

UNDERSTANDING THE SETTLEMENT DYNAMICS OF THE IONIAN COASTAL AREA OF SALENTO (PUGLIA, SOUTHERN ITALY): THE CONTRIBUTION OF NEW ARCHEOLOGICAL DATA FROM THE FORTIFIED MESSAPIAN CENTRE AT LI SCHIAVONI

Giovanna Cera

University of Salento – Department of Cultural Heritage, via D. Birago 64 – 73100 Lecce (Italy)
phone +39 0832 295685, e-mail: giovanna.cera@unisalento.it

Abstract – This paper aims to explore some aspects related to the settlement system on the Ionian coast of the Salento (Puglia, Southern Italy) - particularly in the time frame between the Archaic and Hellenistic periods - thanks to the special focus on the new archaeological data from the small fortified centre at Li Schiavoni.

The Salento coastline on the Ionian Sea, from Taranto as far as Santa Maria di Leuca, constitutes a rich vein of archaeological sites and is particularly renowned for the presence of a highly diversified series of settlements both on the coast itself and a just barely inland. These settlements developed in locations favourable to a range of human activities and in strategic positions for controlling both access to the sea and the immediate inland area.



Figure 1 - Oblique aerial photograph of the fortified Messapian centre at Li Schiavoni (Puglia, Southern Italy); in the background the Ionian coast.

Among these early communities is the small Messapian settlement located in the Li Schiavoni area, which developed over the course of the VI century BC on a large elevated plateau, dominating a wide stretch of the Ionian coastline, about four km inland from the modern town of Porto Cesareo (figg. 1-2). Extending over approximately three hectares, the settlement was protected by walls forming a roughly elliptical shape, about 650 m in length, as well as a ditch on the eastern side¹.



Figure 2 - Location of the fortified Messapian centre at Li Schiavoni (Nardò, Lecce, Puglia, Southern Italy).

In addition to the walls and the ditch, the defensive nature of this hilltop fort is revealed above all the choice of location, naturally protected by the elevated position, enabling occupation and control of the surrounding area as well as the coastline below, in direct relationship with the latter (fig. 2).

On-site stratigraphic studies, begun in 2016², have documented the building features and construction phases of the ancient walls, which date back to the VI century BC. These are formed by two facing walls constructed in large irregularly shaped limestone blocks, erected directly onto the rock base (or in some parts on a bed of stone chippings to

¹ For further details on the site and excavation findings: [11]; [12]; [13].

² The ongoing research is being carried out under the patronage of the SABAP Superintendent's Office for the provinces of Brindisi, Lecce and Taranto (prot. n. 4810 del 10-5-2016; prot. n. 10420 del 4-4-2017; prot. n. 8898 del 28-3-2018; prot. n. 13765 del 15-5-2019) and financed by Nardò town council and Salento University.

make the base more even) and were roughly 3,50 m thick. The space between the two walls was then filled with small and medium sized stones (fig. 3).

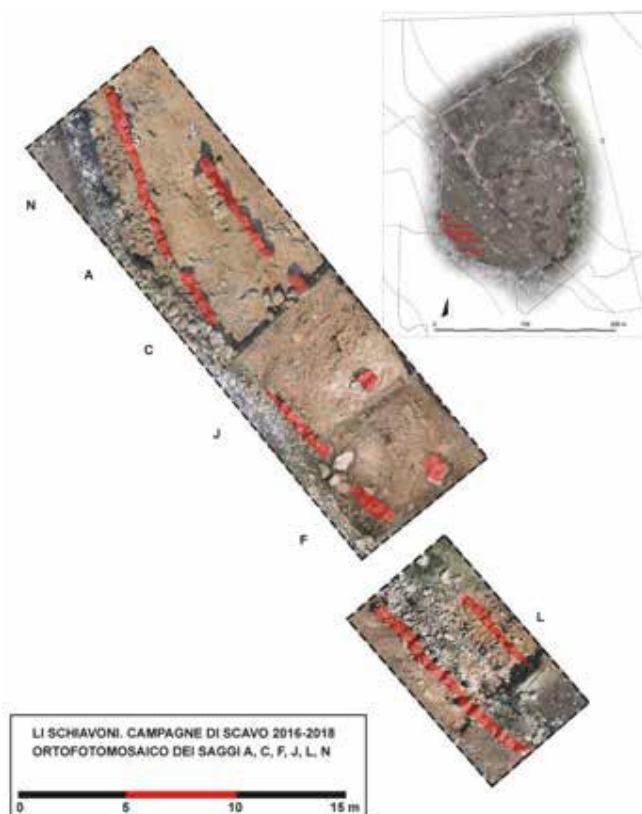


Figure 3 - The fortified Messapian centre at Li Schiavoni; in evidence the remains of the ancient walls, documented by the excavations.

