Archaeologia Historica Polona
vol. 31, 2023, pp. 7–40, ISSN 1425–3534, DOI: 10.12775/AHP.2023.001

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**SŁAWOMIR MOŹDZIOCH[1], EWA MOŹDZIOCH-KOSTANOVYCH[2]**

# The place called Chiesazza: a study of the Norman monastic foundation in Sicily*

*Abstract*. The history of the Santa Maria di Campogrosso monastery, founded by Norman rulers in the 11th century, is poorly documented in written sources. Between 2015 and 2023, the ruins of the church were the subject of archaeological research by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Burials dating from the 12th to 14th centuries were discovered, including the remains of people from continental Europe. In the church's nave, remains of an older building dating back to a period from the 11th to the 12th century were encountered. By means of carbon-14 dating of mortar and human remains in correlation with coin finds, the younger church was determined to have been constructed between the second half of the 12th century and the first half of the 13th century. Based on historians' descriptions of the 16th and 17th centuries, the monastery is considered Basilian. The results of the archaeological survey suggest that it was Latinised in the first half of the 12th century. GPR surveys revealed the outlines of the monastery walls, which are typical of Benedictine monasteries. The authors examine historical studies related to medieval Poland and Sicily, highlighting the impact of 19th-century interpretations and overinterpretations on 20th-century historiography. They assert that, in addition to the prevailing paradigms of the era, the scarcity of systematic excavations and challenges in accurately dating archaeological findings significantly influenced research outcomes. The emergence of new archaeological and historical theories in Poland and Sicily, and the re-evaluation of established paradigms became feasible due to advancements in dating methods for archaeological sources that occurred at the turn of the 21st century.

* Project "The history of the Castello dei Tre Cantoni in Scicli in the light of archaeological sources as a contribution to the discussion on the origins, functions and sociotopography of the centres of power of medieval Sicily" 2021/43/B/HS3/01988, funded by the National Science Centre (Poland).

*Keywords:* Santa Maria di Campogrosso monastery, Norman rulers, archaeological research, medieval burials, 12th–14th centuries, radiocarbon dating, Basilian, Latinised, Benedictine monasteries, medieval Poland, medieval Sicily.

In the second half of the 11th century, the Normans systematically established control over Sicily creating a network of keeps to strengthen their authority (Bresc 1984; 1994; Maurici 1992; 1998; Bresc, Maurici 2009). This network primarily comprised castles, while monasteries played a minor role in comparison (White 1938; Scaduto 1982). Nevertheless, these monasteries were crucial in spreading Christianity throughout the island and facilitating the adoption of social and economic innovations occurring in Western Europe at that time (Kula 1962; White 1962; Bloch 1967; Lopez 1971; Hodgett 1972; Pounds 1974; Gimpel 1976; Pirenne 2014).

The Norman rulers established the Santa Maria di Campogrosso monastery in a strategically important location, approximately halfway between the historic settlement centres of Palermo and Termini Imerese (Fig. 1). This area has long been acknowledged for its significance, with archaeological evidence indicating continuous use since ancient times (Vassallo 2019). However, only a few artefacts from the periods preceding the construction of the church have been discovered at the examined site. These were several dozen fragments of late Roman ceramics.

While the archaeological evidence of settlement in the surrounding area during the Byzantine period remains sparse, recent exploration has unveiled rock-cut tombs in the adjacent mountains (Canale 2016). Regrettably, long ago, these graves were subjected to looting and destruction. In 2022, a fallen tree revealed two tombs containing severely damaged skeletons. They date back to the 7th or 8th century, aligning with the Byzantine period (Fig. 2).

## *History of the site in the light of the written sources*

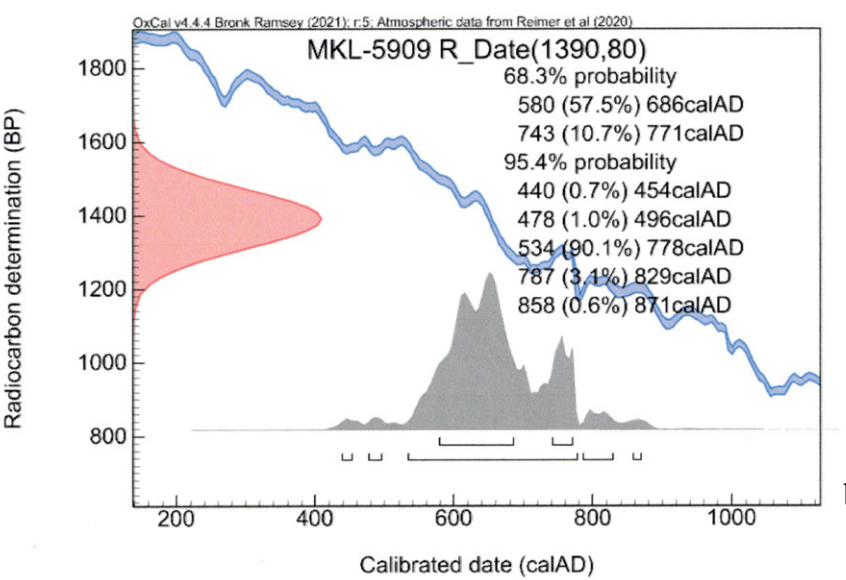
The origins of the Monastery of Santa Maria di Campogrosso and its associated church are documented in a limited number of historical texts (Oliva 2008). The 16th-century historian Tommaso Fazello posits that the monastery was established after the Saracen defeat at the Battle of Misilmeri, the estimated date ranging between 1068 and 1072, specifically before the conquest of Palermo (Fazello 1558, p. 662). Tommaso Fazello ascribes the founding of this monastery' to Count Roger, a figure of high significance in the Norman conquest of Sicily (Malaterra 1928, lib. II, ch. 41; Böhm 2020). In contrast, Sicilian historian Rocco Pirro credits Robert Guiscard with this initiative (Pirro 1630, p. 211; 1733, p. 292). If R. Pirro's assertion is valid, the monastery would have been founded before Guiscard's death in July 1085, which occurred during the preparations for the siege of Cephalonia.


Fig. 1. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Location of the archaeological site (developed by A. Kubicka)

Assuming the chroniclers' information regarding the Basilian character of the monastery is accurate, it is likely that this congregation was changed to adhere to Benedictine rule in the mid-12th century. This shift was accompanied by construction of a larger church dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel. This hypothesis is confirmed by documents from the reign of Charles of Anjou that refer to the monastery as Benedictine (Filangeri 1952, pp. 167, 242).

In the 12th century, the economic impact of the monastery expanded significantly, leading to territorial disputes with the neighbouring monastery of Santa

a




b

Fig. 2. Angelia. The cemetery from the Byzantine period. a – one of the graves; b – the dating results obtained for bones from the burials discovered in 2022 (a – photo by S. Możdzioch; b – drawing by Marek Krąpiec)

Maria di Ammirato (referred to as "dell'Ammiraglio") in Palermo. A document from 1172 confirmed the boundaries of the dell'Ammiraglio monastery's holdings and in 1173, the territorial conflict was officially resolved in its favour (Garofalo 1835, pp. 33–34).

From 1170 to 1176, the Monastery of Santa Maria di Campogrosso was paying rent to the Diocese of Agrigento for the Church of Santa Maria di Ravanusa (also identified as Revenosa) (White 1938, pp. 272–273).

