

MOUNTAIN OF MARCH



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Leaving Piazza Armerina and travelling northwards across the main road to Barrafranca, about one kilometre from "*Ponte Olivo*" (Olivo Bridge), you reach a country road leading to "*Montagna di Marzo*" (literally translated as "Mountain of March")

This mountain towers over a valley where the stream Olivo flows into the artificial catchment basin.

The landscape which unfolds before you is beautiful in its own right: imposing pines, pale green eucalyptuses and many examples of *maquis* (a Mediterranean bush) rise in the middle of rich vegetation, punctuated, in the beautiful season, by yellow daisies, poppies and irises.

But there is more to the "*Montagna di Marzo*" than just beautiful flora and fauna: the area is also rich with interesting archaeological history. The hilltop site was first used in the Bronze age till the *Sicilian** age and continued until the complete Hellenistic colonization.

Since ancient times, tales have been told of wonderful treasures which were hidden in this mountainous area and a significant destruction has been perpetrated by clandestine diggers' hands, not with altruistic motives but for their own gain.

So now, instead of being able to see and enjoy these fine treasures in our many local museums these artefacts have been sold to private collections and lost forever because of looting in times long-ago.

**Siculi*=people of central and southern Italy who arrived in Sicily, according some historians in the 13th cent. B.C.,according Tucidide in the 11th century B.C.



The first of many regular excavations started in 1962, under the direction of the Professor Vinicio Gentile. Many others followed, and they were submitted to the Professor Vito Romano and to the Superintendent of Antiquities of Eastern Sicily, Luigi Bernabò Brea. But it was only in 1966, with the intervention of Professor Luigi Mussinano from the University of Trieste that they succeeded in mapping and discovering the exact extent of the archaeological site.

The summit of the massif of the "Montagna di Marzo" can be divided in two regions: west and east. Towards the west it consists of a slightly uneven plateau about six hundred metres high which descends steeply to the valley at the edge of it. Towards the east it rises like a hill almost 800 metres long and 350 metres wide. The summit of this hill forms an undulating plain on which the ancient city was built. At the centre of the city was the **acropolis**, inside which are the remains of a **sacellum**, or altar, from the Hellenistic period, where fragments of fictile (clay) small figurines and two great busts of female divinities have been found. Along the boundaries of the sacellum, partially destroyed by a fire in the following, Roman or Byzantine, era, the threshold of the building is visible. It is formed by three square-hewn stones or ashlar made of tufa (a porous rock composed of calcium carbonate), with the signs of the hinges and doors still evident.

The date of the city can be fixed at the 5th-4th century B.C., but its existence actually continued to the Roman and Byzantine eras. In fact traces of some finds show that the site has probably been inhabited since the Bronze age.



The town layout shows a road scheme that divided the area into a right-angled grid, with two main roads running parallel to each other. Most of the buildings are essentially from Roman times, and the walls follow almost all the same alignment.

The numerous wells and the traces of the natural springs, still visible today, show that the city had an abundant supply of water.

The steep slopes that surround the hill, made a natural defence for the area, while the heart of the city was protected by boundaries of which evidence still exists. These defences were made of small and medium sized stone blocks, rather coarsely hewn and overlapped without mortar.

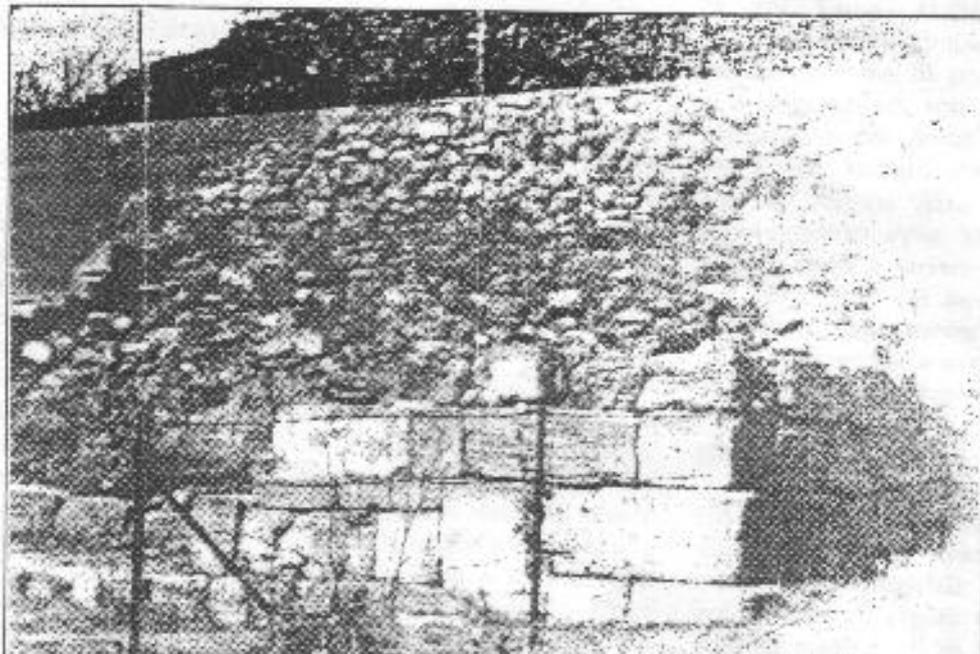


The inner filling of the wall was made up of a mixture of stones and earth.

