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Invaders or Refugees? Polarized Narratives and The Ambiguous Status of Migrants, Yesterday and Today. A Case Study from Ancient South Italy.

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Abstract

In this paper, I point at the rhetorical constructedness of the invaders/refugees divide around which much of the polarization of the political debate surrounding migrations is articulated today. In order to do so, I consider a case study from ancient south Italy, Metapontum, and the debate surrounding the status of the Greek migrants who settled there: were they colonizers or refugees? The social surface of the extant Greek textual evidence betrays *both* a colonial mindset on the part on the part of Greek migrants towards the lands where they settled (an emptyscape up for grabbing), *and* a rhetoric legitimizing their claims to the land by representing them as refugees, exiles, and survivors of wars and famines, while also appealing to the religious predestination of their arrival. Archaeological evidence and spatial data similarly suggest that while Greek migrants radically transformed the space within which they settled by manipulating the territory with large-scale engineering enterprises, at the same time they were forced to occupy the less desirable, most insalubrious corners of the region, the malarial coastal plains, while indigenous peoples kept inhabiting the best portions of the land. The intrinsic ambiguity of the status of Greek migrants in Metapontum, I argue, invites us to overcome the polarization of the political debate surrounding migrants.

About the Author

Maddalena Scarperi is a PhD candidate in Ancient History in the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She gained her BA and MA from the University of Trento, Italy, and spent time as a visiting student at Barnard College, Columbia University and the University of Tübingen. She is currently writing a dissertation where she looks at both textual sources and material evidence to explore the lives of Metapontine local dwellers from a post-colonial, multi-scalar, and gender-based perspective. More about her dissertation project here.

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On the inaugural day of his presidency, Jan. 20, 2025, Donald Trump issued a raft of executive orders on immigration. He declared the situation on the U.S. – Mexico border a national emergency, unlocking federal funding for the construction of a border wall. In his words, "Our southern border is overrun by cartels, criminal gangs, known terrorists, human traffickers, smugglers, unvetted military-age males from foreign adversaries, and illicit narcotics that harm Americans, including America. This invasion has caused widespread chaos and suffering in our country over the last 4 years. It has led to the horrific and inexcusable murders of many innocent American citizens, including women and children, at the hands of illegal aliens"[1]. Insisting that "over the last 4 years, the United States has endured a large-scale invasion of unprecedented level"[2], he proceeded to suspend ('realign') the Refugee Admission Program[3], shutting down the Customs and Border Protection app (CBP One) designed to help migrants secure an appointment to apply for legal entry into the United States[4]. In another executive order, he declared his intent

[1] The White House (2025) *Declaring a National Emergency at The Southern Border of The United States*. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/declaring-a-national-emergency-at-the-southern-border-of-the-united-states/ (Accessed: January 28 2025).
[2] The White House (2025) *Securing Our Borders.* Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/securing-our-borders/, (Accessed: January 28 2025).
[3] The White House (2025) *Realigning the United States Refugee Admission Program.* Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program/ (Accessed: January 28 2025).
[4] https://www.cbp.gov/about/mobile-apps-directory/cbpone (Accessed: January 28 2025).

to end birthright citizenship allegedly with the intent of protecting the "meaning and value" American citizenship[5].

A few days later, 49 migrants rescued the previous weekend in the SAR (Search and Rescue) waters south of Lampedusa were shipped to the much-debated "migration hotspots" of Shengjin and Gjiader, Albania, where they will be held while their asylum requests are processed[6]. Coming from what are deemed as "safe countries" (Bangladesh, Tunisia, Gambia, Ivory Coast), they will most likely be denied legal entry and repatriated to their country of citizenship, despite the fact that many of them will already be the survivors of the notoriously horrific Lybic detention camps where migrants are routinely tortured and murdered while Italy and Europe keep pouring money on Lybian militias. The program of deportation of asylum seekers to Albania is only the last of an endless number of measures taken by Italian governments over the past few years in response to what is still occasionally called 'an invasion', even as the number of arrivals keeps dropping[7].

While Italy and the U.S. are the two countries I am the most familiar with, concerns surrounding migrations and their management (or suppression) seem to be ubiquitous across Western democracies. Everywhere these concerns are associated with the raise of far-right parties which gain and maintain popular favor by fueling fears that national security is under attack. In

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[5] The White House (2025) Protecting the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-meaning-and-value-of-american-citizenship/ (Accessed: January 28 2025)

[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/26/world/europe/italy-migrants-albania.html?searchResultPosition=1 (Accessed: January 28 2025); https://www.ilpost.it/2025/01/25/nave-cassiopea-migranti-centri-albania/?homepagePosition=0 (Accessed: January 28 2025); https://www.ilpost.it/2024/12/02/gjader-shengjin-albania-centri-migranti/ (Accessed: January 28 2025).

[7] http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2024_fine_mese.pdf (Accessed: January 28 2025); https://www.ilpost.it/2023/04/16/protezione-speciale-migranti-governo/ (Accessed: January 28 2025); https://www.ilpost.it/2023/05/03/camera-fiducia-decreto-cutro/; https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legge:2023-03-10;20 (Accessed: January 28 2025).

Italy and the U.S., Giorgia Meloni and Donald Trump present themselves as divinely favored leaders who promise returning their respective countries to a strong economy and to an idealized ordered and prosperous past first and foremost by suppressing those minorities which they identified as a threat and the main cause of national decline. Leveraging on the fears fueled by these narratives they in turn legitimize actions which challenge the stability of the democratic institutions of their respective countries.

