# The Social and Cultural Contexts of Historic Writing Practices

*edited by*

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# Chapter 16

## Marking identity through graphemes?
## A new look at the Sikel arrow-shaped *alpha*[1]

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### Introduction: scripts, graphemes and identity

Exploring scripts in their social context often involves considering the role that writing – sometimes down to the level of spelling conventions and individual graphemes – plays in the construction of identities. In this paper we look at some of the issues which similar approaches face when they are applied to ancient contexts. In doing so we focus on a case-study which at first sight might seem to pertain exclusively to the epigraphic domain: the peculiar arrow-shaped form that the letter *alpha* takes in the Greek alphabetic variety employed by the Sikel people of ancient Sicily. However, this grapheme has a peculiar place in the history of Classical scholarship. Many studies of Sikel epigraphy subscribe to the view that it was an *identity marker* of the Sikels (see below for full details). Such a culturally loaded interpretation has more recently been expanded to include the idea that the arrow-shaped *alpha* was a symbol of the Sikels' antagonistic opposition to Hellenisation.

In this paper we look at these interpretations in order to address two questions. The first specifically concerns the case-study at hand: is it possible or even desirable to speak of a Sikel *ethnos*, which expressed a clear identity through a mere graphic variant of its script? In order to answer this first question, in the paper we shall proceed along two complementary routes. First, we shall review what historical and

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archaeological evidence we have in favour of the existence of a Sikel *ethnos*. Defining clear-cut 'ethnic' groups on the basis of material culture is a notorious problem in Italian proto-historic archaeology (Albanese Procelli 2003, 230–232; Pope 2006; Cultraro 2012, 181) and we anticipate here that in the case of the Sikels the useful evidence is so scarce and ambiguous that it seems far-fetched to link the *epigraphic* use of the arrow-shaped *alpha* to the expression of a well-defined Sikel identity. This in turn leads us to bring back the study of this graphic variant to its epigraphic context. Our second interpretative route will map the presence this grapheme in Sicilian epigraphy as a whole, and not just in some selected Sikel sites. This survey of the evidence will allow us to pinpoint the distribution of the arrow-shaped *alpha* in relation to geography, communication routes, and archaeological evidence. With this factual approach, we wish to look at the inscriptions and try, as far as possible, to discuss the context of production of the Sikel inscriptions, which is marked by contact with the Greeks, but at the same time avoiding the slippery interpretative categories of acculturation and ethnic identity.

The second question which we seek to address in this paper is a broader one: whether scholars of the ancient world can really hope to achieve sufficiently clear-cut results regarding the role played by script – and especially graphic peculiarities (spelling, diacritics, peculiar letter-shapes like the arrow-shaped *alpha*, etc.) – in the construction of identities. We look at this question in this Introduction in order to set out some of the caveats that seem more pressing to us.

Modern societies present scholars with a whole range of textual and oral sources rich in contextual information that illuminates the relation between writing, society and identity. Take for instance the important role played by Hebrew characters in the construction of Jewish identity across Europe, Africa and the Middle East (Hary and Wein 2013, 90), or by the Greek alphabet in the self-representation of the Turkish-speaking Orthodox Greeks of central Anatolia ('Karamanlidica': Irakleous 2013; Kappler 2016). However, to what extent can the interpretative paradigm provided by these modern case-studies be safely applied to the investigation of writing in ancient societies? A crucial divide lies precisely in the amount of metalinguistic evidence that we have for each context. Consider, for instance, the great difference between Roman Italy, with its wealth of epigraphic, historiographical and literary information on the relation between certain scripts and the expression of identities – as in the case of the Greek community of Latium (Adams 2003, 90–91) or the Celtic and Venetic peoples of the north (Marinetti 2008) – and the much more elusive case of Minoan Crete. Here until about 1600 BC Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A co-existed, but hypotheses on their social or political differentiation (*e.g.* Godart 1979; Perna 2016, 104), or on their recording different language varieties (*e.g.* Olivier 2008, 181), are destined to remain speculative: the languages are undeciphered and the total lack of metalinguistic information is an unavoidable limit. The same dearth of relevant contextual evidence affects the study of the 'Sikel' arrow-shaped *alpha*. Since there are no sources informing us about how the Sikels perceived their identity (if at all), speculations on the role played by writing and script in this respect are highly hypothetical.

Historical and documentary evidence aside, the case for an identity-loaded interpretation of the arrow-shaped *alpha* is also problematic when we address it from the point of view of sociolinguistic methodology. Many of the current interpretative paradigms concerning the ideological meaning of scripts focus on spelling and orthographic rules (especially in connection with language standardisation and state-led reforms: see *e.g.* Coulmas 2003, 234–240; Johnson 2005, 119–130; Sebba 2007 *passim*).[2] The situation of ancient Sicily, of course, is not comparable and our case-study itself is different: the arrow-shaped *alpha* is not a separate *grapheme* that the Sikels employed for a specific phoneme used in their language, but a mere *graphic variant* of a standard grapheme (and one which, as we shall show below, is not lacking in Greek inscriptions either). The use of the arrow-shaped *alpha* thus does not pertain to spelling or orthographic rules, but to epigraphic practice.

In this respect, too, the information that we can use to speculate about the ancients' *perception* of graphic variants is slim. The Greeks have not left much evidence that allows us to say that the *use of certain different signs* was a marker of regional or local identity, let alone of other peoples' identity. Thus when Herodotus (1.139: a discussion of Persian names) mentions that the Dorians wrote final /s/ with the letter *san* (<M>) instead of *sigma* (<Σ>), he simply describes an epigraphic fact and does not offer any hints as to the *ideological meaning* of *san*, which remains of little interest for ancient Greek commentators.[3] Similarly, we find no discussion of the use of the 'red' arrow-shaped *chi* that was very prominent in the epigraphy of Euboea and the western colonies.

The situation is no different in ancient Sicily. Greek sources are mostly interested in the origins and, to a lesser extent, geographical location of the non-Hellenic peoples of the island, not in their culture, languages and writing (Albanese Procelli 2003, 18–22; Cusumano 2006, 121–122; Sammartano 2006, 19–20; Péré-Noguès 2011, 156–157; Poccetti 2012, 55–56, 58–65). Paired with a scant epigraphic corpus, and the archaeological difficulties mentioned above, this is a serious drawback for any speculation on the ancient perception of Sikel culture, which often appears more as an ideological construction of Greek historiography than as a historical reality.

In the light of these gaps in the documentation and the methodological caveats put forward in this Introduction, in the next section we shall delve into the arguments adduced in favour of a symbolic interpretation of the arrow-shaped *alpha*. We shall then turn to our proposal for a more factual, less ideologically charged approach to this graphic variant which takes its cue from a careful reconsideration of the

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[2] A good example from the history of Greek culture is the huge controversy which has surrounded the debate over the reform of Greek orthography between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Bernal 2007; Banfi 2014, 141–156). Although arguably an important step towards simplification, the 'loss' of the old diacritics (breathings, grave and circumflex accents, etc.), eventually sanctioned in 1982, produced an incredible amount of ideological and emotional reactions, especially outside the academic debate (Moschonas 2009, 298–299).

[3] Ath. 11.467 further discusses the use of 'Doric' *san* in musical notation. The *san* was in fact in use also outside strictly Doric areas (*e.g.* Aetolia and Acharnania), while Sparta and Messenia employed *sigma* from the start: cf. *LSAG*[2] 33.

production contexts of the inscriptions in order to correlate, as much as it is possible, the presence of the arrow-shaped *alpha* with the material culture, topography and historical development of the main indigenous sites.

## The Sikel script and its arrow-shaped *alpha:* current interpretations

Sikel is one of the fragmentary languages of ancient Italy and remains largely unknown, though it is now mostly agreed that it was an Italic language (Poccetti 2012, 77–85). Around the mid-sixth century BC the Sikels adopted the Greek alphabet to write simple texts on vases and stone. Since many of them are doubtless in a language other than Greek, it seems safe to adopt the label of 'Sikel' for the epigraphic record of the areas which archaeology also identifies as non-Greek, and specifically Sikel.[4] The script employed in texts in the Sikel language is based on the Greek alphabet, with two major differences: the lack of aspirated signs (which points to the absence of aspirated stops in the language) and the special shape of *alpha*, written with a vertical middle bar instead of the horizontal one. It is often a matter of interpretation whether a given text (especially when it is very short, like ownership inscriptions) really is 'Sikel'. Usually, scholars identify ambiguous inscriptions of this kind as 'Sikel' on the basis of provenance, linguistic traits that are compatible with Sikel, and formal epigraphic features such as the arrow-shaped *alpha*. This sign is attested in two variants: the first with a bar attached to the vertex of the letter (ʌ) and the second with a detached bar (Figs 16.1 and 16.2).

Because this sign is found in all the sub-regions of the Sikel area (Fig. 16.3), and is not typical of Greek epigraphy in general, scholars have come to call it '*alpha Siculum*'.[5] This term, which was simply descriptive to begin with, has gradually acquired other meanings, essentially following the authoritative interpretation of Luciano Agostiniani, the main expert in non-Hellenic Sicilian epigraphy, who has repeatedly defined the arrow-shaped *alpha* as:

> a graphic marker [...] endowed with a certain social meaning [...] which emerged as a sign of Sikel-internal *solidarity* and *antagonism* [our italics] towards Greek elements (our translation of Agostiniani 2012, 148).

According to this interpretation, the arrow-shaped *alpha* transcends its nature of a formal marker of epigraphic habits connected with Sikel centres and becomes the

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[4] Linguistic criteria to distinguish between Greek and non-Greek language are discussed by Poccetti (2012, 72–73). For epigraphic criteria, see Agostiniani (1992, 130–131); Agostiniani (2012, 144). Exemplary cases of inscriptions securely identified to be in the Sikel language are, in particular, the graffiti of Montagna di Marzo (see below); the inscriptions from the site of Mendolito di Adrano (see below); the inscription on an *askos* from Kentoripa (*PID* 2.3 447) and the stele from Sciri Sottano (Agostiniani 1992, 148 no. 7; ISic003362).