It is also possible to see at regular intervals, in the defensive wall , pillars formed by well-hewn, overlapping stones to strengthen it. Close to the base of the wall are the remains of a rectangular turret, added at later time.

In this fortification is a door opening, where it is possible to see its stone threshold. The jambs of this door consist of two pillars formed by a pile of great square stones jutting out and arranged as a buttress to strengthen the building. In the tallest pillar the holes of the socket for the closing bar are still visible.

**Remains of the
southern monumental door**



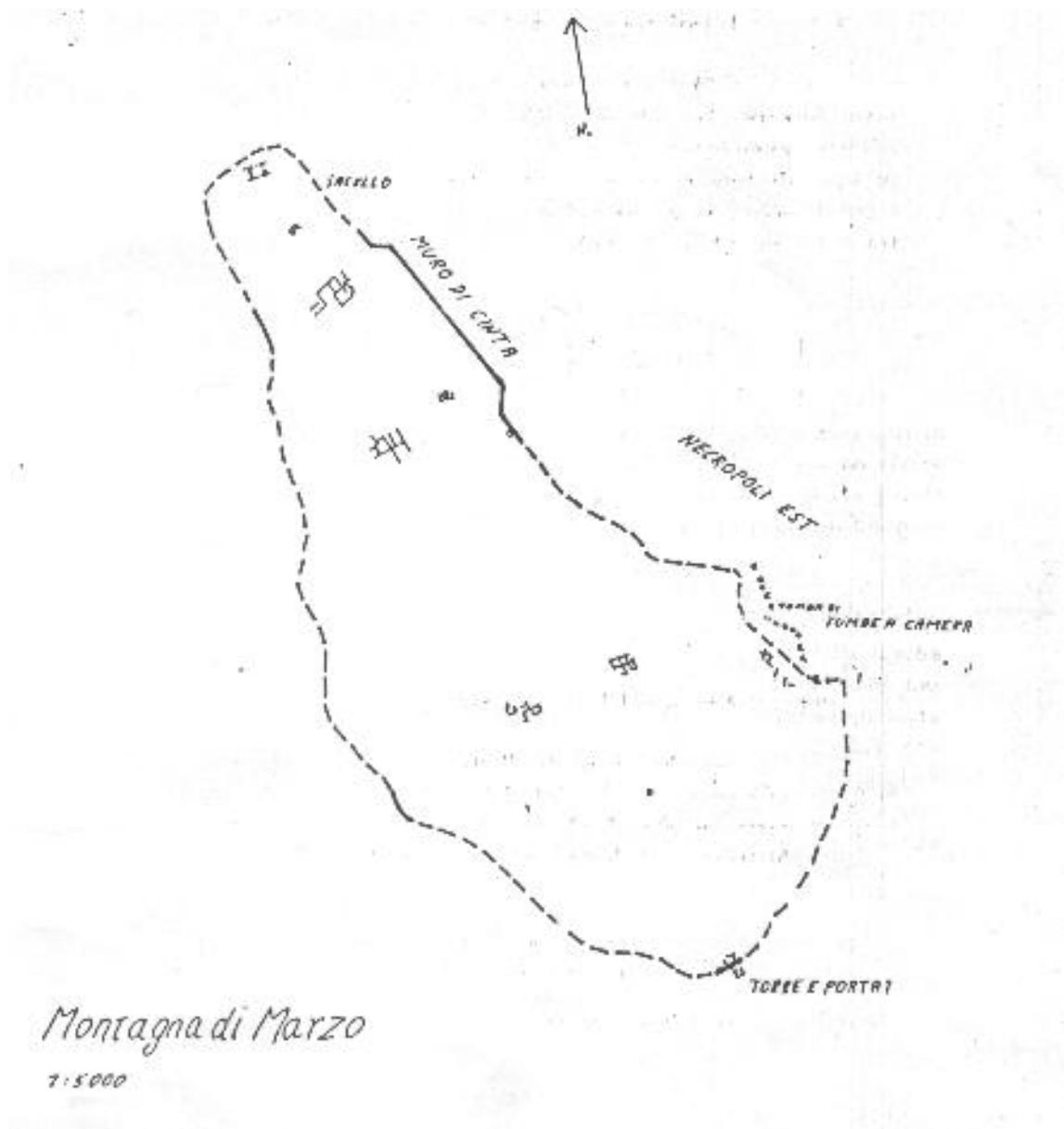
To the south of the city, around 500 metres away, a sacred area dating back to Hellenistic times has been found. Here there are some remains of altars and plinths of small temples, as well as small rooms for sacrificial rites where some offerings were burnt.

