

# Settlement evolution and commercial dynamics of Casale San Pietro (Castronovo di Sicilia, PA): the study of the pottery from the field surveys.

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## Introduction

Casale San Pietro, in the commune of Castronovo di Sicilia (Palermo, Sicily), is one of the main sites investigated for the ERC project "Sicily in Transition". The site is placed on the main road from Palermo to Agrigento (SS189) and known since ancient times; it's been identified as *statio* (or *mansio*, a stopping place on the main routes), with a surrounding *vicus* (settlement).

An intensive programme of surveys was undertaken in the area around the main site of Casale S. Pietro, with several activities such as remote sensing, surface collection and test excavations. The pottery here described was collected, dated and mapped during the interventions of field survey and pickup of diagnostic material in the fields and olive groves south-west of Casale San Pietro (fig. 1). From a total of 3023 fragments, 1224 were selected because diagnostic, and the majority has been classified and dated. The ceramic material dates to a wide time frame, so it was categorised into 4 chronological groups (fig. 2): Late Roman - Byzantine (5th-7th CE), Late Byzantine - Proto-Islamic (8th-9th CE), Islamic (9th-11th CE) and Norman-Swabian (12th-13th CE). Afterwards, the pottery was divided into technological groups, based on their function: transport and storage (amphoras), fine tableware (plates, bowls, keeled basins, etc.), coarse wares (bowls, open shapes, jars, jars with filters, lamps) and cooking wares (pots, olle, lids, mortars).