In a political climate, where migrants have become the scapegoat for widespread anxieties and economic concerns exploited by unscrupulous political leaders who threaten the health and stability of western democracies, how we talk about migrations and human mobility is a very delicate matter. As a social historian working on migrations in the ancient Mediterranean, this is an issue I am often forced to think about. My job, in fact, largely consists of building narratives which engage with my evidence in ways which are, hopefully, relevant and meaningful to the type of questions which our present circumstances invite us to consider. How should I best (that is, most ethnically) talk about migrations in the human past when there is so much at stake in the current political circumstances, and especially for migrants, the vulnerable and easy target of coward political leaders? What am I supposed to do when I see that the migrant subjects I study could be narrated with equally good arguments as settler colonizers *and* as refugees?

It is with this daunting question in mind that in this paper I will take you on a journey to ancient south Italy. We will first look at the ways in which modern scholars have narrated the arrival of Greek migrants and their relationship with other communities in this area. Then, we will consider the complexity of the phenomena of migrations as they emerge in the ancient evidence. In doing so, we will focus our attention on the coasts of the Ionian Gulf (the sole of the Italian

"boot"), and in particular on the settlement of Metaponto, in present-day Basilicata[8]. In the concluding section, I will make a few considerations about the dangers of partial narratives about a past, the Greco-Roman one, which has been repeatedly exploited and weaponized throughout history to justify partisan political ideologies and the dehumanization and elimination of the 'othered' minorities. This is especially important at a time when migrant people from certain regions of the world are already subject to countless practices of physical elimination (through the funding of Lybian militias known to systematically tortur and murder migrants, the impeding and hindering of rescuing operations in Search and Rescue zones of the Mediterranean, through the denial of documentation, jailing, and the physical deportation to the country of origin; through the ruthless exploitation of undocumented and legally invisible migrants in the agricultural sector). While there are no simplistic "lessons from history" for me to impart today (there rarely are), I hope my case study might stimulate questions and add depth and complexity to the ways in which we engage with ongoing debates on human migrations.

The Greeks in the Mediterranean: "Ants or Frogs around a Pond"

Let's get started then and jump back of about 2.700 years to an area of the Mediterranean world which is conventionally referred to as *Magna Graecia* and approximately corresponds to present-day southern Italy (Basilicata, Apulia, Calabria, Campania) and Sicily. *Magna Graecia* literally means "Greater Greece" in Latin, and it is a translation of the Greek '*Megale Hellas'*. This is how Greek speakers and later the Romans called an area whose coasts were so densely populated with Greek speaking communities that, from the maritime perspective of Greek travelers who approached these territories from the sea, it appeared like a second Greece. A "Little Greece" of

[8] See PIC. 3 and PIC. 7.

antiquity. For as my students learn on their first day of sitting in a Greek History class, Greek speakers were all over the place in the Mediterranean world in antiquity. Initially, between the 10th and 9th century BCE, Greek traders traveled along the same routes followed by Sardinian and Phoenician traders, frequenting the same culturally mixed *emporia* (ports of trade) where they would acquire metals and other natural resources lacking in their environments of origin (copper, tin, iron, but also wood and pitch) as well as luxury goods[9]. From the eight century BCE, then, Greek speakers started to reside more permanently abroad (that is, outside of the Aegean) in settlements that our Greek sources call *apoikiai,* 'home-aways'. Hundreds of *apoikiai* are archaeologically attested in as broad a range of locations as the Black Sea region, the Near East, North Africa, Southern France, and the Atlantic coast of Spain[10]. By the fourth century BCE, in Plato's famous words the Greeks were "like ants or frogs around a pod"[11]. Many of these cities were concentrated on the coasts of the region which, as a result of these waves of migration, came to be called Magna Graecia.

The Scholarly Debate on "Greek Colonization"

[9] See Demetriou 2012, Garland 2014, Giangiulio 2021, Horden and Purcell 2000, Malkin 2011, Murray 1978. In fact, already in the Bronze Age the Mycenaeans who spoke a version of proto-Greek attested in Linear B tablets were well known having traveled far and wide across the Mediterranean, including in South Italy. With the 'collapse' of the Mycenaean palatial civilization contacts between Greece and the Aegean and the rest of the Mediterranean world seem to have become more rarefied (and/or archaeologically invisible). Based on the archaeological record (our main evidence until the Greeks adopted and adapted the Phoenician alphabet and in the 8th c. BCE resumed to leave behind written records), Greek traders especially from the island of Euboea appear to have resumed their ventures across the Mediterranean in the 10th c. BCE.

[10] See PIC 1.

[11] Plato, *Phaedo* 109 a-b: ἔτι τοίνυν, ἔφη, πάμμεγά τι εἶναι αὐτό, καὶ ἡμᾶς οἰκεῖν τοὺς μέχρι Ἡρακλείων στηλῶν ἀπὸ Φάσιδος ἐν σμικρῷ τινι μορίῳ, ὥσπερ περὶ τέλμα μύρμηκας ἢ βατράχους περὶ τὴν θάλατταν οἰκοῦντας, καὶ ἄλλους ἄλλοθι πολλοὺς ἐν πολλοῖσι τοιούτοις τόποις οἰκεῖν. "Secondly, said he, I believe that the earth is very large and that we who dwell between the pillars of Hercules and the river Phasis live in a small part of it about the sea, like ants or frogs about a pond, and that many other people live in many other such regions." See pic. 1.

This migration of Greek speakers across the Mediterranean between the 8th and 5th centuries BCE has traditionally been referred to in the scholarly debate as "Greek colonization". The term *colonization*, however, has long been criticized for imposing an anachronistic framework shaped by European imperial history onto the ancient world. First employed by nineteenth-century European historians who mistakenly interpreted Greek *apoikiai* through the lenses of modern colonial enterprises, this model assumed a structured, state-driven expansion akin to the overseas empires of Britain, France, or Spain. Consequently, Greek *apoikiai* were imagined as politically and economically dependent on their *metropolis* ("mother city-state")[12]. Additionally, cultural interactions between Greek newcomers and pre-existing communities were framed through the paradigm of "Hellenization", understood as an unidirectional process of cultural assimilation in which Greek settlers imposed their supposedly superior culture on the "non-Greeks" (often referred to in the scholarly literature as *Anhellenes*, while Greek sources predominantly use *barbaroi*, meaning "those who stutter/speak with an accent", "foreigners", or "barbarians"). The assumptions underlying the term colonization, and the ideological baggage it carries, have been argued to obscure rather than clarify the complexity of the historical phenomena at play[13].