[5] Ribezzo (1913, 374); Zamboni (1978, 963); Manni Piraino (1978, 14); Agostiniani (*e.g.* 1980–1981, 507–508; 1984–1985, 215; 1991, 28); Camera (2010, 116); Poccetti (2012, 73); Tribulato (2015, 66). The term is not used in either *PID* 2.3 or *VSS*. For the Greek alphabetic models behind the Sikel script of the three sub-regions, see below.

symbolic image of an ethnic group – a case of *iconisation* (though Agostiniani never overtly uses this terminology). It seems to us that there are two problems with this interpretation. The first problem concerns the nature of the graphic symbol itself. Contrary to some established examples of iconic graphic markers – for instance, the Spanish 'deviant' <k> instead of standard <c> in anarchist graffiti discussed by Sebba (2007, 82–83) – the Sikel arrow-shaped *alpha* is not a different grapheme, but simply a variant of the same sign. In extreme terms, it may be argued that the alternation between the arrow-shaped and the 'normal' *alpha* concerns *handwriting* (*i.e.* the way individuals *write*) and not *orthography* (*i.e.* the way they *spell*). Moreover, differently from the Spanish <k>, we lack any clear evidence of the symbolic or 'antagonistic' character of the arrow-shaped *alpha*, as we shall discuss below.

The second problem, as already mentioned in the Introduction, concerns the perception of the Sikels as an *ethnos.* Before addressing this question, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the archaeological evidence pertaining to the eastern part of the island. In eastern but also in central Sicily – hence in the two areas which Greek literary sources describe as



*Fig. 16.1. Example of arrow-shaped* alpha *(type 1). From Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli (2018, fig. 108), all rights reserved. Montagna di Marzo. Tomb East 31, cup no. 70.*



*Fig. 16.2. Example of arrow-shaped* alpha *(type 2). From Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli (2018, fig. 112), all rights reserved. Montagna di Marzo. Tomb East 31, no. 77.*

being inhabited, respectively, by *Sikeloi* and *Sikanoi* – there are similarities in funerary practices, housing habits and clothing that, by and large, seem to point to an ethnically similar group. It is not really possible to describe the Sikels as a group with a distinctive material culture, opposed to that of other indigenous peoples of the area. Above all, it would be incorrect to combine evidence from different sets of data to shed light on whether or not an *ethnos* exists. To quote what we believe to be still one of the most insightful works on the issue:
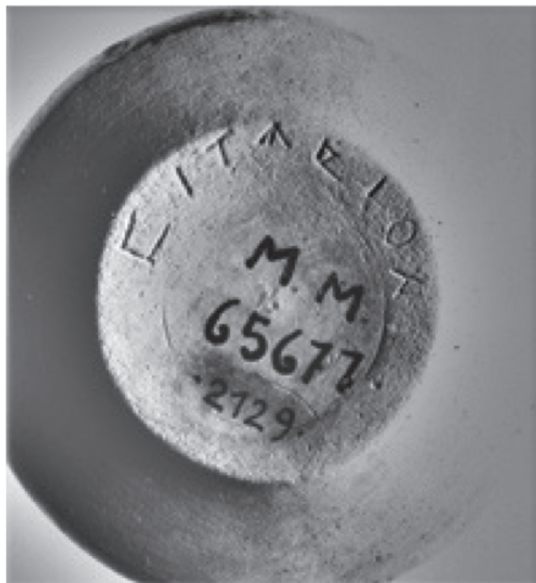
> It is neither possible nor indispensable [...] to establish an actual correspondence between names inherited from literary sources [...] and archaeological *facies*, which is to say territorial entities defined only on the basis of material culture (our translation of Albanese Procelli 2003, 18).

*Sikeloi*, as summarised by Nicola Cusumano:

> is the name *used by the Greeks* [our italics] to indicate all the populations of central-eastern Sicily with which they came into contact during colonisation and, subsequently, with their penetration into the hinterland (our translation of Cusumano 2006, 121).

The image of the Sikels as an *ethnos* mainly derives from a misinterpretation of Diodorus' account of the events related to Ducetius, who endeavoured to create, around the middle of the fifth century, a Sikel *synteleia* ('union'). Diodorus represents this confederation as composed of *omoethneis* Sikels (*i.e.* 'of the same race': Diod. Sic. 11.88.6) and thus in a way that *also* emphasises the ethnic aspect. However, as De Vido (forthcoming) notes, this emphasis surfaces only in connection with Ducetius' enterprise and has mainly political and territorial relevance. Moreover, as Péré-Noguès writes: 'If Diodore's story conveys the image of a Sikel world gathered around its leader, it tends, however, to erase much more complex social and cultural realities' (our translation of Péré-Noguès 2011, 166).[6]

Both archaeological research and historical sources make it hard, if not impossible, to give a clear definition of the Sikels as a unitary entity. At the same time, recent historical discussions of the most appropriate way of addressing colonial identities have spoken against applying too rigid a model (be it the old notion of 'acculturation' or the more recent theories of 'hybridity' and 'middle ground'). Maurizio Giangiulio, for instance, has made the case for the need to overcome ethnic identity as an unhelpful interpretative category in colonial Sicily where, he argues,

> there are no cogent reasons to think that ethnic differentiation was the most salient line of demarcation. Neither artefacts and practices were primarily characterised by their ethnic origin, nor a straightforward correlation between language and ethnic presence can be taken for granted. Therefore, we should be wary of assuming ethnic identity as the, or the most important, analytical focus (Giangiulio 2010, 14).

If, therefore, it is misleading to assume that a Sikel ethnic identity can be found, what is one to make of Agostiniani's sociolinguistic interpretation of the arrow-shaped *alpha* as a marker of Sikel identity? Already hinted at in earlier contributions of his (*e.g.* Agostiniani 1988–1989, 181; 1991, 28; 1992, 137), and adopted by other scholars as well (*e.g.* Albanese Procelli 2003, 222; Willi 2008, 44; Poccetti 2012, 73; Tribulato 2015, 65–68), the full-fledged theorisation of this interpretation has appeared in two more recent contributions in which Agostiniani has collaborated with archaeologist Rosa Maria Albanese Procelli to define the archaeological and historical context of the use (and abandonment) of the arrow-shaped *alpha* at the indigenous site of Montagna di Marzo (Agostiniani 2012; Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018). These two articles are exemplary demonstrations of how an

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[6] We will discuss below the issue of Ducetius' enterprise and its role in the debate on Sikel identity.
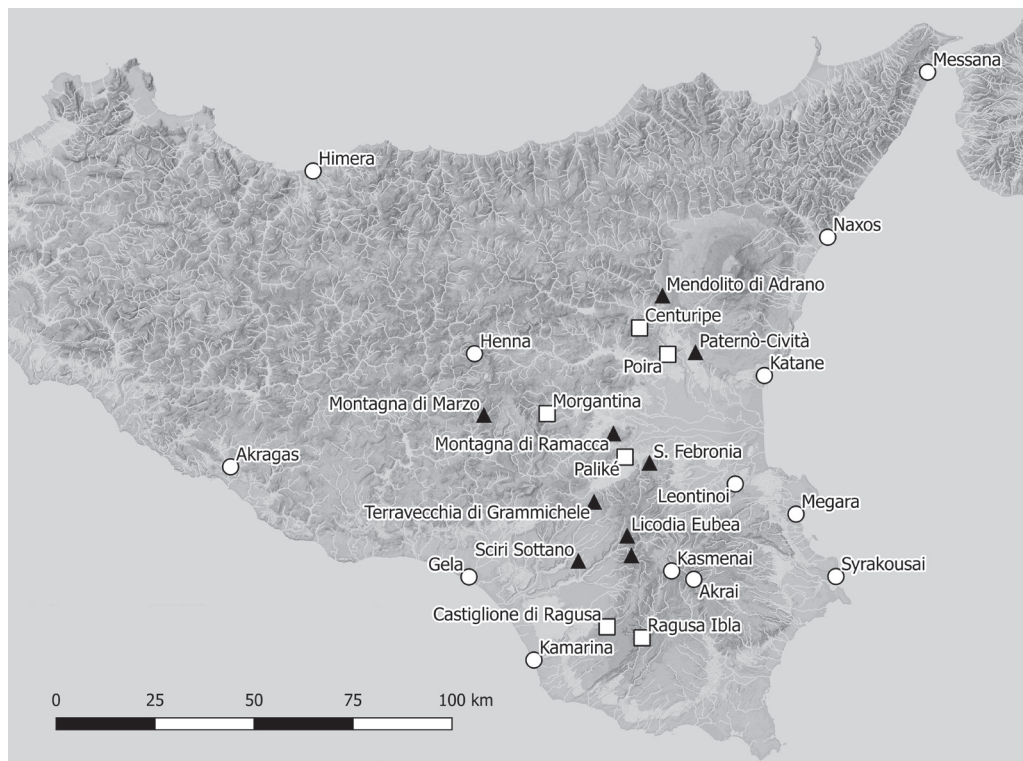
*Fig. 16.3. Map of centre-eastern Sicily. V. Mignosa-M. Jonasch based on TanDEM-X © DLR 2019, all rights reserved. ▲: indigenous sites with inscriptions with arrow-shaped alpha; ☐: indigenous site with inscriptions without arrow-shaped alpha; ◯: Greek poleis.*

interdisciplinary approach can open new perspectives in the analysis of short and elusive epigraphic texts. Taking up from Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli's example, in this paper we take this interdisciplinary dialogue a step further and propose an approach to the arrow-shaped *alpha* which is not limited to one indigenous site but looks at the whole Sikel area. We will address the following three issues:

1.  What is the origin of the arrow-shaped *alpha*? Does it perhaps represent the specialisation of a Greek epigraphic practice?
2.  In the light of the available evidence, is it correct to interpret this *alpha* as a marker of *Sikel identity* (and not merely as a graphic variant typical of the Sikel alphabetic variety)? To discuss this point, and keeping with the methodological inspiration behind this volume, in this paper we address the epigraphic habit of three prominent Sikel centres in a multidisciplinary perspective, forsaking the narrow approach of epigraphic *corpora* and placing inscriptions within their full archaeological and historical context. We will pay attention to the contexts of use of Sikel inscriptions, the details of their geographical distribution, and the historical

background, which is often taken for granted and not sufficiently brought into
the picture in linguistic and epigraphic discussions of the 'Sikel' *alpha*.

