Smelting, smelted and smelling sulphur: resource landscapes, identities and social relations in Early Bronze Age Sicily (ca. 2300-1500 BC)

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July 22, 2021

Abstract

In the prehistoric Mediterranean, it seems plausible that sulphur was incorporated into society not only for economic reasons but also as a cultural resource that transformed and was transformed by local ways of living and identities. Processual theoretical approaches have highlighted how human collectives economically benefit from resources, however, recent anthropological research has illuminated how the threads of human cultures, identities, perceptions, experiences and the landscape become interwoven. Drawing upon the latter, contemporary archaeological theory is becoming increasingly concerned with understanding how to incorporate natural resources in this entanglement of cultural, sensorial and natural dimensions as an active force.

Within this framework, this paper tackles the appropriation of sulphur in Early Bronze Age Sicily (EBA, ca. 2300-1500 BC), ultimately focusing on identities that might have emerged through engaging with this mineral within a natural and built landscape for cooperative/competitive relations. Therefore, it addresses life worlds in resource landscapes by drawing upon the archaeological evidence of sulphur extraction in the case-study region of Palma di Montechiaro, in Agrigento, Sicily. It suggests that the transformation of sulphur into a cultural resource was related to the identities of dwellers, miners and non-kin that emerged as a result of shared experiences within wider social arenas of interaction. It will propose that the sensory experience of the smell of sulphur played a role in this process by combining a phenomenological approach to raw materials with ethnographic and archaeometric evidence of sulphur's extraction process. To discuss this, I will review data regarding traditional technologies of extraction in the case study area, complemented by a re-assessment of the social and cultural practices in the excavated EBA settlement of Monte Grande, which comprises a thick description of the archaeological evidence for the smelting and extraction of sulphur. Finally, I propose an interpretation of how the relations that bound the local community together emerged from these interwoven engagements with, and responses to, the smells of the smelting process. In contrast to current interpretations, such an approach demonstrates how sulphur was more than just a commodity to exchange.

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