lociulo and Mr. Antonino Campione of the cultural association “EcoMuseo Nicosia, Petra D’Asgotto” for the precious support on site, for the precious advices and for the given material. I thank Dr. Maurizio Bombace, without whose precious help it would have been impossible to carry out the simulations in GIS

environment. My thanks to all the staff of the Forestry Corps in service at the R.N.O. “Monte Altesina” and to the staff of the *Soprintendenza* of Enna. I also thank my wife Sareh Gheys and my friend Gianluca Rosso for the precious help offered during the surveys.

² Cilia 1993-1994.

³ Bonanno 2009; 2013b.

⁴ Bonanno 2013b: 90.

⁵ Cilia 1993-1994: 919-920.

⁶ Bonanno 2009: 539-540.

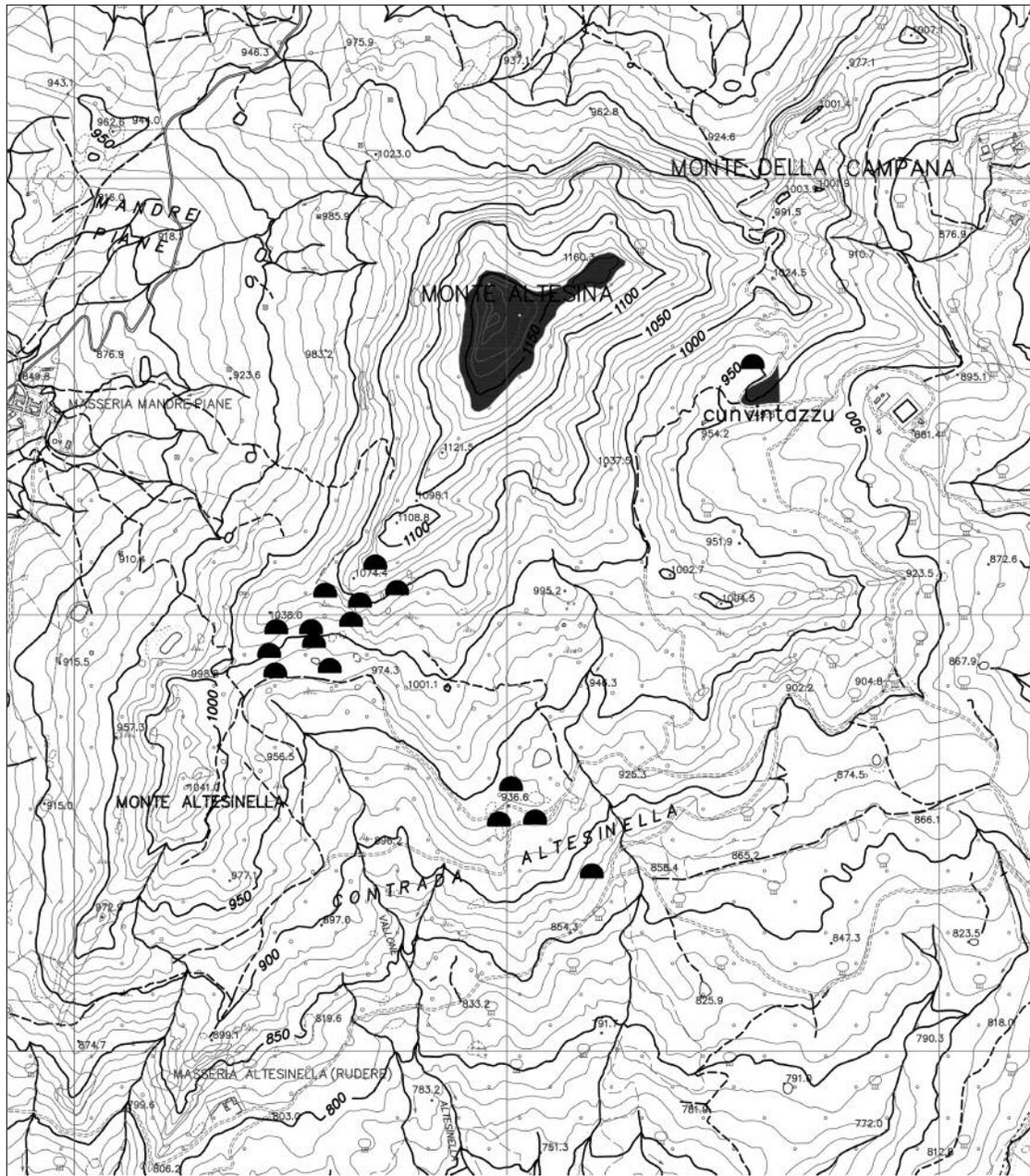


Fig. 1 – The settlement of Mount Altesina: the archaeological settlement (in evidence) and the arrangement of the Protohistoric tombs (semicircles. Re-elaboration from the Regional Technical Map, scale 1:10.000, section 622120, detail; G. Labisi 2019).

