

# An early Byzantine 'élite' tomb in a domestic context at Kaukana, Sicily

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## Introduction

'Kaukana' is a late Roman and early Byzantine village settlement on the S coast of Sicily, near Punta Secca in Ragusa province. It was identified in the 1960s by P. Pelagatti, then an Ispettrice of the Soprintendenza alle Antichità at Syracuse.<sup>1</sup> The ground-plans of some 25 buildings, most of them houses but including a small palaeochristian church, were found by superficial clearance of the present surface, followed by selective excavation of parts of some of them. The village was identified at the time as Kaukana, mentioned by both Ptolemy and Procopius; although I do not accept the identification for reasons stated elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> I continue to refer to the site here by its now-traditional appellation. A new research project, launched by the University of British Columbia in collaboration with the Soprintendenza dei Beni Culturali e Ambientali di Ragusa, was started in the early summer of 2008 and continued in 2009. Its goal was to learn more about the settlement, its evolution over time and, on the basis of the material culture, its links with other parts of Sicily and with the wider Mediterranean world.

The building chosen as the focus of the research, no. 6 on Pelagatti's plan, had not previously seen detailed investigation. By analogy with other buildings at the settlement, it appeared to consist of 4 rooms, arranged on two sides of a larger open area interpreted as a courtyard. The new excavations have confirmed the presence of the yard and identified several phases in the evolution of the building. At first this was a one-storey building consisting of just two rooms with an adjacent walled yard (Phase 1). Soon afterwards (Phase 1A) the building was enlarged by adding an upper floor on top of the two rooms; this necessitated the building of a staircase in the yard. In Phase 2, an additional room, probably single-storey, was added to the west of the two-room nucleus. In Phase 3, the yard was extended westwards. In Phase 4, somewhat surprisingly, a monumental tomb was built at the W end of the yard, and an additional partition wall (re-using an olive-press weight with characteristic central swallow-tailed groove: fig. 1, far left) was added to provide some privacy for the activities which were conducted around the tomb. In the course of Phase 5, the building gradually silted up with wind-blown sand, despite attempts to combat this by the periodic laying of new floors at ever higher levels.

Dating evidence for Phase 1 is at present scarce, but the occupation material recovered so far falls generally in the period 450/550; Phase 2 is not earlier than c.530/40; and Phase 4, on which this note will concentrate, dates to the second half of the 6th c., with the latest material associated with the tomb dating to c.600 or a little later. Some early 7th-c. coins in the upper levels of the sand confirm that the building had become completely silted up by c.625/50.

## The tomb and its associated features

The tomb is a substantial mortared structure, measuring externally 2.77 by 1.20 m and standing a maximum of 0.84 m high. It is aligned N-S and was set in the NW corner of the yard extension, up against pre-existing walls on the W and N sides (fig. 1, foreground). The cover-slabs of the tomb vary in size and thickness. It is clear from these and from the evidence of a double

1 The main reports are: P. Pelagatti, "Scavi e ricerche archeologiche nella provincia di Ragusa," *Archivio Storico Siracusano* 12 (1966) 23-29; "L'attività della Soprintendenza alle antichità della Sicilia Orientale fra il 1965 e 1968," *Kokalos* 14-15 (1968-69) 355-57; "Intervento," *Kokalos* 18-19 (1972-73) 185-86; "Kaukana, un ancoraggio bizantino sulla costa meridionale," *Sicilia Archeologica* 18-20 (1972) 89-99; and P. Pelagatti and G. Di Stefano, *Kaukana: il chionon bizantino* (Palermo 1999).

2 Pto. 3.4.3; Procop., *Evaurā* 1.14.4. Cf. R. J. A. Wilson, *Sicily under the Roman Empire* (Warminster 1993) 393, n.184; "Postilla," in F. P. Rizzo (ed.), *Di abitato in abitato. In itinere fra le più antiche testimonianze cristiane degli isola* [Convegno Ragusa-Catania 2003] (Pisa 2005) 163-67.