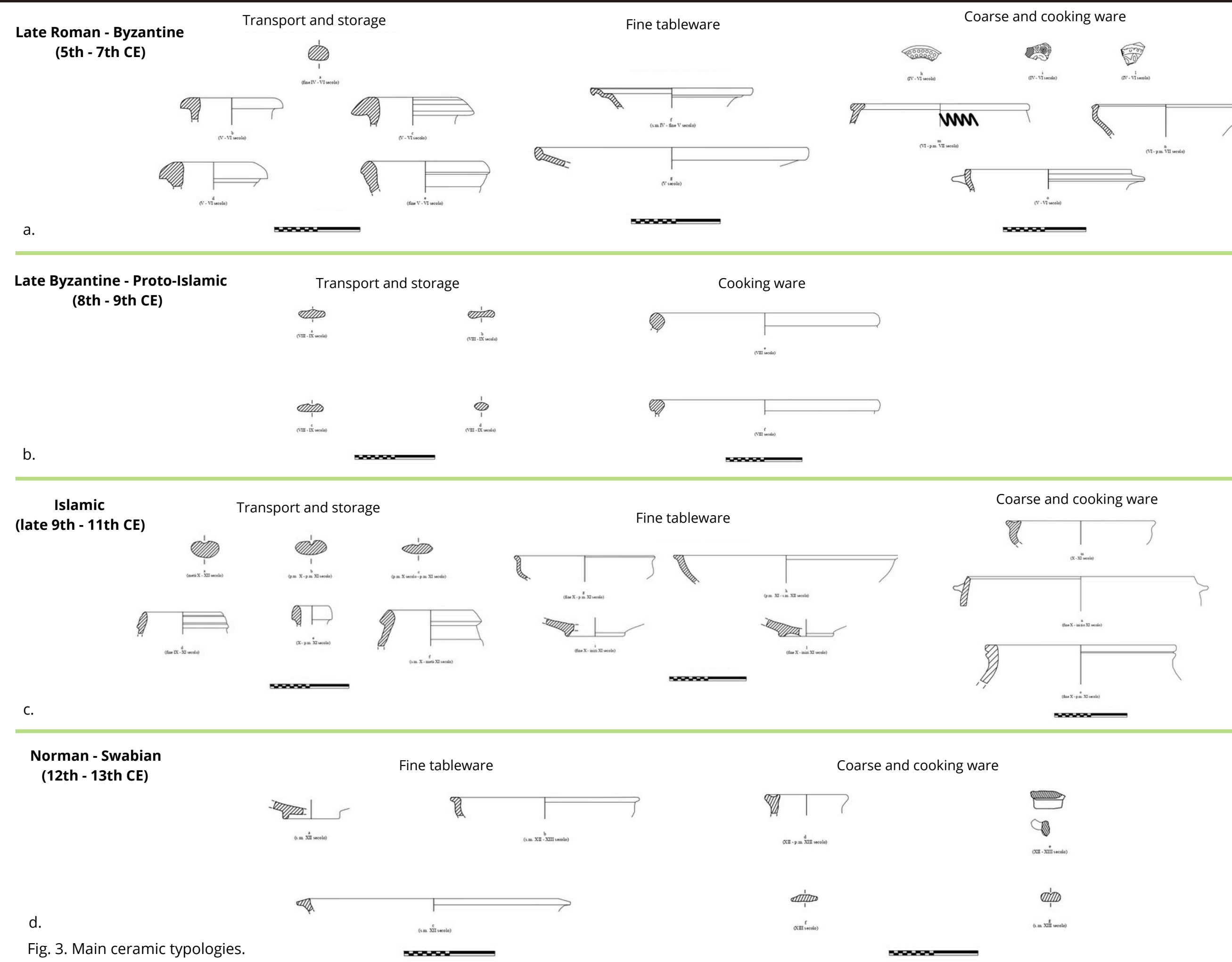


Fig. 3. Main ceramic typologies.

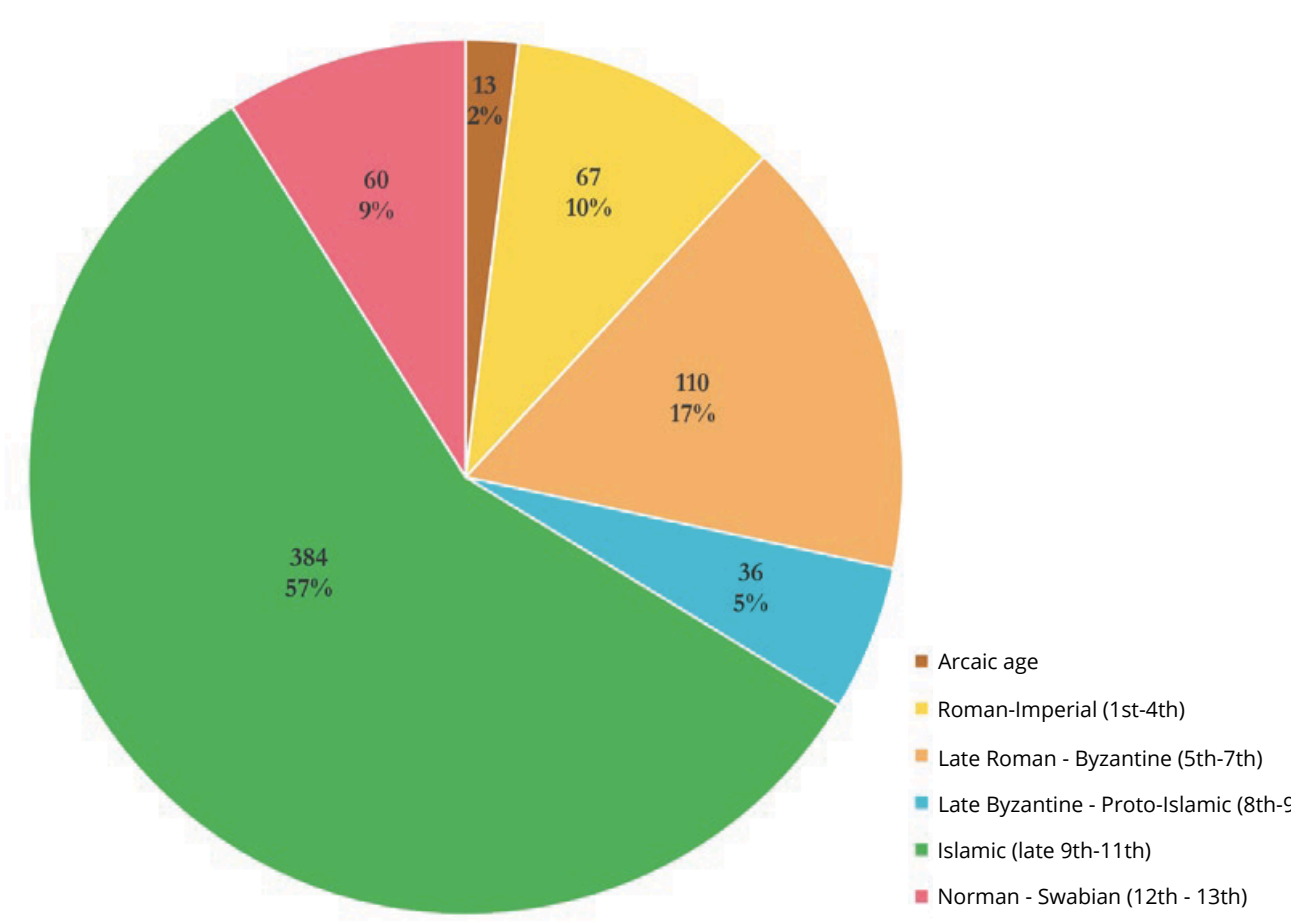


Fig. 2. Ceramic records for each chronological period.

