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After African trades: changing in Cignana landscape between Late Antiquity and Medieval age.

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Cignana is the name of a district 20 Km SE of Agrigento, on the southern coast of Sicily. Between the II and III century A.D., a luxurious villa with mosaics and small baths – partially excavated by the Soprintendenza of Agrigento – was built in the same place as a previous rural settlement (IV century B.C.).

Since 2007, the University of Palermo has carried out surveys which show how the Villa, with regard to this area, represented the main site during the early-middle imperial age. The land around is strewn with small contemporary rural settlements, often existing since the Late-Classic or Hellenistic period. Italian sigillata, African Red Slip ware (Hayes 3, 8 and 9) and African Cooking ware (Hayes 23B, Hayes 196 and 197) are the most common finds.

Starting from the last decades of the IV century, a first change occurs in the Cignana landscape: some long-life sites disappear, others grow in size and became large villages. One of these is located on the site of the Villa and endured until the VII century: it consists of many simple rectangular constructions, sometimes with outdoor working areas. However, this village does not seem to play its previous hierarchical role. There are three other similar villages located in easily accessible places, at the same altitude, close to springs and to the road network.

As shown by the number and variety of African imports, V and VI centuries A.D. represent the period of huge expansion for these villages: Viticchié, Margio Canneddaro and, perhaps, Mortilli also endured until the first decades of the VII century, albeit reduced in size. This is suggested by sherds of the later typologies of African pottery, especially amphorae (Keay 61, Keay 34) and African Red slip ware (Hayes 105, 108 and 109, dish Sidi Jdidi 8).

Later, we do not have reliable chronological markers until the XI-XII centuries, except in a few small sites (Casazza and Celsovecchio). The ending of big African trades has led to a gap in our information and has produced the image of an abandoned landscape, characterized by a dramatic decrease of population. However, it may be accounted for by our limited knowledge of early medieval pottery, especially common ware local production.

Faint traces of life are shown by a few fragments of Rocchicella cooking pots (VIII - early IX) and amphorae with grooved handles, similar to the finds at S. Agata al Carcere in Catania. The presence of Rocchicella ware in this area of Sicily might suggest important transformations in the socio-political and cultural background. The introduction of this new typology, with specific technical and decorative features, is commonly linked with the arrival in Sicily of foreign populations, probably from the east, and allocated for military purposes.