The archaeological findings have uncovered some interesting data regarding the internal organisation of the settlement in archaic times, including both living spaces and small burial sites, alternating with open areas, similar to other Messapian settlements on the Salento region. The remains of a former home have been found in the south central area of the plateau. These comprise one room used as a kitchen and pantry, with a ceramic fireplace and a series of large food containers in hand turned pottery and another adjacent room, most likely originally covered by a canopy, with a cistern for gathering rain water, constructed inside a natural cavity in the living rock³.

³ [13].

On the outer edges of the area, various fragmentary items have been discovered - unfortunately out of context and all jumbled – linked to the presence of burial sites (blocks and slabs of local Leccese stone and tufo, fragments of grave goods) already brought to light in illegal diggings. In any case the quantity of pottery imported from Greece and Greek colonies is significant, clearly witnessing the participation of this small centre in the trading networks gravitating along the Salento Ionian coast.

In fact we cannot exclude this proximity to a series of promontories alternating with naturally protected stretches of coastline (Torre Chianca, Scala di Furno, Porto Cesareo, la Strea) and suitable for mooring, as a possible premise for the original emergence of the Li Schiavoni settlement. In fact, this small landing stage⁴, connected to the Scala di Furno sanctuary near Porto Cesareo⁵, could have played an important role in the exchange and redistribution of goods, establishing a direct link with the Li Schiavoni settlement. The latter undoubtedly benefitted from the favourable location, close to slightly inland routes in the direction of Capo di Leuca and those crossing the ‘isthmus’ to the Adriatic shore (San Cataldo)⁶.



Figure 4 - The Salento peninsula (Puglia, Southern Italy); in evidence the Messapian settlements mentioned in the text.

⁴ [43], p. 259.

⁵ [43], pp. 258-259; [8], 291; [33], pp. 90-91; [42].

⁶ [47], pp. 58-59, 71.

This close link between an elevated fortified area, just inland from the shore with one or more landing places (often connected to places of worship) enabling seafaring activities, is a recurring settlement model in Messapia and well documented in other sites along the Ionian coast⁷ (fig. 4). An example is the system linking the inland town of Nardò (an active centre from the archaic period onwards)⁸, with the port of Santa Caterina⁹ and the nearby Grotta di Capelvenere sanctuary (late VI – early V; late IV – early III centuries BC)¹⁰. Further south still we find the community of Alezio¹¹, which controlled the port of Gallipoli, and the vast city of Ugento¹², linked to the port of Torre San Giovanni¹³. On the southern tip of the coast is the settlement of Vereto¹⁴, connected to the harbour of Torre San Gregorio¹⁵ and perhaps even to the sanctuary of Grotta Porcinara (Leuca)¹⁶.

Other fortified sites controlling the Ionian coastline also emerge in this phase, such as Li Castelli¹⁷, near Manduria, where we can most probably identify the last Messapian stronghold just before Taranto territorial jurisdiction limits. It is surely not a coincidence that near this demarcation line the defence system becomes more intricate with the presence of fortified centres – of which unfortunately little is known – such as Monte Masciulo (Maruggio) (VI – IV centuries B.C.) where the remains of a lookout tower¹⁸, have been identified, Monacizzo and Monte Sant’Elia (Roccaforzata), all local Iron Age villages which later became fortified Greek colonies¹⁹.