## Pottery from the field surveys

The **Late Roman - Byzantine** pottery (5th-7th CE) (fig. 3a) is predominantly from North Africa (Sidi Jdidi, Nabeul, El Mahrine) or local production (Cignana, Termini Imerese): African and Sicilian amphoras, fine tableware like African Red Slip ware (mostly plates or other open shapes), coarse wares such as basins, lamps, jars, and cooking wares like African or local pots and mortars. The pottery from North Africa proves the uniformity of our *mansio* with the Mediterranean regions, where the use of pottery from North Africa was widespread. This economic indicator shows the close commercial links between Sicily and North Africa. The presence of local pottery, instead, shows the participation of Casale San Pietro to the regional trade networks.

The group of the **Late Byzantine - Proto-Islamic** (fig. 3b) pottery is the least numerous, due to the poor archaeological visibility of 8th-9th century. This pottery is mostly local or regional, with open shapes, cooking pots and perhaps a small percentage of globular amphorae from the East. Some chronological markers for these centuries: ribbon handles with median groove in amphoras, inverted rims or with triangular section in pots and other cooking wares.

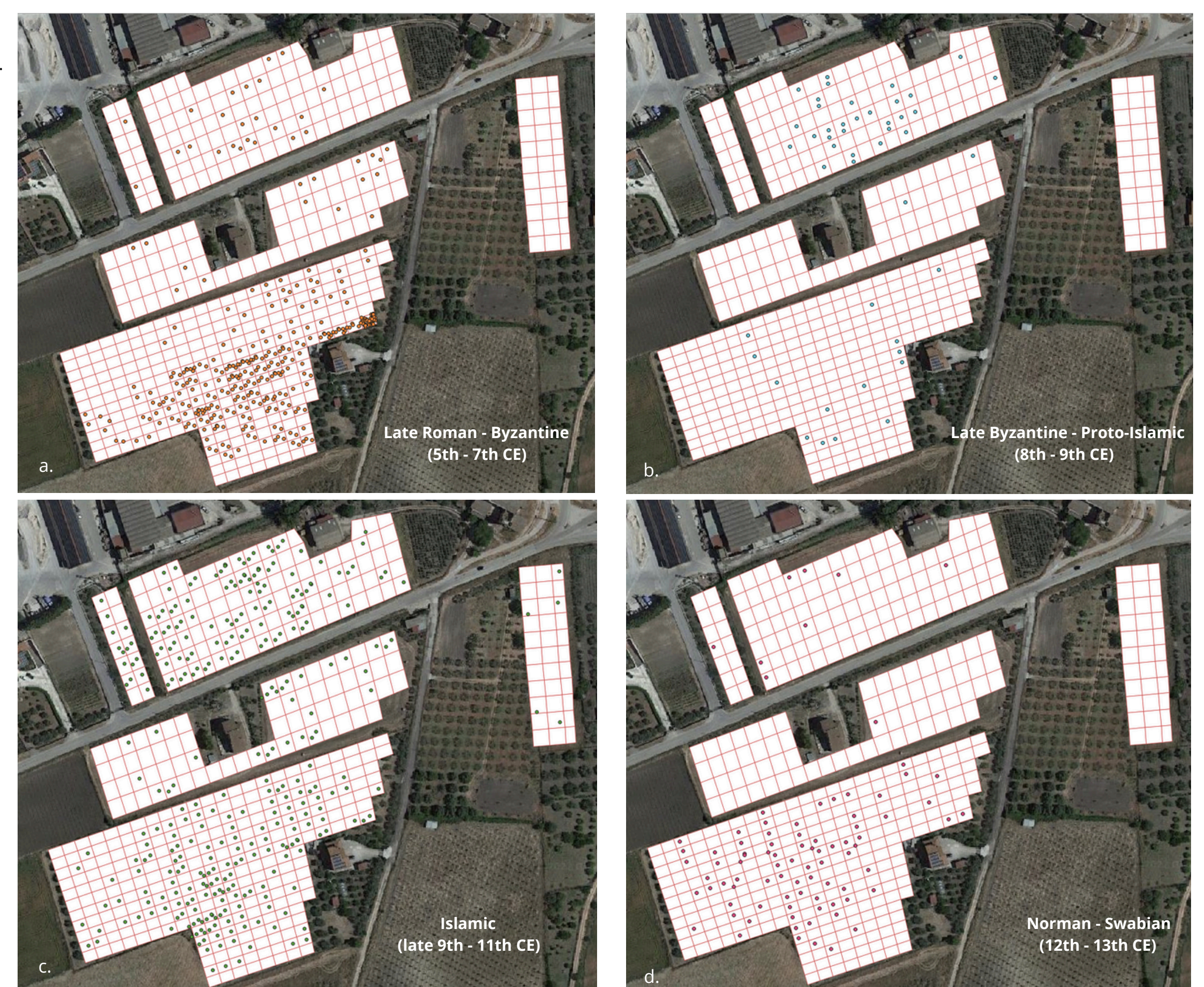
The **Islamic** pottery (9th-11th CE) (fig. 3c) is the richest group (57% of the total), including shapes from the main ceramic classes. The main shapes are amphoras from Palermo (80 samples) for transport and storage; also coarse and fine tableware (glazed or aroma) are well represented. The striking aspect is the provenance: almost all the pottery comes from Palermo (more than 90%) which was now the capital and the main manufacturing centre of the island. It was possible to recognise some of the typical products from Palermo: **painted amphorae, glazed tableware** (monochrome and polychrome) and new shapes like **vases with filter**, showing the "islamization" of material culture.

