

# INVESTIGATIONS at CASTRONOVO di SICILIA

## Results and Future, 2015

### Introduction

The period of history being studied by the present researchers is the 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the subject of interest is the social and economic change brought about by successive changes in regime in Sicily (FIG 1). Europe during the period concerned was subject to a wide range of ideological confrontations: Christian factions drove the Carolingian empire in the north (8/9<sup>th</sup> century) and the Byzantine empire (6/12<sup>th</sup> century) in the east. Islamic empires were established by the Umayyads in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Abbasids in the 9<sup>th</sup> and the Fatimids in the 10<sup>th</sup>. Sicily lies at the centre of this zone of confrontation, with the western part of the island being the more subject to Arab influence and the eastern largely remaining aligned with Byzantine Greece (FIG 2).

*Castronovo di Sicilia* lies in the centre of the island at the headwaters of the Platani and Torto rivers that flow respectively south and north, and halfway along the line of the current road and railway that connects Agrigento and Palermo. Three principal areas of archaeological interest have been defined: at Monte Kassar (1050m) are the remains of a late Byzantine defensive system dated to the 8/9<sup>th</sup> century; at San Vitale are the ruins of a later stronghold created by Arabs in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, in which most surviving monuments are Norman (11/12<sup>th</sup> century); and in the plain beside the River Platani at Casale San Pietro is an extensive Byzantine settlement of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century, and a 9-11<sup>th</sup> century Arab settlement focused on the historic building at San Pietro itself (FIG 3).

### Investigations in 2014

These centres were defined by background research and endorsed by the 2014 and 2015 evaluation seasons. In 2014 at Monte Kassar, a series of buildings was located on the summit of Monte Kassar by magnetometry and a drystone house built on the inside of the defensive wall was excavated on the south side of a point previously investigated by Agata Villa (FIG 4). This was the first certain indication that the Byzantine fortress was occupied (FIG 5, 6, 7). In the same year the area on the plain to the west of San Pietro was surveyed by surface collection and magnetometry, the results of which suggested a dense occupation from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However test excavation showed that this area had been subject to deep

destruction and dispersal of materials due to ploughing. All three major centres were further defined in 2015.

### **Investigations in 2015**

#### **Monte Kassar, 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine fortress**

On Monte Kassar, the area examined lay on the north side of Agata Villa's excavations. It proved to be an open yard created by levelling prior to the construction of the defensive wall. Standing on this yard were drystone walls of two buildings. These had few diagnostic features, but are thought to be closely associated with the defensive wall, both in time and purpose. At this point, a three-way set of steps had been incorporated in the body of the wall, and a layer of tread leading to them suggested intensive use over a considerable period (FIG 8, 9).

The previous excavations by Agata Villa had contacted a spread of plaster thought to have underlain the Byzantine features. The plaster was encountered on the west side of a rudimentary wall assigned a date in the Archaic period. Exploration of this plaster floor over a more extensive area showed that it had been laid in a semi-circular hollow cut through the blocky sandstone natural. There was no wall associated with this semi-circular cut, but a shallow scoop was located in the centre of the plaster spread containing a rich assemblage of archaic pottery and lumps of pure lime. This may have been intended as a hearth but there were few signs of burning. The surface of the blocky sandstone natural further west had been cut by two other features that cut each other. They were curved and narrow and the example to the north was sectioned to natural rock and proved to have thick-walled Archaic pottery in its upper fill. These features elongated resembled storage pits (*souterrains*) known in later Celtic cultures (FIG 10).

#### **Casale San Pietro: Byzantine period, 5-7<sup>th</sup> century**

The zone indicated by surface finds as belonging to the Byzantine village was explored in 2014 when two 6/7<sup>th</sup> child burials and an 11<sup>th</sup> century hearth were excavated (FIG 12). These were cut into or situated just above the natural concreted gravel of the flood plain. In 2015 two additional test excavations were carried out to the south of the church. In the area most distant from the church (Int 8) recent ploughsoil lay on natural gravel 0.4m from the surface. The area nearest the church (Int 6) contained a wall built of well mortared lozenge-shaped river cobbles, sealed by a spread of tiles and rubble at the base of the recent ploughsoil (FIG

