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Equality in the colonies: concepts of equality in Sicily during the eighth to six centuries BC

Matthew Fitzjohn

Abstract

In the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC, a series of Greek settlements of significant size and organization were established on the east coast of Sicily. Their spatial organization and systems of land tenure appear to have been established on the principle of equality. This stands in contrast to the widely held belief that relations between Greeks and the indigenous population were based predominantly on inequality. The aim of this article is to re-examine the material expression of equality in the Greek settlements and to reflect upon the ways in which our categories of colonizer and colonized have influenced the way that we look for and understand the social relations between people. I argue that the evidence of hybrid forms of existence as expressed through material culture represent different forms of equality that were experienced across the island in the Archaic period.

Keywords

Sicily; hybridity; cultural translation; Hellenization.

Introduction

This article is concerned with defining and identifying equality in Sicily during the Archaic Period (eighth to sixth centuries BC). In the late eighth century, a series of Greek settlements of significant size and organization were established on the east coast of Sicily (Fig. 1). These new settlements appear to represent the earliest examples of the dual aspect of the *polis* (city-state): a built city and a social community. It has been argued that the spatial organization and systems of land tenure were designed not only to reflect but also to provide the foundation for new laws and constitutions and to nurture equality among their occupants (Di Vita 1996: 263–308; Hansen 2000: 147–8; Cahill 2002: 18–22).

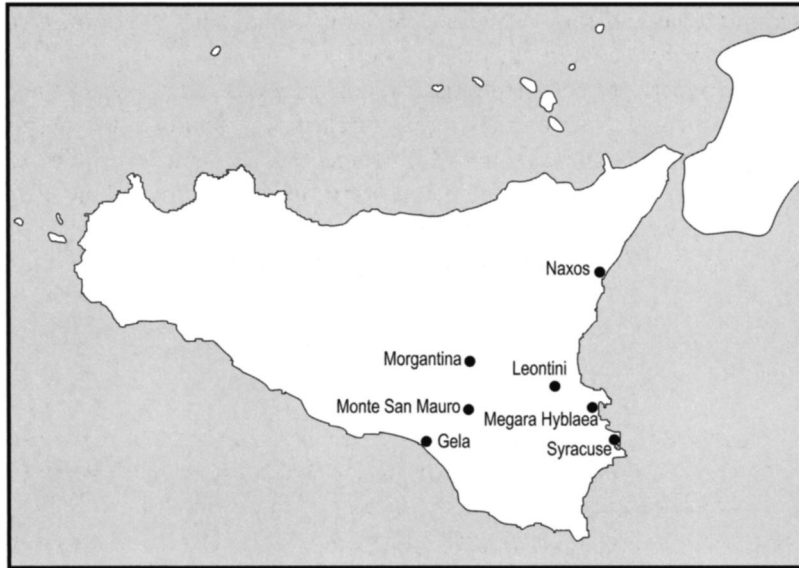


Figure 1 Map of Sicily showing the location of sites mentioned in the text.

Equality is a complex and highly contested concept. If we are going to concern ourselves with the notion of equality, we need to ask ourselves: what do we expect the ideal of equality to be? What are the material requirements and measure of the ideal of equality, what is the extension of equality or in other words, equality among whom? These questions are difficult to define let alone answer, especially if we focus only on urban planning and the division of space. Furthermore, in any context, no single notion of equality can be all encompassing (Rae 1981: 132), so, in the context of Archaic Sicily, one notion of equality cannot necessarily be applied to all sites and social situations. Rather than assume that all Greek settlement was the same, I propose that there was considerable variety in the types of communities that existed. Part of this discussion will focus on the hybrid nature of communities and how the material expression of this hybridity may have acted as an expression of equality.

There has been a tendency for ancient historians and archaeologists to write about this period in a way that presents the history of two distinct homogeneous cultures: the Greeks, a culturally superior group who in the process of settlement attempted to create greater equality, and, in contrast, the indigenous people who were both socially and politically less complex. I would argue that these binary classifications and their associated characteristics have influenced the way in which we have understood changes in the archaeological record as a marker of inequality. We have read the increasing presence of Greek material culture in indigenous centres as evidence for domination and civilization. Reconstructions of the nature of social relations between indigenous peoples and foreign occupiers of their land are entwined with our assumptions about what it was to be a Greek settler or an indigenous person. The result is that we have universalized the experience for the both Greek settlers and for the local inhabitants. We have ignored the variability of

archaeological material and forms of existence, and consequently overlooked some more visible forms of equality between and within groups.

