

Élisabeth Lesnes/Randall W. Younker: *San Miceli. An Early Christian Rural Settlement in Western Sicily. With Contributions by Chiara Caradonna, Christopher R. Chadwick, Carolina Di Patti, Rosaria Di Salvo, Jessica Grimaldi, Giorgia Lanzarone, Giuseppina Mammina, Carina O. Prestes, Simona Provenzano, Francesca Gaia Romagnoli, Maria Carmela Spagnolo, Rosamaria Tarantolo, Philippe Tisseyre, Jared Wilson.* Roma/Bristol, CT: L'Erma di Bretschneider 2025. XVII, 476 pp., 216 ill. € 216.00. ISBN: 978-88-913-3516-6.

The volume represents a substantial and ambitious contribution to the archaeology of Late Antique Sicily and, more broadly, to the study of rural Christianisation in the central Mediterranean. It offers the first comprehensive and methodologically up-to-date publication of the site of San Miceli, integrating architectural analysis, stratigraphic evidence, material culture, funerary data, and epigraphy within a coherent interpretative framework.

At a time when scholarship on Late Antiquity has increasingly moved away from urban-centred narratives toward a more nuanced understanding of rural landscapes, the publication of “San Miceli” is both timely and significant. While Sicily has long occupied an important place in discussions of Roman and late Roman history – owing to its strategic position, agricultural productivity, and dense network of urban centres – its rural Christian archaeology has remained unevenly documented and, until relatively recently, under-theorised. Against this backdrop, “San Miceli” emerges as a key case study for reassessing how Christianity reshaped the countryside, not merely as a passive extension of urban ecclesiastical structures, but as a dynamic arena of social, economic, and religious transformation.

The authors set out to do more than publish a site report. Their explicit aim is to situate San Miceli within wider debates on settlement hierarchy, religious space, and community formation in Late Antiquity. In doing so, the volume positions itself at the intersection of several major strands of current scholarship: the archaeology of early Christian architecture, the study of *agglomérations secondaires*, and analyses of long-term continuity and change in rural settlement patterns. This ambition constitutes one of the book’s principal strengths, even where the archaeological evidence itself occasionally resists definitive interpretation.

San Miceli, located in western Sicily within the territory of modern Salemi, is presented as a rural settlement organised around a substantial ecclesiastical complex, including a basilica with mosaic pavements, a baptistery, associated annexes, and a necropolis. Chronologically, the main phases of activity span the fourth to the sixth centuries CE, with traces of earlier occupation and indications of later transformation or decline. From the outset, the authors emphasise that the site cannot be reduced to a single functional category: it is neither a villa chapel nor a marginal rural oratory, but rather a complex and evolving settlement node with religious, funerary, and possibly administrative dimensions.

This refusal to impose rigid typologies is methodologically sound and reflects broader trends in late antique archaeology. Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly questioned binary models – urban versus rural, public versus private, pagan versus Christian – in favour of more flexible approaches that acknowledge hybridity and local variation. The authors of “San Miceli” explicitly align themselves with this perspective, presenting the site as evidence for the plurality of Christian experiences in the countryside and for the negotiated character of religious change.

The volume also engages, both implicitly and explicitly, with the influential concept of *agglomérations secondaires*, originally developed in the context of Roman Gaul and increasingly applied to other regions of the Empire. By framing San Miceli as a potential secondary centre – intermediate between dispersed rural habitation and urban settlements – the authors contribute to ongoing discussions concerning the role of such sites as nodes of connectivity, service provision, and identity formation. Whether San Miceli fully conforms to this model, or instead represents a locally specific variant, remains a question that recurs throughout the volume and invites further comparative analysis.

Another important contribution of the book lies in its treatment of early Christian liturgy and pastoral care. The presence of a baptistery in a rural context is particularly striking, raising questions about ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the decentralisation of sacramental practices, and the early development of territorial structures beyond the city. Combined with the Greek mosaic inscriptions naming donors and ecclesiastical figures, the site provides rare insight into the cultural and linguistic complexity of western Sicily in Late Antiquity and into the mechanisms through which Christian communities articulated and displayed their identity.

The inclusion of a foreword by Roger J. A. Wilson (pp. XV–XVII), a leading authority on Roman and late Roman Sicily, further underscores the scholarly importance of the volume. Wilson situates San Miceli within the longer trajectory of Sicilian archaeology and highlights its relevance for understanding processes of continuity and transformation from the Roman to the post-Roman world. His remarks frame the volume not as an isolated site publication, but as part of a broader reassessment of the island's rural landscapes.

