Papers in Italian Archaeology VI

Communities and Settlements from the Neolithic to the Early Medieval Period

Proceedings of the 6th Conference of Italian Archaeology held at the University of Groningen, Groningen Institute of Archaeology, The Netherlands, April 15-17, 2003

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THE ISLAND OF CAPRI IN THE GULF OF NAPLES BETWEEN THE 5TH AND THE 2ND MILLENNIUM BC

Claudio Giardino

Abstract: The Gulf of Naples was one of the focal points for the maritime routes in the Central Mediterranean during the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. The prehistory of Capri – that closes the southern side of the Gulf – is well known to the scientificcommunity because of the old excavations at the Grotta delle Felci. Now recent research provide new data for understanding the pre- and protohistoric settlement system on the island. Capri flourished particularly in the Late Neolithic. The island had another period of prosperity during the Middle Bronze Age, as the other island of the Gulf of Naples, Ischia, Procida and Vivara. During this period the Aegeans established their commercial base for the Thyrrenian Sea in the Gulf, where they collected the metals from the mining areas of the West.

INTRODUCTION

Capri is a hilly island, just 5 km away from the Sorrentina Peninsula; it is mostly constituted by limestone rocks. The island is lacking of large areas for agriculture; even the water is scarce. It has no mineral resources. The Roman historic Dion Cassius defined Capri an island without any utility. The name itself of the island, Capri, means goats: it recalls wild cattle-breeding. During some of the prehistoric periods the densely of population was high.

Capri bars the Gulf of Naples to the south: therefore it constitutes a natural gate for the navigation from the south Tyrrhenian Sea to the centre and the north of the Italian peninsula (Fig. 1). Thanks to this geographic position, the island was an important junction in the ancient routes, particularly in the Neolithic and in the Bronze Age for the routes related respectively to the obsidian and metal trades.

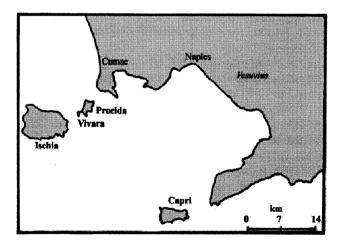


Fig. 1. The Gulf of Naples.

Nowadays the development of Capri is strongly related to the tourist industry. The consequent, intense building activity has made very difficult to lead archaeological field surveying today. Nevertheless, we have conducted several campaigns of systematic surveys in the past years, in order to identify, as much as possible, the prehistoric framework of settlements in the island.³ We also carried out a series of researches in the museums that keep finds from Capri, in order to re-examine all the evidences from old investigations.

First of all we have to remark the existing disproportion between the materials collected in the excavations at the Grotta delle Felci ('Cave of Ferns') and the finds coming from all other sites.

Unfortunately the recognition of the old reports frequently does not provide us with precise information, because the places are today deeply modified or no more accessible. Moreover the shortage of the materials recovered in the field surveys often permits to classify a site as 'Neolithic' or 'Bronze Age', or else, in more generic terms, as 'Pre-protohistoric site' (see the Map of distribution, Fig. 2). This material, in fact, often lacks in diagnostic typological elements. The framework emerging from all this data is still fragmentary; nevertheless the new systematic field surveys and the reassessment of the old finds have allowed a better definition of several ancient sites. It allowed to formulate new hypotheses on territorial dynamics in the prehistory.

THE GROTTA DELLE FELCI

Up today the main attention concerning the prehistory of Capri remains focused on the Grotta delle Felci, thanks to the old diggings carried out between the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century. Far and away, the cave is the most important archaeological deposit of the island for the periods from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Any study on the prehistory of Capri cannot set aside from a systematic re-examination of the archaeological evidences recovered there, that are mostly unpublished. The Grotta delle Felci is located near the southeastern coast of the island, on the southeastern slopes of the limestone massif of Monte Solaro.

¹ Dion Cassius, LII 43, 2.

² Federico 1998, 376.

