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THE PELORIAS SHELL IN THE ANCIENT COINS: TAXONOMIC ATTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CAPO PELORO AND LAGHI DI GANZIRRI CSI

LA CONCHIGLIA PELORIAS NELLA MONETAZIONE ANTICA: ATTRIBUZIONE TASSONOMICA ED IMPLICAZIONI NELLA GESTIONE DEL S.I.C. CAPO PELORO E LAGHI DI GANZIRRI

Abstract – A bivalve shell, linked to the nymph Pelorias on Zancle coins of VI cent. b.C. has been identified as a species of the genus Pinna. The linking of the Pelorias with the Faro lake, where populations of both Pinna nobilis and Pinna rudis actually occur, is confirmed by the choice of this numismatic type, which could be referred to the economic value of byssus production. This concomitant historical and ecological interest is of great importance in order to valorise and protect the Capo Peloro and Laghi di Ganzirri CSI.

Key-words: Pinna nobilis, Pinna rudis, brackish waters, protection, archaeology, Zancle, Messana.

Introduction – In the present advanced cultures, the natural environments and related biodiversity are perceived as absolute worths, although often sacrificed to the economic benefits. Probably, such dichotomy has been better solved in some ancient Mediterranean cultures, as also suggested by the emphatic employ of naturalistic subjects in the official iconography, as for example in the coins, to symbolize power or prosperity. In the ancient territory of Zancle-Messana (north-eastern Sicily), between the VI and IV centuries b.C., Calcidian colonizers asserted their identity throughout the ancestress nymph Pelorias, as a personification of the present territory of Capo Peloro and Laghi di Ganzirri (Fig. 1a), that was symbolized in their coins as a bivalve shell (Fig. 1b). Aims of the present investigation were to identify the represented shell at the species level; to frame such species in the ecosystem of Capo Peloro transitional waters and related human context; to suggest some possible implication of the ancient importance of the Pelorias shell in the management and exploitation of the Capo Peloro protected area.

Materials and methods – Data herein presented have been collected during an interdisciplinary PRA research program, carried out since 2006. The investigations started with an iconographic collection of Pelorias coins struck in Zancle-Messana, compared with similar subjects of the Mediterranean area. Subsequently, a morphological comparison of the coin subjects with the Mediterranean bivalve species has been carried out. Finally, the Capo Peloro transitional waters have been surveyed to recognize those species that could be referred to the coin types, supported with a photographic documentation realized on field.

Results – The study of a wide sample of different coins minted by Zancle-Messana (Caccamo Caltabiano, 1985; Ead, 1993), and bearing a Pelorias shell at the center of a grid, that has been interpreted as a cult area (De Guadan & Lascaris, 1960), highlighted some common features that have been firstly referred to a generic fan-shell typology, but different from the well known Pecten type. Subsequently, in the artistic representations of the Pelorias, some morphological elements that are
The Pelorias shell in the ancient coins

characteristic of the family Pinnidae were pointed out. Such attribution was in accordance with the recognition of the endemic Mediterranean *Pinna nobilis* L. in several coin types struck in other mints of the Mediterranean area, beginning from Kyzikos in Propontis and Gryneion in Aeolis (Fig. 1c), Asia Minor (Imhoof-Blumer & Keller, 1889). Nevertheless, the *Pinna nobilis* representations differ noteworthy from those of Pelorias, as in the former the shell is laid on a plane surface, while in the latter the subject is shown living in the seabottom, partially buried in the sediments, as characteristic of the Pinnidae. Further differences concern the shell ornament that is lacking in the *P. nobilis* representations, while in Pelorias it displays ribs that extend beyond the shell edge, as in the co-generic *P. rudis* Lamarck. At the present day, the surveys carried out in the Capo Peloro area testify that both species co-exist not only in the nearby seabottoms (Giacobbe & Leonardi, 1987), but also in the Faro Lake, in the shallowest sandy bottoms, at 0.5-3 m depth (Fig. 1d).

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**Fig. 1** - a) Capo Peloro area and coastal lake of Faro; b) coin with a Pelorias (Zancle, late VI cent. b.C.); c) coin with a *Pinna nobilis* (Gryneion, III cent. b.C.); d) *P. rudis* living in the Faro Lake.

*a) area di Capo Peloro e lago costiero di Faro; b) moneta raffigurante una Pelorias (Zancle, tardo VI sec. a.C.); c) moneta raffigurante una Pinna nobilis (Gryneion, III sec. a.C.); d) P. rudis nel Lago di Faro.*

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**Conclusions** - Interdisciplinary investigations, based both on the analysis of ancient numismatic sources and of ecological evidences, suggest that the occurrence of both *P. nobilis* and *P. rudis* in the Faro lake had in the ancient age a remarkable symbolic value, probably linked to the economic importance of the byssus production. Up-to-date, the occurrence of these two protected species adds a high historical and cultural value to the ecological heritage of the protected area of Capo Peloro, which cannot be ignored in the future management and valorisation programmes of the SIC.

**References**


