

4 Project aims

In the 18th century AD, some west Europeans began arguing that their civilization was inherently superior to all others, because they had inherited from ancient Greece a unique tradition of secular, scientific rationalism. They argued (i) that this special Greek culture formed during the archaic period (c. 700-500 BC); (ii) that Greek colonists spread it through the west Mediterranean; (iii) that this created the broadly shared culture through which the Roman Empire and Christianity expanded; and (iv) that this Greco-Roman-Christian background explained the 17th-century Scientific Revolution, the 18th-century Enlightenment, and, in 19th-century versions, the Industrial Revolution, democracy, and imperialism.

Greek colonization of the west Mediterranean is a crucial stage in this theory of world history. We normally refer to the general theory about the Greek origins of a distinct western civilization as “Hellenism,” and the process by which Hellenic culture was transferred to other peoples as “Hellenization.” The Hellenist model holds that the Hellenization of indigenous west Mediterranean culture was deep and rapid. However, when modern archaeology began in the late 19th century, very few scholars were interested in directly testing the theory by excavating indigenous sites to document exactly what changed when Greeks came west. Most preferred to take the basic theoretical framework for granted, and to excavate the actual Greek colonies (Agrigento, Selinunte, etc.) to illustrate their assumptions about the spread of Hellenic culture.

Archaeologists outside the Mediterranean largely abandoned Hellenist models in the early 20th century, developing broader evolutionary theories about the shift from simple hunter-gatherer bands to complex ancient states. In these theories, Greece is simply one example among many of a network of little city-states on the fringes of larger territorial empires, and Hellenization is just a fancy word for a process of diffusion. But in the west Mediterranean the first serious challenge to the Hellenist model came only in the 1990s, from scholars influenced by postcolonial theory. Postcolonial scholars, initially interested in the literature that had developed in and about former European colonies since decolonization began, emphasized that the kind of one-way transmission of cultural traits from the colonizing power to the colonized was an imperialist fantasy. They stressed that areas of colonial interaction see fluid interactions, contested meanings, and the construction of wholly new hybrid identities. They often spoke of the creation of a “third space,” between colonizers and colonized.

In the 1990s, Mediterranean historians and archaeologists influenced by postcolonialism argued that colonial interactions in the seventh and sixth centuries BC were just as fluid and complex as those in the twentieth century AD. Archaic colonization did not transmit Greek culture to passive natives; rather, people reacted by constructing complicated hybrid cultures. Some argued that the very notion of a distinctive “Greek culture” only formed slowly, partly in response to western colonization and partly in response to the war against Persia in 480 BC; so speaking of “Greek” sites and documenting the transmission of their culture to “native” sites might in fact be meaningless. Postcolonial historians also pointed out that Phoenicians had settled some parts of the west Mediterranean well before the Greeks, and that any assessment of “Hellenization” would have to come to terms with prior “Phoenicianization.” The general conclusion of postcolonial critiques of Hellenist models seems to be that the consequence of the Phoenician/Greek expansion was one more episode in a much longer series of kaleidoscopic shifts in cultural identity, rather than a watershed in world history

Hellenization vs. postcolonialism is now a major academic battlefield, but we lack adequate data to resolve the issue. There are two main reasons for this. First, although evaluating the consequences of the Phoenician/Greek expansion obviously depends on examining how the communities that were already in the west Mediterranean changed after colonization began, few archaeologists have excavated indigenous western sites. Second, the relatively few excavations that have taken place have rarely collected the kinds of information we need to test the theories.

We are digging at Monte Polizzo to try to do just this. Several other projects (in south Italy, Sardinia, and southern France) are addressing the same problems, and our common goal is to produce a new history of the impact of the Greek/Phoenician expansion. This may have major implications for how we explain the social evolution of the Old World.

We chose Monte Polizzo because it was a large (20 hectares) indigenous site in the only part of the Mediterranean (western Sicily) where Phoenicians and Greeks both settled, and was occupied during the major period of colonial expansion (c. 700-500 BC).

Hellenization models imply the steady native adoption of Greek artifacts and behaviors, while postcolonial models imply more complex flows, with different groups and individuals adopting different novelties, and a tendency for entirely new material forms and practices to be constructed. To judge between these approaches (and to move beyond them) we need to do three things: (i) to measure exactly how much indigenous material culture and customs changed; (ii) to understand whether native peoples used Greek or Phoenician artifacts in the same ways as Greeks or Phoenicians, or used them in new ways; (iii) to quantify the development of hybrid material culture and practices; and (iv) to broaden the range of practices studied, through systematic analysis of bones, seeds, residues, and pollen.

To accomplish these goals, we chose to focus on Monte Polizzo's religious areas, since religion has been one of the major areas of debate between champions of Hellenization and postcolonial models, and to emphasize stratigraphy and context much more than has been normal in the west Mediterranean.

Our initial results are providing a new picture of native religion. In the sixth century BC, activity focused on a round building (A1; see fig. 3.11 above) at the summit of the site. Red deer were dismembered and cooked, their antlers were modified and perhaps used in rituals, and then stored in large coarseware pots, which were later dumped. Lots of metal and bone ornaments were used around A1, although since the site was peacefully abandoned, only tiny fragments survive. Both the round building and the deer rituals suggest that the sixth-century peoples in this area (whom the Greeks called Elymians) were trying to evoke ancestral traditions. Round houses had been normal till about 650 BC, but by the time A1 was built, had been replaced by rectilinear houses (which are the norm at Monte Polizzo). Similarly, finds from the nearby site of Monte Maranfusa show that deer had been an important part of the diet around 800 BC, but by 500 had declined significantly. The architectural form and the content of the rituals both seem to be looking backward to traditional ways, and have little in common with Phoenician or Greek practices. It may be that Monte Polizzo zone A reveals resistance to new ideas—a kind of religious fundamentalism—rather than Hellenization.