The aim of this paper is to address the gap in our preconceived notion of the occupants within settlements in order to question how people have identified social situations in colonies or constructed a unidirectional development of settlement and society. I shall appraise the current state of our understanding of this transitional phase in the development of the *polis* and the processes of cultural interaction through an examination of the creation and modification of settlement layout and the use of domestic space.

Designing equality

A complex range of interacting factors motivated people from different parts of Greece to leave their homes and settle in other parts of the Mediterranean. Wars, loss of land, increasing class domination and inequality, poverty or famine may have been among the reasons, while the possibility of acquiring wealth and the freedom from the social constraints of their own domestic situation may have also been contributing factors (Murray 1993: 102–23).

Although there are no surviving written accounts contemporary with the creation of the settlements in Sicily, our narratives of the social history and physical formation of the Greek settlements have been highly influenced by later ancient sources in which the process of founding a colony and the division of space is discussed (Di Vita 1996: 263–308; Cahill 2002: 1–22). Of particular relevance to this discussion are Plato and Aristotle who, concerned with civic strife caused by economic, social and political inequalities, suggested that urban planning could provide a correspondence between physical organization and social structure, possibly acting as a mechanism for achieving equality, unity and order.

The presence of roads and the apparent demarcation of space in the earliest levels of Greek settlements have led some to argue that, from the eighth century on, there were attempts to equalize the amount of land distributed to each inhabitant and so maintain a balance between poverty and wealth. The extreme case of this argument has been made by Vallet et al. (1976), Tréziny (1999) and Di Vita (1996: 267). They have claimed that, as originally planned, Megara Hyblaea was organized as a grid system of streets along two main routes running east-west from coast to plateau and with a system of minor streets running north-south. Within this system there were *insulae*, areas of demarcated land that were essentially identical, inside which were equal plots that varied only in small measurements and contained each settler's house with a small plot of land (Fig. 2).

Much emphasis has been placed on how each *insula* and plot was calculated from a standard measurement to ensure the creation of physically and ideologically equal plots (Tréziny 1999: 141) In other words, equal plot size represents social equality (Vallet et al. 1976; Tréziny 1999: 141–83). What is more, the urban plan was not just a symbol, a material expression of new cultural ideas of *isonomia*, equality before the law, but rather the process of demarcation, allocation and habitation in equal lots established and nurtured the notion of equality. While the apparent connection between discussions in Aristotle and Plato and the archaeological evidence for the process of urbanization in

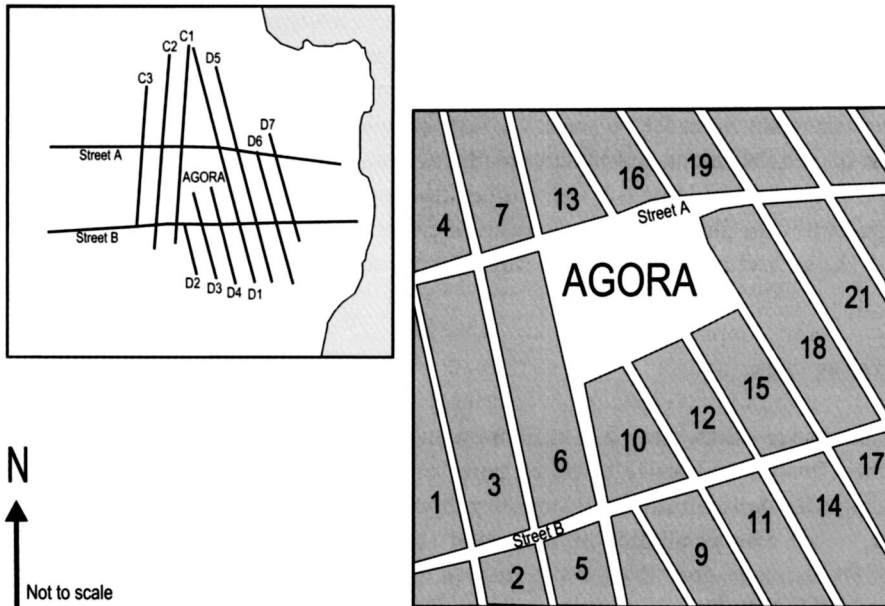


Figure 2 Plans of area around the Agora in Megara Hyblaea including representation of insulae (after Tréziny 1999).