13). Pottery associated with the wall suggested occupation between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century (FIG 14). Examination of areas of mortar extruding from the wall showed that its elevation, which stood to 0.53m, mainly comprised foundations set in mortar laid in a U-shaped trench (*al sacco*). The plough had therefore removed all traces of floors or exterior surfaces of activity and truncated the wall to its foundations. A row of stones displaced from the wall remained in formation. It can be noted that not only is the ploughing very deep (at least 0.4 m from present ground level) but powerful enough to displace whole courses of mortared wall sideways. The modern ploughs drawn by caterpillar tractors are quite capable of doing this, suggesting that the most destructive levelling took place recently.

### **Casale San Pietro: the Arab period, 9-11<sup>th</sup> century**

Intervention 5 at Casale San Pietro was situated west of the church building at a place designed to pick up the deepest sequence that was extant. It began as a 2x2 test excavation which cut through a metalled trackway and a ploughsoil of medieval date onto a layer of rubble that featured large sherds of 11/12<sup>th</sup> century pottery. Following this promising start, the trench was extended to a length of 6m in a northerly direction. The layer of rubble remained strong and at the north end was found by excavation to have concealed a fine wall built in ashlar, later modified by another coarser wall inserted at an imprecise right angle (FIG 15). The wall therefore had two phases. The original wall had been constructed in a foundation trench. The contexts were well stratified and rich in ceramics suggesting a coherent sequence of sealed assemblages from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (FIG 16, 17). Beneath the occupation zone of the wall lie the tiles of the 5-7<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine village. The 8<sup>th</sup> century was missing.

This is the first certain sighting of a well-stratified sequence with culturally Islamic pottery of the 9-11<sup>th</sup> century in Sicily. The evaluation indicated that survival was potentially very good: the building that was contacted survived to a height of 0.65m above its contemporary ground level. The top of this surviving structure was encountered 0.5m below the present surface of the ground, and 1.80m below the present church floor. Other walls showing in the neighbourhood of the Casale buildings or embedded in its fabric could also be survivors from the Arab phase. It can be surmised that about 2.5m of stratified deposits from the middle ages (9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century) survive under the church floor in the Casale San Pietro mound.

### **Synthesis and future**

At *Monte Kassar* we have obtained new information on the use of the fortress and its date. There is little doubt that it represents a serious investment by the Byzantine state to defend the island at a key point in the road network during the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and that this defence became ineffective in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. These dates, dependent largely on ceramics, are consistent with the archaeological evidence for military quarters occupied by a resident garrison in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and the eventual surrender of the site in the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century as implied by the written documents. The interior of Monte Kassar has produced little surface material, so that the garrison appears to be largely quartered near the wall, occupied in a watching role especially to north, east and west. Topographic survey suggests that a number of other towers remain to be discovered especially in the area of the northern approaches. Further exploration can be conducted by magnetometry, which is known to work well. But the future of this site lies not so much in more research as in its development as one of the most important and most neglected monuments in Sicily. A priority would be the commissioning of a conservation and display plan.

The investigations at *Casale San Pietro* show that in the fields and orchards the destruction of the Byzantine and later occupation has been very thorough and virtually nothing remains above its contemporary ground level. However, negative features, such as furnaces, kilns and stone foundations give strong signals to magnetometry; much of the area of occupation could be mapped by this means, even if dating evidence could remain elusive.

By contrast, the area within and round the Casale San Pietro historic building cluster is rich and deep and far from destroyed. This area not only has the potential to reveal the architecture and economy of Islamic Sicily, but is probably the only place where the Byzantine ‘agri-town’ has not been destroyed by ploughing. For these reasons, a programme of research, conservation and public reception is highly desirable. The area still free of buildings is large enough to answer the bulk of the research questions asked today. On the other hand the dumping of large amounts of Byzantine or earlier building stone, observed by the directors at first hand, including fragments of a large column, shows that the land is under continual pressure from farming, road-widening and redevelopment.

