

Contestualizzare la “prima colonizzazione”:

Archeologia, fonti, cronologia e modelli interpretativi fra l'Italia e il Mediterraneo

Contextualising “early Colonisation”:

Archaeology, Sources, Chronology and interpretative models between Italy and the Mediterranean

Is the tangling of events in the Mediterranean around 770-760 BC in the Conventional Absolute Chronology (CAC) a reality or a construct?

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In this paper, the Conventional Absolute Chronology is abbreviated as CAC.

The Revised Absolute Chronology is shortened as RAC.

The title of the paper might therefore as well have been the alliteration “CEC, CAC and RAC”. It discusses the effect of a revision of the absolute chronology around 800-750 BC on the reading of events that led to a Greek colonization process of Southern Italy in the subsequent 50 years, from ca. 750 to 700 BC onwards.

The word pre-colonial is avoided since it makes archaeology, or for that matter history, into teleology (Nijboer 2011). It is replaced here by the words “prospecting phase”, the period of time reflected in the Odyssey, the period prior to the establishment of permanent overseas settlements in the Western Mediterranean by Phoenician city-states, Euboeans and other Greek communities.

The paper will discuss the following topics:

1. Some statements/prolegomena
2. Update on the chronological debate “The Iron Age in the Mediterranean”
3. Some Radiocarbon results referring to contexts in Italy of the 8th century BC (Francavilla Marittima and the warrior tomb of Tarquinia)
4. Why do dates in the CAC mesh around 770-760 BC?
5. Conclusion and discussion

1. Some statements/prolegomena

The lecture opens with some statements on CAC and RAC that will be elaborated further on.

The CAC is based on Thucydides foundation dates of various Greek overseas settlements in Southern Italy during the late 8th century BC combined with a stylistic analysis of Geometric and Early Proto-Corinthian, ceramic table wares. The CAC is writing history based on specific Greek shards found outside Greece during an advanced stage of the Iron Age often without taking fully into account the context in which these

shards were found.

The main advantage of the CAC is that we do not need to alter textbooks and can continue using Greek shards of the 8th century BC as a canon and as the most correct measure for dividing time in the Mediterranean and beyond. Classical Archaeology in its strictest sense but also not academic since it hardly allows questioning. I prefer a more open debate on chronology as supported by various well-known Italian pre-historians such as Prof. Bietti Sestieri, Prof. Pacciarelli and the late Prof. Peroni.

The CAC attempts to date in decades. Stylistic analysis of 6th century BC Black Figure, Attic pottery can lead to a resolution in decades. However, such precision is in my opinion less feasible for Geometric or even Early Proto-Corinthian ceramics.

The CAC has led to an entangling of events in the Mediterranean around 770-760 BC.

The CAC is not in line with ancient literary sources. The CAC is a construct of the past based on a specific reading in time of Middle and Late Geometric shards found in Italy and elsewhere.

The RAC is based on radiocarbon dates and unfortunately only a few dendro-dates so far.

The main advantage of the RAC is that it disengages events in the Mediterranean during the first half of the 8th century BC.

The RAC leads to a lengthening of the prospecting phase by Euboeans and other Greek groups by a few decades, at the most. It makes the rupture of 770/760 BC in the Mediterranean less marked in time.

The RAC is in line with accounts by Thucydides, other ancient authors and in line with the reference in ancient times for the state archives in the Levant that existed mainly in the form of papyrus documents from the 11th century BC onwards. These documents are lost to us now.

The RAC dates in 25 years; a higher resolution seems impossible at this stage. For a higher resolution we would need prime archaeological contexts with dendro-dates, such as those available for central Europe where they decided some years ago to raise the absolute chronology of the late 8th century BC by more or less 70 to 80 years.

The RAC dissociates in time the Phoenician advance towards the Western Mediterranean from the Euboean spread towards Italy.

CAC = RAC from 750-725 BC onwards. So the chronological problem addressed in this paper focuses on the period 825-750 BC.

2. Update on the chronological debate “The Iron Age in the Mediterranean”

In order to question the radiocarbon and dendro-chronological research by some others and me, a few participants of the CEC have in the past years referred to radiocarbon research by Prof. Finkelstein of the Tel Aviv University and his colleagues, labelled here as the Tel Aviv group. For details on the debate, one can consult three articles in Radiocarbon published in 2009 and 2011 (see references below). Without going in too much detail at this stage, I do not accept the interpretation of the radiocarbon data of the Tel Aviv group as long as they have not explained some discrepancies in their data set, especially with respect to relative chronology. The Tel Aviv group more or less follows the CAC while I support the RAC.

One of the aims of this conference is to discuss differences of opinion regarding early colonization and therefore also differences of opinion regarding absolute chronology of the 9th and 8th century BC. Thus it is necessary to explain what the discrepancy is in the interpretation of radiocarbon data

- by Prof. Finkelstein and his colleagues and
- by Prof. van der Plicht, Prof. Bruins and me.

The difference is not a disagreement about the radiocarbon dates themselves but how to assess radiocarbon datasets in combination with archaeological information.

3. Some Radiocarbon results referring to contexts of the 8th century BC (Francavilla Marittima and Tarquinia, warrior tomb)

In the past decade I have not focussed on dating with the radiocarbon method, contexts that are fully assigned to the 8th century BC due to characteristics of the radiocarbon calibration curve. The plateau in the calibration curve, known as the Hallstatt plateau, makes the radiocarbon method less useful for dating from the 8th till 5th century BC. The standing of the CAC is partly caused by this plateau in the calibration curve. Recently I obtained some radiocarbon results, implying that much of the 8th century BC dates can remain as they are. In this section I will present data from two archaeological contexts; one related with the arrival of Euboeans in southern Italy at Francavilla Marittima while the other refers to a specific warrior tomb at Tarquinia.