In 1179, William II granted the Arab settlement of Ayn-lien to a hospital associated with the Santa Maria di Campogrosso monastery (Mortillaro 1843, pp. 189–190). The precise location of this settlement remains uncertain. Some researchers propose the existence of an Arab settlement named Aylyel (Ayn bi-yen?) near the San Michele River. The only find discovered during excavations associated with the Arab culture is a fragment of a stone (a funerary stele?) with an inscription in the Kufic style dating back to the Norman period (Fig. 3).

The reform of the Santa Maria di Campogrosso monastery ensured nearly an entire century of successful existence. We know that the monastery owned property in Palermo in the second half of the 13th century. In 1261, Prior Orlando leased a house with a courtyard in Palermo. Notably, one of the witnesses to the lease act was a monastery monk Giacomo da Firenze (Mortillaro 1843, pp. 417–419). The names of the prior and the monk suggest their northern origin, explicitly signalling a trend of Latinisation of the monastery.

In the year of the Sicilian Vespers (1282), the region surrounding the San Michele River experienced significant upheaval during the Franco-Spanish


Fig. 3.
Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Fragment of a stone (a funerary stele?) with an inscription in the Kufic style, dating to the Norman period (photo by A. Kubicka)

conflicts. These events likely contributed to the decline of the monastery. Consequently, by 1283–1284, the Archbishop of Palermo had appropriated movable and immovable property belonging to the monastery. Friar Cirino was appointed to oversee the assets of three deteriorating monasteries, namely, Santa Maria di Ustica, San Onofrio, and Santa Maria di Campogrosso (Mongitore 1734, pp. 138–139; Mortillaro 1842, p. 326; 1843, pp. 428–429). In 1283, Cirino was involved in a legal dispute regarding a property in Palermo that had been formerly purchased by prior Tommaso (*Documenti* 1882, pp. 547–549; Marrone 2012, p. 34). The most recent recorded mention of Cirino as the prior of the Monastery of San Michele di Campogrosso dates back to the year 1285. For an annual fee of one augustale, he granted four houses with courtyards in the Kalsa district to a certain Betto di Sardegna (Mortillaro 1843, pp. 233–235).

The power struggles between the Angevins and Aragons for control of Sicily persisted throughout the first half of the 14th century, occurring sporadically. Angevin forces probably sacked the area in the monastery's vicinity, frequently behaving "like privateers" against the local inhabitants (Zurita 1562, p. 55). The information regarding the fate of the monastery during the 14th and 15th centuries remains scarce.

A defensive post referenced in 1355 (Librino 1928, p. 207) and in sources from 1414 and 1418 (*castello* – Bresc, D'Angelo 1972, p. 401) likely played a significant role in this region.

By the 16th century, the San Michele del Golfo monastery had been abandoned. In 1542, royal visitator Francesco Vento observed that the ruins of the church were occupied by robbers, posing a significant threat to travellers (Vento 1542, no. 1305, f. 11 – cited by Oliva 2008, p. 73, fn. 37; see also Fazello 1558, p. 192). As a result, he recommended either demolishing or reconstructing the church, which would entail considerable expenses. Franciscus Puteus's visit in 1583 confirmed that the church remained in a state of disrepair. Following the directives of the Visitator, the church was partly demolished, with sculptures that had been preserved moved to the Chapel of Michael Archangel at Palermo Cathedral (Oliva 2008, p. 73, fn. 44). However, it remains unclear whether the recorded transfer of the statues is merely an invention of contemporaneous historians. A subsequent evaluation by Visitator Joanne-Angelo de Ciocchis in 1741 confirmed that the church had been desacralised (De Ciocchis 1836, p. 143).

More than a century later, in 1895, the dilapidated church was restored under the direction of Achille Patricolo, the son of the esteemed architectural conservator from Palermo, Professor Giuseppe Patricolo. However, these restoration efforts were primarily limited to ad-hoc conservation of the ruins. The Soprintendenza di Palermo has preserved records about the restoration that took place over several days in December 1895, some of which have been partially published by Ernesto Oliva (2008). Today, we see the ruins of a structure that has been gradually

deteriorating for nearly 500 years since its partial demolition (Fig. 4). In 2015, the Research Centre for Late Antique and Early Medieval Studies of Institute Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, initiated excavations at the site, now referred to as "Chiesazza" (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. View of the ruins of the church (photo by S. Moździoch)


Fig. 5. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Location of the excavation trenches from 2015–2023 (photo by S. Moździoch)

### *Results of the excavations*

The excavation efforts began in 2015 with an objective to determine the construction period and eventual decline of the church and the monastery, and to explore the layout and functions of the monastery buildings (Baranowski *et al.* 2017). The investigation started with precise site measurements, complemented by thorough scanning and the creation of a three-dimensional model of the church ruins (Fig. 6). Ground-penetrating radar (GPR) investigations, electrical resistivity tests, and magnetometry studies were also performed.

### Cemetery

In the early years of the research, excavations were focused primarily on the church cemetery adjacent to the church's southern wall (Fig. 7). Between 2015 and 2020, as many as 42 burials were unearthed, holding remains of young men, women, and children.

The deceased were interred according to Christian rites with a typical east–west orientation, the head westwards, without any grave goods. A small number of those buried in earthen pits had their heads secured with stones. Furthermore, stones were placed at the knees and the feet of the deceased to maintain their fixed positions. Several child graves were found, including one of an infant, a child aged 2–3 months, one aged 1–2 years, a four-year-old, and two children aged 5–6 years. The child graves were covered with roof tiles.

Sicilian anthropologist Rosaria di Salvo suggests that some individuals buried in the cemetery were from continental Europe, as evidenced by their tall stature – men 171.5 cm to 180.8 cm tall and women 152 cm to 164 cm tall (Di Salvo 2020). The analysis of strontium isotope levels in teeth substantiates this conclusion, revealing that some individuals were born outside of Sicily. In contrast, others, particularly those interred in the western section of the cemetery, are identified as native islanders.

A notable grave (tomb 4) near the wall was a monumental stone structure containing remains of a man over 180 cm tall. Testing indicates that his origin is continental; this has been confirmed by genetic tests (haplotype R1b) and the strontium isotope content. The skeleton has been radiocarbon dated to the 11$^{th}$–12$^{th}$ centuries (accuracy of 95.4% – 1022–1050 [34.8%], 1080–1154 [60.6%]) (Fig. 8).