Over the past few decades, scholars have then proposed various alternatives to the "colonization" model. Some have suggested reframing Greek mobility as a diaspora phenomenon[14]. However, the notion of diaspora typically implies forced displacement or

[12] See Finley 1976.
[13] While some degree of state planning and official sanctioning did occur in some cases, scholars have insisted that Greek migrations lacked the degree of formalization of modern colonial enterprises. Moreover, the paradigm of colonization lacks to acknowledge the mixed and co-operative nature of Greek *apoikiai*, often founded by migrants joining from a plurality of Greek cities and regions and arriving in consecutive waves. Additionally, scholars have insisted that Greek *apoikiai* remained autonomous entities, pursuing their own alliances and policies. See Finley 1976; Osborne 1998.
[14] Hall 2002; Antonaccio 2010.

persecution, whereas Greek migration was often voluntary and opportunistic[15]. Other scholars argued for understanding Greek migration through network theory, emphasizing decentralized, self-organizing patterns of mobility as opposed to state-led colonial enterprise or, to the other extreme, an entirely unstructured process[16].

One further body of scholarship, drawing on postcolonial critical theory, has focused on reinterpreting the nature of the interactions between Greek migrants and the peoples they encountered when resettling abroad. These scholars challenged the notion of Hellenization as a one-way process of cultural assimilation, instead highlighting on the active role played by 'indigenous' peoples in appropriating and reinventing Greek cultural elements. Rather than vertical domination, Greek settlers engaged in horizontal processes of negotiation with the 'indigenous' populations, leading to a mutual exchange of cultural influences[17]. Additionally, some scholars suggested reinterpreting Greek migrants through the notion of *subalternity,* similarly borrowed from postcolonial studies. In their view, rather than dominant colonizers, Greek settlers were, for the most part, in precarious positions themselves, reaching their 'home aways' as displaced individuals, refugees or economically vulnerable people seeking better opportunities abroad[18].

Postcolonial approaches to ancient Mediterranean mobility have significantly contributed to the scholarly discourse, particularly by foregrounding the experiences of communities and individuals traditionally marginalized or almost entirely ignored in historical narratives. My own

[15] Osborne 1998, Horden and Purcell 2000.
[16] Malkin 2002; 2011.
[17] Van Dommelen 1997; Hodos 2006.
[18] It is certainly not by chance that the main proponent of this interpretative framework, Gabriel Zuchtriegel, is a German scholar writing in the same years when, following the Arab Springs, arrivals of migrants through the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes peaked and Germany, under the leadership of Angela Merkel, welcomed over one million of refugees. Zuchtriegel 2018.

works aligns with this perspective, seeking to recenter the experiences of those marginalized in the process of history-making. However, postcolonial approaches also have their limitations. By implicitly conceptualizing the transcultural contexts occasioned by Greek migrations as 'colonial', such approaches implicitly invite thinking of Greeks migrants as 'colonizers'. As someone writing between Italy and the U.S. in 2025, amid post-fascist leaderships that justify and encourage verbal and physical violence against highly vulnerable migrant minorities, the potential for such an identification is deeply concerning. What, in fact, if my 'postcolonial' investigations of transcultural contexts occasioned by Greek migrations (written with the intent of voicing the experiences of human groups and individuals erased from historical narratives) were to be weaponized to support the view that the migrants reaching the coasts of Italy or the Southern U.S. border represent, in fact, the modern parallels to ancient colonizers? This would go to support the view that modern migrants are, in fact, "invaders" and do represent a "national threat", to quote once again the alarmist tones of Trump's executive orders on immigration. Afterall, the opposite interpretation of ancient Greek migrants as 'subalterns' was proposed in 2017 by a German scholar writing in the same years when, under the leadership of Angela Merkel, Germany welcomed over one million refugees, and the public discourse was dominated by concerns around "the migrants' crisis" with reference to the increase of arrivals of asylum seekers through the Balkan route and the Mediterranean Eastern and Central maritime routes. It is very clear, in that case, how the application of the notion of subalternity to the ancient context was informed by a conceptual overlap between ancient Greek migrants and contemporary 'refugees' reaching the shores of Europe at the time.

The response, I believe, lays in the ancient evidence itself. When foregrounded, it defies easy simplifications and in fact invites us to look past polarized narratives of migrations, past and

present. Neither the notion of colonizer, nor that of subaltern, nor the dichotomy colonizer/colonized, in fact, fully capture the inherent complexity of the historical phenomena associated with human mobility which our evidence attests. If anything, the evidence invites us to abandon easy dichotomic simplifications of such complex historical phenomena as human migration. Let's then turn to the evidence and see how and why that is the case.