At the same time, the ambition of the book inevitably raises methodological and interpretative challenges. The archaeological record of San Miceli has been shaped by a complex history of excavation, preservation, and documentation, including early interventions that predate modern stratigraphic standards. While the authors are generally transparent about these limitations, the extent to which certain reconstructions rely on comparative reasoning rather than direct evidence merits careful consideration, particularly given the central role that San Miceli is likely to assume in future syntheses of late antique rural Christianity.

This review therefore approaches San Miceli as more than a descriptive catalogue of archaeological data. Its aim is to evaluate the volume as a scholarly intervention: to assess how convincingly it integrates diverse categories of evidence, how effectively it engages with current debates in Roman and late antique archaeology, and how far its conclusions may be extended beyond the specific case study.

The volume is conceived not merely as an excavation report, but as an integrated study that brings together architecture, stratigraphy, material culture, funerary evidence, and epigraphy within a unified analytical framework. This editorial strategy reflects current best practice in late antique archaeology, even as it introduces certain challenges in terms of organisation and narrative flow.

The book is organised into a sequence of thematic and analytical sections that move from the geographical and historical setting of the site, through detailed presentations of the archaeological evidence, to interpretative chapters addressing the broader implications for the study of rural Christianity. This progression is broadly logical and enables readers to engage with the empirical data before confronting higher-level interpretations. The initial chapters situate San Miceli within its environmental and territorial context,

outlining its relationship to surrounding settlements, communication routes, and agricultural landscapes. These sections, while largely descriptive, are essential in framing the site as a rural centre embedded within a wider system rather than as an isolated ecclesiastical enclave.

The core of the volume is devoted to architectural and stratigraphic analysis (“Stratigraphy and Structures”, pp. 15–70). The basilica, its annexes, the baptistery, and associated structures are presented in detail, supported by plans, sections, and photographs. The authors make a sustained effort to disentangle the complex building history of the site, identifying multiple construction and renovation phases. Particularly noteworthy is the integration of architectural discussion with functional interpretation: buildings are not treated as static entities, but as spaces that were used, modified, and experienced over time. This approach is especially effective in the discussion of the baptistery and its relationship to the basilica, where architectural detail is explicitly linked to questions of liturgy, ecclesiastical authority, and community organisation.

The presentation of material culture – including ceramics, amphorae, and other artefacts – combines specialist catalogues with synthetic discussion (“The Classes of Materials and Contexts”, pp. 71–212). While the sheer volume of data may occasionally challenge non-specialist readers, this level of detail is appropriate for a work intended as a long-term reference and allows for independent reassessment of the evidence.

A similar balance characterises the treatment of “The Necropolis” (pp. 213–294) and funerary evidence. Burial types, grave goods, and spatial organisation are presented clearly and are integrated into broader discussions of Christian identity, continuity with pre-Christian practices, and social differentiation. The decision to embed funerary analysis within the overall interpretation of the site strengthens the argument that San Miceli functioned as a cohesive community centre.

The inclusion of a dedicated section on epigraphy, and in particular on the Greek mosaic inscriptions, represents another strong editorial choice. These texts are treated not as ancillary data, but as central evidence for understanding patronage, language use, and self-representation. Careful readings and contextualisation situate the inscriptions within both Sicilian and wider Mediterranean traditions.

From an editorial perspective, the volume benefits from a rich and generally high-quality illustrative apparatus. Plans, photographs, and drawings are effectively integrated into the text and play a crucial role in supporting the authors' interpretations, particularly in complex architectural discussions.

As is often the case in collaborative archaeological publications, maintaining narrative coherence across contributions of varying scale and focus presents a challenge. While the overall structure is sound, certain sections occasionally appear more compartmentalised than others. This does highlight the difficulty of fully integrating highly technical analyses into a single interpretative narrative.

The editorial decision to foreground interpretation throughout the volume, rather than confining it to a concluding synthesis, is both a strength and a risk. It ensures that archaeological data are consistently framed by clear research questions, but it sometimes results in interpretative hypotheses being introduced before all relevant evidence has been fully presented. Readers accustomed to more strictly sequential site reports may find this approach demanding, though it reflects a conscious and defensible methodological stance.

Overall, the structure and editorial choices of the volume demonstrate a clear commitment to producing a comprehensive and analytically engaged site publication. While the density of information and the ambition of the interpretative framework occasionally test the limits of coherence, the book succeeds in balancing empirical rigour with broader historical inquiry. It stands as an important reference for the archaeology of late antique Sicily and for the study of rural Christianity in the Mediterranean world.

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