The settlement which displays the most similar characteristics to our Li Schiavoni site – in particular the immediate inland location and the modest extension of the village itself – is the I Fani site near Salve, in the southern tip of the Salento peninsula. Here, a modestly sized settlement (approximately three hectares) developed on an elevated site, barely in from the coast and surrounded by an elliptical circuit wall built in large irregular blocks of stone (with a perimeter of 650 m)²⁰. Another element common to these two sites is the fact that both register a cessation phase about halfway through the VI century B.C. At the Li Schiavoni site the lack of pottery items from timeframes successive to the V century B.C. has been revealed both by surface research and stratigraphic investigation. This data is in line with documentation from other Messapian settlements also experiencing phases of abandonment and decline²¹, at this time, due to conflict with Taranto²². It is furthermore

⁷ [8], pp. 287-288, 306.

⁸ [32].

⁹ [16], p. 449 e fig. 27; [32], pp. 213-220; [31], pp. 124, 126.

¹⁰ [33], p. 81 n. 33, with bibliography.

¹¹ [22]; [21], pp. 143-146.

¹² [29].

¹³ [14], p. 564; [16], p. 449 e fig. 26; [31], p. 124.

¹⁴ [40]; [41].

¹⁵ A bustling centre from early Hellenistic times onwards yet a fully equipped port only from the late Republican era (II century B.C.): [7], mostly pp. 140-142; [8], pp. 30, 278-285; [31], p. 124.

¹⁶ [33], pp. 68-71 n. 21, with bibliography.

¹⁷ [1]; articles by A. ALESSIO, F. GUARINI e L. LEPORE, in [26]; [19].

¹⁸ [18]; [4], p. 368; [2], pp. 90-92. References in [35], p. 203.

¹⁹ About Sant’Elia: [4], p. 368; [2], pp. 90-92. About Monacizzo: [45], above all, p. 33 ss.

²⁰ [20]; [39].

²¹ See, for example, the sites of Cavallino ([17], pp. 42-43), of San Vito dei Normanni ([44], p. 322), the shrines of Oria, Monte Papalucio ([34], pp. 59-60) and Porto Cesareo, Scala di Furno ([33], p. 91).

²² [16], pp. 435-437, 439; [28], pp. 44-45.

significant that simultaneously, we witness the decline of the sanctuary area at Scala di Furno, a sign of a general crisis in the area leading to the abandonment of these minor centres along the coast.

From this moment onwards the Li Schiavoni area appears completely abandoned, however not definitively. Excavations conducted along the walls have documented rebuilding and reinforcement operations, implemented in a successive phase (fig. 5). The construction features of this second phase, which strengthen and notably widen the thickness of the oldest walls (now 6.7 m circa), imply a great sense of urgency in completing the reconstruction. A huge amount of earth and recycled building materials (mainly roof tiles, as well as large limestone blocks and slabs of tufo), evidently recovered from abandoned homes inside the walls, is amassed to reinforce the original fortifications, at this stage partly collapsed and ineffective. Likewise, an obvious need to work quickly and save on expense is clear from the way the support wall is built in local limestone blocks, easily found on the site and unfinished, laid directly on the ground with no foundation trench.



Figure 5 - The fortified Messapian centre at Li Schiavoni; in evidence the remains of the archaic walls and the Hellenistic reinforcement

Materials recovered from levels associated with the infill of the walls indicate a time frame of between the end of the IV and the first half of the III century as *terminus post quem* for this restoration. Despite the difficulties in proposing a more accurate date, it does not seem incautious to see a connection between these operations and the threat represented by the *bellum sallentinum* between Messapians and Romans, although we cannot exclude links with later events such as the war with Hannibal²³ or even strictly local conflict situations.

It must be stressed that the reinforcement of the walls is not accompanied by a repopulation of the site, as only sporadic and isolated forms of human occupation can be recognised throughout the IV-III centuries B.C. However, we can assume that, thanks to the reinforcing, the Li Schiavoni fortifications offered a safe haven for local inhabitants, able to find refuge there in moments of greatest danger. In a settlement context and very different conditions to those in which the site developed originally, the centre partially recovers its role as a lookout station monitoring the surrounding coastline and inland areas.

A very different situation characterises, in contrast, other coastal and inland centres on the Ionian shore, displaying full efficiency in the IV-III centuries BC. It appears that in this very same phase some portal towns, already thriving in archaic times, are endowed with walls or ditches, as documented for example in Santa Caterina, the port of Nardò, and further south, at Torre San Giovanni²⁴, Ugento harbour. In these centres we find fortifications displaying notable commitment, implying the availability of abundant economic resources only partly linked to genuine defence issues and evoking symbolic values of territorial control and collective representation.