3.  Is it correct to interpret the lack or abandonment of the arrow-shaped *alpha* in some
    Sikel centres as evidence that the writers wished to *avoid a sign endowed with a certain
    'social' meaning*, as claimed in recent scholarship? In the discussion of our case-studies,
    we shall be exploring an alternative solution: namely, that what we are simply
    witnessing here is the alternation of two different epigraphic practices, both of which
    are amply attested in the whole Sikel area. The distribution of the inscriptions with
    Sikel *alpha* vis-à-vis those *without* it leads us to envisage a switch in the alphabetic
    model adopted in Sikel epigraphy. Such a switch was not uniformly widespread and
    is likely to depend on the particular geographical location of each Sikel centre.

To analyse the issues raised here we have chosen three case studies (Montagna di
Marzo, Mendolito di Adrano, and Castiglione di Ragusa in the Hyblaean area) because
they are representative of the different ways in which Sikel centres have responded
to the contact with Greek culture. They are also some of the richest cases in terms
of epigraphic and archaeological evidence.

## Distribution of evidence

The inscriptions which we will be addressing here were all unearthed in central-eastern
Sicily and are certainly or very likely to be non-Greek. The evidence and counts which
we shall be offering are based on our perusal of the material scattered in archaeological,
epigraphic and linguistic publications now spanning almost a century. There is still
no comprehensive *corpus* of Sikel epigraphy, though Luciano Agostiniani himself has
been at work on one since 1981 (Agostiniani 1980–1981, 507; this would be companion
piece to his *corpus* of Elymian inscriptions, Agostiniani 1977). He has also hinted that
he has seen some unpublished material (Agostiniani 2012, 145) and announces the
*corpus* as forthcoming (Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018, 182). Our statistics are
therefore likely to be incomplete and hence our conclusions may be countered by the
publication of new findings. However, since the eagerly awaited new material is slow
to appear, we think it useful to present a re-assessment of what is already available.
The inscriptions accessible through excavation reports or scientific publications will
soon be accessible online as a database published by V. Mignosa.

Figure 16.3 shows the main sites which have yielded epigraphic evidence identified
as Sikel mainly on the basis of linguistic data. The variations in the script used in
the epigraphic material of the Sikel area makes it necessary – as pointed out by
Agostiniani on several occasions – to distinguish three areas, based on the alphabetic
model provided by the nearest Greek centre(s):[7]

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[7]  See Poccetti (2012, 72), who agrees with Agostiniani's subdivision of the linguistic areas (Agostiniani
     1992, 130–131). We cannot provide extensive coverage of similarities here, but these have long since been
     established: see *e.g.* Agostiniani (2012, 145–154). The Elymian area too borrowed its alphabet from the
     nearest Greek city, Selinous: see Agostiniani (1977; 2006, 684–685; 2012, 140–141); Poccetti (2012, 79–80).

| Indigenous settlement | Arrow-shaped alpha | Other types of alpha |
|---|---|---|
| Mendolito di Adrano[6] | ⋀ (type 1) | - |
| Kentoripa[1] | - | A  A |
| Poira-Poggio cocola[1] | - | - |
| Paternò-Civita[5] | ⋀ (type 2) | Λ |
| Paliké-Rocchicella di Mineo[1] | - | Λ<br>(lost, drawn by Orsi) |
| Montagna di Ramacca[12] | ⋀ (type 1) | - |
| Coste di S. Febronia[4] (one of each, same context) | ⋀ (type 2) | A  A  A |
| Terravecchia di Grammichele[17] | ⋀ (type 1) | A  A |
| Licodia Eubea[7] | ⋀ ⋀ (both types) | A |
| Sciri Sottano[1] | ⋀ ⋀ (both types) | - |
| Monte Casasia[1] | ⋀ (type 1) | - |
| Ragusa Ibla[1] | - | - |
| Castiglione di Ragusa[3] | - | A |
| Morgantina[8] | - | A |
| Montagna di Marzo[86] | ⋀ ⋀ (both types) | A  A |

*Fig. 16.4. Synoptic table of types of alphas. Eastern and southern Sicily. Superscripts indicate numbers of inscriptions for each site.*

- The Aetna region, which includes Mendolito di Adrano, Kentoripa, Poira, Paternò-Civita, Paliké (Rocchicella di Mineo), Montagna di Ramacca and Coste di S. Febronia. This area borrows its alphabet from Katane and/or Naxos and/or Leontinoi.
- The Hyblaean Mountains region, which includes Terravecchia di Grammichele, Morgantina, Licodia Eubea, Sciri Sottano, Monte Casasìa, Castiglione di Ragusa and Ragusa Ibla. This area borrows the alphabet from Syrakousai, her sub-colonies and, more marginally, Gela.
- Central Sicily, including Montagna di Marzo, Terravecchia di Cuti and Sabucina. These sites are clearly influenced by the alphabet of Gela.

It is important to note that, as Figure 16.4 shows, the arrow-shaped *alpha* does not appear systematically in all the non-Hellenic inscriptions. As a matter of fact, 'normal' *alphas* also feature in clearly non-Hellenic inscriptions and we also have sites in which both occur. Moreover, as we discuss in the next section, the arrow-shaped *alpha* also sporadically occurs in Greek inscriptions. It follows that it can only be considered a sufficient criterion to identify a text as 'Sikel' when other factors (mainly the material culture of the sites) coexist.

In addressing the individual cases of the presence or absence of arrow-shaped *alphas* in Sikel centres we will adopt an interpretative key that places emphasis on the communication routes between the settlements and their connection with the
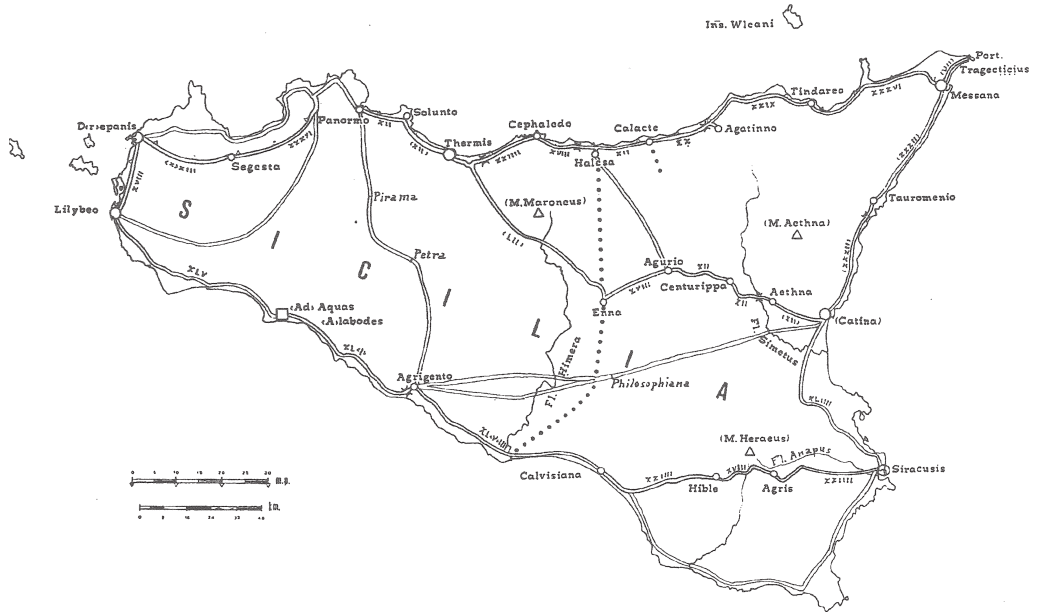
Fig. 16.5. Road network of Roman Sicily. From Uggeri (2004, fig. 1), all rights reserved.

Greek centres. Here we offer an overview which will be taken up in more detail in the sections where we discuss the case-studies.

The exact definition of communication routes in pre-Roman Sicily is a matter of debate (see Burgio 1996), although analysis of the distribution of artefacts and of cultural influences, when combined with the geomorphological and hydrographic features of the territory, helps one define at least the main roads. As Pace observes:

> The stable agricultural organisation of the Sican and Sikel societies before the arrival of the Greeks, and the presence of large population centres lead us to imagine the existence of a network of trails even before the archaic period (our translation of Pace 1958, 459).

There is a general consensus in favour of the hypothesis that modern-day transhumance paths go back to the road network of the period before the Graeco-Roman age (Orsi 1907, 741–748; Albanese Procelli 2003, 78; Uggeri 2004, 7). In the Roman period, especially in east and central Sicily, previous routes were restored and resumed: for instance, the main route which led from Katane to Henna and then on to Himera (see Fig. 16.5) already existed during the Greek period, and was probably used by the Romans to connect east and central Sicily to the north.[8]

Other crucial information for the definition of the communication network of these areas is their morphology, in particular the palaeo-drainage system, which

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[8] Uggeri (2004, 23) argues that the irregular and not straight layout (unlike other roads created anew) of Roman routes in Sicily is the consequence of the use by the Romans of Greek roadways.

*Fig. 16.6. Modern hydrographic network of centre-eastern Sicily. Redrawn by P. Boyes after detail from 'Linee guida del piano territoriale paesistico regionale. 2. Carta geomorgologica', Regione Siciliana, Dipartimento BB. CC. AA. ED. E.P. For the entire coloured map see: http://www.regione.sicilia.it/ bbccaa/dirbenicult/bca/ptpr/vettoriali/02Geomorfologia.pdf.*

certainly would have characterised the landscape in a very different manner in antiquity. River valleys, such as *e.g.* those in central Sicily (see Spatafora 2012), were a fundamental resource not only for agriculture, but also because they served as communication routes, especially in mountainous areas (such as that around Mt Aetna). Although it is certain that ancient rivers had a stronger flow rate than in present days, it is possible to use today's hydrographic network to gain an idea of the ancient one (Fig. 16.6).

Starting with the Aetna region, the presence of three wide and viable rivers made the connections between sites easy. These are the Simeto River, which connected the area in the slopes of Mt Aetna with the plain of Katane; the Dittaino and Gornalunga Rivers, connecting the plain of Katane with the hinterland; and the Margi River, which ran close to the southern part of the Plain of Katane. As concerns the roads, it is likely that the Henna-Agyrion-Katane road, which in the Roman age connected Katane to Himera through the hinterland, already existed in the Greek period. However, if we examine the transhumance paths (see Fig. 16.7) in the light of the archaeological evidence of the area we can reconstruct a much wider network of routes, which shows how much the sites, and the areas themselves (the Aetna region and the Plain of Katane), were connected to one another.