Sicily is attractive, in part because of its explanatory simplicity, we must be careful not to let later ideals distort an earlier archaeological reality. Despite the system of measurement there are significant differences in the size of the lots: between lots to the west and lots to the east of the agora the average difference is 14m^2 . Tréziny (1999) explained away any differences in the division of land, announcing them as accidental, an involuntary result of the difficulties of urban planning.

The insulae of sites may have been similar in size, but that does not mean either that people had equal access to them or that each piece of land was of equal value. Even where there was complete equality of area, there could have been considerable difference in the value of land in different parts of a city. In fourth-century Olynthus, for example, inscriptions of land transactions reveal that comparable transactions for plots of land of similar size show considerable variations in value (Cahill 2002: 276–81). At Olynthus, we see that the houses surrounding the agora were sold much more frequently and were considerably more expensive than those elsewhere. Further away from the agora, the houses were no smaller or less-well built than the more expensive houses near it but they were worth much less. It was proximity to the market at the agora and the ability for households to be more closely tied to the market economy which caused the increase in house prices (Cahill 2002: 280). Similarly those plots nearer the agora at Megara Hyblaea may well have been more valuable than those further away.

Moreover, most later foundation decrees (for example, Cyrene) state that, when a city was founded, some land was usually set aside to allocate to later settlers. But this land would not be as desirable as that allotted to the original settlers: it was likely to be farther away, of lesser quality or in smaller plots than the land divided among the first settlers.

This inequality appears to have been a cause of stasis in states such as Thurii (Diod.Sic. 12.11). We often lack data on the countryside of urban centres like Megara Hyblaea and Naxos, so it is difficult to ascertain whether those who belonged to the agricultural community had as much equality as those who lived in the city. This is not an inconsequential point, as a considerable proportion of a centre's population may well have lived in the countryside, if the settlement pattern were as dispersed as at Metapontum in southern Italy or Chersonesos in the Ukraine.

At the same time as it has been argued that Greek settlements were founded upon principles of equality, it is assumed that they were established on land that was taken from the indigenous people by force. In other words, equality was born out of inequality and oppression. In reality, this is an oversimplification. In a number of situations it is difficult to differentiate the processes that led to the changes in archaeological record and thus to comprehend the history of the occupation. In the colony of Leontini and the indigenous site of Monte San Mauro the archaeological evidence provides not only indications of equality where only inequality has been seen before, but a much more complex picture of occupation and socio-political relations.

Unequal relations

Colonial episodes have often been presented as confrontations between two distinct entities, internally homogeneous and externally bounded. This perspective originates from the normative concept of culture, in which culture has been regarded as a clearly definable unit that is represented by particular material forms. Post-colonial theorists have argued that attention needs to be directed to the varying local and historical nature of specific encounters in which colonized and colonizers interact, rather than making broad generalizations that make simple oppositions and universalize the experience of both groups (Stoler 1989: 135–6; Prochaska 1990: 135–79; Loomba 1998). In the case of Archaic Sicily it is clear that the definitions of the Greek and indigenous societies, and their associated material culture, have often been too simplistic. Although scholars have drawn attention to hybrid burial practices from Gela, Megara Hyblaea and Syracuse (Shepherd 1993, 1995) and at the site of Morgantina (Lyons 1996: 177–88), the implications of this work have not been fully investigated.

In colonial situations both colonizer and colonized redefine their social positions and express themselves in response to others, as a result of competition or a need for solidarity (Bhabha 1994). In a discussion of Bhabha's own experience of migration and also the ramifications of Salmon Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, he suggested that a 'third-space' was created that characterized the hybrid cultural practices of displaced populations. This third-space is created when displaced populations are forced to negotiate their own traditions and those that they encounter in order to make their home at the edges of these cultural and linguistic traditions. The identities that are created from such experiences are of neither one nor the other culture but are both and neither at the same time (Bhabha 1994: 139–70, 212–35). The creation of a third-space and the negotiation of traditions may lead to the re-working of material culture and cultural practices by groups and individuals. The result of these adaptations may be deviations and

subversions of the 'dominant' culture as well as the reproduction of colonial culture in indigenous contexts (Bhabha 1994: 102–22).