Along the southern wall of the church, another tomb was discovered, featuring a stone structure known as a *logette* tomb (Fig. 9). Anthropomorphic tombs have been present in cemeteries since ancient times and were also found in medieval Christian burial grounds throughout western and southern Europe (Pastura 2020). In the Middle Ages, distinct stone pillows marked the burial sites for monks in

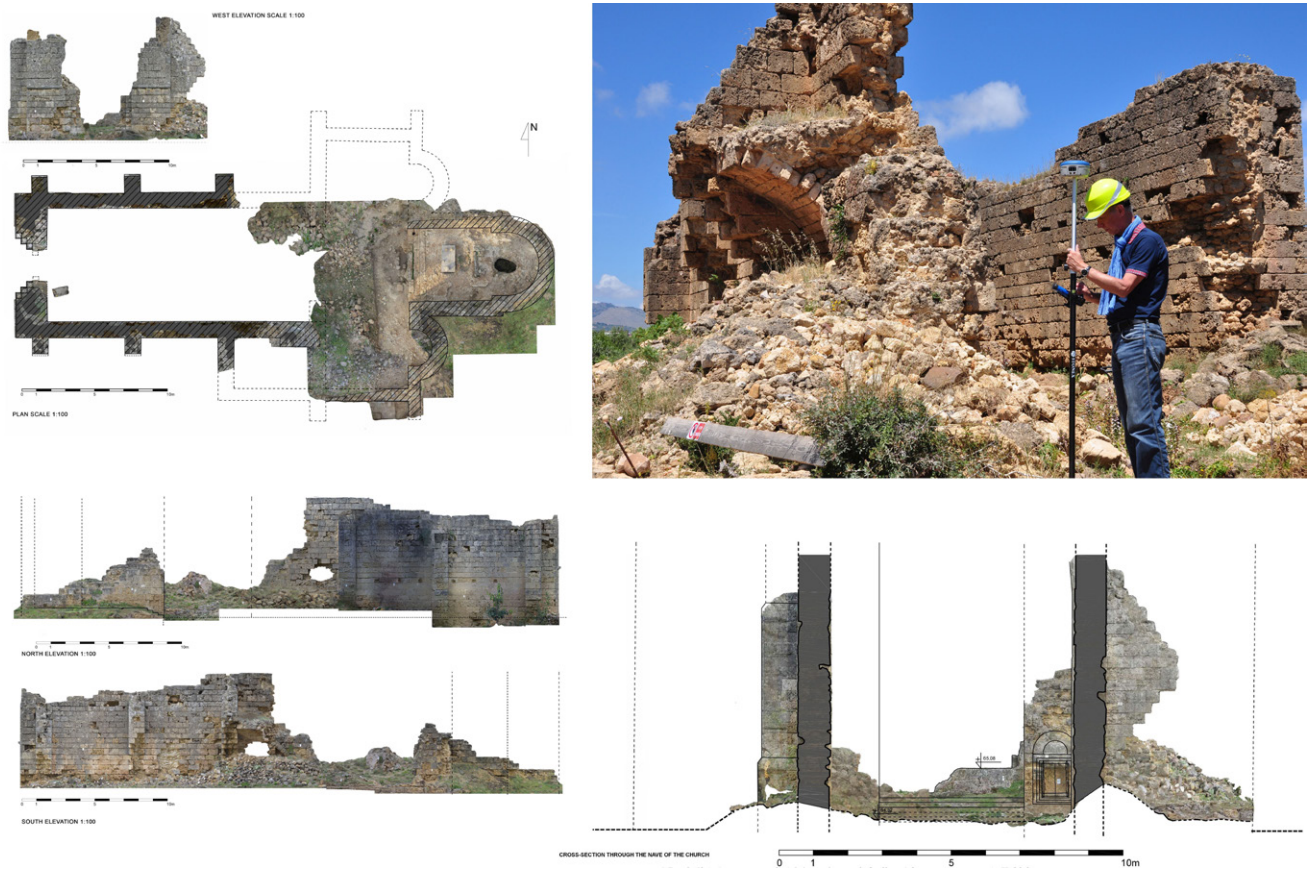



Fig. 6. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Plans of the church and a view of the ruins from the southeast during measurements (developed by A. Kubicka and P. Wroniecki)


Fig. 7. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. A plan of excavations in the church cemetery with the location of burials and the results of strontium isotope analysis and radiocarbon dating (developed by S. Możdzioch)


Fig. 8. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Church cemetery – grave no. 4 (photo by A. Kubicka)


Fig. 9. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Church cemetery – anthropomorphic grave (no. 8) holding the remains of several burials (photo by M. Przysiężna-Pizarska)

Western Europe until the 13th century and in Central Europe until the 14th century (Durand 1988; Istrate 2013).

An intriguing discovery involves a decorated stone featuring an engraved pattern of three interconnected squares. This piece was part of the construction for tomb 10 (Fig. 10). The design can be seen as a symbolic representation of Jerusalem or as a board for a popular medieval game called "mill" (*mulino*, *filetto*). Nonetheless, the religious significance (Jerusalem) seems more likely given the location where the stone was uncovered. The cemetery was used from the early 12th century to the 14th century (Fig. 11).

## Church interior

The investigation within the church's nave revealed remnants of a timber and lime structure (Fig. 12), potentially indicating an earlier church. However, the layout of this previous building is difficult to reconstruct due to the extensive renovations that have occurred throughout the years. The earliest radiocarbon dating linked to this earlier structure suggests it was used during the late 11th and the early 12th centuries. Following the dismantling of this structure, the floor of a newer church (IIA_5b) was established.

The preserved floor traces within the nave disclose three distinct phases of the church's interior usage: from the 13th to the 14th century (layers between floors 5a, b, and 4a), from the 14th to the 16th century (layers between floors 4a and 3a), and from the 16th to the 21st century (layers above floor 3a) (Fig. 13).

Numerous pottery fragments dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries were discovered in the subsequent layers. Additionally, coins from the reign of Frederick III (1296–1337), Frederick IV (1355–1377), Martin I of Sicily (1402–1409), and Alfonso V (1416–1458) were unearthed. The excavation also revealed a variety of animal bones, several hundred nails, and fragments of horseshoes, indicating sporadic habitation in the area. This activity may have been linked to the castle crew during the 14th and 15th centuries or transient individuals, such as pirates and brigands, as Tommaso Fazello and visitor Francesco Vento noted in the 16th century.

Unlike the nave, the areas of the presbytery and transept exhibited a layer comprising stone rubble, mortar fragments, sand, and larger stone blocks resulting from the deconstruction of the vaults and upper portions of the masonry church walls during the late 16th to the early 17th century. The extensive dismantling of the younger church reached the base rock in numerous locations. Within the south transept, a keystone was located on the bedrock alongside stones from the vault rib that had fallen onto the ground following the removal of the floor (Fig. 14).

Fig. 10. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. A stone with an image of three squares (called *triplice cinta or mulino*) discovered in grave no. 10 (photo by M. Przysiężna-Pizarska)