³ Giardino 1998; Boenzi 2001.

⁴ De Blasio 1895; Colini 1903; Pigorini 1906; Peet 1909; Rellini 1923; Buchner 1954-55.

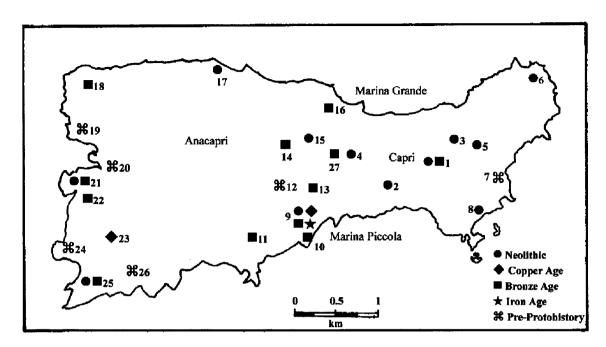


Fig. 2. 1. Capri-Hotel Quisisana; 2. Petrara (o Munaciello); 3. Grotta di S. Michele; 4. Le Parate; 5. Mongiardino; 6. Il Capo ('Sopra Tiberio'); 7. Grotta di Matermania; 8. Tragara; 9. Grotta delle Felci; 10. Riparo Kromberger; 11. Cave under Monte Solaro; 12. S. Maria a Cetrella; 13. La Torina; 14. L'Anginola; 15. Calcara; 16. Marina Grande-S. Costanzo; 17. Hotel Cesare Augusto; 18. Damecuta; 19. Punta Capocchia; 20. Rio; 21. Campetiello; 22. Mesola (or Messolo); 23. Grotta del Pisco; 24. Pino; 25. Il Limmo; 26. 'Between Torre della Guardia and Belvedere Migliara'; 27. Via Aiano di Sopra.

The cave is a small natural cavity: it is about twenty meters long and approximately eighteen meters wide; it is one hundred meters high on the sea level. The access is from the north, after the larger Grotta dell'Arco; with some difficulty it is possible to get from the southern side to the sea below.

A large rock fixed to the ground closes the western side of the cave. The vault is a dozen meters from the actual floor and it is covered by degraded stalactites. Neolithic burials were found in the hollows of the northwestern wall of the cavern; in these burials rich objects were placed with the deceased. Already from this early day, the Grotta delle Felci had an evident ritual function. This peculiar aspect is emphasized also by the recovery of amulets in stone, together with very refined painted pottery.

The cave held its sacral role all over the prehistory. It was the sanctuary in which the community officiated its own cults, executed its sacrifices and, in the Neolithic, buried his deads. The ceremonies carried out in the cave had complex rituals: vessels full of foods and drinks were offered to the divinity in this place.

Some records made during the digging testify the existence of elaborated ritual practises. Two jars were found upside down inside the funerary hollows. Red ochre had an important role in this prehistoric religion. Grinders and pestles were found on the floor levels; they were used to reduce the ochre to powder. Ochre powder

was found on the ground of the cave, intentionally scattered to produce a wide spot, together with a reddened pestle. During the excavation a pot was found still containing some ochre. Schematic, symbolic pictures were painted with ochre on some pebbles (Fig. 4:2). Those pebbles are probably attributable to the Neolithic levels; they are most likely some kind of idol or fetish.

The cave was dug in several campaigns of excavations. The first digging was carried out by Ignazio Cerio, at the end of the 19th century; Ugo Rellini led other excavations in 1921-1922. Alberto Carlo Blanc made another digging in 1941; it was mainly of palaeontological interest. Cerio dug the most superficial levels, with the Bronze Age layers. He found a stratigraphic sequence a pair of meters depth; the deposit had however to be originally higher. As Cerio briefly reports, the superficial layer contained modern, roman and protohistoric materials; this is a clear indication of the uninterrupted frequentation of the site; the Bronze Age levels (1700-1000 BC) were just under the soil.