We now have a continuous ceramic type-series from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the 13<sup>th</sup> and are ready to draw a complete narrative from Castronovo di Sicilia as it experienced successive Byzantine, Arab and Norman regimes. Since the focus of settlement shifted, the investigation will continue to be applied at the three main sites at Castronovo. At the same time we are examining the assemblages from 14 other unpublished distributed over the Sicilian island, so

will eventually be in a position to report on the experience of the island as a whole and its changing contact zone.

## Summary

Historic Castronovo is on the verge of a new floruit. Its contribution to research in a relatively unknown period has already been inestimable. Its principal remaining asset is the unexcavated 9<sup>th</sup> century and later sequence that undoubtedly remains in and around the buildings of Casale San Pietro. In conjunction with further research, both here and on Monte Kassar a dazzling potential for monumentalisation awaits realisation. Its rewards for Castronovo in terms of increased tourism and identity can be judged as outstanding.

Martin Carver and Alessandra Molinari

23 Sep 2015

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FIG 1: Poster for the end of season talk at Casale San Pietro

FIG 2: Regime change in Sicily, 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century

FIG 3: Four centres of activity at Castronovo: Byzantine fort at Monte Kassar (7/8<sup>th</sup> century); Arabic citadel (9/11<sup>th</sup> century); roadside settlement at Casale San Pietro (5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century), including newly discovered Arab settlement 9-11<sup>th</sup> century; Norman and Medieval town (at site of present town)

FIG 4: DTM of Monte Kassar showing area of excavation and survey 2014 and 2015

FIG 5: Monte Kassar: Geophysical survey by Helen Goodchild, University of York, showing possible barrack blocks

FIG 6: Monte Kassar: Excavated house against the inside of the fortress wall, 8<sup>th</sup> century

FIG 7: Monte Kassar: Byzantine military belt buckle, refurbished, found on the floor of the house

FIG 8: Monte Kassar: Steps discovered within the fortress wall, looking North

FIG 9: Monte Kassar: digital plan of Byzantine buildings against the fortress wall

FIG 10: Monte Kassar: under the Byzantine fort were traces of a settlement of the Archaic period (c500BC) with an assemblage of fine wares.

FIG 11: The historic building cluster around the church at Casale San Pietro on the Agrigento-Palermo road with Monte Kassar in the background

FIG 12: Casale San Pietro: excavations in the fields beside the road reveal two children's tombs of the 6/7<sup>th</sup> century. This example included a pottery bottle with incised cross.

FIG 13: Casale San Pietro. The fields around the church were severely disturbed by ploughing, truncating the stone buildings. This wall of a Byzantine (6/7<sup>th</sup> century) building was reduced to its foundations.

FIG 14: Casale San Pietro. Excavation of an Arab structure east of the church. Within the inner angle of the wall is a stone bench.

FIG 15: Casale San Pietro. The sequence above the Arab building, 9<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century

FIG 16: Casale San Pietro. African Red slip of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century

FIG 17: Casale San Pietro. Islamic pottery of the 9-11<sup>th</sup> century

FIG 18: Staff and students from the Universities of York and Rome Tor Vergata at Monte Kassar

FIG 19: On the steps at Mont Kassar; staff and students of Rome and York with director Alessandra Molinari and inspector of the Palermo Soprintendenza Stefano Vassalo.

FIG 20: Madeleine Hummler, Jasmine and Fiona with Conker.

Venerdì 25 settembre 2015 ore 18.00 presso il CASALE SAN PIETRO

## Castronovo

### tra bizantini e mussulmani

Il campagna di scavo delle Università di York e Roma-Tor Vergata



Saluti del Sindaco dott. Francesco Onorato

**Interverranno:**

Dott.ssa C. Li Calzi Assessore Regionale turismo, sport e spettacolo

Dott.ssa M.E. Volpes Soprintendente per i Beni Culturali Ambientali di Palermo

Dott. S. Vassallo Direttore archeologo Soprintendenza del BB., CC., AA. Palermo

Prof. M. Carver Professore emerito University of York

Prof.ssa A. Molinari Professore di Archeologia Medievale - Università degli studi di Roma Tor Vergata