Textual Sources, Archaeological Evidence, and The Case Study of Metaponto

First, a few preliminary disclaimers. As it often happens, the archives of knowledge available to historians working on mobility in the ancient Mediterranean world are both extremely fragmentary and incredibly partial. No "Italic" or "Phoenician" or "Sardinian" or "Etruscan" narratives survive to account these people's stories of migration. As far as textual sources are concerned, what we have is mostly (and almost exclusively) Greek texts. And while these texts do represent an extraordinary piece of evidence, at the same time they can only offer a partial picture of the reality from which they emerged, one inevitably filtered through the experiences and perspectives of Greek speakers who looked at the world they encountered through their own cultural lenses. Besides texts, a wealth of information comes from the archaeological evidence, extremely rich for some contexts. Yet the archaeology is not without its own interpretative challenges. For one, the material datum hardly ever maps onto the narratives in our texts: no names, no dates can be detected in these materials. When it comes to mobility, the material evidence illuminates the networks through which *things*, rather than humans, moved. Moreover, a variety of other factors (the bio-chemical composition of a given object or human remains, contexts and status preservation, history and methods of excavation, to name a few) act as powerful agents to randomize the available data. Only a small portion of practices and acts are, as a result,

archaeologically visible. With all these caveats in mind, then, what does then the evidence, textual and material, reveal about the power dynamics which articulated the experience of Greek migrants in the ancient Mediterranean world? Should we think about them as colonizers or subalterns? Or perhaps neither, or both?

a. The Textual Sources

On the one hand, the colonial mindset which occasionally informs the extant Greek texts would have us lean towards the "colonizers" interpretation. The representation of the land of the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* is an exemplary case in point. While it is impossible to identify it with a precise territory, its description reflects the ways in which eight-century BCE Greeks imagined the Western Mediterranean: a lush natural world rich in fertile left unexploited by its uncivilized inhabitants, defined by all the ways in which they were not Greeks[19]. The colonial mindset with which early Greek migrants approached the territories where they eventually founded countless settlements is likewise evident in the representation of these territories as 'emptyscapes', no-man's lands either entirely devoid of inhabitants or only scarcely populated[20]. Other accounts represent 'indigenous chiefs' granting asylum to Greek refugees or giving up a portion of their lands, occasionally marrying them to their own daughters[21]. Reading these stories in Lenape Land, we

[19] See *Od.* 9.106-150.
[20] The examples here are countless. To cite just a few, see *Od*. 9.118-123: "Countless goats/ live there but people never visit it./ No hunters labor through its woods to scale/ its hilly peaks. There are no flocks of sheep,/ no fields of plowland – it is untilled,/ unsown and uninhabited by humans." (Trans. E. Wilson); cf. Antiochos of Syracuse *FGrHist* 555 F12: "Antiochos says that, when the area was abandoned, some Achaians, called in by the Achaians of Sybaris, repopulated it." A collection of Greek stories of foundation of their Western *apoikiai* is in the classical Bérard 1957.
[21] Herodotus, for instance, accounts that Arganthonios, king of the semi-legendary harbor city of Spain, Tartessos, became friend of the Phocaeans who were among the first Greeks to reach Iberia. Upon learning that their city (in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey) was under threat of Persian attack, he invited them to resettle in his own country and when they refused, provided them with funds to build defense wall around their city (Hdt. 1.163). According to Thucydides, Megara Hyblaea in Sicily was named after a Sikel chief, Hyblon, who had granted a portion of his land to Greek migrants from Megara, inviting them there himself (Thuc. 6.4.1).

have learned to look at them with due suspicion. Suspiciously colonial also sound a series of accounts which represent the arrival of Greeks settlers as a return to a long-lost ancestral land[22], and/or as the eventual arrival to a promised land granted by a favorable god[23].

While these Greek accounts about the foundation of Greek *apoikiai* outside of Greece do feature a colonial mentality, at the same time, when read against the grid, they reveal another side of the coin where the relationship of power between Greek migrants and 'locals' appear less obviously vertical. First, since the stories in these texts represent single instantiations of fluid oral and semi-oral narratives informed by contemporary discourses, the heavy emphasis they place on the Greeks' right to the land appears like a Greek response to discourses which contested the legitimacy of their presence in the land they occupied. This is especially clear in a series of stories of foundation where the primary concern seems to have been explaining why the myth-historical founders of a given Greek *apoikia* didn't return to their home country and rather decided to stay: sometimes they claimed that the first settlers were forced to stay as their ships had been set on fire by the women traveling with them[24]; other times, the story went that their mother-city would not take them back, or that upon attempting to settle in a location different from the one which the god had assigned to them, the settlers were punished through divinely sent famines and deadly plagues[25]. Others were said to have been massacred by the 'indigenous' people as a form of divine

[22] Again, examples are countless. Famous is that of the Spartan Dorieus, step-brother of the more famous Leonidas. According to Herodotus, Dorieus led an unsuccessful expedition to Sicily where he intended to found a settlement in a land won over by his mythical ancestor Herakles in times of old for his descendants to inherit (Hdt. 5.43-46).
[23] This is the most common narrative trope in Greek stories of 'colonial' foundation: the destination is indicated (or even spontaneously prescribed) by the oracle of Delphi, voicing the will of god Apollo. By way of example, see the stories about the foundation of Croton (Antiochos of Syracuse, *FGrHist* 555 F10) and Cyrene (Hdt. 5.150-159).
[24] This was the story in another story about the foundation of Croton. See Antiochos of Syracuse, *FGrHist* 555 F10. The motif of Trojan women burning ships is discussed in Malkin 1998, 197-8, Erskine 2001, p. 36; Fowler 2013, 567 n. 150, Sheer 2018.
[25] This was the case, for instance, of Cyrene (see Hdt. 4.154-158, especially 4.157). Cf. the case of the Phocaeans, displaced from their homes by Persian invaders (Hdt. 1.163-167) and the one of Epizephyrian Locris, founded by enslaved individuals who had escaped with the wives of their masters (Arist. fr. 547 Rose *apud* Pol. 12.5-16 and *apud* Athenaeus *6.264c, 272 b;* Dionysios the Periegetas 364-366 and schol. and Eustatius *ad loc.;* Pol. 12.8.2; 12.5.9-11).

retribution for not going straight to the location indicated by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi[26]. Interestingly, these apologetic tones which heavily insist on the impossibility of returning home and the necessity to stay, are not entirely different from those coloring the stories today's migrants accounts when forced to account their story as part of the process of asylum seeking. Just like present-day migrants, ancient Greek settlers might have come up with these apologetic narratives to respond to discourses which questioned the legitimacy of their presence.