The Sikel centres located on the Hyblaean Mountains, all in high-up positions except for Sciri Sottano, and with fertile land in the valleys, constitute a homogeneous area at the crossroads between the Greek and Sikel sites of the Plain of Katane, the Sikel centres in inner Sicily, the southern colonies of Kamarina and Gela, but also Syrakousai and its *emporia* to the east. This region is characterised by an intricate system of development along smaller and larger rivers and through valleys, mountain ranges and caves (overview in Uggeri and Patitucci 2017, 9–24). The Hyblaean plateau is dominated by Monte Lauro (986 m), which those who travelled from Leontinoi to the southern coast would bypass by going through the Syracusan *emporia* of Akrai and Kasmenai and then proceeding through valleys formed by sloping mountain ranges. This was the principal communication route of the area, which developed along the Dirillo River and had an important stop in Licodia Eubea. Another route unfolded along the Margi River gorges, where the most important centre is Terravecchia di Grammichele. As we shall discuss below, the relative homogeneity of the Hyblaean area in terms of epigraphy and findings – but also some of its most notable exceptions – can be explained by looking at its ancient hydrography and communication routes.

Sites in central Sicily which have yielded Sikel inscriptions are Montagna di Marzo, Terravecchia di Cuti and Sabucina. The last two sites are located on the road from Katane to Himera (see Fig. 16.6). Montagna di Marzo, even if apparently more isolated, was the nearest Sikel settlement to Gela, and it was located in the northern end of the Olivo River valley (today's Braemi River), in a network of routes which from the east coast led southward (see Fig. 16.6). In the Roman period, the route from Katane to Agrigento had an important stop (*mansio*) in the near-by centre of Philosophiana (identified with contrada Sofiana in modern-day Mazzarino: see Sfacteria 2016, 55–59).

In the light of this communication network, below we shall discuss three case-studies in order to provide a different perspective to analyse the epigraphic evidence of each of the three Sikel sub-areas, contextualising inscriptions in their archaeological and geographical settings. As we shall argue, a wider and more fine-grained overview of the history of the sites leads one to scale down the 'argument' of identity to explain their epigraphic habit and suggests instead a more practical explanation for the spread

of the arrow-shaped *alpha*, one in which movements of people, goods and techniques has a prominent role.

## The arrow-shaped *alpha* is not a Sikel invention

In this section we wish to look at the first question which we have posited – namely, to what extent the arrow-shaped *alpha* is distinctly Sikel – by looking more closely at the Greek evidence and its distribution in southeast Sicily. Precisely because of the close dependency of Sikel sub-varieties on their Greek models, it is unlikely that this form of *alpha* was 'invented' by the Sikels as a means to distinguish their script. Indeed, similar *alphas* (with a vertical bar or central dot) are employed in inscriptions from various areas of ancient Italy, *e.g.* those from the Rhaetic and South-Picene areas (Marinetti 1985, 56), with the notable exception of Etruscan varieties.[9]

Already some 30 years ago Antonietta Brugnone demonstrated that the arrow-shaped *alpha* is attested in a small corpus of Greek texts from all over Sicily (but especially from the southern and eastern areas) and written both in the 'red' and 'blue' varieties of the Greek alphabet (Brugnone 1978b; see also Poccetti 2012, 73). As summarised in Table 16.1, these Greek arrow-shaped *alphas* are attested from around 520 BC until at least the middle of the fifth century, mostly in inscriptions on metal, and from seven different *poleis* (Akragas, Gela, Kamarina, Akrai, Selinous, Himera and Katane). The southern area is the most widely represented, with Gela scoring five different texts. It is notable that five of these *poleis* are proven to have transmitted the alphabet to the Sikels.

These Greek texts are therefore contemporary with the Sikel attestations, with the latter showing some possibly earlier specimens in the southern area.[10] Texts on metal are predominant, with only a loom weight from Akrai and an epitaph from Gela being on stone. It is therefore possible that the arrow-shaped *alpha* of Sicilian Greek inscriptions was a special variant associated with metal, perhaps for technical reasons – or that it became distinctive of this typology of texts because of a local epigraphic habit.[11] In archaic and Classical Sicily, epigraphy on metal is as common as that on stone, probably because the island does not have marble caves and its limestone has a high porosity. The natural conclusion would be that the Sikels derived the arrow-shaped *alpha*, like the rest of their script, from a Greek model but made it standard in

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9   Cf. the comparative table in *PID* 2.3 502–503. Earlier scholarship on Sikel epigraphy has invoked a direct influence from Oscan epigraphy, see *e.g.* Manni in *Kokalos* (1978), 43.

10  These are a funerary inscription from Licodia Eubea (*VSS* 21; cf. the drawing in Agostiniani 1992, 150 no. 12; ISic003363), dated to the first half of the sixth century, and a graffito on an Ionic cup from Monte Casasia, dated to the mid-sixth century by Pelagatti (1973b/2017, 100) and Frasca (1994–1995, 559), but to the end of the century by Agostiniani (1992, 131). The epigraphic interpretation of the inscription, which Cordano (1993, 156) read as ΑΡΕΛΥΒΑΛΕΛ, is controversial (cf. Agostiniani and Cordano 2002, 80): for a drawing, see Lorefice (2012, 254, fig. 17).

11  Its attestations in continental Greece (Arcadia and Megaris) are also on metal: cf. Brugnone (1978b, 72–73). Brugnone (1978b, 75) goes on to argue that the arrow-shaped *alpha* spread to Sicily and the Adriatic area of northern Italy specifically because of Arcadian influence: this hypothesis is unwarranted.

*Table 16.1 Distribution of arrow-shaped alphas in Sicilian Greek texts*

| Date | Akragas | Gela | Kamarina | Akrai | Selinous | Katane (and Aitna) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | | Sites | | |
| 525–500 BC | Inscriptions on didrachms (Jenkins 1970, pl. 37; between 520 and 480 BC) | | | | | |
| ca 500 BC | | Lamella with names (*IGDS* I 176; actual find-spot unknown) | | | | |
| 500–475 BC | Opisthographic *lamella* with names (*IGDS* I 180 = *IGDS* II 77, beginning of 5th c.; dicussion in Brugnone 1978a; Poccetti 2018, 640–663) | Defixio (*IGDS* I 134.b, beginning of the 5th c.) | | Limestone loom weight (*IGDS* I 108, where the *alphas* are drawn with a central stroke; but cf. the drawing in Orsi 1900, 45; beginning of the 5th c.) | | Coin legends on tetradrachms (Katane) and *litrai* (Aitna; cf. Jenkins 1970, 59; ca 460 BC) |
| 475–450 BC | *Lamella* with names (not later than 470 BC? Cf. Poccetti 2004, 618) | | | *Defixio* (Bettarini 2005, no. 22) | Coin legends on two obols (cf. Jenkins 1970, 59; probably later than 472 BC) | |
| | Legends on Geloan *litrai* (Jenkins 1970, 59; 233–234; 465–450 BC) | | | *Defixio* (Bettarini 2005, no. 23) | | |
| | Funerary inscriptions on a limestone temple-shaped cippus (mid-6th c. according to Gentili 1946; ca 475–450 BC, *LSAG²* 278 no. 56) | | | | | |
| ca 450 | | | *Defixio* (*IGDS* I 121)* | | | |

* The precise findspot of the Gela *defixio* is unknown. The text and its meaning in context have attracted a lot of attention; for a full bibliography see *SEG* LVII 905B.

*Fig. 16.7. Network of 'trazzere' (transhumance paths) of modern Sicily (the thickest ones). The thinnest paths are modern trails. Redrawn by P. Boyes after detail from 'Carta della viabilità storica 1885', Regione Siciliana, Dipartimento BB. CC. AA. ED. E.P. For the entire coloured map see: http://www. regione.sicilia.it/bbccaa/dirbenicult/bca/ptpr/vettoriali/10Viabilita.pdf.*

their writing practice, or in certain varieties of it. This scenario was already considered by Agostiniani (1980–1981, 519), who however posited a complicated transmission process whereby the slight differences in the execution of the *alpha* (Fig. 16.7) may go back to two Greek variants of the grapheme, employed respectively in texts on metal and on stone.

We wish to advance a simpler hypothesis, which assigns a fundamental role to portable texts, such as *lamellae*. It is usually taken for granted that the transmission

of scripts happens through commercial media, and so vases, with the various types of inscriptions they carry, take centre stage. Indeed, scholars have noted that the Sikels adopted Greek writing together with its most typical textual types and formulae (ownership and/or dedicatory inscriptions on vases of indigenous or Greek origin, funerary inscriptions on stone and public inscriptions on architectural elements). However, the role of magic – a practice strongly associated with metal inscriptions – should not be underestimated. It is far from improbable that various kinds of magic practitioners moved between the Greek and the indigenous worlds. Hints in this direction are the fact that Sicilian *defixiones* abound in non-Greek names (cf. Poccetti 2004, 665; Meiser 2012) and that their main finding-spots on the island, Selinous and Himera, had continuous and complex contacts with the indigenous populations.[12] The *defixiones* from Gela and Akragas too show various degrees of interference from the indigenous world, as noted by Poccetti (2004, 664–665).

All these facts suggest that individuals with an indigenous affiliation were involved in the kind of practices connected to *defixiones* (cf. Poccetti 2004, 664). Speculatively, it may be argued that starting from a specific Greek epigraphic habit the arrow-shaped *alpha* spread to the Sikels via the special medium of *lamellae* of various kinds. While for the Greeks this grapheme was clearly a mere formal variant (with a technical, occasional and/or local character), for most Sikels it became the preferred variant. The prevalence of this variant, however, must not be considered as a deliberate choice on the writers' part, *i.e.* a marker that would differentiate the Sikel inscriptions from the Greek ones, but rather as an epigraphic habit that spreads together with epigraphic practice.