In the more northern part of the Ionian coast the inland centre of Li Castelli is enlarged and reinforced by a new circle of walls²⁵, while further west, again immediately inland from the sea, the watchtower of Monte Asculio appears to be still in use and a possibly fortified settlement springs up close to the harbour, and to the sanctuary in the Torre Ovo²⁶ inlet.

With regard to Li Schiavoni however, it seems that, not long after the rapid reinforcement of the walls, the centre is completely abandoned once again. This is not by any means an isolated example, but part of a more general moment of deconstruction and/or abandonment common to many Messapian settlements in the second half of the III century, following the conquest of the entire region by the Romans and the war with Hannibal.

Nonetheless, in the second half of the II century a limited and partial reoccupation of the Li Schiavoni site takes place. In the northern section of the archaeological centre a consistent quantity of pottery shards (1500 mq)²⁷, has emerged, to be attributed to the presence of a vast rural settlement, in use up until late antiquity.

In this same timeframe, current documentation implies a later reoccupation of the coast during a phase of greater political stability, where previously active ports (Torre

²³ We know from historical sources that some Messapian settlements on the Ionian coast switched their support to Hannibal between 213 and 209 B.C.: Liv. XXII, 61, 11-12 (*Uxentum*); XXV, 1, 1; XXV, 22, 14; XXVII, 15, 4 (Manduria). On episodes from the second Punic War in Salento: [25], p. 58 ss.; [24], p. 157 ss.

²⁴ About Santa Caterina and Torre San Giovanni see notes 9 and 13.

²⁵ [19], pp. 318-319.

²⁶ [36]; [38]; [2], pp. 98-99; [31], p. 126.

²⁷ [11], p. 85 nota 24 e fig. 15.

Ovo²⁸, possibly the site of a wool dying plant²⁹, Santa Caterina, Torre San Giovanni, Torre San Gennaro) develop new trading dynamics, as attested also by numerous shipwrecks found along the coast³⁰. Besides these sites, new coastal settlements also develop, frequently linked to natural harbours, with activities based on fishing and fish products (Torre Chianca, near Porto Cesareo³¹, Santa Maria al Bagno³² and Palude del Capitano near Nardò³³).

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²⁸ Structural elements initially considered part of a harbour (docks and a pier) ([36], pp. 80-83) are now believed to be the remains of homes, in view of their position relative to the original coastline ([2], pp. 98-99). For other findings cf. see [3], p. 92.

²⁹ [36], p. 83

³⁰ Near the coast at San Pietro in Bevagna a cargo from a Roman ship (mid III century A.D.) carrying 23 marble tombs has been found ([5]). In the area of Torre Chianca there are five columns in cipollino marble, from another Roman ship cargo (late II-early III century AD) ([46]; [8], 2, p. 13; [9], p. 543 nota 9). From the waters in Porto Cesareo the wellknown green basalt statue of the Egyptian divinity Thot emerged (VI century BC) ([37]), indicative of the Roman trade in Egyptian sculptures ([27]). Under the water near Punta dell'Aspide (Santa Caterina), a ship carrying late Greco-Italian amphora from the II century BC was discovered wrecked off the coast ([8], 2, pp. 14-18; [3], p. 92).

³¹ At the level of the Torre Chianca promontory a settlement has been identified thanks to numerous remains of buildings and burial places; the remarkable concentration of mollusc shells found suggested the presence of a workshop producing purple dye ([46], pp. 74-75 e fig. 9; [43], p. 259; [31], p. 126; [9], p. 543), a theory recently rejected (since the shells are very small) in favour of more generic activities linked to fishing and fish products ([6], p. 210).

³² Very likely a port, with vestiges of buildings, tombs and streets from late Imperial times; identified with the *Emporium Nauna* mentioned in the inscription *CIL* IX, 10, dated 341 A.D. ([32], pp. 220-222; [30]).

³³ Investigations have brought to light vestiges of a possible late Republican villa (II century B.C.) and a fishing village from Imperial times ([10]; [3], p. 92).

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