A second way in which the colonial mindset informing some of the Greek texts appears attenuates has to do with the representation of the non-Greek, 'indigenous' inhabitants of the region: while at times, especially in early texts, these represented in dehumanizing ways (as Cyclopic monsters primarily defined by all the ways in which they are *not* Greek), in fifth-century BCE texts, 'indigenous' people are represented in more flattery ways. For instance, a group of people of south Italy which the Greek sources call 'Chones' are defined as a "well-ordered" people and to them is attributed the invention of the *syssitia*, elite banquets[27]. For other Italic peoples, such as the so-called Oinotrians and Peuketes, Greek texts constructed complex mythical genealogies which presented them as 'cousins' of the Greeks, the descendants of 'pre-lunar' (very ancient) heroes who had in turn once upon a time landed at the coasts of Italy from Greece[28].

b. The Archaeological Evidence: The Case Study of Metaponto

Power relationships between Greek settlers and neighboring communities appear even more ambiguous when viewed through the lens of archaeology. A good illustration of this is Metaponto, a Greek settlement on the coasts of present-day Basilicata for which we happen to have some of the best archaeological data.

[26] This was the case of Dorieus, for instance. See Hdt. 5.45.
[27] See Antiochos of Syracuse, *FGrHist* 555 F3a; Arist. *Pol.* 1329b 14 ff.
[28] See Asheri 1996, Giangiulio 2014, Nafissi 1985.

Based on the archaeological record, it appears that Metapontum was first occupied in the early 7th century BCE, at the same time when a mixed Greek-indigenous settlement situated on a hilltop 8 kilometers inland, Incoronata, was abandoned[29]. By the late 7th century BCE, the site underwent a new formal foundation, with more permanent architectural features replacing earlier huts and wooden structures. A few decades later, around the mid-6th century BCE, the settlement underwent a new comprehensive spatial and infrastructural reconfiguration, which rendered it unmistakably recognizable to the ships approaching its shores a "Greek" *apoikia*[30].

This transformation involved the systematic reorganization of the urban layout with the adoption of an orthogonal grid plan, paralleling contemporary developments in other Greek *apoikiai* of southern Italy, such as Cumae and Poseidonia in Campania and Megara Hyblaea in Sicily. Monumental construction projects also played an important role in this process, including the erection of major temple complexes both within the *agora*, the civic and commercial center, and in extra-urban locations, particularly at the city's border zones[31].

The restructuring of the settlement was not confined to the urban center but extended to the surrounding countryside. Around the mid-6th century BCE, large-scale landscape modifications were undertaken, notably the construction of an extensive canal system aligned with the city's grid plan and extending several kilometers into the hinterland. Aerial photographs taken

[29] For an overview of the two sites at Incoronata, 'Indigenous' and 'Greek', and the early settlement of Metaponto, see Carter 2006, pp. 51-89. More recent excavations conducted by Mario Denti suggest that Greek Incoronata might in fact have been less Greek than previously imagined. Scholars disagree about the possible reasons for the abandonment of the Incoronata 'Indigenous' settlement: according to Orlandini, the site was destroyed by Greek colonizers. Conversely, De Siena has argued that the site wasn't destroyed but simply abandoned when its population decided to relocate in the plain and found the early 'huts' settlement of Metaponto in Proprietà Andrisani.
[30] For a concise overview of the archaeological context of Metaponto, see Carter 1998, pp. 5-17.
[31] For a summary of the results of over 30 years of systematic excavation of the urban center by the Archaeological Superintencency of Basilicata and the German Archaeological Institute in Rome, see Carter 1998. New excavations by the University of Basilicata (Maria Chiara Monaco, Fabio Donnici) and the Scuola Superiore Meridionale (Carlo Rescigno) are currently underway at the urban site and at the sanctuary of Hera (so-called the Tavole Palatine).

by the U.S. military in the 1950s revealed the enduring traces of these features, usually called "division lines" in the scholarly literature. The precise function of these canals has been the subject of academic debate[32]. While they likely served multiple purposes (facilitating transportation during the dry season and possibly demarcating land ownership), their primary role appears to have been water management. Water, in fact, has been an omnipresent feature of the Metapontine landscape since antiquity, and the canal system was a crucial intervention to mitigate its effects.

The abundance of water in Metapontum was both a blessing and a challenge. On the one hand**,** the fertility of the Metapontine plain was directly tied to its ample water supply, a feature celebrated in antiquity through the city's coinage. Between the late 6th and 3rd centuries BCE, Metapontine coins prominently featured an ear of barley alongside the city's abbreviated name (META or similar), underscoring the region's agricultural prosperity[33]. On the other hand, seasonal flooding from the Bradano and Basento rivers — bordering Metapontum to the north-east and south-west— combined with periodic aquifer surges, often transformed the surrounding fields into vast expanses of marshland**,** as it still happens occasionally today[34]**.** These environmental conditions posed significant health risks, as evidenced by bioarchaeological analyses of human remains from Metapontum's extra-urban *necropoleis* (a word which literally means 'cities of the dead' and which archaeologists use to indicate burial sites). Skeletal and isotopic studies indicate

[32] See, for instance, Adamesteanu 1973, Abbott 2011, Carter et al. 2004, Carter 2006, Gioia *et al.* 2020, Prieto 2005 and 2011. GIS least-cost path analysis of the division lines in Metaponto's countryside have recently been carried out by Christine Davidson (Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario). See PIC 6.
[33] See Rutter 2011. See PIC. 3.
[34] The disastrous floods which occurred in 1959 and 2013 are still vividly impressed in the memories of the inhabitants of the area. See PIC. 4 and PIC. 5.

that malaria was endemic in the area between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE, affecting individuals of all ages, sexes, and socioeconomic backgrounds[35].