## Was the Sikel *alpha* really a marker of identity? The case of Montagna di Marzo

The most important site for Sikel epigraphy is Montagna di Marzo, which has yielded almost half of all the Sikel *alphas* known today. As mentioned above, Montagna di Marzo was strategically located in the middle of a communication network and in an area rich in both Sikel and Greek settlements. The site already thrived in the late Bronze Age and its material culture became progressively characterised by elements which are closer to Greek ones.[13]

The Sikel inscriptions from Montagna di Marzo amount to 86 items (Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018, 183); 83 are graffiti incised on vases found in the necropoleis.[14]

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[12] On Selinous see Bettarini (2005) and Rocca (2009). Himera has now become the first finding-spot for Sicilian *defixiones*: campaigns in 2008–2011 and 2018 have unearthed some 54 specimens in the west necropolis (Vassallo and Valentino 2010), which are now in the process of being studied (a general overview of the evidence has been published in Vassallo *et al.* 2020). For the relations of these two *poleis* with the indigenous *chora*, see Ampolo (2012) and Vassallo (2010).

[13] For references on the archaeological history of the site see Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli (2018, 151).

[14] There also are two painted inscriptions on vases and a short graffito incised on a grave: see Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli (2018, 183).

All the texts but one are very short, consisting in individual words (most probably names) or sequences of two or three words (most probably ownership or dedication formulae). The longest inscription, on a local amphora now in the Agrigento Museum, consists of 93 letters: its interpretation remains highly debated.[15] The arrow-shaped *alpha* is only found in non-Greek inscriptions and also features at the beginning of an abecedary found in this site (Agostiniani 2012, 148 with fig. 8).

Agostiniani's theory that the arrow-shaped *alpha* was a marker of Sikel identity rests exclusively on the evidence from Montagna di Marzo, and especially on the inscriptions from the so-called 'Tomb 31 East', containing burials pertaining to two male individuals, probably of high status (Mussinano 1966; 1970; full catalogue of grave goods in Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018). In the inscriptions on the vases belonging to both dead bodies Agostiniani identifies two hands (*i.e.* two engravers). The first hand uses the arrow-shaped *alpha*, as well as a *rho* with a short left stroke and a much longer right stroke; the second hand uses a 'normal' *alpha* and a *rho* in which the right stroke is clearly shorter (Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2015, 38, with figs 21–24; 2018, 190). On two vases (nos. 69 and 70) pertaining to the burial at the back of the tomb, the two hands have written different texts on each vase (Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018, 186–189, with figs 107–108). On one further vase (cup 72), the arrow-shaped *alphas* in the text engraved by the first hand have been 'corrected' into 'normal' *alphas* by the second hand (Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2015, 41–42, with fig. 31).

Agostiniani's conclusion with regard to these inscriptions is that the second hand changed the arrow-shaped *alpha* on purpose because it was a 'marked sign, endowed with socio-cultural values' for the Sikels but not for Greek-speakers (Agostiniani 2012, 150; Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018, 191). His interpretation rules out the possibility that the alternation is simply due to carelessness on the writers' part (a point of view with which we agree) and associates the graphic alternation with the funerary practices evidenced by the tomb. Agostiniani also notices a correlation between the type of vessels and the type of texts incised on them (Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018, 194–196). Local or Attic vessels of a simpler kind bear inscriptions consisting of short words (ϜΟΛΑ: 2x, ϜΙΤΑΡΙΟΝ: 2x, ϜΙ: 1x, ΓΕΛΕ: 1x), whereas the seven high-quality Attic drinking vessels are all incised by the same hand, which does not use the arrow-shaped *alpha*. Two of these texts (one repeated 3 times, the other 2 times) can be interpreted as ownership formulae (tentatively: ΜΑΡΕΣΚΑΚΑΜΙ 'I belong to Mares Kaka', ΑΡΑΚΑΚΑΜΙ 'I belong to Ara Kaka'). Two further graffiti contain ΙΤΑΛΟ and the last one ΡΑΤΟΡΑ: both are interpreted as the genitives of personal names (Ἰταλός and Ῥάτορας). In the last vase ΡΑΤΟΡΑ, originally written with arrow-shaped *alphas*, was later corrected by the hand which incised a second inscription on the vessel (ΑΡΑΚΑΚΑΜΙ) with 'normal' *alphas*. Thus, according to Agostiniani, while texts pertaining to every-day practices (graffiti indicating the contents of vessels) used

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[15] See the contributions collected in *Kokalos* 1978; and the later discussions by Poccetti (2004), Martzloff (2011), and Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli (2018, 191).

arrow-shaped *alphas*, in those pertaining to higher-status practices (ownership formulae in the context of a funerary symposium), the arrow-shaped *alpha* was felt to be out of place and hence corrected (Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli 2018, 195).

The ingeniousness and appeal of this hypothesis are evident. Yet, we believe that a less ideologically charged interpretation of this epigraphic *corpus* is needed. It seems to us that the distribution of shorter inscriptions with a simple name (ΙΤΑΛΟ, ΡΑΤΟΡΑ) and longer inscriptions with ownership formulae (ΑΡΑΚΑΚΑΜΙ, etc.) may more simply speak in favour of the existence of two scripts, both used by speakers of Sikel and both in circulation in Montagna di Marzo around the middle of the fifth century, perhaps a by-product of a 'complex interplay between overlapping and multi-layered identities' (Giangiulio 2010, 16). As Agostiniani and Albanese Procelli note, the vase with ΡΑΤΟΡΑ later completed with ΑΡΑΚΑΚΑΜΙ (cup 72) could contain two different ownership inscriptions. Hence, we suggest, we would simply have two slightly different forms of the same script, the first one perhaps earlier than the second.

It is very important to emphasise that Agostiniani's hypothesis that the arrow-shaped *alpha* has an 'antagonistic' character rests exclusively on *one* correction, occurring on cup 72. In the two cups with ΙΤΑΛΟ (nos 69 and 70) the second engraver *does not correct* the arrow-shaped *alphas* and actually uses them *also at the beginning of the second inscription.* Thus, the distribution could be explained by assuming that the two hands at work had two different systems as a reference point. Speculatively, the second scribe – who writes only the texts with the sequences ΜΑΡΕΣΚΑΚΑΜΙ, ΜΑΡΕΣΚΑΚΑ and ΑΡΑΚΑΚΑΜΙ and also uses a more open *rho* – may have been trained in a less conservative system, where the arrow-shaped *alpha* was not in use, while the first hand – who writes the texts with ϜΟΛΑ, ϜΙΤΑΡΙΟΝ, ϜΙ, ΙΤΑΛΟ, ΡΑΤΟΡΑ, and a *rho* with a long right stroke – may have been acquainted with a different system. Variation in spelling due to the co-existence of parallel models in a bilingual context is normal in societies where orthography is not likely to have been heavily codified (see Sebba 2007, 163–165 for the connection between spelling and authority).

This interpretation seems to us more economical and also preferable on the historical level since it does not imply the existence of a Sikel 'identity' – an idea which has very little factual evidence to sustain it, as we discussed above (and to which we will return in the Conclusions). It also seems more probable from a linguistic perspective. In Montagna di Marzo, Sikel and Greek co-existed at this stage, as shown by the fact that Greek inscriptions on vases (all with 'normal' *alphas*) have also been found.[16] If marking identity really *was* a concern of the Sikels, persistence in the use of the native language would be a better candidate for an identity marker than spelling.[17] The fact that within one generation Sikel ceased to be written across the whole island suggests that in the middle of the fifth century the language was

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[16]  *IGDS* I 166 (three erotic graffiti, ca 500 BC) and 167 (sympotic inscription, beginning of fifth century); *IGDS* II 71 (ownership inscription, first half of fifth century).

[17]  See the case of Oscan at Bantia, discussed by McDonald and Zair (2017), with useful methodological warnings.

going through its last phase of authentic vitality: the spread of new practices may have affected script first, and later language.

## Writing without antagonism. The case of Mendolito di Adrano

The Sikel inscriptions from the Aetna region come from the sites of Mendolito di Adrano, Kentoripa, Poira-Poggio Cocola, Paternò-Civita, Paliké (Rocchicella di Mineo), as well as the area around Montagna di Ramacca. Commercial exchanges and contacts between Sikels and Greeks started soon, around the seventh century BC but the area remained isolated enough from the main 'Greek' routes up until the foundation of Adranon (located on a ridge on the southwestern slopes of Mt Etna) by Dionysius I in 401 BC (Diod. Sic. 14.37.5). Archaeologically, the Aetna area lies in the Sikel heartland: during the short-lived revolt led by Ducetius, in the mid-fifth century, the rebels' headquarters were Paliké and the near-by sanctuary of the Palikoi.

According to our estimation, the Sikel inscriptions from this region total ca 36. All the sites except two, Kentoripa and Paliké, have produced texts with the arrow-shaped *alpha*. The famous inscription on the Kentoripa *askos* (a small wine-jug), dated to the first half of fifth century BC,[18] features the 'normal' *alpha* and other elements which characterise the script of this inscription as unique in the Sikel *corpus* as a whole. As concerns Paliké-Rocchicella di Mineo, the area of the sanctuary has yielded an inscription (now lost, but sketched by Orsi),[19] with an *alpha* with an oblique bar on the right (Λ).

Apart from these two exceptions, the inscriptions and graffiti from all the other sites feature various typologies of *alpha*, among which are the arrow-shaped ones.[20] At Paternò-Civita we have tiles with Greek inscriptions (*SEG* 28 769), as well as some five specimens of uncertain linguistic attribution, but with arrow-shaped *alpha*s (Pelagatti 1976–1977, 533–536; Agostiniani 1992, 131). At Coste di S. Febronia, on the entrance walls of a rock-cut chamber (second half of the seventh–first half of the sixth century BC)[21] one finds two longish inscriptions and two *alphas* (higher than the other letters): one 'normal' and the other one arrow-shaped.[22] Montagna di Ramacca has yielded graffiti on pottery dated to the first half of the sixth century, consisting of

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[18] *PID* 2.3 447; *VSS* 25; Pulgram (1978, 72); Morandi (1982, 168); Agostiniani (1992, 147).

[19] Orsi (1900, 59 no. 37); Toscanelli (1914, 595 fig. 185); *VSS* 37 (p. 38, fig. 41); *PID* 2.3 35; Cordano (2003, fig. 12; 2008, 43; 2012, 165 fig. 5); ISic004394. Schmoll (1958) reads the inscription as ΟΣΤΙΥΗΑΓΕ.ΚΕ..Ι.Δ.

[20] The only inscription discovered in Poira we are aware of is on an oinochoe found in a funerary context and inscribed as follows: HIMII (Cultraro 1989–1990).

[21] See the archaeological context offered by Maniscalco (1993–1994; 1997–1998).