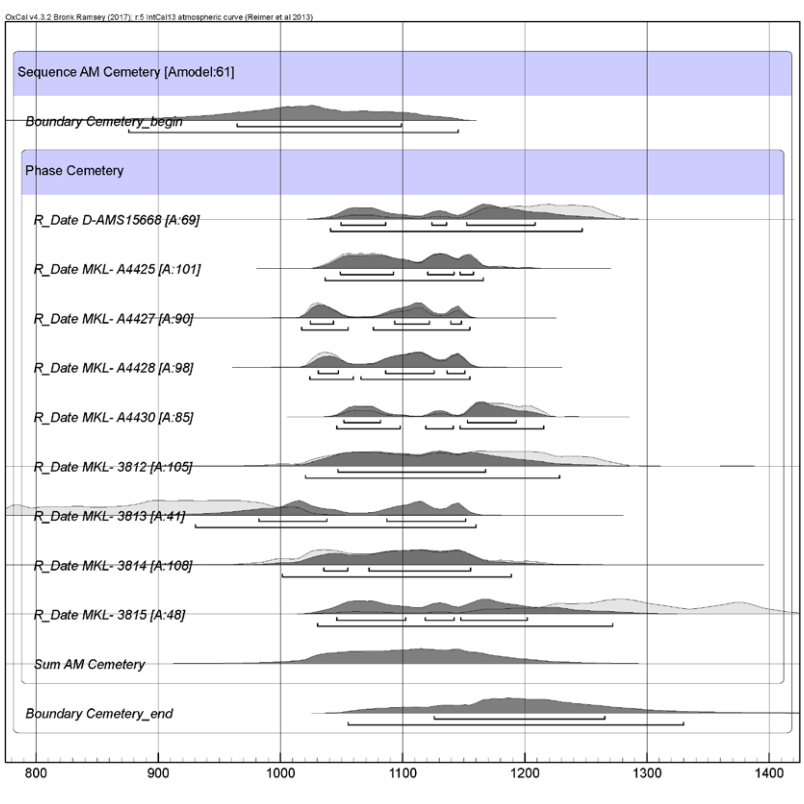
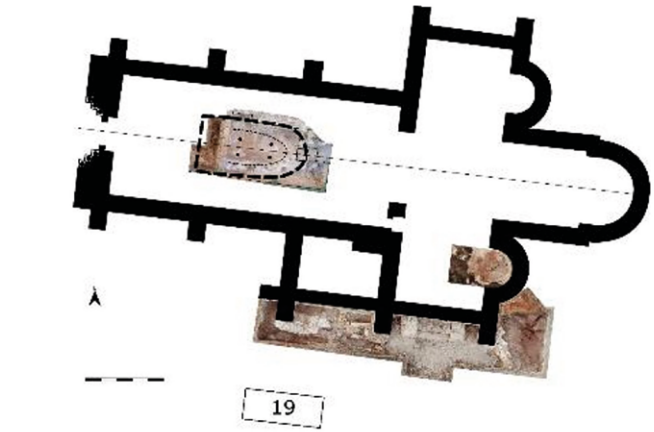



Fig. 11. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Radiocarbon dating of burials from the church cemetery (developed by M. Krąpiec)

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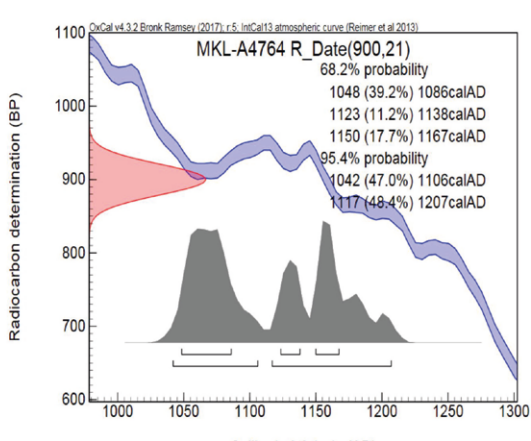


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Fig. 12. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. a – remains of the structure of an older building (a church?) discovered in the nave; view from the east to the traces of the wooden piles; b – radiocarbon dating of coal from one of the piles of the structure (a – photo by S. Moździoch; b – developed by M. Krąpiec)

Fig. 13.
Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Church interion – vault key with floral ornamentation found on the rock beneath a layer of rubble with a fragment of a vault rib (photo by S. Moździoch)

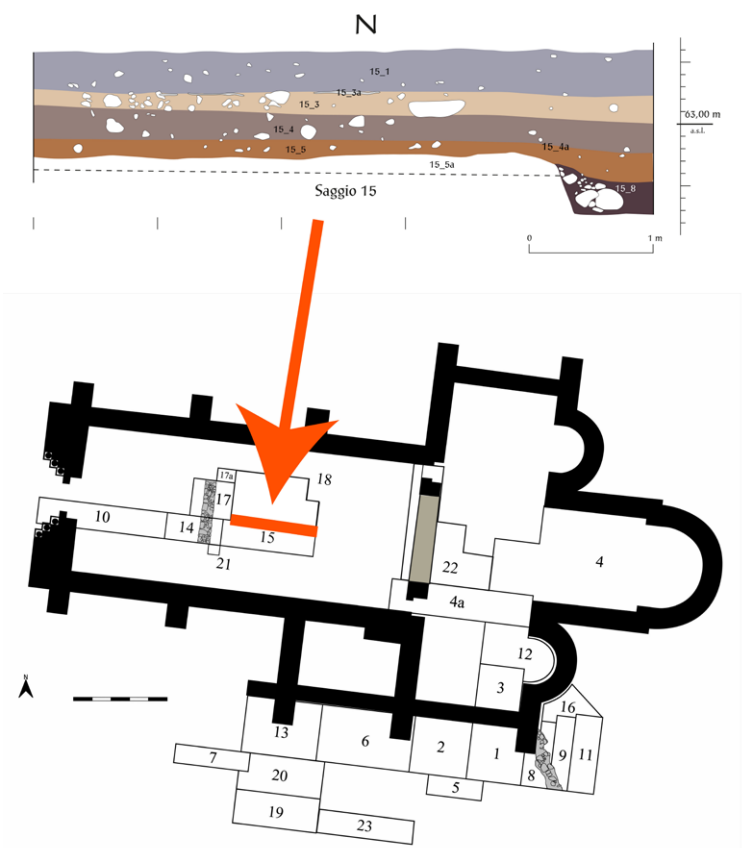


Fig. 14. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. The excavation profile in the church's nave with traces of three levels of floors (15_3a, 15_4a, 15_5a) and cultural layers from the 13th to 16th centuries (developed by S. Moździoch, K. Chrzan, E. Mozdzioch-Kostanovych)

## Area of the monastic buildings

The stratigraphic analysis of the trenches near the southern cemetery area requires further clarification. Non-invasive research allowed the course of the former monastery walls to be discovered (Fig. 15). This proposed layout corresponds with standard designs seen in Benedictine monasteries. The estimated size of the monastery's cloister is approximately 30×30 m, resembling the excavated monastery of San Michele alla Verruca (Gelichi *et al.* 2003; Alberti 2005; Gelichi *et al.* 2005). The excavations support the theory that the 12th–13th-century monastery was modified for defensive purposes during the 14th and the early 15th centuries. This timeline is reinforced by the discovery of coins from Queen Maria of Sicily (1377–1392) and King Alfonso V (1416–1458). Additionally, the excavations revealed remnants of a tower that likely belonged to the former monastery (*castellum*?) (Fig. 16).

## Discussion on the chronology of the construction of the church

According to T. Fazello, architectural historians initially dated its creation to the second half of the 11th century. The question remains, was the church constructed in its current form during that period? Heinrich Mathias Schwarz, a German art historian, advanced a later construction date to the 13th century (Swabian period) (Schwarz 1942–1944, pp. 1–112). In 1950, Mario Guiotto, Director of the Office for Historic Preservation in Palermo, voiced his reservations regarding the 11th-century date at the 7th National Congress of Architectural History in Palermo. He highlighted potential structural modifications, suggesting that certain architectural elements, such as buttresses, might date to the 13th century (Guiotto 1955 p. 3). In 1979, Guido di Stefano published *Monumenti della Sicilia normanna*, asserting that written sources related to Santa Maria di Campogrosso support a late-11th-century date for the church. However, an analysis of the employed architectural styles undermines this early chronology (Di Stefano 1979, pp. 30–31). In the 1980s, Vladimir Zorić conducted a thorough investigation of some stonework marks from Santa Maria di Campogrosso, juxtaposing them with a series from the cathedral in Cefalù, located approximately 50 kilometres away, and concluded that the two phases of construction occurred primarily in the 12th century (Zorić 1989, pp. 575–579). Some of these marks correspond to those found on the stones used for building the Maredolce Castle in Palermo and Maniace Castle in Syracuse (Fig. 17) (Zoric 1989).