Fig 1

## EAST meets WEST in SICILY in the 6-10<sup>th</sup> century

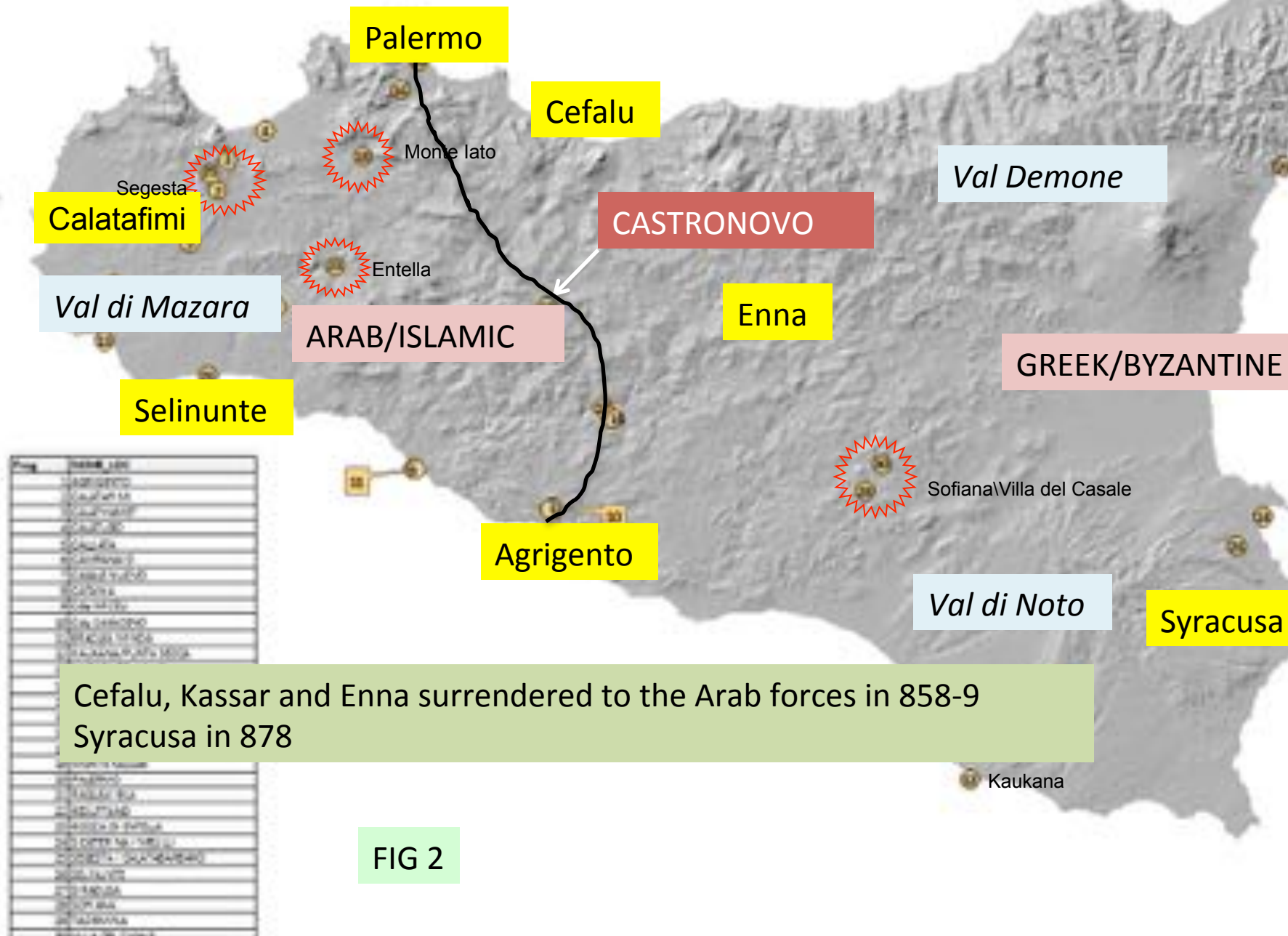


FIG 2



*Monte Kassar Byzantine Fort 8-9<sup>th</sup> century*

*San Vitale Islamic fort, 9<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>h</sup>?*

*Casale San Pietro  
Roadside settlement  
6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century, with  
Arab occupation 9-11<sup>th</sup> c*