The post-Classic structures were made from reused materials, although information on the latter are scarce;⁷ however, during site visits, it was possible to identify “combed” tiles dating to the Byzantine period as a surface material.⁸ In the site there is also an Arabic epigraph with a *shahāda*. The epigraph is carved on a rocky wall, immediately south of the entrance to a chamber tomb (Figs. 3-4). Mount

⁷ There is few informations published for the post-Classical phases, except for the presence of accumulations in which the fictile fragments

mentioned above were found (Bonanno 2013b: 92).

⁸ Cf. Arcifa 2010.

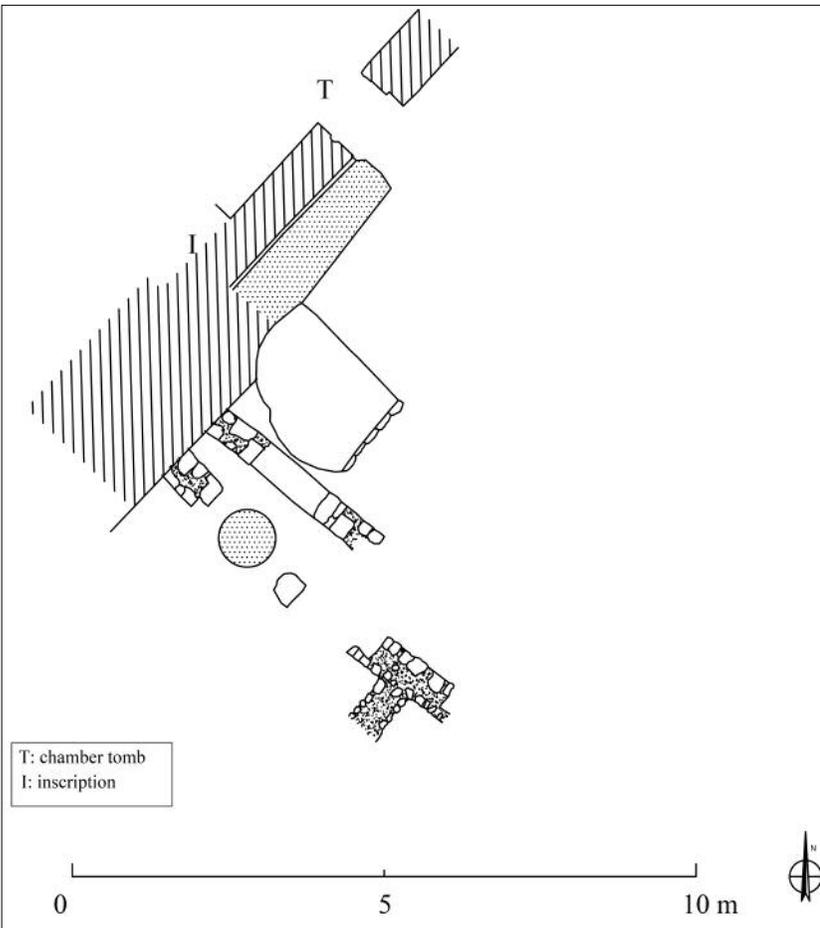


Fig. 2 – Monte Altesina (Nicosia, Enna): the structures of the Classical period (G. Labisi 2018).

Fig. 3 – The area of the chamber tomb and the Arabic epigraph of Mount Altesina (G. Labisi 2018).

Fig. 4 – Monte Altesina (Nicosia, EN): map of archaeological evidences in the area of the epigraph, current state (G. Labisi 2019).

Altesina was also frequented after the Middle Ages: 800 m southeast of the summit are the remains of the convent (internal measures: 6.5×10.3 m) and the church (internal measures: 6×10 m) of Santa Maria dell'Artesina of the order of St. Augustine of the reform of Centuripe (Fig. 5), attested from 1576 until 1650.⁹ In

⁹ Amico 1855: 108-109; D'Urso 2010: 57.