Margarita Tabanelli posits that the church was reconstructed during the early Aragonese period (Tabanelli 2019, pp. 99–100).

The archaeological studies have yielded new data that assist in reconstructing the upper portion of the building. The absence of stone vaulting elements within the layers of rubble preserved inside the church indicates that unlike the chancel and


Fig. 15. Santa Maria di Campogrosso – traces of the course of the monastery walls discovered due to non-invasive research (a); plan of the San Michele alla Verruca monastery (b) (a – deveped by P. Wroniecki; b – after *L'indagine archeologica* 2003)

Fig. 16.
Santa Maria di Campogrosso. The ruin of the tower discovered south of the church in the cloister (?) of the former monastery (photo by S. Moździoch)

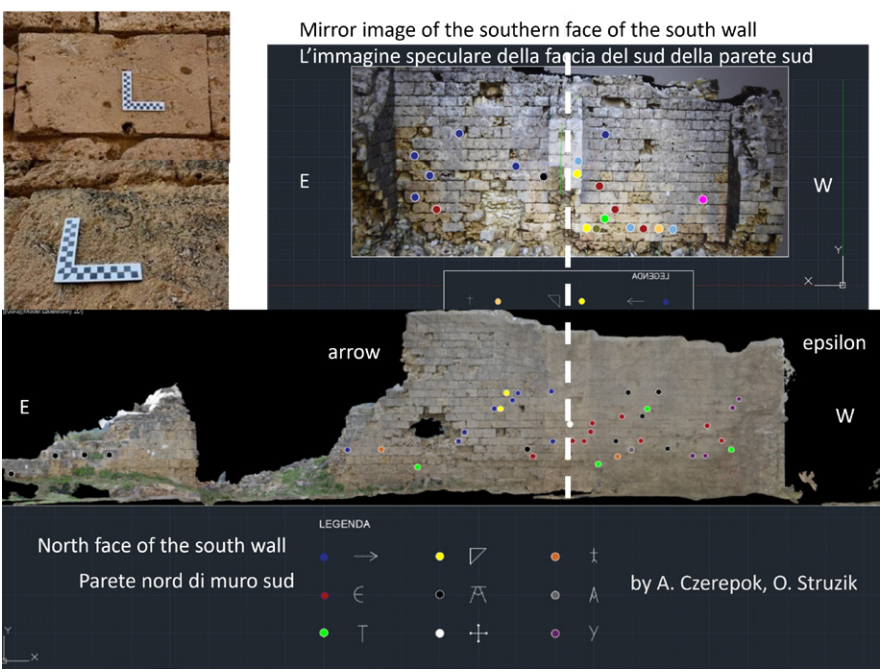


Fig. 17. Stonemarks from Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Arrangement of different groups of stone marks on both faces of the southern wall of the church (developed by S. Moździoch, A. Czerepok, O. Struzik)

transept sections, the nave was likely covered with a wooden roof. In the southern part of the transept, evidence of a cross vault, undoubtedly closed by a keystone, was established following the discovery of fragments in 2017 (Fig. 12).

From 2017 to 2022, remains of pillars were unearthed, confirming existence of a tower at the intersection of the nave and the transept (Fig. 18). The discovery of narrow passages between these pillars and the nave walls proved significant (Fig. 19). Owing to this finding, the church of Santa Maria di Campogrosso can be classified into a group of Romanesque churches known in France as *églises du passage* (in German, *Passagenkirchen*) (Konerding 1976). Primarily linked to monastic sites, this particular church type was constructed in France during the 11th and 12th centuries (Fig. 20). Closer analogues are found in French churches such as Saint-Céneri-le-Gérei in Normandy and Saint-Léon-sur-Vézère (Fig. 21). Notably, the Church of Saint-Céneri-le-Gérei was erected at the turn of the 12th century by the Giroie (Gerei) family, which is connected to the Grandmesnil family that produced Robert, abbot of the Saint Eufemia Monastery in Calabria.

A systematic analysis of the coin finds has been carefully correlated with the radiocarbon dating conducted on the bone remains discovered in the cemetery and the mortar used for building the church. This comparative research indicates that the construction of the temple commenced in the late 12th century and was completed in the 13th century (Fig. 22) (Krąpiec *et al.* 2020). This hypothesis is further supported by stratigraphic observations. For example, a *follaro* from William I's reign (1154–1166) was located within the layer of mortar and small stones

Fig. 18. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. The remains of pillars supporting the chancel wall and the church tower (photo by S. Moździoch)

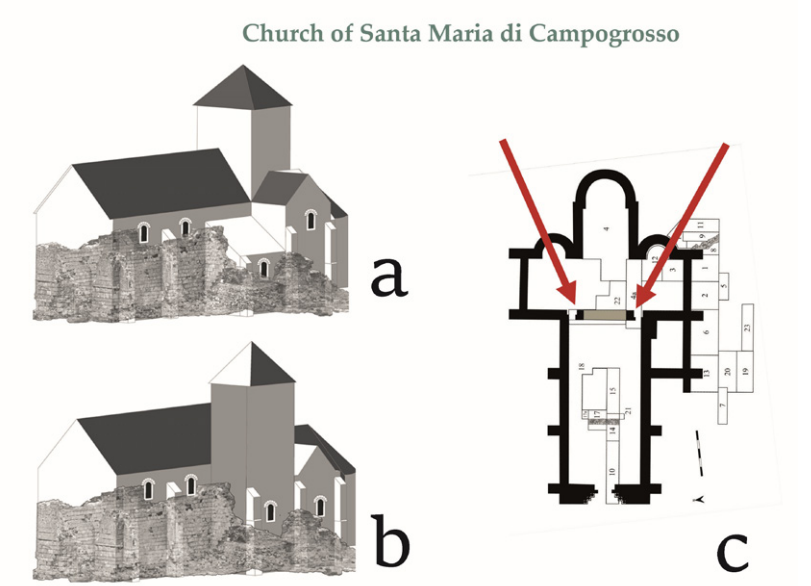


Fig. 19. Reconstruction of the church of San Michele di Campogrosso and the location of narrow passages by the church walls (developed by A. Kubicka)


Fig. 20. Group of Romanesque churches known in France as *églises du passage* (marked with red circles) (after Konerding 1976)