Two further aspects of our finds seem to support the postcolonial approach. First, there was tremendous fluidity in religious space. The sanctuary perhaps began around 600 BC with a rectilinear building (A5), which was replaced around 550 by a round hut-shrine (A1), only for A1 to be rebuilt as a peculiar mainly rectilinear structure, probably open to the air, around 500 BC. Second, there were surprising variations in finds between indigenous sites in western

Sicily. In zone E, 100 meters north of zone A (see figures 3.5, 3.17), we've begun excavating what we think is a well stratified garbage deposit, going back probably to 700 BC. Other west Sicilian sites have lots of indigenous incised-and-impressed pottery in the 7th century BC, giving way to matt-painted geometric styles in the 6th century. But in zone E we've found consistent amounts of incised-and-impressed pottery across the whole period, combined with lots of matt-painted in the 7th century, dropping off to almost nothing after 550 BC. The most common indigenous decorated vessels at Monte Polizzo are plain gray plates with simple incised bands on the lip. We've also found surprisingly low percentages of Greek pottery, and almost no Phoenician imports, except wine amphoras.

All this suggests great fluidity, contingency, and scope for individual agency, as the postcolonial models predict. However, this is only true if we focus on short-term changes, measurable on the scale of an individual lifetime. Recent work in south Italy, Sardinia, and southern France is producing similar results.

But before we announce the death of Hellenization, we should also put Monte Polizzo into a longer-term perspective, spanning several centuries. When we do this, we find that Greek and Phoenician artifacts, and even behavioral patterns, do largely displace indigenous traditions. In the 430s BC, people at Segesta (just 5 miles from Monte Polizzo) probably employed the same architects who built the Parthenon in Athens, and in the 4th century they added a superb Greek-style theater. Athenian black-glaze imports and local imitations dominate the decorated pottery from 4th-century deposits at Segesta, Salemi, Marsala, and other local sites, and Carthaginian coins are common (at Monte Polizzo we found 10 around the very small 4th-century-BC structure A3, built over A1). And if we broaden the geographical context, we find that despite the very varied local histories of sites from Sicily to Spain and Sardinia, they all share this inexorable movement toward Greek (and in some places Punic) material culture and practices.

The decisive period seems to be the 5th century. In the 6th century, indigenous sites like Monte Polizzo have strong material culture traditions. Two-thirds of the native sites in western Sicily—including Monte Polizzo—are abandoned at points between 525 and 475 BC; and when they're reoccupied, generally around 350 BC, most of the old material culture traditions have vanished. The abandonment of so many sites is not just an annoying obstacle to understanding; it's part of a major change in ways of life, and probably has a lot to do with why the indigenous traditions died. The processes involved are debated, and need a lot more research. One prominent Sicilian archaeologist has suggested that the battle of Himera in 480 BC, when the Greeks crushed a Carthaginian army (explained in section 5.4 below) destabilized native society, causing a demographic and economic collapse after 475. This seems implausible to us on both economic and demographic grounds, and in any case many of the native sites were already abandoned before 480. We suspect that a process was at work like one we can see in eastern Sicily in the 480s: cities increased their power and wealth by persuading or forcing smaller neighbors to abandon their communities and resettle at the larger center. In the 450s, a native Sicel (east Sicilian) leader named Douketios did the same thing, briefly becoming a serious player in east Sicilian politics.

The most likely explanation for the changes in settlement patterns and material culture, it seems to us, is that in the sixth century Segesta and a few other native sites (see fig. 3.3 above) —probably Erice and Entella, as well as Halikyai, probably under modern Salemi—became a lot more powerful than the others, by concentrating population. These bigger sites also have the first clear evidence for native adoption of Greek religious architecture. Possibly

the elites of Segesta and other large towns saw themselves as rivals to the Greek cities in the later sixth century and refashioned themselves as the leaders of native states, squeezing out smaller Elymian towns like Monte Polizzo in the process. To answer this question, we need good data from Segesta, Erice, Entella, and Salemi. But because most of these sites have been occupied continuously since the 8th century BC, we don't have that. Segesta's fortifications and temples suggest the city was stronger than ever in the fifth century; in 416 she persuaded Athens to invade Sicily to help her get the better of Selinunte, and in 410 she persuaded Carthage to do the same.

For the moment, all we can do is try to figure out as much as we can about the abandonment of Monte Polizzo. If we're right (i) that the growth of Segestan state power in competition with Selinunte caused it, and (ii) that the abandonment of so many native sites and the concentration of people in larger towns drove the collapse of indigenous material culture and practices in the 5th century, it seems that neither the Hellenization nor the postcolonial models completely explain the impact of the Greek/Phoenician expansion. We might instead want to think more like analysts of contemporary globalization, linking economic, demographic, and military forces to cultural changes, looking at how fundamentalism co-exists with modernization, and how changes in the connectedness of regions created new winners and losers. But first we need well excavated, precisely recorded data from a tightly stratified excavation—and that's where you come in.