Rising water levels appear to have been a primary factor in the gradual abandonment of Metapontum between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE[36]. In response to worsening hydrological conditions, the settlement was supplanted by the smaller Roman settlement, the Castrum, strategically established on a nearby elevated dune to mitigate flood risks[37]. By the 6th century CE, the area had become largely depopulated and it appears to have remained so until the mid-20th century. It was only in the 1950s, with large-scale land reclamation projects funded by the Marshall Plan, that the plain was repopulated with the construction of modern Metaponto, today home to a community of migrant agricultural workers whose labor sustains the area's once-again fertile fields[38].

The technical challenges of water management and the endemic presence of malaria in the plain likely influenced indigenous settlement strategies well before the arrival of Greek settlers in the region. Oinotrians and Lucanians (as they are identified in Greek and Latin sources) appear to have established their settlements on higher, more salubrious terrains further inland[39]. Similar environmental concerns continued to shape settlement patterns in later periods: most modern villages predating the extensive land reclamation and dam construction of the 1950s were likewise

[35] See Carter 1998. Michele Lacava opens his 1891's report on the "Topography and History of Metaponto" by remarking that his antiquarian investigations were slowed down by the malarial fevers he contracted working at the site. See Lacava 1891.
[36] The abandonment of many sites in the countryside of Metapontum has been interpreted in connection with the arrival of Pyrrhus (traditionally believed to have stopped by at the site around 275 BCE) and later of Hannibal (212 BCE). The urban site was abandoned by the 1st c. BCE, but according to Carter the countryside continued to be inhabited. See Carter 1998 p. 17.
[37] See Gioia *et al.* 2020. The area of the Roman Castrum has been excavated since 2019 by the University of Basilicata under the direction of Prof. Dimitris Roubis,
[38] Prandi 2024.
[39] For Lucanian settlements, see Isayev 2007, and PIC 7. On the Oenotrians, Scarperi forthcoming.

situated on elevated ground, avoiding the persistent risks of flooding and disease that historically plagued the Metapontine plain.

The spatial configuration of the Metapontine landscape and the distribution of Greek and indigenous settlements, then, suggest a complex and ambivalent dynamic of interaction between these communities. On the one hand, the Greek settlers who established Metapontum significantly transformed the region, occupying a vast portion of the coastal plain and extensively reshaping it through urban planning and large-scale hydraulic engineering. The construction of a discernably Greek polis, complete with an orthogonal street grid and a sophisticated drainage system, underscores a concerted effort to assert control over the fertile hinterland and maximize agricultural productivity. In this sense, the Greeks in Metapontum can be seen as colonial settlers, imposing a new spatial and economic order upon the landscape.

On the other hand, the location of Metapontum in the coastal plain may not have been entirely a matter of deliberate choice. The site was environmentally precarious, prone to seasonal flooding, pervasive marshlands, and endemic malaria, making habitation difficult and maintenance of the settlement labor-intensive. While Metapontum experienced a period of prosperity in the late 6th and early 5th centuries BCE, its viability hinged on the continuous maintenance of large-scale water management infrastructures. The settlement's survival depended on political stability to facilitate the coordinated labor and resource allocation necessary to sustain these engineering systems. Episodes of political unrest, regional warfare, or environmental disruptions could easily destabilize this fragile equilibrium, rendering the livability of the site increasingly hard to maintain.

From this perspective, the decision on the part of Greek migrants to settle *and remain* in Metapontum despite its environmental challenges suggests some degree of desperation on their part. The indigenous Oinotrian populations, who established their settlements on more defensible

and salubrious inland elevations, may have willingly ceded the malarial coastal lowlands to these Greek migrants, perhaps in exchange for access to surplus grain or other economic benefits. If so, the Greek presence in Metapontum reflects not so much an assertion of dominance but rather the outcome of negotiation with the indigenous populations, where for lack of better options, these desperate settlers were indeed compelled to accept living in a truly harsh environment.

Conclusions

I started this paper by asking the following questions: how should I best (that is, most ethnically) build narratives about migrations in the human past when there is so much at stake in the current political circumstances, and especially for migrants, the vulnerable and easy target of coward political leaders? What am I supposed to do when I see that the migrant subjects I study could be narrated with equally good arguments as settler colonizers *and* as refugees? The answer, I believe, relies in turning the question around: the job of the historian, after all, is not finding ways make ancient evidence and modern categories of thought square onto each other, but rather, highlighting the ways in which the evidence from worlds past invites us to question and challenge our own categories of thought and ways of looking at today's world. The categories of colonizers, subalterns, refugees are simply inadequate to describe the complexity of the experiences of migrations in the ancient world.

To return to today's heated debates about migration, my case study from antiquity urges us to reject polarized, dichotomic, and simplistic narratives of migrants' experiences. Migrants are neither invaders nor necessarily refugees forced to flee their countries by dire circumstances; they are, quite simply, human beings on the move - nothing more, nothing less. Their reasons for migrating are as complex, multifaceted, and varied today as they were in the past. If anything, the

ancient parallel highlights the paradox that individuals from certain regions of the world are required to fit into the very narrowly defined category of “refugee” to be granted legal access to other regions of the world. Isn’t this as violent and even more pervasive and unjust form of gatekeeping as building massive walls along State borders?

Thank you for reading, and I very much look forward to further discussing these questions with you all.