*Norman town 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>*

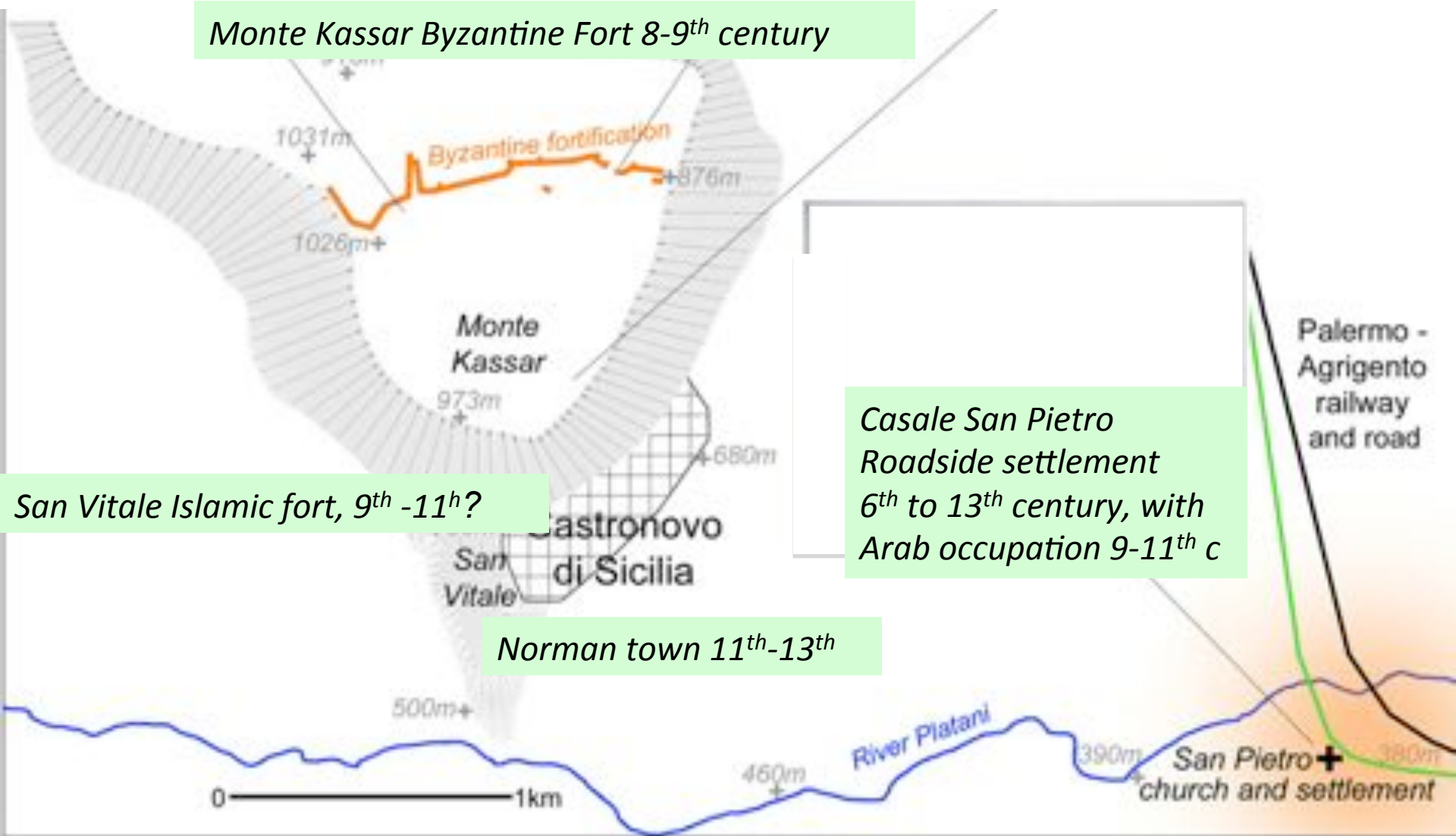


FIG 3

CASTRONOVO INVESTIGATIONS 2015

Monte Kassar – a Byzantine stronghold of the 7-8<sup>th</sup> century