The urbanism and architecture in British and French eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial settings often developed as adaptive strategies that were closely related to the changing policies of colonial rule, which included the adoption of elements from the local architecture (Chatan 2003: 267–92 with references). The architecture within the colonies was more than the simple transplantation of European styles; it was transformed to fit the specific environment in which it was built, often trying to evoke a sense of continuity with the local past in their designs. The resultant architecture often combined Western with non-Western elements resulting in a hybrid form that embodied the tensions and contradictions situated within the colonial experience. It would appear that this happened at the site of Leontini, a colonial settlement that occupies the area of a former indigenous Iron Age site (Rizza 1978: 26, 1980: 115). Traditionally, Leontini has been regarded as an inland Greek colonial site, the inhabitants of which shared the same culture and material practices as those in Naxos. Contrary to this view, the new forms of domestic and funerary evidence appear to indicate that at the start of the Archaic period the inhabitants of this inland hilltop were in fact establishing a new way of life for themselves and negotiating their existence with the incoming Chalcidians.

The first indications of the early colonial settlement are present within the area delimited by the Archaic fortifications on the eastern slopes of the Colle San Mauro. The excavations that focused on San Mauro hill have also provided evidence of indigenous Iron Age long houses and ceramics. The archaeology seems to indicate that the settlement was continuously occupied from the Iron Age through to the earliest Chalcidian settlement of the eighth and seventh centuries BC (Rizza 1978: 33). There has been some element of disagreement about the nature of the foundation of the Greek settlement. The different foundation traditions that we find in Thucydides (6.3) and Polyaeus (5.5) both involve conflict between the Chalcidian settlers and the indigenous population but we lack definitive evidence for destruction of the site; long houses were replaced but were not necessarily destroyed in conflict. Despite this vagueness of the archaeological data, the presence of imported pottery and locally produced imitations of Greek wares, the creation of fortification walls and the replacement of 'indigenous' material culture have been used to endorse the literary narratives of Greek domination of the indigenous group (Rizza 1962, 1978). I would like to suggest an alternative explanation of the Late Iron Age and Archaic period at Leontini, focusing on the domestic and funerary evidence.

The oldest Archaic houses of the eighth and early seventh century, which are believed to have been built by Greek settlers during the first years of the 'colony' were located in the southern area of the San Mauro hill, within the early walled city. They continued to be used during the archaic period. One of the structures was rectangular in form and comprised three rectangular interconnecting rooms (A, B, C) (Plate 1). The structure and its rooms were not built with foundations and stone or mud-brick walls, as at Naxos (Lentini 1987: 816) or Megara Hyblaea (Vallet et al. 1976) nor did they utilize the mixture of stone, wood, daub and thatch that would have characterized the Iron Age long houses from Lentini (Rizza 1962: 3–27; Leighton 2000: 15–40). These buildings were actually dug out of the hillside, producing a structure that resembled those from medieval Sperlinga in

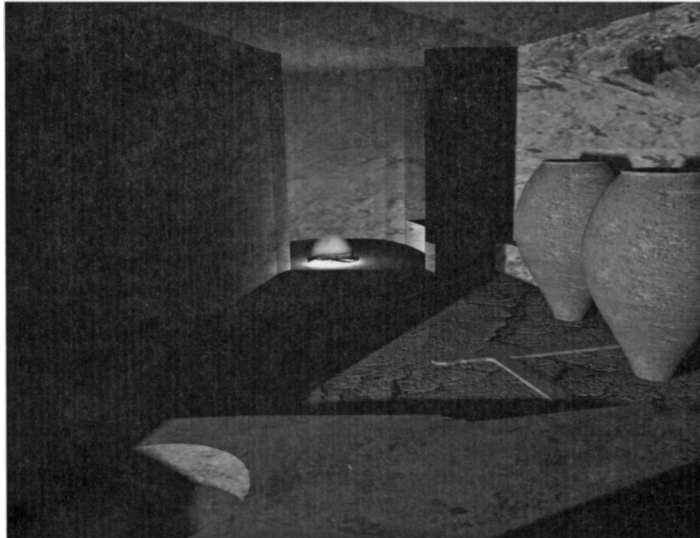


Plate 1 Reconstruction of the rock-cut house in the south side of Colle San Mauro at Leontini. The reconstruction was based predominantly upon the data provided from published articles. The structure was not completely preserved and so aspects were based upon the excavator's interpretation of the structure. The inclusion of artefacts was based solely upon actual archaeological evidence.