- 'Natural' soil: the disturbed superficial layer, contained modern and roman potsherds together with several Bronze Age fragments;
- Level 1: it was an intact layer, in which traces of hearths were recovered together with bones, shells and Bronze Age potsherds;
- Level 2: it was a small sterile layer, consolidated by the ancient walking, constituted by fine limestone silt formed because of the breaking up of the vault during

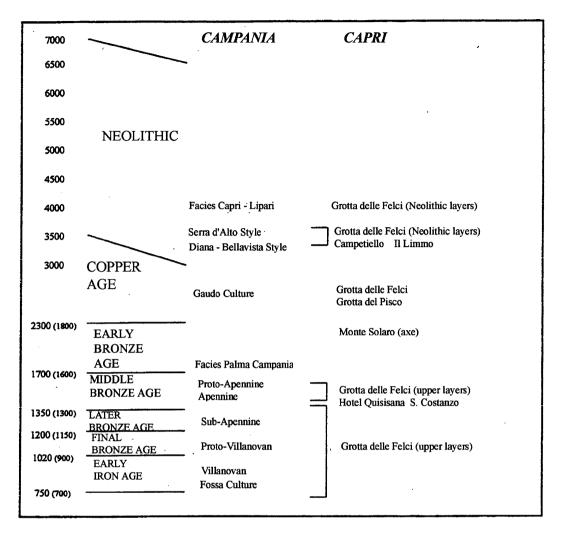


Fig. 3. Chronological chart for the prehistory of Capri and the Campania region.

- a phase of abandonment;
- Levels 3-4: they were two levels of occupation debris, containing traces of fire, grinders, stone pestles, obsidian blades and Neolithic ceramics. In some area of the cave these Neolithic levels were disturbed by a Bronze Age pit;
- Inferior layers (not anthropic): finally beyond six meters under the Neolithic, the layers evidenced sand and volcanic material; they contained fossil faunas, mostly of deer and hearth molluscs, without any anthropic evidence.

NEOLITHIC AND COPPER AGE

The earlier Neolithic phases are absent in the island. Middle Neolithic painted pottery has been recovered in the Grotta delle Felci and in the upper part of the deposit of the Hotel Quisisana in Capri.⁵

The island is characterized by the production of trichrome ware, with decoration consisting of red flame patterns

⁵ Rellini 1923; Whitehouse 1970, 284-286; Frangipane 1975, 104-107; Radmilli 1975, tav. XXVI; Albore Livadie 1990, 24-25.

outlined in brown and narrow lines in brown. This ware has precise and close connections with Lipari (so-called facies 'Capri-Lipari'), in the Eolian. Lipari has extensive deposits of the volcanic glass obsidian; its obsidian was exported all over the north-west Mediterranean, excluding Sardinia and Corsica. Calibrated radiocarbon measurements date south Italian Trichrome Ware between the end of the 5th and the beginnings of the 4th millennium BC. The shapes are mainly slightly carinated cups with vertical handles; there are also biconical vases. Also late Neolithic horizons (Serra d'Alto and Diana-Bellavista styles) are testified at the Grotta delle Felci.

Late Neolithic materials were also discovered in the territory of Anacapri: potsherds and obsidian have been recovered at Contrada Campetiello; fragments of burned clay together with Neolithic potsherds at Contrada Il Limmo, near Punta Carena (Fig. 4:3). Neolithic burials were found only in the Grotta delle Felci, the local sanctuary.

⁶ Whitehouse 1970, 284.

⁷ Pollmann 1993, 107.

⁸ Giardino 1998, 68, note 11.