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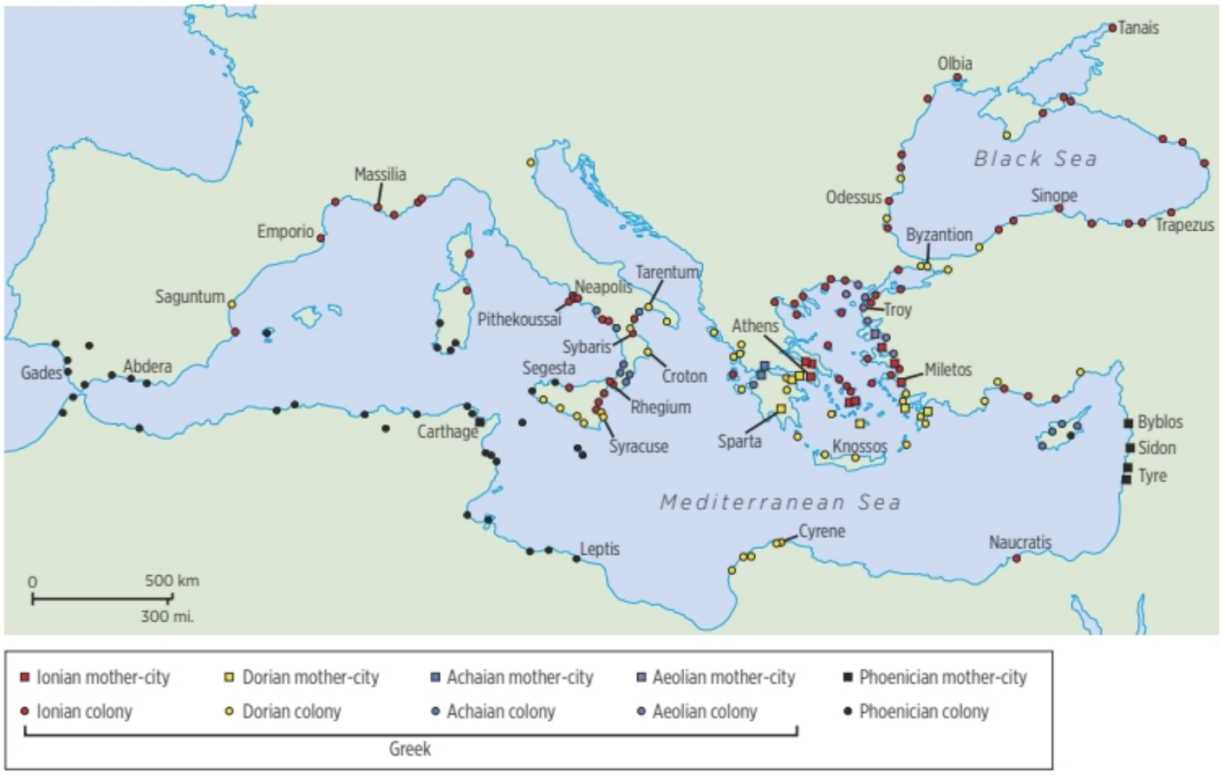
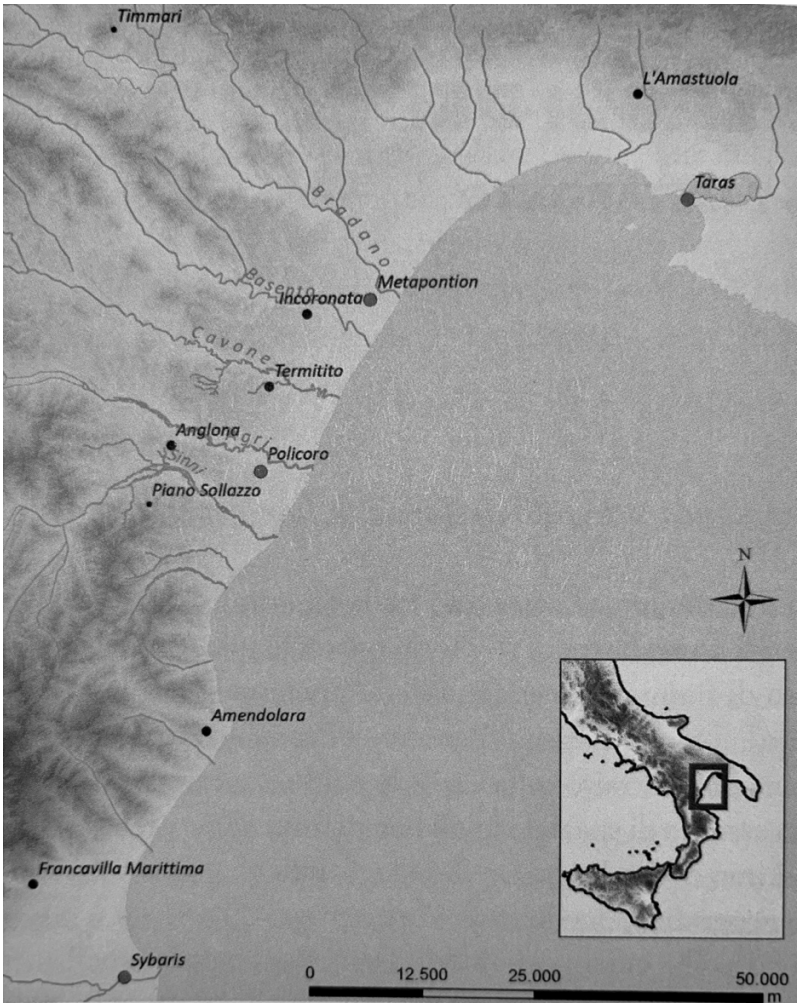
PIC. 1. From McInerney 2018, p. 109.