[22] The inscriptions (ISic003479 and ISic003480) are edited by Cordano (1997–1998; 1999), who reads: ΒΑΗΙΑΕ (wall on the right, upper part); ΒΑΡ.ΙΓΑ or ΒΑΡ.ΚΑ (wall on the right, lower part); Μ (wall on the right, lowest part); ΤΟϞΣΙ (wall on the left); Α (wall on the left, but separated from the first inscription); 'arrow-shaped *alpha*' (wall on the left, but separated from the first inscription). See also Cordano (2003, 45–46, figs 13–14; 2012, 164–165). It is worth mentioning that the editor provided a drawing only for the longer inscriptions, but not for those featuring the two *alphas.*

monograms and fragments of a longer text with the arrow-shaped *alpha* (Agostiniani 1980–1981, 511).

We shall now analyse the above evidence with an eye to the geographical distribution of these sites and their location on communication routes. Above we highlighted the importance of river valleys in the area. Thucydides' description of the Syracusan ambassadors' journey (during the summer of 413 BC) from Mt Aetna to Syrakousai and the Sikels' manoeuvres to ambush them (Thuc. 7.32.1) suggests that there was a route from the Aetna region to Syrakousai which unfolded along the Simeto River.[23] Other information concerning this area comes from Diodorus, who hints at a route between the Sikel settlement of Aitna/Inessa and the sacred area in the Adranon district (Diod. Sic. 14.37).

If one examines the distribution of the sites vis-à-vis rivers and valleys their mutual connection becomes clear. The Simeto River connects Mendolito di Adrano with the southern valley overlooked by five settlements on high ground which have also yielded Sikel inscriptions: Poira-Poggio Cocola, Paternò-Civita, Montagna di Ramacca, Paliké-Rocchicella and Coste di S. Febronia. Based on geography, the Aetna region can be further divided into two sub-areas: the first extends on the slopes of Mount Aetna, including Mendolito di Adrano, Poira-Poggio Cocola, Paternò-Civita and Kentoripa (both set apart by the Simeto River); the second looks out onto the Valley of the Margi River and the plain of Katane and includes Montagna di Ramacca, Paliké, S. Febronia.

The material culture of these sites in the archaic period also offers some very useful insights. Mendolito di Adrano, Civita di Paternò (Lamagna 1994; 1997–1998) and Poira-Poggio Cocola (Rizza 1959; *BTCGI* 1990 *s.v.* 'Poira')[24] have structures which can be identified as 'indigenous', while Paliké-Rocchicella di Mineo (*BTCGI* s.v. 'Palice'; Maniscalco and McConnell 1997–1998; 2003; Pope 2006), Montagna di Ramacca (*BTCGI* s.v. 'Ramacca'; Patanè 1995) and Kentoripa (see *BTCGI* s.v. 'Centuripe'; Pelagatti 1982) evidence buildings which have been ascribed to Greek influence (see Albanese Procelli 2003, 160–163). The response of these settlements to technological innovation from the Greek centres – including epigraphic practices – is not pre-determinable on the basis of the geographical location or the proximity to Greek cities, but it rather depends on numerous variables. If we consider literacy as one of the numerous innovations that the Greeks brought into the 'Sikel' area, it is necessary to take into account the whole historical context to understand its adoption and decline. In this respect, the case of Mendolito is particularly instructive.

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[23] 'Meanwhile the representatives from Syracuse who, as already related, had gone to the various cities after the capture of Plemmyrium had met with a good response and were now on the point of bringing back with them the troops that they had raised. Nicias, however, was informed of their intentions, and sent to Centoripa and Alicyae and to other Sikels who were his allies and who controlled the route, asking them not to let the reinforcements through, but to join up together and bar their way, since there was no other route that they could even attempt to take, because the Agrigentines would not allow them to go through their territory'. Trans. by R. Warner.

[24] Rizza identifies the site with Aitna-Inessa, based on its proximity to Kentoripa, but this assumption remains a hypothesis.

The 'Mendolito di Adrano' site, an anonymous native centre, was occupied between the ninth–eighth and the fifth centuries BC.[25] The site develops at the foot of the volcanic cone of Mt Aetna on a low-lying basaltic terrace, originating from an ancient lava flow, whose western limit presents steep, albeit not very high, slopes on a more recent lava flow, which separates it from the left bank of the Simeto River. The first striking fact about the site is its size (some eight hectares) which, rather than pointing to a densely urbanised centre, seems to point to a settlement with small groups of houses interspersed with large expanses (perhaps used for agriculture or grazing), located within the walls, and built in the middle of the sixth century BC.

We do not have, at present, definitive archaeological evidence of the presence of craft workshops on the site during the last decades of the seventh and, above all, in the course of the sixth century BC. However, it is significant that much of the indigenously manufactured pottery was produced *in situ* for the community's own uses. The locally-made pottery (often of the Licodia Eubea *facies*) is accompanied by colonial Ionian cups and some imported Attic and Corinthian ware (*kylikes*, *skyphoi*, *kotylai*, and transport amphoras).[26] There is also evidence of indigenously manufactured, albeit Greek-influenced, architectural elements, such as a *gorgoneion*, eight antefixes, polychrome terracotta used for cladding in buildings (not necessarily sacred), a number of basaltic capitals of Ionic imitation, and octagon columns, already known to Orsi (cf. Orsi and Pelagatti 1967–1968, fig. 5; Lamagna 2009, 77–78). This suggests the possible presence of relatively important buildings in the area, as well as the presence on the site of engravers skilled at offering a 'local' take on typically Hellenic iconographic motifs. This may be explained on the basis of the communication routes described above. Although the Mendolito site is distant from Greek settlements, the Simeto River provides a crucial connection with the Plain of Katane and the centres gravitating on it: the Greek Katane, Leontinoi and Naxos, and the other Sikel settlements, which also acquired Greek technological innovations through commercial exchanges.

Mendolito has brought forth only four inscriptions, found on different supports.[27] They all feature arrow-shaped *alphas*:

1.  A parallelepiped in lava stone (aka *cippo Sanfilippo*, from the name of the owner of the land in which it was found), interpreted as being a boundary stone dating from the sixth century BC. This stone is difficult to read due to its state of conservation

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[25] The site has been excavated since the seventeenth century, but it was Paolo Orsi who first pointed out its importance to the scholarly community. Systematic excavations were not begun until Pelagatti's mission in the 1960s (see Pelagatti 1964–1965; Pelagatti 1966; Orsi and Pelagatti 1967–1968; Pelagatti 2009).

[26] Pope 2006, 71.

[27] The documents were all published by Manganaro (1961), with the exception of the well-known inscription on the urban gate published by Pelagatti (1964–1965), and have recently been re-examined by Agostiniani (2009), whose studies we refer to for more in-depth information. High-resolution photographs of these documents can be found in Mignosa (2017–2018, 232–234, figs 2–7).

(Manganaro 1961, 110, tab. L–LIII; Orsi and Pelagatti 1967–1968, 144–145, fig. 2; *VSS* 201–202; Zamboni 1978, 958; Agostiniani 2009, 116; ISic003644).

2. Two tile fragments, found in the village and at first interpreted as two different funerary inscriptions (Manganaro 1961, 110), but later identified as a single votive inscription dedicated by magistrates to deities (*LIA*[2] 127 = *PID* 2.3 576 e 577; Ribezzo 1923, 224). More recently Cultraro (2004, 224) has interpreted these fragments as an inscription on roofing slabs of housing structures featuring a dedication by the member of the community who financed the building works. The two fragments read as:

    (a) ΔΟΗΙΤ ΙΜ ΡΥΚΕΣ ΗΑΖΣΥΙΕ that is, according to its accepted interpretation, 'Ruke Hazsuies gives this', or 'gift from Ruke Hazsuie'. This inscription would thus contain a two-member onomastic formula referring to the individual who made or gave something (certainly not the tile but perhaps the building on which it lay or, as G. Colonna points out, something more significant for the community).[28]

    (b) ΡΕΣΕΣ ΑΝΙΡΕΣ, understood as another two-member formula. The inscription dates to the fifth century BC (*VSS* 18–19 = *PID* 2.3 576–577).

3. Tile fragments showing short inscriptions understood to be factory marks, and a fragmentary inscription understood to be the initial part of a name (Manganaro 1961, 110, tab. L, 2–3).

4. An inscription on a sandstone block found in the right pier (or to the east) of the entrance gate to the settlement (ISic003364). Right-to-left writing, 52-letter long and dating back to the mid-sixth century BC (550 BC). Its reading, accepted by most scholars, is ΙΑΜ ΑΚΑΡΑΜ ΕΠΟΠΑΣΚΑ ΑΓΙΙΕΣ ΓΕΠΕΔ ΤΟΥΤΟ FΕΡΕΓΑΙΕΣΗΕΙΚΑΔ[.] ΑΛΑ (Prosdocimi 1995, 1421–1422). The meaning of the text is obscure, but some of the terms seem to have parallels in Italic languages.[29]

While all these inscriptions from Mendolito feature only 'arrow-shaped *alphas*', the other sites in the Aetna region do not show uniformity. The arrow-shaped *alpha* occurs in the native sites of Poira-Poggio Cocola, Paternò-Civita (where the 'normal' *alpha* also appears) and Ramacca, but Kentoripa and Paliké-Rocchicella use the 'normal' *alpha* instead. We wish to offer a tentative interpretation of this distribution based on historical analysis.

At the beginning of the fifth century the Greeks do not seem to have been a threat to the site of Mendolito, which had thrived throughout the seventh and the sixth century: instead, they provided crucial innovations that the Sikels of Mendolito adapted and reshaped to suit their needs. Inscribing a monumental inscription on a gate is not a common practice in Greek Sicily: it is common, on the other hand, in Italic contexts as evidenced by the later inscription from Serra di Vaglio, found

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[28] Colonna (1983, 62–63). See also Cordano (2012, 170).
[29] For an in-depth analysis see Mignosa (2017–2018).

near the fortification walls of the site (for the inscription see Manni Piraino 1968, 451–457 no. 28).[30] Thus, it would seem that in Mendolito the Sikels adopted the Greek alphabet, but proceeded to develop a specific epigraphic habit characterised by the arrow-shaped *alpha*. The sign can be interpreted as a 'preferred variant' (given that it is not exclusively used in the other sites of the Aetna region), which became common in the Sikel epigraphic workshops of the area.