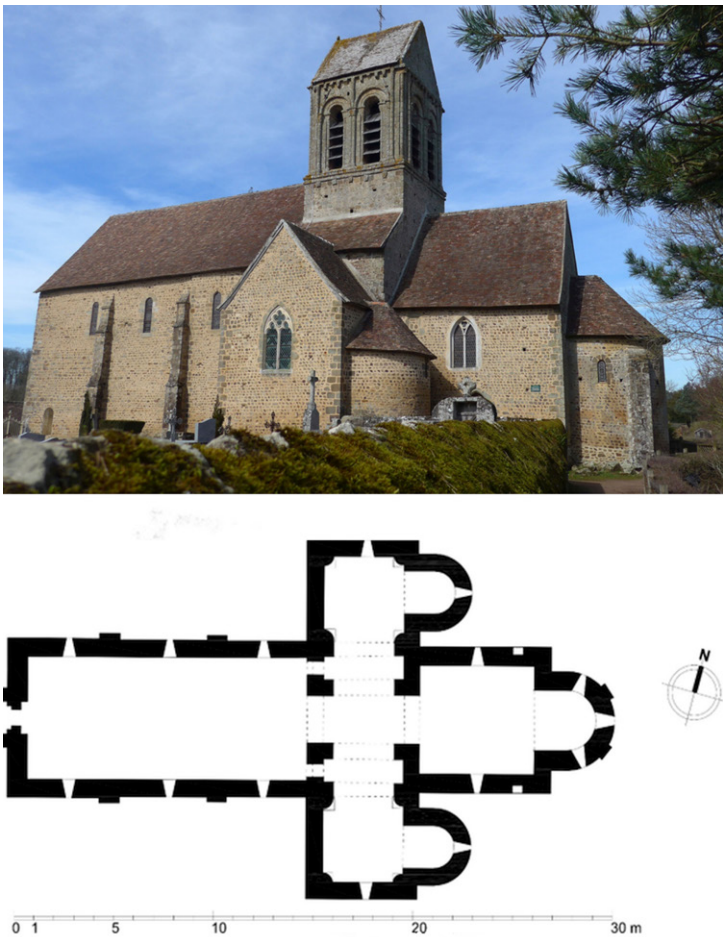


Fig. 21. Church Saint-Céneri-le-Gérei in Normandy erected at the turn of the 12th century (developed by F. Linguanti)

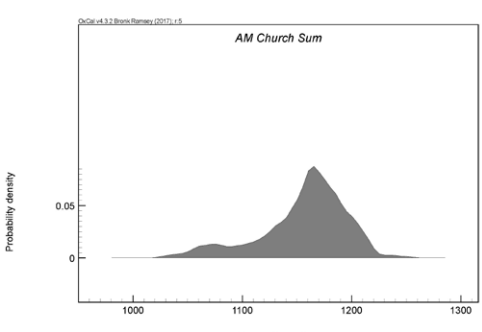


Fig. 22.
Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Radiocarbon dating of mortar samples from the walls of the church nave (developed by M. Krąpiec)

deposited during the construction phase. Additionally, a *follaro* from the reign of William II in Sicily (1166–1189) was discovered within the soil layer covering a child grave (no. 2). The radiocarbon dating of the skeletal remains suggests that this burial occurred during the second half of the 12th century.

Several meters to the west, another child burial (grave no. 7) was discovered (Fig. 23). On the child's chest, two 12th-century deniers were found. The first coin, minted in France at the Provins mint, is dated back to a period from 1125 to 1152, under the reign of Count Theobald II of Champagne (Capobianchi 1896, no. 2; Travaini 1999). The second coin is classified in literature as an Enrician, dated back from ca. 1125 to 1180 (Baldassari 2021). This evidence indicates that the burial likely occurred in the second half of the 12th century or later. Furthermore, tomb 7 was discovered in a layer of mortar associated with the construction of the masonry church, suggesting that it is chronologically more recent than the church itself. Given that the stone structure of tomb 4 has been incorporated into the church's southern wall, it is reasonable to conclude that its construction commenced in the early part of the second half of the 12th century at the latest. This is mainly supported by the carbon-14 dating of the skeleton found in this grave, which indicates that the individual buried there likely died before the end of the 12th century (see above).

All this evidence confirms that the church's construction period spanned from the mid-12th to the mid-13th century.

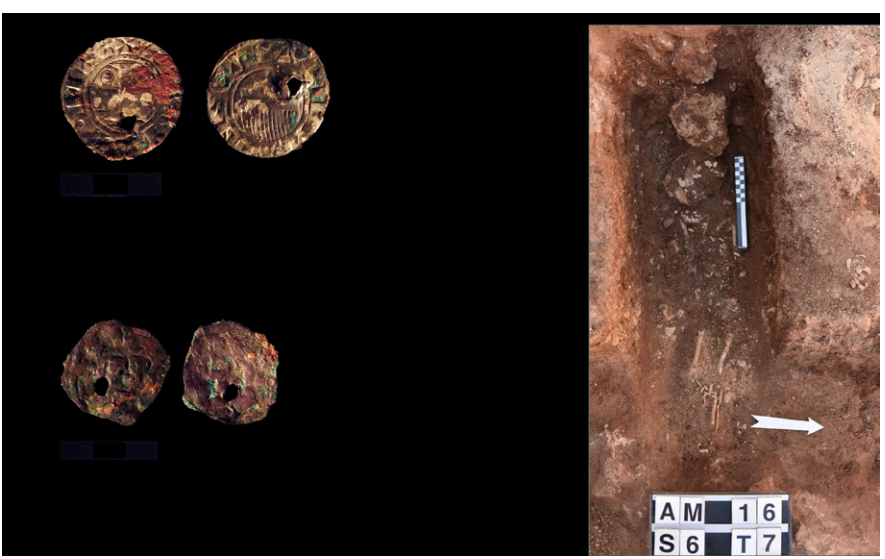


Fig. 23. Santa Maria di Campogrosso. Coins discovered on the chest of a baby buried in grave no. 7, and view of the grave (photo by M. Przysiężna-Pizarska and S. Moździoch)

## The finds

By 2020, an impressive array of archaeological materials had been gathered in the course of the research, including 26,424 pottery fragments. The excavations yielded 23,175 animal bone pieces, 318 unidentified metal objects, 1,114 nails, 253 glass fragments, 12 horseshoes, 39 architectural elements, and 115 coins. The latter category of artefacts was thoroughly discussed in a monograph by Ewa Moździoch (2023).

Additionally, the investigations resulted in as many as 25,000 fragments of fire and tableware pottery finds. The high degree of fragmentation – over 70 per cent of fragments measuring between 2 cm and 5 cm in diameter – coupled with a noticeable erosion on certain pieces poses significant challenges for interpreting technological features and reconstructing the shapes of these vessels. Consequently, dating these ceramics proves to be complicated. It is important to note that ceramic findings from before the church's construction are limited, with only a few dozen Late Roman pottery sherds recorded. The earliest medieval ceramic artefacts, specifically glazed pottery, can be traced back to the 12$^{th}$ and 13$^{th}$ centuries.

The highest number of pottery fragments was found in layers dating from the 14$^{th}$ to the 16$^{th}$ centuries, including proto-maiolica, maiolica spagnola, and ceramica invetriata sull'ingobbio.