The pottery from the **Norman - Swabian** group (12th-13th CE) (fig. 3d) includes Palermitan amphorae, bowls, keeled basins and partially glazed pots (Messina). Pottery from Palermo is still the majority, but it's now joined by productions from new centres involved in the commercial network of the island, such as Messina and Mazara, now competing with Palermo. Compared to the previous group, an evident decrease in number is visible, due to the loss of importance of the settlement and its abandonment.

## QGIS distribution analysis and conclusions

Distribution analysis of pottery have been carried out with QGIS, showing the distribution patterns for every chronological period, in order to observe the transformation over the centuries. The map for the **Late Roman - Byzantine** phase (fig. 4a) shows a copious amount of pottery indicating an extended occupation of the area, with a concentration in the southern field. The dominant presence of African pottery shows the close commercial ties with North Africa, crucial for many essential goods, and it proves the widespread use of this pottery, reaching also the most remote areas of Mediterranean regions. The local pottery indicates the involvement of Casale San Pietro in the regional exchange networks operating in this timeframe. In the **Late Byzantine - Proto-Islamic** period map (fig. 4b), there is a severe decrease of ceramic findings, which can indicate a contraction of the settlement, with a possible shift to the northern area. The reduction of ceramic fragments is also due to the identification difficulties of these centuries. For the **Islamic** phase (fig. 4c), the map shows the highest concentration of ceramic findings and the widest distribution on the area. The homogeneous provenience of this pottery clearly indicates the high volume of commercial exchange between Casale San Pietro and Palermo, capital of the Emirate of Sicily since 831 (*al-Madinah*): the main administrative and economic centre of the island, with a significant role as goods supplier for regional and international markets. Casale San Pietro's *vicus* experienced a demographical and economic growth especially during the second half of the 10th century, thanks to the close relations and proximity to Palermo. In the map for the **Norman-Swabian** phase (fig. 4d), the evidence shows a conspicuous rarefaction of the ceramic findings, mostly in the northern area, which can indicate a crisis of the *statio* and the progressive abandonment of the settlement. These dynamics are probably linked to the Kalbid Emirate crisis and the arrival of the Normans in Sicily. Meanwhile, the population started to move uphill, giving rise to the actual Castronovo village, which will consolidate under the new Norman domination. The study of the field walking surveys pottery combined with the QGIS distribution analysis proved to be very significant for the localization of Casale S. Pietro's *vicus*, the study of its economical dynamics and transformations over the centuries.

Fig. 4. QGIS maps.



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