the Enna province of Sicily. Within this three-roomed structure, the floor was covered with a compact deposit of mixed earth and an abundance of sherds that can be securely dated to the eighth and seventh centuries BC. These fragments included a variety of local ceramic types, imported Proto-Corinthian vessels, five Thapsos-type skyphoi and a pithos.

Rock-cut structures have also been excavated on the north east of the Colle San Mauro, the dimensions, layout and building technique of which are similar to those found on the southern side and terraces of the hill and used from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period (Rizza 1980: 120, 126). Different forms of slightly later Archaic houses were also found on the large terrace on the north of the Metapiccola hill: on the highest part of the hill, in the vicinity of Temple B, there was a 'Greek type' stonewalled construction datable to the Archaic period that overlay the remains of the protohistoric village of the tenth and ninth centuries (Rizza 1980: 127).

At first glance, it appears that the decline of prehistoric single-roomed longhouses, the adoption and use of multi-roomed structures and the evidence for imported and imitated Greek ceramics support either foundation tradition of Chalcidian conquest of Leontini. But there is an alternative way of viewing the material evidence. In some ways Rizza moves close to accommodating an alternative approach to the domestic evidence when he discusses the technique of creating this rock-cut domestic architecture (1980: 126). The inspiration for carving the domestic structures from the rock originated, he argued, from the local skill and knowledge of cutting into the rock to create tombs (Plate 2) and the floors of the earlier Iron Age houses; the Greeks took the idea from local experience and



Plate 2 Examples of rock-cut tombs from Troina in Sicily.

knowledge (Rizza 1980: 127). Although Rizza acknowledges that the colonial population may have been influenced by indigenous practices, I believe that we may go further. I am not denying that there is a definite change in the form and use of material culture on the site, but what I am proposing is that it is representative of something far more complex than can be accounted for by a simple explanation of colonization. We should view the domestic evidence as indicative of ‘cultural translation’ (Bhabha 1994) between cultural traditions at Leontini that represents an accommodation of different groups of people.

Excavating the structures from the bedrock was a highly specific way of dwelling. Clearly, the bedrock was easily workable and could have provided suitable materials to create a stone walled structure, which was carried out for some structures in the sixth and fifth centuries. However, there was in the eighth and seventh centuries a decision to start to create rock-cut domestic structures, but by whom? This was a practice that was not previously used by either the indigenous inhabitants or by the occupants of Naxos from where the Chalcidian population are meant to have originated. The structure contained some features that were present in either or both Greek and indigenous structures: the bench, storage and drinking vessels and a hearth; moreover, it took its form from a development or re-working of indigenous burial practice. But, as a type of domestic space, it was not known from either group’s material repertoire. As such, is it possible that these rock-cut structures represent the active creation of a hybrid third-space, a neutral non-culture specific form of residence that was based upon a desire by two groups of people to accommodate each other, to express a sense of a new community coming together or even equality between the groups?

If Leontini was a Greek site, we might imagine that there would be more typically ‘Greek’ domestic structures; likewise if it was indigenous the use of a type of longhouses might have continued. If, on the other hand, there was a mixed population, of Greeks and locals, we might expect to see multiple forms of architecture that could be read as markers

of different groups living in the same site. Instead, we have a series of structures that took components from known building practices and created a completely new form of space that was equally unfamiliar to both groups. These new hybrid forms of architecture should be seen as an index or marker of equality. In this sense, the notion of equality signifies correspondence between groupings of different people. People do not modify their domestic space and their method of construction without reason. The creation of these structures represents an intentional process that created a new form of dwelling at the site, resulting in the creation of a new form of cultural space, which expressed a community idea.