Fig. 5 – The remains of the convent of S. Maria dell'Artesina (G. Labisi 2019).

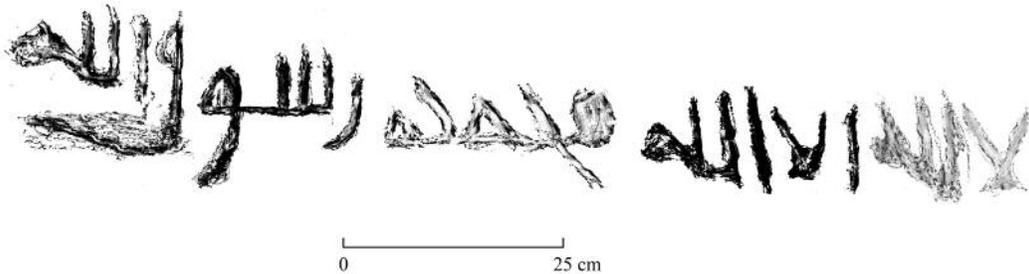


Fig. 6 – Copy of the epigraph in Arabic of Altesina Mount (G. Labisi 2019).

addition, Mr. Antonino Campione testifies, in 2000, the presence of wall paintings, now no longer present.¹⁰ 40 m northwest of the remains of the convent there are two rectangular basins carved directly into the rock.

THE ARABIC EPIGRAPH

The epigraph in Arabic (Fig. 6), of which the first attempt of interpretation is presented here, shows a profession of faith or *shahāda* and is carved directly on the rock (groove of 0.5 cm). Its state of preservation is decent, in some parts incomplete.

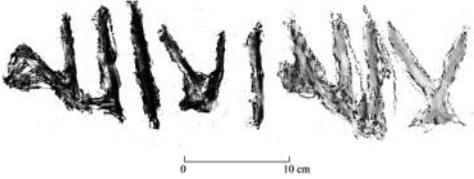
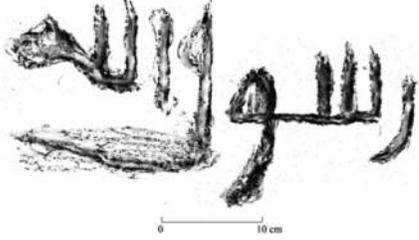
The inscription, located 78 cm south of the entrance of a chamber tomb, is 112 cm long, the average height of the letters is 8 cm and is located on a single horizontal line, in a slightly oblique position.¹¹

¹⁰ Personal communication of Mr. Antonino Campione.

¹¹ The first words of the inscription are in fact

located 189.5 cm above ground level, the last 178 cm above ground level.

Here is the transliteration of the text:

	
<p><i>lā 'ilāh 'ilā Allāh</i></p>	
	
<p><i>Muḥammad</i></p>	
	
<p><i>rasūl Allāh</i></p>	

Translation:

There is no other God but Allāh, Muḥammad is the Prophet of Allāh.

The epigraph is realized in simple Kufic with labile traces of “apicatures” and there are no diacritical signs or field fillers.

The gaps and inaccuracies in the epigraph are probably due to the erosion of the rock, and not to spelling mistakes made by the executor, as in the case of *'ilāh* and the final *dāl* of Muḥammad.

Although the Arabic epigraph of Mount Altesina is incomplete in some parts, it is not improbable to suggest a date to the 3rd/ 9th century for palaeographic comparison, although further specialist studies are required.

HISTORICAL AND TOPOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF THE ALTESINA MOUNTAIN IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

Mount Altesina, the *mons Heraeus* in the Classical period,¹² had a central function in the administrative division of Sicily into *wilāya*¹³ occurred, according to Michele Amari, from the second half of the ninth century.¹⁴

The only episode relating to Mount Altesina described by a historical source that can be traced with certainty to the Islamic period is narrated in the *Kitāb al-bayān al-Mughrib fī ākhhār mulūk al-Andalus wa'l-Maghrib* (1312) of Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Idhārī al-Marrākushī (d. 1321):

اشهره ثلاث¹⁵ جبل مان عفي اقام [...] ال عباس بن الفضل [...] سنة في
صىبى ضرب كل يوم حول يانه فى قتل وى¹⁶