In the north-east of this sacred area there are the remnants of a building which included a sacrificial altar for votive offerings, called *Demetra's* altar and a small well. Around this area a large number of objects have been found made from *acroma* or colourless ceramics.

Sacrificial altar with a small well



However, the area to which particular attention has been paid, not only by the archaeologists, but above all by the clandestine grave-diggers are those of the necropolis adjacent to the city along the east side under the city-walls.

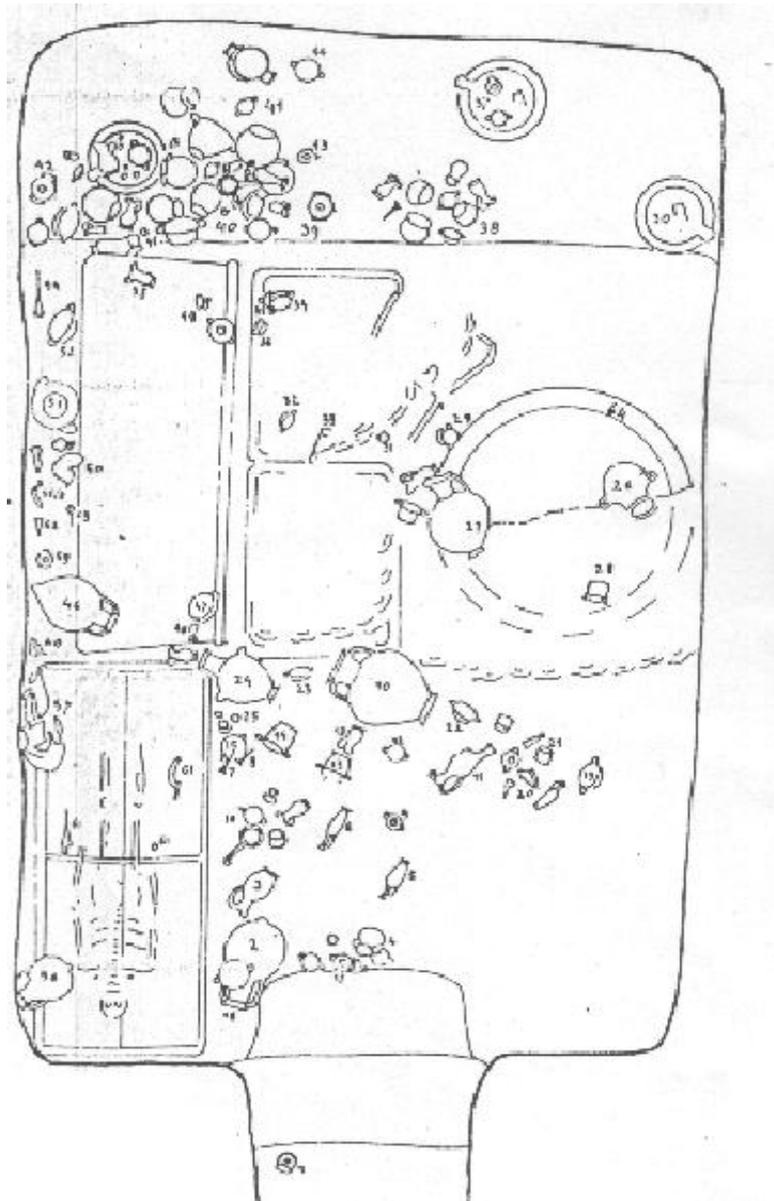


Nearly all the graves of the aforesaid necropolis are "room"-shaped, dug in the tufa rock, with a small **dromos** or entrance and some steps leading inside, where, set at the end, there are one or two **klinais** (couches or resting-places) sometimes replaced with sarcophagi.

There is a significant quantity of pottery material contained in these burials chambers.

In particular, in one of these graves about 130 objects, including ten bronze vases, two sarcophagi, some Corinthian helmets, two *schinieri* (knee-plates) and a shield have been recovered. The sarcophagi contained the remains of two skeletons, most probably warriors' skeletons, with a sword placed on the side and a ring on one finger.

**Disposition
of the objects
inside the grave**



A rather curious discovery was found on a great dish: the remains of hard-boiled eggs, fish and chicken still perfectly recognizable after all this time!

The graves of this necropolis come from a later era and constitute single burials pits containing a small number of vases as burial outfit. Traces of burials of Roman era have not been found.