Both the radiocarbon results from Francavilla Marittima and the warrior tomb at Tarquinia indicate that the absolute chronology of the 8th century BC can not be altered much. The Euboeans seem to have arrived in Italy around 800-750 BC, marking a prospecting phase while the warrior tomb is dated around 730-720 BC marking political confederation of various clans living on one of the main settlement plateaus of Etruria.

4. Why do dates in the CAC tangle around 770-760 BC?

The “foundation” of Carthage, Pithekoussai, Al Mina and quite some other events all date in the CAC around 770-760 BC. These events huddle around 770-760 BC because archaeologists start counting time from the moment that late Middle Geometric II (MG II) and early Late Geometric I (LG I) ceramics are found. Thus local and other materials, which are excavated together with these MG II and LG I ceramics, almost automatically do obtain the same dates as those assigned to the Greek imports. This leads to entangling since it negates ceramic traditions that might be slightly older and that are not in line with the stylistic developments of various types of Greek ceramic table wares. It is a common phenomenon in archaeology and did lead to several chronological mismatches in the past. Thus it was decided, some years ago, to sever the stylistic correlations between early Hallstatt C in central Europe and the early Orientalizing period in Italy. In consequence 725 BC was no longer 725 but became 800 BC after careful examination of dendro-dates in association with their archaeological context.

An eye-opener for me in this respect, that is the meshing of events in the CAC around 770-760 BC, were some lines by Sagona on his deceased teacher, Prof. William Culican (Sagona 1986, 10-2). Culican addressed in various articles from the 1960's till 1980's, the tenacious problem of dating West Phoenician archaeological contexts. Since as a methodology he had to rely on the absolute chronology of imports from Greece, he was left with a discrepancy with the written records of half a century, or two generations. The methodology thus dictates the outcome. Events seem hardly possible prior to 770-760 BC even for cultures that are not characterized by Greek ceramics.

In the past decades, scientific dating methods were increasingly employed in the Mediterranean and over 20 years they have revealed discrepancies between the CAC and the RAC especially for the 10th till 8th century BC. After 20 years we are still debating these discrepancies. Various distinguished Italian colleagues told me that this problem needs to be solved by the next generation archaeologists and that they will in the meantime use the CAC. This implies that it would take two generations or about 50 years before this debate can be settled. I will not spend the rest of my active, professional life trying to convince colleagues but will use the RAC till someone provides scientific data that convince me to alter my position.

A major bone of contention remains the foundation of Carthage. According to Coldstream and the CAC, Carthage was founded at least a couple of generations later than Timaeus' date of 814 BC. According to the RAC Carthage was founded during the late 9th century BC in line with Timaeus' date. When I received the bone samples from the Hamburg excavations at Carthage, quite some years ago, I was told that they pertained to the oldest level of Carthage excavated so far and that the context was primary. The radiocarbon results gave a date in the late 9th century BC and subsequently the context became secondary. It is now accepted that the first layers of Carthage are mixed but this affected only the interpretation of the radiocarbon dates and not the reading of the few Euboean/Greek shards recovered in these layers. I mean, in the ensuing discussions the radiocarbon results became criticized, while the option that the Euboean/Greek shards in these strata were a late intrusion was not seriously discussed. The same happens now with the Huelva town deposit. Attention is focussed on a few of the latest shards in this deposit, the MG II ceramics closing this deposit in the CAC around 770 BC. This comes at the expense of the thousands of local and Phoenician shards found in the same, long-lasting deposit. The most ancient Levantine ceramics at Huelva are assigned to Early Iron IIa and are therefore more than 150 years older than the MG II shards. A colleague from the Tel Aviv group wrote me that they encounter comparable behaviour. It appears that quite a few archaeologists adjust the reading of their contexts once they have received the radiocarbon results. This brings about discord. It should be obvious that it is of no value to have a radiocarbon determination if there is no consensus on the relative chronology or on the event to be dated. In the meantime the CAC still prevails and the entangling of events around 770-760 BC is taken for granted.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In the CAC the stylistic transition from Middle Geometric II ceramics to those assigned to Late Geometric I, is dated to 770-760 BC. This date is acting as a major divide in the Mediterranean separating Greece's Dark Ages from its Renaissance. In Italy 770 BC is seen as the date that opened the peninsula to overseas trade with especially Euboeans. It also acts somehow as a foundation date for Carthage. In the CAC, 770-760 BC functions as a rift of considerable significance bringing together various strands in time reckoning as a manufactured convention sanctioned by a reading of the stylistic development of Greek, ceramic imports. Moreover, it is contrary to the writings of Thucydides on whose foundation dates of Greek colonies on Sicily, Coldstream based his absolute chronology. Once more, Thucydides wrote that Phoenicians were already occupying coastal promontories and islets before the arrival of Greek communities on Sicily (Thuc. 6. 2. 6). The radiocarbon dates presented elsewhere and here, fully support these lines of Thucydides. In the CAC one starts counting time as soon as there is a direct, or worse, an indirect link with this transition in style from MG II to LG I table wares. The debate can be cultivated since there are relatively few Euboean/Greek imports in the Western Mediterranean dated to the first half of the 8th century BC. It might be more interesting to investigate when LG I ceramics emerged and MG II ones disappeared. I doubt that this evolution in ceramic styles can be dated precisely to 770-760 BC. I also question the historic validity of this manufactured, tangling of events. Comparative studies on colonisation processes elsewhere indicate that prospecting phases do vary in time and never mesh as neatly as has been implied for the Mediterranean around 770-760 BC. It seems to me that a prospecting phase, prior to the establishment of Greek, permanent, overseas settlements in the Western Mediterranean during the second half of the 8th century BC, was more diverse and lasted somewhat longer than codified in the CAC.

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