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# ”Useful for the whole world”: Iron ore from Elba on the routes of the Tyrrhenian Sea

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## Résumé

The iron mines of Elba Island have been a major source of this metal for the communities living around the Tyrrhenian Sea, from the Iron age to 1982, when the Elban mines were definitively closed.

Though in many archaeological reports iron ore fragments retrieved in ancient contexts have been attributed immediately to Elba iron mines, this identification could not rely on scientific data. Thanks to recent analytical work, it has been possible to identify a peculiar feature that distinguishes Elban iron ore from other sources of iron, available to ancient western civilizations.

This new analytical tool enabled a reappraisal of several fragments of raw iron ore from archaeological excavations in the Tyrrhenian Sea area, leading to a reliable map of the diffusion of Elban iron ore in antiquity. The trading of raw iron ore over long distances, along with the diffusion of iron sponges, bars or ingots, is a peculiar feature of Elban hematite along its long history and nothing similar can be found in the Mediterranean Sea. This was due to the high quality of Elban hematite, that could be easily worked, and to the proximity of iron mines to the sea. Actually, the iron district of eastern Elba island lies close to the Piombino channel, a major crossroad of maritime routes in the western Mediterranean, so Elban hematite could be easily and cheaply shipped and transported to other places in the Mediterranean, where it could be worked.

The AITHALE project aims at a better understanding of the patterns of exploitation, transformation and trade of the Elban iron ore, and of the impact of this production chain onto local communities.

**Mots-Clés:** Elba island, iron, hematite, ancient trade

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