

Changes of intercultural relations in local communities in medieval Sicily after Norman conquest in the light of archaeological research. The case of area of Altavilla Milicia.

The Altavilla project concerns the history of local cult centre founded at the beginning of the Norman conquest of Sicily - the church and the Italo-Greek monastery known as Santa Maria di Campogrosso (also San Michele del Golfo). The monastery and the church located on a 60 metres high hill dominating the nearby coast, represented a strategic point between important centres, such as Termini Imerese and Palermo ensuring control of the route leading from the east to the west of the island, the ancient Roman Via Valeria as well as bridges constituting the only crossing of the San Michele River gorge.

The team of Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Research Centre on Late Antiquity Culture and the Early Middle Ages in Wrocław led by Prof. Sławomir Moździoch started excavations in the area in connection with implemented a broader research programme on the role of the Normans in shaping the cultural image of medieval Europe.

Norman rulers launched a process of power consolidation by building castles, bishoprics foundation and bestowal of land estates to the faithful, especially Norman knights. Activities involving also founding numerous churches and monasteries contributed to the development and at the same time re-Christianization of the island. Because a large part, i.e. almost one-third of the island population was a Greek-speaking one, which survived the period of Arab rule. The monastic congregations founded by the first Norman rulers also consisted of monks of Italo-Greek origins, derived mainly from Calabria.

The basic research problem is the development of relations between representatives of various factions of religions and cultures in the light of interdisciplinary research with particular emphasis on material culture. The study area, the region of today's village of Altavilla Milicia, adjacent to two important cultural and economic centres of the antiquity and the Middle Ages - Palermo to the west, and Cefalu to the east, is a typical background area, a place where travellers stopped only for a short stay. During the Norman period there was there an Arab settlement Ayn-lien, which became a background of Santa Maria di Campogrosso monastery and its inhabitants probably the object of a Christianization mission. Do the relationships between the newcomers and the local Arab population are perceptible in written sources? What was daily life in the Basilian monastery, because this is the name coined for the monks who lived by the rule of St Basil in later centuries. In fact, the Basilian Order was founded by papal edict much later. Preliminary excavations carried out by Polish expedition led to the unearthing the southern wall of the church and the adjacent cemetery. In graves with stone lining were deposited skeletons of men, most likely the local monks. Stone linings were used repeatedly, in one of them, with a characteristic anthropomorphic shape ('a logette' grave type) were held three subsequent burials. Amongst the graves of adults two children's graves, including one double were encountered. C14 dating of bones of one of the infants buried in the double grave helped to determine the time of burial to the period from the mid-11th to the beginning of the 13th century. Significant research problems to be solved is a riddle of chronology of the church, location and structure of the monastery as well as the Arab settlement of which no trace remains. For the problem of the church origins is also important to undertake a reconstruction of its body, because only fragments of walls survived. Although the 16th-century authors attribute the monastery foundation to Count Roger or his brother Robert Guiscard, the oldest of existing documents concerning the monastery estate dates back to 1134. Another important issue is the shape of the relationship between the Basilian community and the Islamic population.

During the preliminary excavations in the cemetery a tombstone fragment with Arabic inscription was discovered. This is probably verse 33 of the Quran surah 9, praising the Islam over the other religions. It does not seem possible that a tombstone with inscription of this type would coexist with the Christian cemetery, therefore it comes, perhaps, from an Arab cemetery, which was destroyed. On the other hand, fragments of vessels produced in Arab workshops confirm economic links between the monastery and Arab background.

The planned research, apart from the realization of the aforementioned scientific goals, is also supposed to serve the familiarization of Polish students with culture of medieval Sicily and promotion of Polish science. They are the first regular excavations of Polish archaeologists of the Middle Ages in Sicily.