The expression of this new community and the correspondence between different people can also be seen in the modifications to burial practices during the course of the seventh century. During the late eighth and seventh centuries BC, as in the Iron Age, burial occurred in the rock-cut tombs in the slopes of the Sant'Eligio valley at Leontini. The majority of these tombs were quadrangular rock-cut chambers that sometimes contained rock-carved benches. A few dozen of those recorded have provided evidence of burial practice. Typically, between one and three bodies were placed in the tombs, along with a few items, including spindle-whorls, beads and pottery. The majority of the pottery was a hybrid type of local manufacture that combined traditional shapes with Greek Geometric designs. The tomb form, burial rite and accompanying grave goods, some of which could be classified as hybrid forms, appear to reflect local traditions that had been practised during the Iron Age (Leighton 1999: 241). No 'Greek' burial has been found, yet, if Leontini was a truly Greek settlement at this time, surely we would expect to find it? There appears to be increasing hybridity of the tombs through the archaic period, when we see increasing presence of Greek pottery and subtle changes to tomb form and increasing architectural elaboration of the tombs. However, the apparent lack of a wholly Greek presence in the burial record, combined with the increasing hybridization of indigenous burial practice, provides more support to the idea of cultural translation as a result of correspondence between people who saw themselves as equal.

At Leontini, we can see equality not in terms of equal distribution of land, which may or may not be of equal value, but in the architectural spaces and material cultural that were created by the community. The houses, which were neither wholly Greek nor indigenous, represent the different groups of people who lived together, sharing the same settlement. Leontini was not a settlement that was based upon inequality, instead it was occupied by two groups of people who had chosen to live together and afford each other equal access to the same settlement.

Equality and Hellenization

During the course of the seventh and sixth centuries there appear to have been marked changes in the settlement pattern of indigenous sites across Sicily. These changes have been associated with the aggressive territorial expansion of the Greek centres and indigenous people losing access to their land. During the sixth century indigenous sites such as Ossini and Monte Casale in the vicinity of Leontini, and Finochito and Pantalica

in the vicinity of Syracuse were abandoned (Procelli 1989: 679–89; Leighton 2000: 15–40) and fortification walls were constructed at several other sites (Palike, Mineo, Monte Balchino, Monte San Mauro, Civita and Medolito) (Procelli 1989: 679–89). It has been suggested that, by the end of the sixth century BC, ‘Greek’ Leontini and Catania had gained control or at the very least attained influence over a large territory extending westwards to the vicinity of Enna and bordered to the south by the expansion of Syracuse (Leighton 2000: 24). The archaeological evidence for conflict and territorial expansion appears to be supported by ancient texts, which point to an unequal socio-political situation with increasing hegemony of particular Greek polities (Pugliese Carratelli 1996: 141–76). Alongside this inequity, it has been argued, the indigenous people were Hellenized (acculturated) by contact with the superior Greek culture, adopting without question certain Greek forms of material culture and their associated cultural significance.

Here, I particularly want to examine how aspects of the archaeological record that have been used to discuss political and cultural inequality during the sixth century could instead be interpreted as indicators of economic and social parity between the main Greek centres on the coast and the settlements in the interior of the island. Further to this, while it is undeniable that there were changes within the material culture assemblages across Sicily, I would argue that the indigenous communities, especially those further inland, maintained their traditions for longer than has been recognized and were selective about the types of Greek material that they adopted and how they incorporated them into their lives (Leighton 2000: 15–40). This discussion can perhaps be best illustrated with a discussion of Monte San Mauro, a Hellenized hill-top site in the Heraean hills of central Sicily, near the outer limits of Geloan, Chalcidian and Syracusan territory.

On the hills of Monte San Mauro, there are indigenous elliptical buildings that date to the eighth and seventh centuries BC (Valenti 1992) as well as the ‘magazzino’, a bipartite building with mudbrick walls and a thatched roof (Spigo 1987: 863–904). In the ‘magazzino’ there was a range of local indigenous pottery as well as large transport amphorae and imported Greek decorated pottery (Spigo 1986: 1–32). Consequently, Monte San Mauro has been regarded as an indigenous site that obtained Greek ceramics through some form of exchange. During the seventh and sixth centuries the increasing presence of a wider range of Greek material culture has been interpreted as a marker of growing Greek influence over the site. The most significant form of evidence for Greek influence and the Hellenization of the settlement is the construction of a number of Greek-type buildings in the sixth century BC (*c.* 580–500 BC). They had similar forms to the pastas houses in Megara Hyblaea and Naxos, and contained a greater proportion of Greek pottery than the other houses (Cordsen 1995: 114; Spigo 1980: 151).