In [A.H.] 241 [855-6] [...] 'Abbās ibn al-Faḍl [...] stayed three months on an unconquerable mountain beating every day around Enna (ىانه) [and here the Muslims] killed and plundered (transl. G. Labisi)¹⁷

M. Amari associates the unconquerable mountain¹⁸ to the Altesina, which is “just over eight miles”¹⁹ from Enna and being the only mountain that can correspond to the description of Ibn 'Idhārī. Always according to Amari from this mountain 'Abbās or another commander, imagined the division of Sicily into three *wilāya*, as they were then called.²⁰ Mount Altesina (also called “Artesino”, “Artisino”, “Artisinu” and “Lartisina”)²¹ was in fact the geographical centre of the three *wilāya* until the 19th century. The presence of an inscription in Arabic on Mount Altesina, which could be dated to the 3rd/ 9th century, can be traced back to the historical context described in *Kitāb al-Bayān*: it is not improbable to assume, in fact, the realization of the epigraph during the period of occupation of the Altesina by 'Abbās ibn al-Faḍl and its army. Unfortunately, to the current state of our knowledge, the only archaeological information related to a post-Classical frequentation of the site are related to the deposits and fragments of walls,²² insufficient elements to archeologically certify the presence of an Islamic settlement on Mount Altesina. Archaeological research can certainly help to solve the issue and thus document the post-Classical phases of the site and its chronological evolution.

In order to place the archaeological site within the historical context of the first Islamic period, an intervisibility study was carried out by Dr. Maurizio Bombace of LabGIS of the Touristic Department of Sicily in a GIS environment. In fact, the topographical interpretation offered by Amari is illuminating, since, according to the latter, from Mount Altesina 'Abbās ibn al-Faḍl could “*abbracciare con lo sguardo la*

¹² Diod. IV, 84,1; Vib. Seq. 47. See also Manni 1981: 88.

¹³ Amico 1855: 108 and Bresc 1992. However, the administrative subdivision of the Sicilian *wilāya* underwent changes over the centuries (cf. Bresc 1992).

¹⁴ Amari 1854, I: 467.

¹⁵ Amari translates *māni'* with “elevated” (Amari 1881, II: 11); the word is translated here with “unconquerable” (cf. Steingass 1884: s.v. *māni'*, *mana'at*). Gibilmanna is a toponym widely attested

in Sicily, as for example for the Cefalù sanctuary.

¹⁶ From *Kitāb al-bayān* in Amari 1988, I (repr.): 412.

¹⁷ I thank Prof. Michelina Di Cesare (“Sapienza” University of Rome) for her help in translating the passage.

¹⁸ Or “elevated”, see *here* note 15.

¹⁹ Amari 1988, I: 326.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Amico 1855: 108-109.

²² See above.

*configurazione del paese; notar le principali catene di montagne; affissare su questa e quell'altra vetta le fortezze non espugnate per anco, e giù le ubertose pianure ove fosse far preda*²³. The analysis of the intervisibility made by Dr. Bombace between the settlement of Mount Altesina and those present in the surrounding area (considering an average radius of 15 km) reveals, in fact, that from the top of the Altesina (where there are structures of walls not archeologically investigated) it is possible to visually check all the settlements archeologically recorded in the region. In fact, the calculation of intervisibility between the conspicuous points of the territory, both historically and geographically, reveals the relationship between the fortresses of Enna,²⁴ Calascibetta,²⁵ Assoro,²⁶ Agira,²⁷ Nicosia,²⁸ and Sperlinga²⁹. The control over the plains and open settlements, as mentioned by Ibn Idh ri, is also remarkable, as, for example, for the settlement of contrada Canalotto³⁰. It is interesting to note that the settlement of Mount Altesina had a significant function even in the pre-Medieval periods: the analysis of intervisibility reveals that from the settlement of Altesina were visible settlements of Realmese,³¹ Malpasso,³² Polizzello, Serra del Vento,³³ Mount Alburchia,³⁴ Sant'Agata,³⁵ Montagna di Nissoria.³⁶