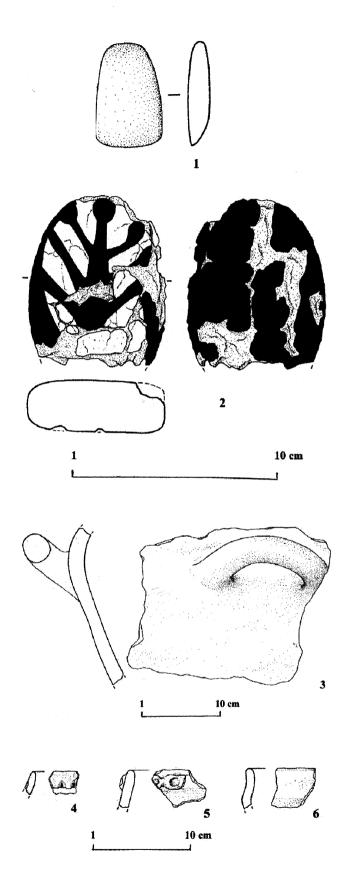


Fig. 4. 1. Tragara; 2. Grotta delle Felci; 3. Il Limmo; 4-5. Grotta del Pisco; 6. Riparo Kromberger.

The obsidian finds from several places of the island probably should be ascribed to the Neolithic. Obsidian – blades and cores – are attested, at the Grotta delle Felci, at Campetiello, at Calcara, at Hotel Cesare Augusto, at Il Capo ('Over Tiberius') and at Le Parate; approximately one thousand tools were discovered in the past from this last site. Stone axes were collected in the past in many localities: at Petrara on the western slopes of the hill of Castiglione and at Mongiardino, near Tragara (Fig. 4:1); of some other axes it is unknown were they come from. The transition period between the Late Neolithic and the first age of the metals in Italy is traditionally placed at the beginning of the second half of the 3rd millennium BC.

Some potsherds are attributable to an horizon that is contemporary of the Aeolian facies of Piano Conte; they were found at the Grotta delle Felci (Fig. 5:1).

The Gaudo culture characterizes late Copper Age in Campania. Some potsherds of scaled impasto ware and few other fragments testify this chronological horizon at Capri, from the Grotta delle Felci (*Fig. 5:2*). ¹² From the cave some lithic finds are also generically attributable to the Copper Age: a fragmentary battleaxe in grey stone and one barbed and tanged arrowhead in yellowish flint. Some fragments of impasto ware from the Grotta del Pisco (Anacapri) belong to the Copper Age too (*Fig. 4:4-5*); this cave is in the southwestern side of the island. ¹³

THE BRONZE AGE AND THE EARLY IRON AGE

The Bronze Age – especially Middle Bronze Age – is a period of particular prosperity for the island of the Gulf of Naples. In this period the Gulf became a strategic centre in the transmarine routes from the Aegean towards the metal ore deposits of northern Tyrrhenian Italy, Tuscany and Sardinia.

A flanged axe from an unknown cave under Monte Solaro can be ascribed to an archaic moment of the Early Bronze Age. ¹⁴ A fragment of dagger from the Grotta delle Felci is a slightly later, Early-Middle Bronze Age. ¹⁵ It can be ascribed to the Mercurago type and the S. Ambrogio type (variety C). ¹⁶

Most of the Campania region was ravaged by the socalled Avellino volcanic eruption of Somma-Vesuvius at the end of the Early Bronze Age.

The date of the eruption is still controversial. Radiocarbon dates from organic samples and soil fractions calibrated yields two different calendar age

⁹ Douglas 1985, 292; Friedlander 1989, 100.

¹⁰ Nicolucci 1874, 5; 1876a, 7; 1876b, 82-83.

¹¹ Rellini 1923, 312, 315; Douglas 1985, 288-291; Giardino 1998, 79.

¹² Rellini 1923, 330; Marzocchella 1985, 31, 33.

¹³ Giardino 1998, 80-81.

¹⁴ Rellini 1923, 352. ¹⁵ Rellini 1923, 351-352.

¹⁶ See Bianco Peroni 1994, 44, pl. 21: 357.