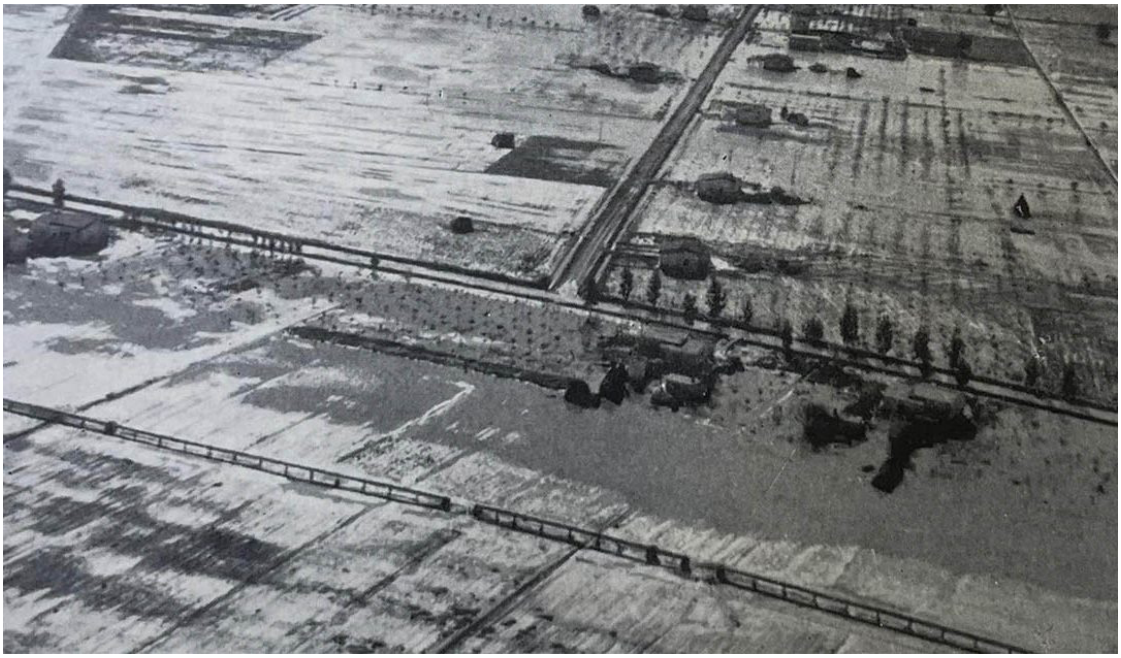


PIC. 2. From Osanna 2024, p. 170.



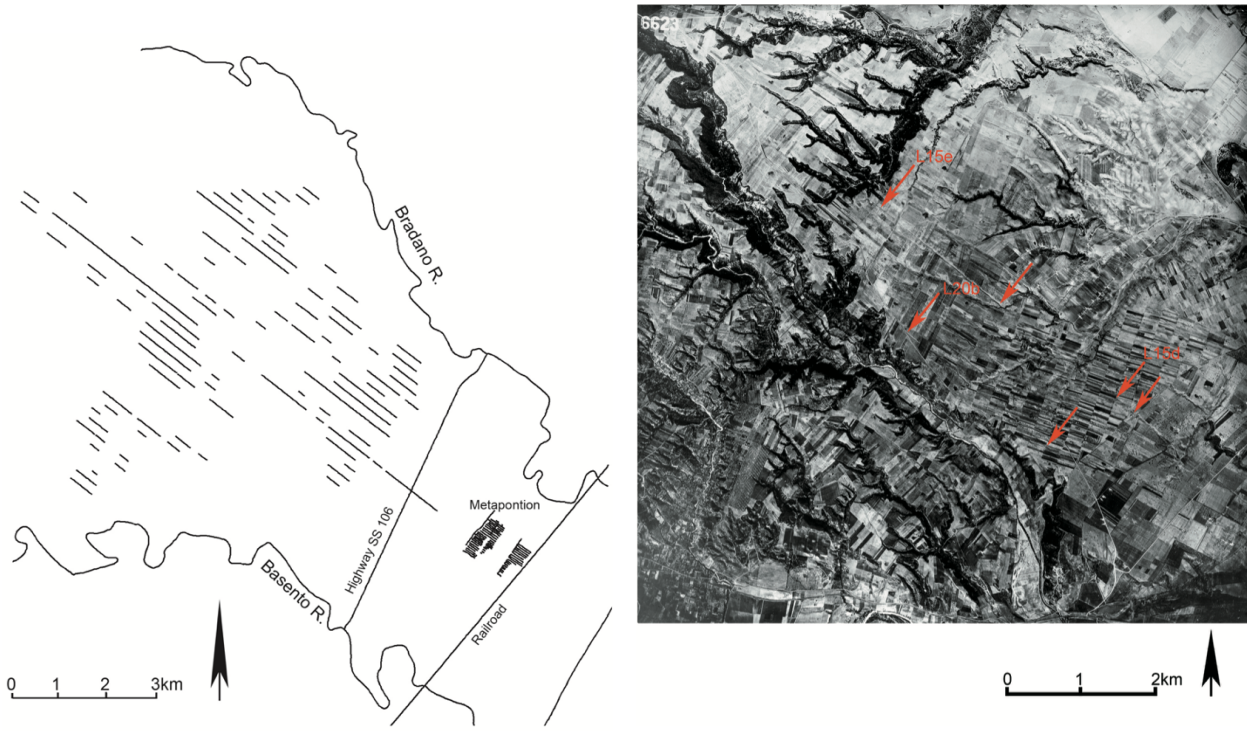
PIC. 3. Metapontine Coin (540-510 BCE ca), from the CNG archive, https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=387588 .

PIC. 4. Fields of Metapontum after the flood of 1959. https://www.quotidianodelsud.it/basilicata/matera/cronache/territorio-e-ambiente/2023/05/21/maltempo-e-pioggia-incubo-del-metapontino



PIC. 5. Modern Metapontum during the 2013 flood.

PIC. 6. "Division lines" in the countryside (*chora*) of Metaponto, from Prieto 2005.



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PIC. 7. Greek, Phoenician, and Indigenous settlements of Magna Graecia and Sicily (6th-3nd c. BCE). From Carter 2006.