The distribution of the *alpha* in the region does not perfectly match the two geographical sub-areas and this probably stems from the fact that all the centres in the Aetna region are connected to one another. Such regional connectivity fostered a high circulation of people, goods and practices. Among these there must have been artisans (stonecutters) who mastered the epigraphic techniques and, thanks to a wide communication network, spread their distinctive epigraphic habit (including the type of *alpha*) around the area. In those centres such as Kentoripa and Paternò-Civita in which the Greek presence was already significant in the second half of the sixth century, stonecutters were more influenced by the 'original' Greek alphabet and used it from the beginning. Thus, it may be assumed that Paternò-Civita and Kentoripa have inscriptions with the 'normal *alpha*' because of their connection with Katane. This is suggested by the existence of the Henna-Agyrion-Assoros-Kentoripa-Katane route, which may have been created precisely to connect Katane to important commercial areas – or which was the very reason for the establishment of such connections.

## Why was the arrow-shaped alpha abandoned? The Hyblaean area and Castiglione di Ragusa

The Sikel inscriptions from the Hyblaean area come from the sites of Terravecchia di Grammichele, Morgantina, Licodia Eubea, Monte Casasia, Sciri Sottano, Castiglione di Ragusa and, possibly, Ragusa Ibla. These settlements, some of which go back to prehistoric times, are usually located in a high-up position controlling valleys and water streams (Uggeri and Patitucci 2017, 78 with fig. 122; fig. 7).[31] Contacts between Greeks and Sikels were intense and multifaceted in this area, where 'multiple processes of cultural contact and social change were running' (Giangiulio 2010, 16).

According to our counts, based on the available published material, the Sikel texts from the Hyblaean area amount to ca 43. Apart from the usual graffiti on Greek vases, some of which will be discussed below, there are also five funerary texts on stone. Two were inscribed on the stone slabs ('portelli') closing the rock-cut tombs ('a grotticella') which are typical of this area: one is from Ragusa Ibla (ΓΟΣΤΙϘΟ, late sixth century: *VSS* 29; Agostiniani and Cordano 2002, 79; Cordano 2012, 167 and 180, fig. 7: see below for a discussion; ISic003376), the other comes from Licodia Eubea (ΡΑΡΟΤΑ, with arrow-shaped *alphas*, first half of the sixth century: Agostiniani 1992, 150 no. 11; Cordano 2012, 167 and 180, fig. 8; ISic003360). Three other texts were inscribed on

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[30] On the Italic features of the evidence from Mendolito di Adrano see Mignosa (2017–2018, 220–222).
[31] See Mercuri (2012b, 289–290) for a description of the area and its (commercial) routes.

stone media that have been described as *stelai.* The most famous, a long winding
inscription beginning with the indigenous name ΝΕΝΔΑΣ, is from Sciri (first half of
the fifth century: Agostiniani 1992, 148 no. 7; Cordano 2012, 181, fig. 9; ISic003362).[32]
The other two are from Licodia Eubea and both have been dated to around the end
of the sixth century: the first has the two-member formula ΑΔΙΟΜΙΣ ΡΑΡΟΙΟ; the
other begins with ΤΟΔΕ followed by a text whose interpretation remains controversial
(overviews in Agostiniani 1992, 150 nos. 12 and 13; Agostiniani and Cordano 2002, 81;
ISic003363 and ISic003361).[33]

Arrow-shaped *alphas* feature in inscriptions of all kinds from all these centres
except for Castiglione di Ragusa and Morgantina, where the *alpha* always has the
'normal' shape.[34] Agostiniani (1992, 131) concludes that the epigraphic habit of the
whole area escapes an overarching interpretation. We wish to suggest here a tentative
explanation of the distribution based on the topography, history and archaeology of
these sites.

The Sikel Hyblaean area can be divided into two main sub-areas, each with
its peculiar character. Terravecchia di Grammichele, Licodia Eubea, Sciri Sottano
(in modern-day Mazzarrone) and Monte Casasia constitute a small cluster of nearby
centres dominating the valleys of the Dirillo River and its smaller tributaries, along
the route that led from Leontinoi to Gela and the sea (overview in Frasca 1994–1995,
563–569; Uggeri and Patitucci 2017, 16–17). Though increasingly influenced by
Greek practices, these sites preserved their distinctive Sikel culture throughout the
archaic age.

Terravecchia di Grammichele is situated on the slopes of the hills overlooking
the valleys of the small Margi River, an area rich in minor indigenous settlements
(Branciforti 2000). The necropoleis (Mulino della Badia, Madonna del Piano, Casa
Cantoniera) bear witness to the coexistence of different burial practices (Albanese
Procelli 2003, 167; Camera 2010). This has been interpreted as a sign that already
towards the end of the sixth century the site started undergoing a cultural change,
perhaps as a result of the Greek expansion into the interior (Procelli 1989, 685; Camera
2010, 117–118). The epigraphic record also features a Greek text, Δαμαίνετος Μνασία,
inscribed on a lead *lamella* from the nearby sacred area of Poggio dell'Aquila (*IGDS*
II 95, beginning of the fifth century). Apart from some isolated marks difficult to interpret,
the inscriptions on vases comprise two graffiti with arrow-shaped *alphas*: ΝΕΔΑΙ,
inside an Attic cup (ca 525–500 BC; cf. Agostiniani 2002, 83–84 with fig. 4; Camera 2010,
115),[35] and ΜΑΙΟ on an indigenous vase from the end of the sixth century (Camera
2010, 115 with fig. 63). A further graffito inscribed under the foot of a black-figured

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[32] Agostiniani (2012, 148 no. 7) provides a tentative reading of the text.
[33] Agostiniani and Cordano (2002, 81) mention two others unpublished stelai from Licodia Eubea as 'of
little consequence'.
[34] See the two graffiti with ΝΕΝΔΑΣ on two Ionic cups (Pelagatti 1973a, 155–156).
[35] Another Attic cup bears the graffito ΟΥΠΕΙ ΠΙΝΙΓΟΙ ΕΜΙ, probably an ownership inscription, with
no *alphas.*

*kotyle* features normal *alphas*: the interpretation of the text, dated to ca 500 BC, is controversial and it was initially thought to be in Greek (Agostiniani 2002, 82–83 with fig. 3). If the chronology of these three texts from Terravecchia di Grammichele can be considered representative, we may be witnessing here the succession of two writing systems, in accordance with the evolution of the cultural *facies* of the site, although the linguistic interpretation of the last text remains ambiguous.

The important settlement of Licodia Eubea, on a hill overlooking the Dirillo River, is an exemplary case of an indigenous site that between the seventh and the mid-fifth century underwent a gradual cultural change, resulting in a unique archaeological *facies* characterised by distinctive pottery (the so-called Licodia Eubea *facies*: overview in Camera 2013). The texts from Licodia Eubea are all Sikel (though some of them are just one-letter graffiti, maybe trademarks) and, as mentioned above, feature only arrow-shaped *alphas*. A similar scenario emerges from Sciri Sottano, slightly to the south of Licodia Eubea, of which only the necropolis is known. The only text, the funerary stele mentioned above, again shows only arrow-shaped *alphas.*

The settlement of Monte Casasia, the highest in the Hyblaean area (730 m), is immediately opposite Licodia Eubea, on the right side of the Dirillo valley and in a location difficult to access. Surveys in the necropolis have documented the extensive presence of local pottery produced *in situ* as well as of Greek pottery (overview in Lorefice 2012). The earliest phase of the necropolis (mid-seventh to mid-sixth century), which precedes the foundations of both Kamarina and Gela, already witnesses the presence of imported Greek (mostly Corinthian) ware. In this period, Monte Casasia seems to have had dealings with the eastern Greek *poleis* (especially Leontinoi). The changes caused by the foundation of Kamarina in 598 BC are reflected in funerary practices and ceramic types: as mentioned above (see note 9), the only inscription from the site is the obscure graffito ΑΡΕΛΥΒΑΛΕΛ (with at least one secure arrow-shaped *alpha*) on an Ionic 'B2' cup, a type which Lorefice (2012, 236–238) connects with the second phase of the necropolis, when rituals appear to have become more clearly Hellenised; the script remains distinctly local.

While the first sub-area of the Hyblaean region shows the persistence of the indigenous *facies* throughout the sixth century and into the fifth, the profile of the second sub-area, represented by the sites of Ragusa Ibla and Castiglione di Ragusa, is partially different. Their contacts with Kamarina were intense and long-lived, first of all for a topographic reason: Ragusa Ibla and Castiglione controlled the transversal route which, extending through the territory of modern-day Comiso and Chiaramonte Gulfi, connected the internal Selinuntine road (see above) and the coastal Helorine road (Uggeri and Patitucci 2017, 78 with fig. 122). The necropoleis of both sites show evidence of 'aristocratic' burials which have been associated with the presence of high-status Greeks, probably coming from Kamarina. At Ragusa Ibla, the Pendente necropolis features monumental structures, while the Rito necropolis has yielded sophisticated funerary sculptures associated with exquisite Greek import ware (Di Stefano 2012, 258–259). The only inscription from this site, ΓΟΣΤΙϘΟ (see above),

is not overtly Sikel: if, as has been suggested, it is an anthroponym based on the root *gʰostis*, which is not continued in Greek, this form could still be interpreted as an Italic name borrowed by Greek and inflected in the genitive singular (with *omicron* representing /oː/). In conclusion, at present we have no unambiguously Sikel inscriptions from this site.

Castiglione di Ragusa is certainly the more notable of the two Sikel centres. Located on a plateau at 643 m of altitude and overlooking modern-day Comiso, it was already inhabited by the end of the Bronze Age (Pelagatti 2006). Its two necropoleis are characterised by different burial practices that have been interpreted as evidence that two ethnic groups were active at this site (Mercuri 2012b; Uggeri 2015, 226–232). Indigenous people buried their dead in the west necropolis (full study in Mercuri 2012a), which has yielded only simple vascular graffiti, such as those with ΝΕΝΔΑΣ (see note 34 above). Greek 'emigres', perhaps artisans, used the east necropolis, where typically Greek burials such as 'cappuccina' tombs and stone sarcophagi mix with indigenous practices.