MONTE KASSAR

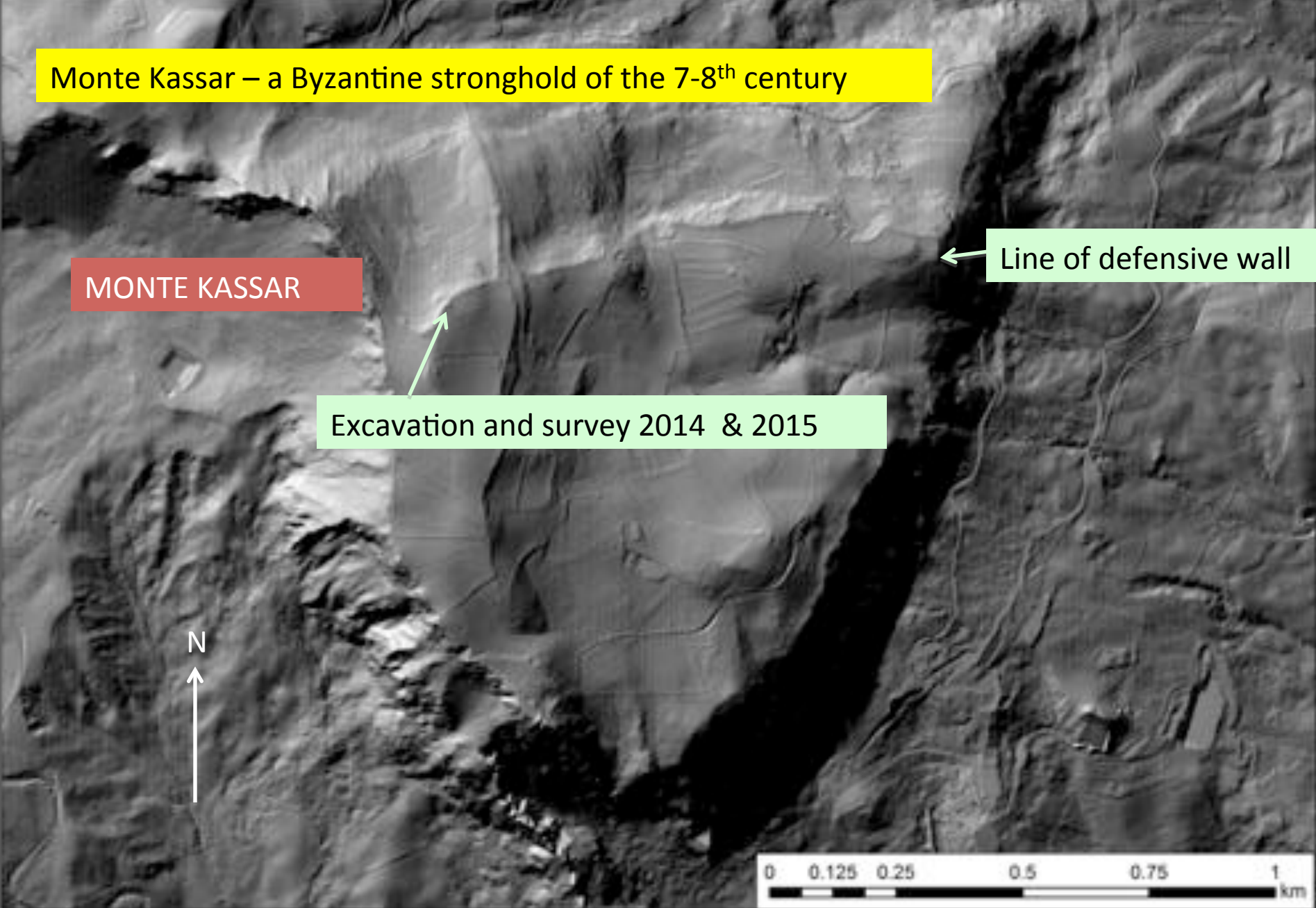
Line of defensive wall

Excavation and survey 2014 & 2015

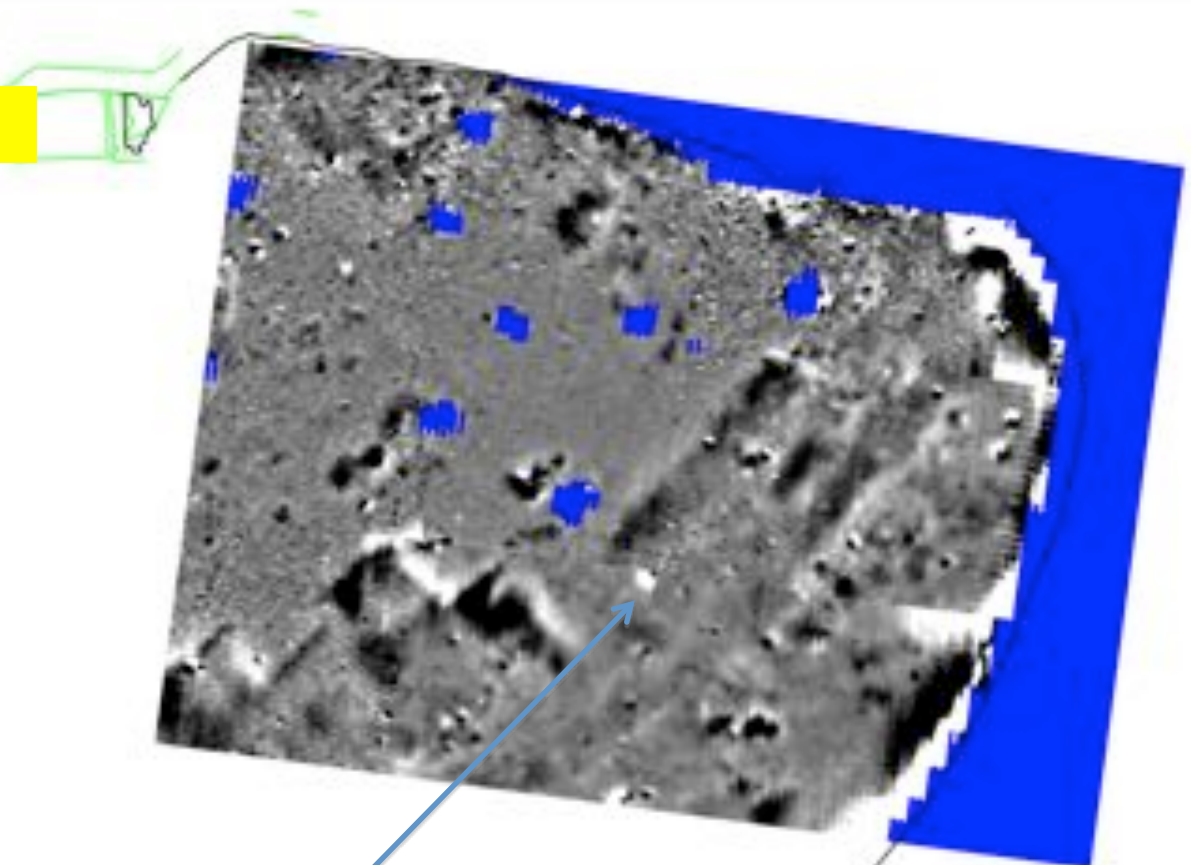
N  
↑

0 0.125 0.25 0.5 0.75 1 km

FIG 4



Excavations



MONTE KASSAR

Barracks?



FIG 5





FIG 6: Excavated house built against the wall of the Byzantine fortress, 8<sup>th</sup> century

FIG 7: Byzantine military  
belt buckle found  
on the floor of the  
excavated house