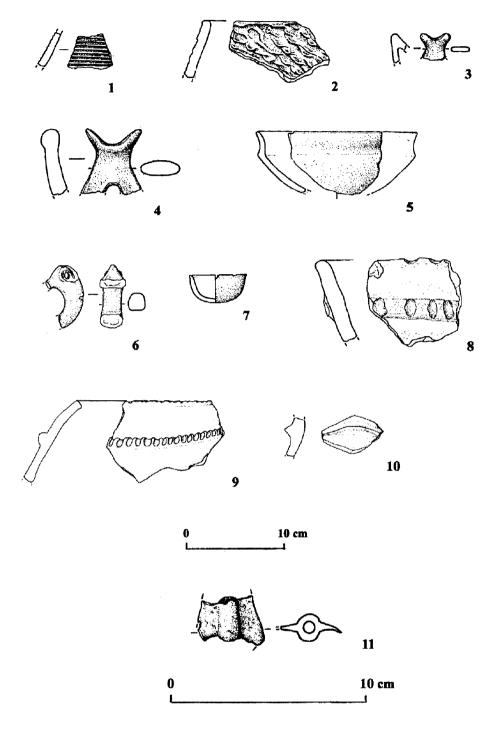


Fig. 5. 1-11. Grotta delle Felci.

ranges: $1880-1680 \ BC \ (preferable)^{17} \ and \ 1684-1535 \ BC.^{18}$

This disaster spared Capri and the other islands of the Gulf of Naples. The economy started developing in the whole area of the Gulf at the beginnings of the Middle Bronze Age, after a short while from the eruption. The

island of Vivara, became a real international port of trade, where the Aegeans came in tightened contact with the local communities, stimulating their cultural and technological development. Late Helladic pottery was found at Vivara-Procida and at Ischia, but not at Capri.

At the Grotta delle Felci, the Middle Bronze Age layers are rich with Proto-Apennine ware, the peculiar handmade, burnished pottery that characterizes the early phases of the Middle Bronze Age in most of Southern

¹⁷ Terrasi et al. 1999.

¹⁸ Southon et al. 1999.

Italy (Fig. 5:3-9). Some potsherds resembling the Grotta Nuova Culture were also found in the cave; ¹⁹ they testify some connection between Capri and central-northern Italian communities in this period.

Proto-Apennine potsherds were found at the Riparo Kromberger too, a small shelter near the Grotta delle Felci (Fig. 4:6).

The later phase of Middle Bronze Age is characterized by the Apennine culture. Its distinctive ware has dark burnished fabric and incised band decoration filled with white inlay. Very good samples of this pottery were found at the Grotta delle Felci. Grotta delle Felci maintained a relevant role as a ceremonial centre during the whole Bronze Age. The holiness of the place is testified by votive deposits of elegant vases, also in miniature, food containers, animal bones, marine shells and remains of ritual hearths.

Middle Bronze Age materials were found also in other sites of Capri. Generally it is not easy to set out a precise chronological attribution, because they are mostly tiny fragments, coming from field surveys.

Middle Bronze Age potsherds were discovered in the upper, disturbed levels of the deposit near the Hotel Quisisana at Capri;²⁰ an alignment of limestone blocks together with some Middle Bronze Age pottery was found during an excavation under the church of S. Costanzo at Marina Grande.²¹ The church of S. Costanzo was built on a small hill, near the natural harbour. Other potsherds were gathered at Cala di Mezzo (Anacapri) and in the Roman villa of Damecuta, above Punta dell'Arcera, a strategic place to control the Gulf of Naples.

Bronze Age pottery fragments were also found in the centre of the island, at La Torina and at L'Anginola. These sites are both located along the natural path that connects the east and the western side of the island. Up to now, any Late Bronze Age materials were discovered at Capri.

Early Iron Age finds come only from the Grotta delle Felci. They are a few impasto pottery and a spearhead fragment (*Fig.* 5:10-11), that probably represent the extreme continuation of a cult activity.

PREHISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF CAPRI

The archaeological evidences testify that the island of Capri enjoyed a special prosperity during prehistory. The large amount of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites give to us an indication about the demographic development related with the full valorisation of the potential riches of the

island. The Grotta delle Felci, the main sanctuary of the island, reflects a good image of economic and social conditions of the local communities, considering, as usual, the deformation related to the ritual ideology. Here, in fact, a large amount of valuable material was found both in the Neolithic and in the Bronze Age levels.

The first period of prosperity was during the Late Neolithic. The abundance of obsidian artefacts at Capri and the close connections between Capri and Lipari (one of the main centres of obsidian production in the Mediterranean) suggest that the development of island was related with the maritime trades of the volcanic glass. Analyses on obsidian from Capri located two different provenances: Lipari and the nearer island of Palmarola, in southern Latium Region.²²

During the Neolithic period the sites are spread on the whole island. In fact in that time they were not only on the coasts, but also in the hinterland, along the inner ways of communication. It is possible to suppose a phase of decline of Capri related to the crisis of the obsidian trades. The island recovered its function in the maritime traffics during the Middle Bronze Age. At the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age the area of the Gulf of Naples became the centre of a complex system of middle and long distance trades.

On the Gulf the Aegeans established a network of permanent relationships with the indigenous elites of Vivara, to guarantee a constant and regular flow of the demanded goods. In fact the Mycenaeans organized a complex exchange framework with metals from the West to supply regularly the powerful states of the Near East.²³ At Vivara-Procida a proto-Mycenaean port of trade was discovered in the archaeological excavations. It is dated between the second half of the 17th century and the first half of the 15th century BC. At Vivara existed a center for making and distributing copper. The metal came from the mining areas of north Thyrrhenian sea, probably Sardinia and Tuscany. Therefore in these centuries the Gulf of Naples assumed an exceptional strategic importance for the economy of the whole Mediterranean area. Thanks to its position Capri could control the admittance into the Gulf of all the ships coming from the south of the Italian Peninsula, and therefore also from the Aegean Sea.

The location of the Middle Bronze Age sites of Capri suggests that the indigenous communities were mostly related with seafaring activities: fishing, trades and piracy.

The myth of Teleboi is probably an indication of the importance that the piracy had for the protohistoric economy of Capri. Capri is the only place among the Greek colonies where this mythic tradition is documented. Following the classical tradition, Teleboi

¹⁹ Marzocchella 1985, 33, pl. II: 3.5, 3.8.

²⁰ Albore Livadie 1990, 24.

²¹ Arthur 1992, 27-29, 39-40.

²² Hallam et al. 1976, 97; Giardino et al. 1998, Guidi et al. 2003.

²³ Marazzi 1994, 33-37; Giardino 1998, 157-162.

had an ancient kingdom at Capri; they were people of seamen and pirates, originally coming from north-western Greece.²⁴ Some of the Bronze Age sites are located on the heights along the coast, and they are mostly tied to demands of security and sea control. Hotel Quisisana at Capri, Riparo Kromberger, Damecuta and Cala di Mezzo had a location that allows a control of a wide expanse of sea and, at the same time, they are easy to be protected by a sea attack.

On the contrary, the site of San Costanzo at Marina Grande, the main harbour of Capri, is only at about one hundred metres from the seaside: this place is probably related with the important landing-place. Torina and Anginola are located along the passage between the western plateau of Anacapri and the eastern side of the island. These sites were probably placed along the main inner way of communication.

At the end of the Proto-Apennine phase the Aegeans abandoned the Gulf of Naples. This displacement of the Mycenaean routes caused a serious crisis for all the islands of the gulf. The settlements at Vivara-Procida did not survive at the end of the Middle Bronze Age. At Ischia there are no indication of settlement continuity between the Apennine phase and the Early Iron Age. The island enjoyed only a pure local economy after the Middle Bronze Age, and it was far away from the international routes. This is suggested because of the fact that at Capri there is a lack of Late Bronze Age archaeological documents and also a scarcity of Early Iron Age evidences.

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²⁴ Federico 1998, 383-388.

²⁵ Gialanella 2001, 239-245.

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