The east necropolis is absolutely unique in the whole Sikel area because it is the probable finding spot of the so-called 'Castiglione Warrior': an early sixth-century bas-relief of a warrior with a shield and spear on a horse, flanked by the heads of a bull and a sphinx (?), which was initially interpreted as the architrave of a building but was later connected to a monumental tomb in the east necropolis (Di Stefano 2012, 260). The apparently 'indigenous' craftsmanship of the bas-relief pairs with a Greek inscription (*IGDS* I 44 = ISic003474) which if read from the bottom up – as would be natural to those passing under the architrave – yields an almost perfect hexameter (Σκύλ(λ)ος ἐποίησε(ν) Πυρ(ρ)ίνῳ τῷ Πυτίκ(κ)α 'Skyllos made for Pyrrhinos son of Putikkas'). A work of this kind would only be possible within a community were Greeks had a prominent social role. The presence at Castiglione of Greeks of a certain standing is also suggested by another Greek inscription, a funerary epigram for a married couple (with Greek and indigenous names) inscribed on a tomb *portello* (*IGDS* I 127 = ISic001481, end of the sixth century BC) which, though not unequivocally from Castiglione, has recently been connected to the site.[36] In conclusion, Castiglione seems to evidence the full coexistence between Sikels and high-status Greeks which has led Albanese Procelli (2003, 224) to speak of a 'bilingual' context. Again, ethnic labels, though handy, are not completely fit to capture the multi-faceted reality of this site:[37] what is important, for our present purpose, is that Castiglione displays a level of cultural exchange that is profoundly different from that of the other centre in the Hyblaean area.

The last site of the Hyblaean region is Morgantina, located on the hills rising to the west of the Plain of Katane. Although seemingly isolated from the other Sikel

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[36] The first editor, Pugliese Carratelli (1942, 321), attributed the stone to the Sikel 'mountain area around Kamarina'. For the identification with Castiglione, see Cordano (2012, 167) and Di Stefano (2012). For a recent analysis, see Tribulato (2018, 224–229).

[37] See also Giangiulio (2010, 18).

and Greek centres, Morgantina is actually located on one of the main routes between Katane and Akragas (see Fig. 16.5 above) and is equidistant from Syrakousai, Katane, Kamarina and Gela. The Sikel centre, preceded by a protohistoric phase (tenth–ninth centuries), was already established in the second quarter of the sixth century and was destroyed in 459, during the campaigns of Ducetius (Diod. Sic. 11.78.5). Imported Greek pottery and building techniques are common (Antonaccio 1997), suggesting – as for Ragusa Ibla and Castiglione – that contacts with the Greeks were precocious and intense. Evidence from the necropolis also suggests that already in the archaic age Morgantina was characterised by a distinctive culture, which mingled elements of different origin but resulted in being original and unique (Lyons 1996; Antonaccio 1997; Giangiulio 2010, 20). This is reflected in the epigraphic record, where clearly Greek texts mingle with more elusive ones. All the eight inscriptions are graffiti and feature only 'normal' *alphas* (see Antonaccio and Neils 1995; Antonaccio and Shea 2015). Some inscriptions are clearly connected to sympotic rituals: see ΠΙΒΕ on a *kylix* (Watkins 1995, 39–41; Antonaccio and Neils 1995) and ΛΑΠΕ on a mug (Antonaccio and Shea 1995, 60–61). Other texts have simple personal names, some of them possibly Greek: ΠΥΡΙΙ on a *kylix* (Lyons 1996, 7), ΔΑΜΙΣ on a lamp (Lyons 1996, 145) and ΚΥΠΑΡΑΣ ΕΜΙ a Lakonian krater (for other graffiti see Antonaccio and Shea 2015).

The highly 'mixed' context of Morgantina is a good place to stop and take stock. The seeming lack of homogeneity in the Hyblaean epigraphic record results from the evolution of epigraphic practices under different contact situations. While all the sites in the area at some point came into contact with the Greeks, some (Monte Casasia, Sciri Sottano) remained more isolated, others show signs of higher exchange around the mid-sixth century (Terravecchia di Grammichele, Licodia Eubea), and others still seem to have been inhabited by Greeks early on, and to have experienced a high level of cultural interchange (Castiglione di Ragusa, Morgantina). The distribution of arrow-shaped *alphas* and their evolution into 'normal' *alphas* can be conveniently explained in the light of all this. Monte Casasia, Sciri Sottano and Licodia Eubea show no 'normal' *alphas* and this may be consistent with the lower presence of Greeks and the consequent permanence of the epigraphic habit established among the stonecutters of these areas. In Terravecchia di Grammichele the only text without arrow-shaped *alphas* is the inscription on the Attic *kotyle* dated to ca 500 BC; in Morgantina and Castiglione – a site that was inhabited by Greeks who were already writing sophisticated inscriptions by the late seventh century – there is *no* arrow-shaped *alpha*; the same could perhaps apply to Ragusa Ibla, though the epigraphic evidence here is too scanty. Mercuri (2012b, 289) argues that Castiglione had a special connection with Gela on top of the more obvious one with the closer Kamarina, as suggested by otherwise rare archaeological material shared by the two centres. It is therefore possible that Castiglione was among the first sites of the Hyblaean area to adopt the Greek alphabet according to the specific model of Gela, which – as seen above – also occasionally employs the arrow-shaped *alpha*.

## Conclusions

The three contexts presented here – Montagna di Marzo, Mendolito di Adrano and the Hyblaean area – in a chronologically coeval period respond differently to the impetus derived from the phenomenon of Greek colonisation. Montagna di Marzo begins to be settled around the sixth century, on the one hand as a 'reaction' to the foundation of Gela (ca 689), and on the other hand to Morgantina's political and cultural evolution, which had already been heavily permeated by Greek elements by the sixth century, and which was only a six-hour walk away. It is reasonable to assume that between the sixth and fifth centuries, Greeks were not only present in the site, but somehow lived harmoniously with the indigenous community. A hint in this direction is provided by the Greek inscriptions, seemingly confined to funerary or, however, private contexts. The evidence from Montagna di Marzo can thus be viewed in the sociolinguistic framework that connects bilingualism and the co-existence of writing systems with the emergence of 'interlingual phenomena' (Sebba 2007, 162–163). In this framework, Sikel engravers ended up adopting the script which they learned from the continuous contact with the Greeks and which mimicked the Greek epigraphic habit. However, in an initial phase of contact the situation was more fluid and both scripts, as well as their graphic variants, coexisted.

In the Hyblaean area most centres maintained their writing practices unaltered because they were excluded from the frequent contact with the Greeks that characterised other sites centres and therefore maintained their own epigraphic habit. Castiglione, on the other hand, had been more stably inhabited by Greeks since the beginning of the sixth century. Its special standing in the Sikel community of the area is suggested by the presence of two Greek epigrams (out of the nine in the whole epigrammatic corpus of archaic Sicily: see Tribulato 2018), the monumental burials of the east necropolis and the alliance with Kamarina against Syrakousai in 553/2 BC. It is not by chance that the lack of arrow-shaped *alphas* characterises the Sikel epigraphy of this centre rather than that of other places. This state of affairs should not be taken as proof that the arrow-shaped *alpha* was endowed with an ethnic or social meaning, but simply as evidence that the long process of Sikel alphabetisation occurred in different phases, reflecting different circumstances. Some centres, like Castiglione, seem to have been more advanced in the acquisition of a more distinctly Greek script before they also forsook their language.

By contrast, the centre of Mendolito, situated on a communication route along the Simeto River, has yielded materials from the late Bronze Age (1270–1000 BC), the Final Bronze Age (1000–850) and the Iron Age II (730–650), which confirms the existence of a settlement before the foundation of the nearby Katane and Naxos. The epigraphic practice here is different from the other two Sikel centres which we have studied. It is public and geared towards self-representation; both material culture and epigraphy are markedly 'local', which means that the centre adopted innovations from Greek sites but retained its own culture. During the process of alphabetisation the Mendolito engravers

maintained the writing system which they had initially acquired, with its arrow-shaped *alpha*, as long as the centre was populated. This happened not because Mendolito preserved a strong 'Sikel' identity, but because it produced its own inscriptions: an epigraphic production which depended on local workshops and was far from the influence of other scripts/alphabetic varieties. When the gradual encroachment of Greeks in the area took place, by the second half of the fifth century BC, the site was abandoned, perhaps replaced by Adranon.

The epigraphic impetus of Montagna di Marzo, Castiglione di Ragusa and Mendolito di Adrano in the fifth century perfectly matches the information that comes from historiographical sources. This is the period immediately preceding the Sikel rebellion led by Ducetius against Greek expansion in the eastern part of the island.[38] Ducetius managed to create a coalition of various Sikel centres, though by no means all of them. He even founded a new centre at Paliké and built a sacred area near the site (Diod. Sic. 11.88.6–11.90.2). His independentist policy however led to an alliance of Syrakousai and Akragas against him, which eventually caused his defeat. It is important to recall these historical events here because scholars have used them to show that a strong 'Sikel identity'[39] existed during the fifth century and produced Ducetius's struggle for Sikel freedom. However, Ducetius's attempt to create a union of Sikel communities was short-lived and failed in 450 BC. If his initial success no doubt stemmed from an agreement between the Sikel centres, the short duration of the Sikel union may be explained just as conveniently as a sign of the actual fragmentation of the small Sikel settlements, which were isolated from one another and probably never constituted a cohesive entity (of the same opinion De Vido 1997, 36–37).

In conclusion, the fact that the flourishing of Sikel epigraphy and Ducetius' enterprise are quasi-coeval cannot be used as decisive evidence for the hypothesis that the Sikels thought of themselves as an *ethnos*. Hence, we really have neither historical nor epigraphic evidence to claim that the Sikels may have wished to communicate their *shared* Sikel identity through the use of a graphic marker, the arrow-shaped *alpha*. Instead, as we have argued in this paper, the use and diffusion of this grapheme should be assessed by looking to epigraphic practices and geographical factors rather than to cultural and identity ones.

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[38] On Ducetius and his enterprise, see Adamesteanu (1963); Galvagno (1991); De Vido (1997); Galvagno (1999); Consolo Langher (1996, 246–251); Consolo Langher (1997, 61–69); Cusumano (2006); Copani (2007); Bellino (2014).

[39] On the problem of the interpretation of Diodorus' account on Ducetius (Diod. Sic. Books 11 and 12) through the perspective of identity, see De Vido (forthcoming).