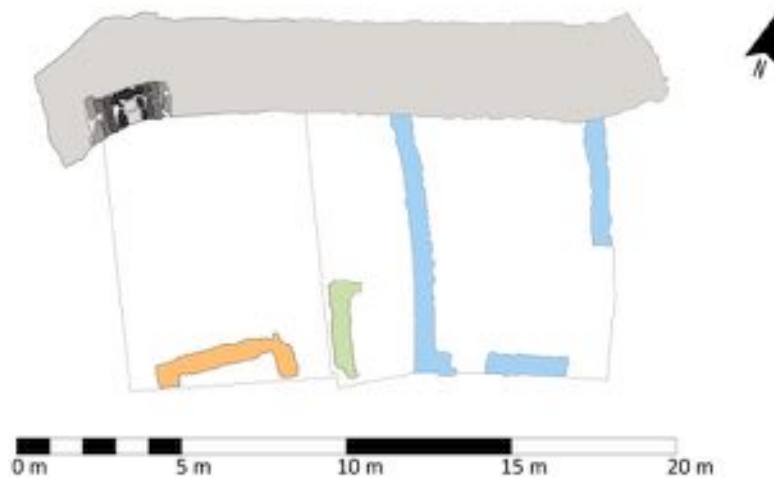


FIG 8 Monte Kassar: Steps discovered within the fortress wall, looking North



MK15  
Monte Kassar

strutture



MK15  
Monte Kassar

ricostruzione  
planimetrica

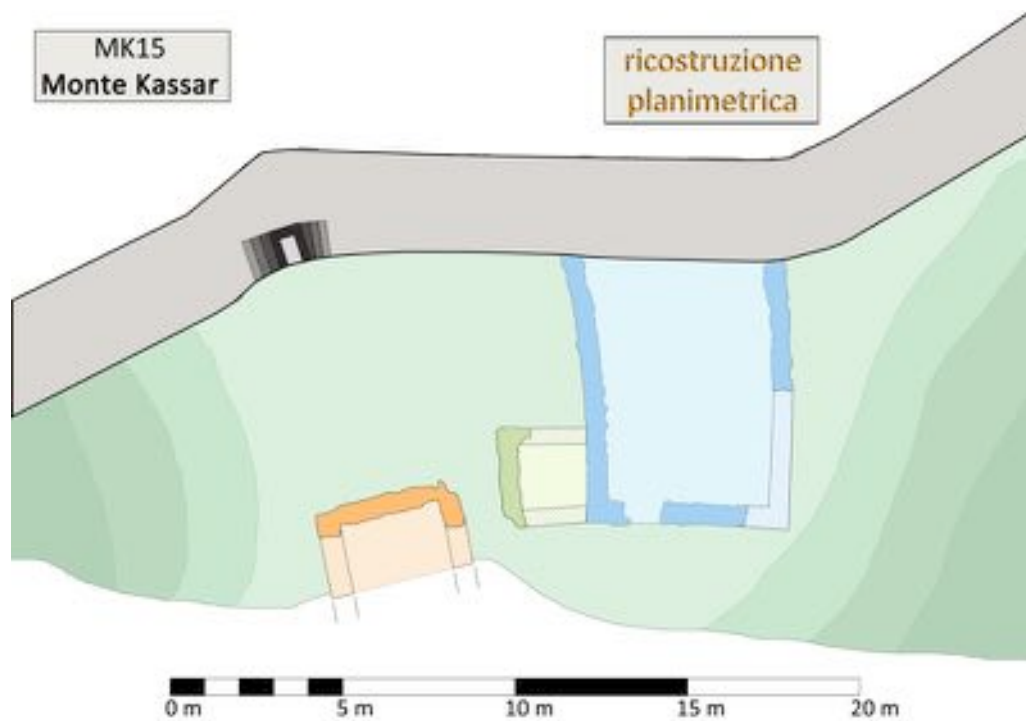


FIG 9



Fig 10





FIG 11: The historic buildings at Casale San Pietro on the Agrigento-Palermo road. Monte Kassar in the background

Tomb 1 at San Pietro

FIG 12







FIG 13

## Le sigillate africane di V-VII secolo



FIG 14






FIG 15







1000 aratura 21<sup>st</sup> c

1004 strada 18<sup>th</sup> c

1003 aratura 11/12<sup>th</sup> c

1005 crollo 10/11<sup>th</sup> c

1016 tegole, 9/11<sup>th</sup> c

1019 piano d'uso 10<sup>th</sup> c

Muro arabo

FIG 16

Trincea di fondazione

Pottery from the islamic settlement at Casale San Pietro, 10<sup>th</sup> century



FIG 17



CSP15 INT5  
US1005





FIG 18





FIG 19



FIG 20