## *Polish and Sicilian medievalists: insights and ideas*

We have experienced a strong sense of *déjà vu* during our research and related reading, as they have revealed intriguing similarities between the historical study of the Norman state in Sicily and the Piast state in Central Europe. In both cases, the work of 20$^{th}$-century historians specialising in the Middle Ages was strongly conditioned by theories from the 19$^{th}$ century. Back then, they were formulated in the context of a struggle for social and national freedom in response to the social and political order of that time. Just as Joachim Lelewel left a lasting mark on the study of the Polish Middle Ages (Serejski 1953; 1958; Grabski 1983; 1988), Michele Amari gained recognition as an insightful researcher of Sicilian history (Nef 2010; Mandalà 2016). Michele Amari and Joachim Lelewel were esteemed scholars whose contribution to understanding the origins of the Sicilian and Polish states have left a lasting impact over the centuries. In the context of pre-state cultures, 19$^{th}$-century historians strove to find an ideal world, contrasting with their contemporaneity (Boroń 1999). The significance of cultures such as the Slavic in Poland (Michalski 2013; Mühle 2018; Boroń 2020) and Arabic in Sicily (Mallette 2010) has often been overstated. Under the influence of 19$^{th}$-century theories, but also due to the political and ideological context of the scientific activities of historians after World War II,

the importance of pre-state Slavic culture was over-emphasised (for more on this subject; Moździoch 1991, p. 88 *ff.*; 1994, Szczerba 2021, pp. 13–33).

Similarly, the rise of the Norman state is believed to have been driven by the social and economic advancements achieved during the pre-state period, primarily influenced by advanced Arab culture.

The emergence of the Polish state in the 10th century and the Sicilian state in the 11th century was a turning point for the societies that formed them, initiating accelerated socio-economic development. The power of the creators of early medieval states was based on a network of defensive points – castles in Poland and Sicily, which served as centres for controlling the conquered territories.

During the second half of the 20th century, Polish archaeologists and historians postulated that the significant strongholds that formed the foundation of the Piast state were established in the 8th and 9th centuries (Hensel 1963, p. 45 *ff.*). Consequently, these keeps of the Piast state were believed to be a continuation of earlier Slavic fortifications. Reconstructions often exaggerated the scale of Slavic strongholds, exceeding archaeological evidence (Fig. 24). In academic literature, they were often labelled as "Slavic cities" (Hensel 1956; 1963).

In a similar vein, discussions surrounding the Norman state in Sicily frequently suggest that the architectural style of the Arab period significantly influenced Norman architecture, viewing it as a continuation of the former (Galdieri 2000; Gallini 2019). This notion is intriguing, particularly given the challenging nature of finding material evidence of Arab architecture in Sicily. This paradox, juxtaposing the absence of evidence with a strong belief in its existence, presents a captivating challenge for archaeologists and historians. On one hand, they attempt to rationalise this phenomenon by attributing it to destruction over subsequent centuries. On the other hand, despite archaeological findings indicating that objects traditionally associated with the Arab period, such as the baths in Cephala Diana or the palaces of Zisa and Maredolce in Palermo, may have later origins, there is a persistent belief that remnants from the Arab era must exist but are yet to be uncovered.

Just as in the 20th century, when the archaeology of the Middle Ages in Poland was mainly Slavic, so now, young Sicilian archaeology is becoming primarily Arabic (Mandalà 2016).

According to proponents of the discussed paradigms, the craftsmanship of pre-state societies such as the Slavic and Arab cultures was expected to meet high standards. This perspective has led to overinterpretation where nearly every finding is viewed as evidence of the Slavs' advancement and exceptional professional skills (Hensel 1963, p. 103; 1967, p. 98; Gediga 1970 – critical viewpoints see Moździoch 1991; 1994). Similarly, recent studies in Sicily on animal husbandry based on animal bones selectively gathered from various sites suggest that the remarkable breed of sheep from the Norman period is a result of the earlier achievements of Arab breeders (Aniceti 2022, p. 187; Aniceti, Albarella 2022). Unfortunately, this fact is

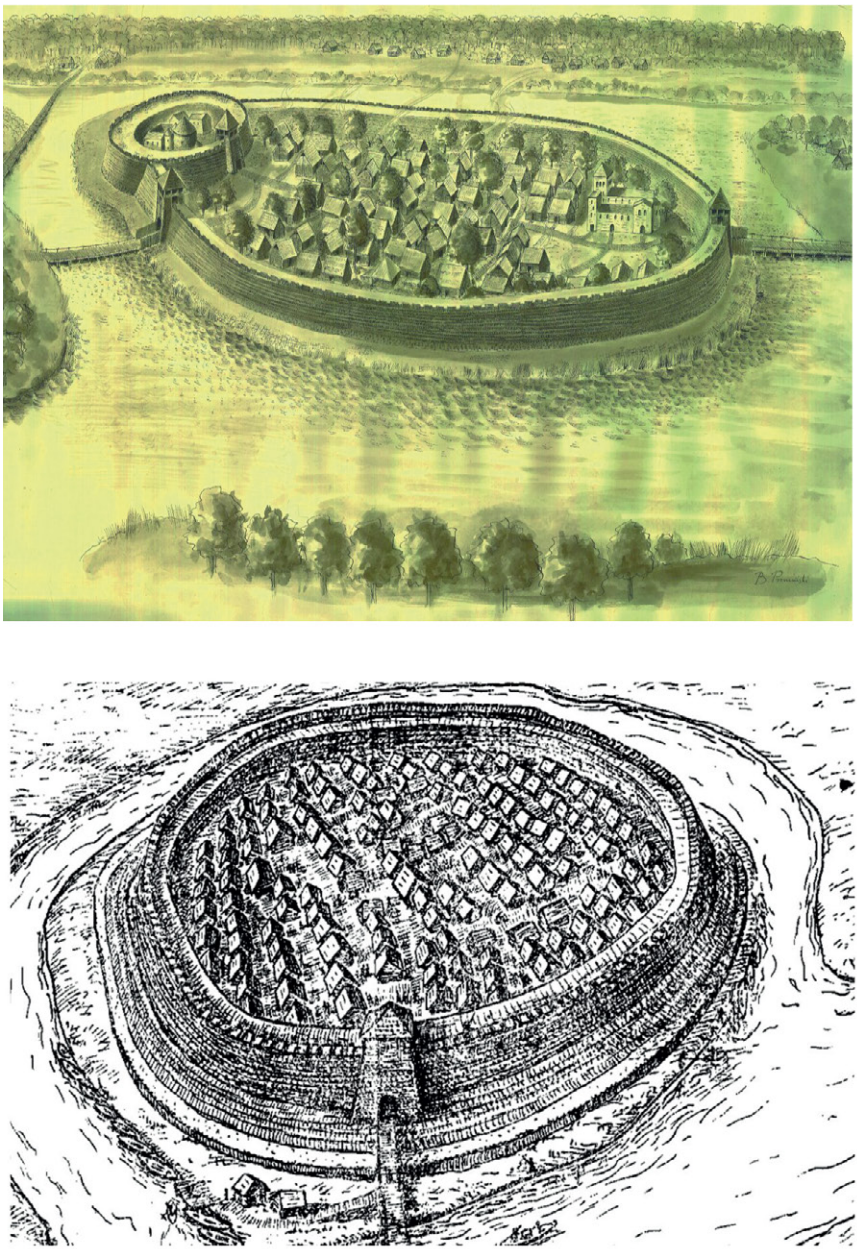


Fig. 24. Reconstructions of the early-medieval strongholds in Wrocław (a) and Opole (b) (archives of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Wrocław)

challenging to prove due to insufficient excavations, difficulties establishing the chronology of the historical materials obtained, and a lack of suitable archaeogenetic and isotopic studies. These conclusions seem to reflect the author's admiration for Amari's vision and the concept of the "Arab agricultural revolution" (Aniceti 2022; Aniceti, Albarella 2022).