The occupation of Mount Altesina in the period of the Islamic conquest can be included, moreover, in the topographical context related to the control of the road system. By occupying, in fact, the Altesina, 'Abbās and its army could exploit and control the rich network of roads that intersected in this area. One of the oldest roads is “the internal road from Halaesa to Enna and Phintias”, datable at least to the period of Hiero II of Syracuse. According to G. Uggeri one of the mule tracks mentioned by Cicero through which the “*frumentum Hennenses metiantur vel Phintiam vel Halaesam vel Catinam, loca inter se maxime diversa, eodem die quo iusseris deportabunt*”³⁷ passed 3 km west of Mount Altesina through the contrade Pietrelunghe, Magalufò, to Malpasso.³⁸ Another important road that passed not far from the settlement of Mount Altesina is the internal road Catania - Termini: according to G. Uggeri the road passed through the Contrade Parisi, San Benedetto and Mistri,³⁹ 8 km south of Altesina. The settlement of Mount Altesina thus played an important role in the control of the island's internal road network. As far as the post-Classical periods are concerned, G. Uggeri himself suggested that the road system of Classical Sicily was not abandoned in the Middle Ages, but was reused and integrated into the territorial systems of the various periods.⁴⁰ A recent topographical study has re-examined the road system of the Enna territory according to a diachronic approach. Specifically, the road system between Enna and Agira has been analysed: after an analysis in a GIS environment, scholars suggest that the historical road system prefers mountainous areas to valleys, probably responding to the political need to control the production areas and protect the territory.⁴¹ The Islamic settlement of Mount Altesina controlled, therefore, the historical road system theorized by scholars, thus confirming what was reported by Ibn 'Idhārī: from the

²³ Amari 1988, I: 326.

²⁴ Bejor – D'Agata 1989; Bonanno 2013c.

²⁵ Albanesi Procelli 1986.

²⁶ Bejor – Morel 1984.

²⁷ Bejor 1984; Patanè 1989.

²⁸ Scibona 1993.

²⁹ Valbruzzi 2013.

³⁰ Amata 2001; Giannitrapani 2013.

³¹ Albanese Procelli 1982; Giannitrapani 2013.

³² Albanese Procelli 1988-89; AA.VV. *Da Mal-*

passo a Calcarella 2001.

³³ Burgio 2012 and related bibliography.

³⁴ Collura 2016, 220-225 and related bibliography.

³⁵ Bonanno 2013a, 43-44.

³⁶ Buscemi Felici 2004.

³⁷ Cic. II *Verr.* III, 83: 192.

³⁸ Uggeri 2004: 279-282.

³⁹ *Ibidem*: 249-250.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*: 287-296; see also Arcifa 2005.

⁴¹ Citter *et al.* 2017: 310-311.

“unconquerable” mountain, the Muslims could besiege Enna and the other *kastra*, but above all, inflict substantial damage to the harvests and to the open settlements.

CONCLUSIONS

From this study it became clear that the settlement of Mount Altesina, whose name remains anonymous, played an important role in the territorial context of central Sicily over the centuries. The archaeological excavations carried out on the upper part of the mount have revealed, in fact, the presence of an important settlement and a cultural area whose presence can be attributed between the 5th and 3rd centuries BC. However, the excavations have only concerned a small part of the settlement and future research can certainly document with precision its extent and its occupation over the centuries. As far as subsequent periods are concerned, the Arabic epigraph is an exceptional testimony, being one of the few *in situ* epigraphs outside the western Sicilian context. The epigraph could be dated by palaeography to the III/IX century (although further studies are needed), a date corroborated by an episode reported in the *Kitāb al-Bayān* of Ibn ‘Idhārī in which it is stated that in 241/855-6 the commander ‘Abbās ibn al-Faḍl remained three months on a mountain “unconquerable” to plunder Enna and its territory. Amari, considering the topographical characteristics and the proximity to Enna, associates the “unconquerable” mountain to the Altesina, highlighting also how, starting from the Islamic period, the Altesina mountain was the geographical centre of the three Sicilian *wilāya*. The topographic analysis in a GIS environment of the intervisibility between archaeological sites in different periods by Dr. Maurizio Bombace has revealed, moreover, that from Mount Altesina were visible the conspicuous points of the territory, both historically and geographically, and specifically the fortresses of Enna, Calascibetta, Assoro, Agira, Nicosia and Sperlinga. Moreover, the above analysis shows that the settlement of Mount Altesina had a significant role in controlling the viability of the area, particularly with regard to one of the possible variants of the route mentioned by Cicero that connected Halaesa to Enna and the section of the internal way Termini - Catania, also used in the Middle Ages.

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