However, if we look a little more closely at the use of these structures they appear to be much less Greek and much more hybrid than the term Hellenization or Hellenized can express. Despite their form, the use of roof tiles rather than thatch and the increased presence of Greek artefacts, there were many elements of indigenous continuity in the settlement and indigenous transformation of Greek cultural practices. The layout of the settlement was not orthogonal as in the coastal sites but was dictated by terrain; the floors of the structures were not paved; there were hearths and layers of clay on stones for cooking and the function of the rooms, including the pastas corridor, appears to have been

more fluid than in the Greek world. At the same time as the pastas house forms were adopted, different types of domestic structure were also built, including a rectangular stone-walled two-floored building with a courtyard (Orsi 1911: 805), which was not only different from the pastas-type houses but it was unlike anything in use either during the earlier occupation of Monte San Mauro or what was present at the coastal sites. Furthermore, the botanical remains at the settlement indicate the continuation of traditional agriculture including the cultivation of barley, spelt, vetches and beans rather than the introduction of olive or grape cultivation which is often associated with the arrival of Greek culture (Spigo 1986: 1–32; Leighton 2000: 36).

The commonly held ideas of political and economic inequalities in Archaic Sicily and of Hellenization fail to capture the true sense of what was occurring at Monte San Mauro. It is undeniable that the presence of Greek ceramics and Greek-style architecture are an indication of some form of contact or exchange between the sites of Monte San Mauro and the Greek centres. However, the increasing wealth of the site, attested by the range and volume of objects in both the structures and burials, indicates that the inhabitants of this site played an active role within the regional economy. Contrary to the traditional picture of Sicily, it appears that the lives of the indigenous inhabitants were not dominated by the settlements on the coast during the sixth century. They were not only engaged in their own subsistence system of agriculture but they were actively engaged in trade and had access to a similar range of goods that can be seen in the ‘dominant’ Greek settlements. The inhabitants of Monte San Mauro and the coastal sites had equal opportunities to improve their well-being and to gain the resources that they aspired to. What is more, at Monte San Mauro they chose which aspects of Greek culture they adopted and used them in non-traditional ways.

Conclusions

In insisting on hybrid forms of existence and material culture as an indicator of equality in Archaic Sicily, I am seeking to highlight the existence of alternatives to the model of manufactured urban equality that pervades the literature. At least two models of equality are available. On the one hand, there were settlements that were possibly formed with an organized urban plan that attempted to apportion land to the settlement’s inhabitants based upon ideological principles. The inhabitants may have been driven by a desire to ensure that landholders received similar sized plots on which to live. However, while equality of land holding may have been an important ideal in later Greek thought and law, it did not necessarily make the plots in sites such as Megara Hyblaea exactly the same. Not only were there differences between the size of plots but some of these plots were probably more valuable than others. On the other hand, other forms of settlement from the seventh and sixth centuries suggest a second model of equality. The hybrid material culture within these sites suggests that they may have been inhabited by different groups, who reconciled differences in order to be able to live together, through the manipulation of existing forms of material culture.

In Archaic Sicily, far from being the preserve of the foundation of Greek coastal settlements, equality appears to be visible in contexts that previously have only been

considered in terms of social and political inequality. In this article an attempt has been made to explore a few of the ways in which equality may have been created by drawing upon the concepts of cultural translation and hybridity. The apparent merging of cultural practice and the creation of new forms of domestic structure and modes of living have characterized all of the settlements that were analysed. I have suggested that in the site of Leontini new house forms not only represent the creation of a hybrid identity but may also mark a process of conciliation, the result of which was a form of parity within the community. At a site like Monte San Mauro, the hybridity represents not only the inhabitants' ability to operate within a regional economic system and access resources but also how they determined the ways that they utilized new forms of material culture.

Such an approach has implications for the ways that Greek colonization has been and remains caught up in discourses of inequality and domination. We need to move beyond the limitations of contemporary definitions of 'Greek' and 'indigenous' and instead admit the possibility of more complex social groups and cultural forms. Unless we acknowledge the variability of our evidence such as the rock-cut houses at Leontini or the use of Greek material culture at a site like Monte San Mauro, we run the risk of doing nothing more than scratching the surface of the rich and varied social contexts of the past.

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