In 1974, Andrew Watson brought the notion of the "Arab agricultural revolution" into the scientific conversation, crediting the Arabs with numerous innovations in medieval agriculture, including that of Sicily (Watson 1974). Although Watson's theories faced criticism in various publications, the concept he proposed gained traction over the years, especially after the term "green" was incorporated. The rising interest in environmental matters further fuelled the popularity of this topic.

The core issue in archaeological research lies in the reliance on pottery typology as the primary method for establishing chronology. At times, it seems that Polish and Sicilian ceramologists share a misleading belief that it is possible to date discoveries with an accuracy of 50 years using this approach.

At the end of the 20th century in Poland, the broader use of absolute dating methods such as the $^{14}$C-AMS method or dendrochronology significantly changed the existing knowledge about the early Middle Ages. These methods showed, for example, that some types of pottery were 1–2 centuries younger than archaeologists believed (Dulinicz 1994). Owing to dendrochronology, it was possible to determine more precisely when the Slavic and Piast strongholds were built, sometimes shifting the time of their creation by 100 or even 200 years. The Piast fortifications have proven to be the product of a developing state rather than a continuation of traditions. This new timeline also questions earlier notions regarding the Slavs' initial cultural accomplishments. According to Tomasz Jasiński, the new dendrochronological dating has enabled a new interpretation of written sources, indicating that the Polish state was established much later than historians had assumed (Jasiński 2007).

Considering the similarities in medieval research development, should we expect changes in Sicily due to the growing use of absolute dating methods? The limited use of absolute dating methods in Sicily complicates the comprehensive assessment of the timelines for various castles, churches, and other structures from the Norman period. Presently, the dating depends primarily on ceramic typology, which is significantly influenced by dates derived from historical texts. While there have been numerous critiques about the precision of radiocarbon dating for the Middle Ages (as noted by Sikorski in 2009), applying this analysis with a broader range remains a reliable dating method.

With its rich heritage from ancient cultures, Sicily is predominantly associated with classical archaeology. This discipline tends to attract the most interest from

researchers and educators. Unfortunately, medieval archaeology often receives less attention in this context.

In recent years, the advancement of medieval archaeology in the region has surged, fuelled by the dedication of Sicilian archaeologists. Collaborative scientific projects with international researchers, such as the "Sicily in Transition" initiative, signify the beginning of a transformative chapter (Carver *et al.* 2019). A wealth of publications resulting from this project can be found at https://sicily-in-transition.org/publications. Furthermore, studies revisiting earlier research, such as the excavations in Mazara, have been undertaken (Molinari, Meo 2021). This refreshed approach utilises modern research methods, including radiocarbon dating, which has the potential to enhance our comprehension of the Middle Ages, akin to the advancements seen in Polish history.

What accounts for the similarity in the attitudes of Poles and Sicilians toward the origins of their states, particularly regarding tendencies toward megalomania, despite their cultural differences? Is Prince Don Fabrizio Salina's observation in *Il Gatopardo* that they are deeply entrenched in their past accurately reflecting the Sicilian experience and perhaps that of the Poles? Furthermore, that: their vanity is stronger than their misery; every invasion by outsiders, whether so by origin or, if Sicilian, by the independence of spirit, upsets their illusion of achieved perfection, risks disturbing their satisfied waiting for nothing; having been trampled on by a dozen different peoples, they consider themselves to have an imperial past which gives them a right to a grand funeral (Di Lampedusa 1991).

Do both nations believe that it has already been good and will not get better, so the celebration of the past remains a consolation?

Although medieval Poland and Sicily differ in many respects, from their different cultural contexts to their diverse geography, the effects of ideology and politics on the scholarly discourse of archaeologists and medieval historians are surprisingly similar. While dynamic, these trends invariably shape how we interpret archaeological discoveries.

## *Closing remarks*

Can the findings of our small-scale research at a single medieval site in Sicily impact the development of Norman period archaeology in Sicily? We believe so, and this is for three reasons, at least.

Firstly, Sicilian medieval archaeology has only started to develop over the past fifty years, so it is still young. According to one of the founders of Italian medieval archaeology Riccardo Francovich, it was still a young science in the 1980s (*Archeologia e storia* 1987). Medieval archaeology in Sicily is even younger (Molinari 2004).

Any systematically gathered and published excavation holds significant importance, providing valuable insights for comparison.

Secondly, they indicate that the process of "Latinisation" or, more broadly, "Westernisation" of Sicily's spiritual and material culture may have occurred relatively swiftly in some instances. It could be attributed to the direct influx of populations from the continent (Gabor *et al.* 2017, p. 321) and, to a lesser extent, the assimilation of the Western-Latin culture model by the indigenous communities. A similar trend can be observed in Central Europe beginning in the mid-12th century, during which Western European settlers displaced the indigenous Slavic population under the direction of local rulers. Thus, "Westernisation" can be partially understood as a consequence of population exchange. This issue was extensively discussed during the Second Congress of Polish Medievalists in relation to the Slavic region (*Słowiańszczyzna* 2008).

Third, the first research of our institute and the first $^{14}C$ dating results prompt us to rethink the concepts functioning in the scientific literature of the 11th-century chronology of the "Norman" church of Santa Maria di Campogrosso (as mentioned above, it was built in the second half of the 12th and the first half of the 13th century). The first radiocarbon dating results also questioned the existence of Byzantine, Arab and Norman phases of the Castello dei Tre Cantoni castle in Scicli. Dating of the mortar from the walls of the Scicli castle indicated that they were built much later, in the second half of the 14th century (Moździoch *et al.* 2020).

The identity of the Sicilian population has been significantly shaped since the Norman conquest, influenced more by confrontations with Islam than by an overarching spirit of tolerance. A pivotal aspect of this cultural transformation was the emergence and deepening of the Marian cult. In the case of our monastery, the only material testimony of this cult is a 14th–15th-century plaque adorned with Marian symbolism that was discovered within the nave of a younger church (Fig. 25). After founding the town of Altavilla Milicia in the early 17th century, Marian's devotion shifted to this new settlement, which correlates with the emergence of a miraculous image and the legend attached. Perhaps the 14th-century painting of the Madonna, a today's object of worship, came from the church we have investigated (Bucaro 2010).

The Normans played a crucial role in the migration of people from Western Europe. With their cultural and spiritual contribution, they were vital to the development of Latin-Christian Europe. Can the transformations that led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Sicily, one of Europe's wealthiest medieval states, be linked to its reliance on the material advancements of Arab culture? Proving this through archaeological findings presents a significant challenge. Or, is it an impossible mission?

The story of the excavations at the Chiesazza site reflects the spirit of scientific discovery and highlights the strength of collaboration. Our research could only thrive due to the support from our Sicilian colleagues, including archaeologists and


Fig. 25.
Santa Maria di Campogrosso. An object with Marian symbolism found in medieval layers in the church nave (trench 18) (photo by I. Moździoch)

historians. We sincerely appreciate the generosity and willingness of the Soprintendenza di Beni Culturali ed Ambientali staff in Palermo to share their expertise with us.

Additionally, the support from the local community in Altavilla Milicia played a crucial role in the success of these archaeological efforts. This project also provided a valuable learning experience for numerous Polish students, enabling them to engage with Italian and Sicilian cultures while fostering a cultural exchange that enhanced the Sicilian community's understanding of modern Polish culture.

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