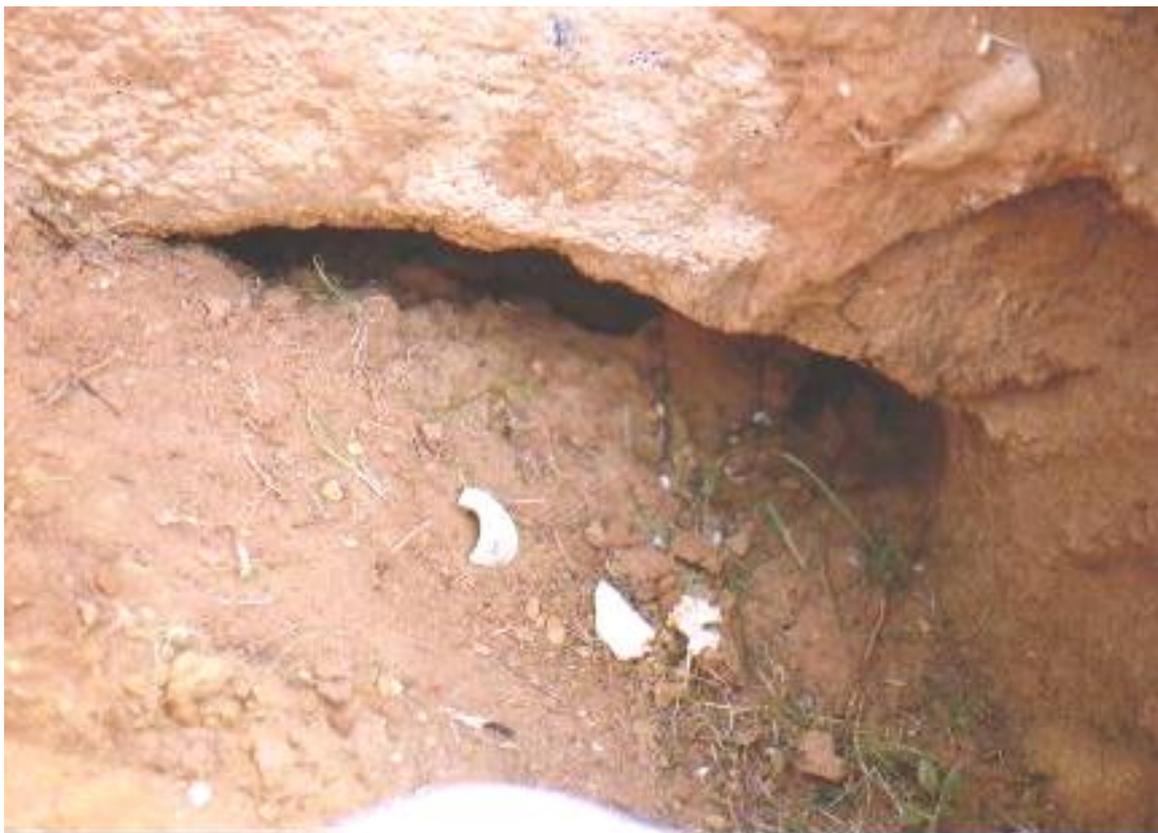
The northern Necropolis is wider than the others and broadens for around a kilometre at *Ramursura*. It includes 60 graves datable between the 6th and the 1st century B.C. Some are rectangular pits dug in the tufa and contain pottery decorated with geometric patterns or like **Attic**(=*from the region around Athens*) type; others are as "**cappuccina**" with a covering made up of big clay tiles or stone slabs .

The burial goods of these last ones contain ceramics of **Siceliota*** style with red figures. Other necropolises with graves pits have been found in the south and west areas, always along the slopes of the massif, almost all of which have been plundered.

In fact, these graves seldom preserve any fragments of what they once contained. All the material which has been discovered can be dated, primarily to the **Sicula** and Greek eras of the fourth and third century B.C. and to the Roman era of the first and second century A.D..

From this, it is easy to conclude that the burial sites have been used more than once.

** Siceliota=belonging to Sicelioti, the heirs of the people who, from Greece, went to live in Sicily from the 8th century B.C. on)*





Violated grave



Burial with utensil for sampling, abandoned by the clandestine diggers

The remains of another Byzantine necropolis have been brought to light in the city centre.

Many of the objects recovered in the archaeological area of "Montagna di Marzo" include: vases, coins, masks, fictile weights, armours and statues. These can be seen in the museums in Siracusa, Agrigento and Caltanissetta and in the archives of the Trigona Palace of Piazza Armerina.



Attic Pelike (6th century B.C.)



Attic Lekythos (6th century B.C.)

Glossary:

ACROPOLIS:

the most elevated part in a fortified city

SACELLUM:

place with altar devoted to a god.

ACROMA:

not coloured

DROMOS :

entry

KLINAI

pallets

FICTILE :

Made of clay

SCHINIERI:

Pieces of armour to protect the shin- bones

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