

The Rediscovery of the Great Urban Sanctuary of Selinunte between the early 19th and early 20th century: Perspectives, Legacies, Problems

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this paper is the rediscovery of the great urban sanctuary of Selinus between the early 19th and early 20th century, from Jacob Ignaz Hittorff to Ettore Gàbrici. The great urban sanctuary is understood to be the area of the acropolis delimited to the south by the SB road, to the west by the SA road, to the north by the Sf road and to the east by the massive terraced steps used to double the size of the sacred area in the second half of the 6th century. Overall, the Selinuntine sanctuary represents one of the largest sacred areas of the Western Greeks, comparable with the urban sanctuaries of Metapontum and Poseidonia/Paestum. Yet, two centuries after the beginning of research in the sanctuary, we are far from having a clear idea of both the history of the area from prehistoric to early modern times and the articulation of the various parts of the sanctuary and the ritual dimension in the Archaic and Classical periods, the heyday of Selinunte. This is largely due to the legacy of the nineteenth-century tradition, which led to a focus on the two large peripteral temples C and D, rather than on 'minor' structures such as *oikos* temples, altars, *stoai*, banquet halls, and performance facilities, which also populated the area in large numbers. The same tradition is largely accountable for an approach to architecture that focuses on the reconstruction of buildings and their design aspects, to the detriment of interdisciplinary research aimed not only at reconstructing the biography and post-antique reuses of buildings, but also and above all the cultic and ritual dimensions associated with them, through targeted stratigraphic excavations, and the study of material culture and archaeozoological and palaeobotanical remains, now revealed in large quantities by the new excavations of the mission of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University and the University of Milan, in agreement with the local Archaeological Park of Selinunte, Cave di Cusa, and Pantelleria.

Keywords : ancient greek architecture, history of research, Selinunte, travelogue, urban sanctuary.

RÉSUMÉ

Le sujet de cet article est la redécouverte du grand sanctuaire urbain de Sélinonte entre le début du XIX^e et le début du XX^e siècle, de Jacob Ignaz Hittorff à Ettore Gàbrici. Le grand sanctuaire urbain correspond à la zone de l'acropole délimitée au sud par la route SB, à l'ouest par la route SA, au nord par la route Sf et à l'est par les marches massives en terrasses utilisées pour doubler la taille de l'aire sacrée dans la seconde moitié du VI^e siècle. Dans l'ensemble, le sanctuaire de Sélinonte représente l'une des plus grandes aires sacrées des Grecs en Occident, comparable aux sanctuaires urbains de Métaponte et de Poseidonia/Paestum. Pourtant, deux siècles après le début des recherches sur le sanctuaire, nous sommes loin d'avoir une idée claire à la fois de l'histoire de la zone depuis la préhistoire jusqu'au début de l'époque moderne et de l'articulation des différentes parties du sanctuaire ainsi que de la dimension rituelle aux époques archaïque et classique, l'apogée de Sélinonte. Cela est dû en grande partie à l'héritage de la tradition du XIX^e siècle, qui a conduit à se concentrer sur les deux grands temples périptères C et D, plutôt que sur les structures "mineures" telles que les temples *oikos*, les autels, les *stoai*, les salles de banquet et les salles de spectacle, qui sont également très diffusés dans cet espace. Cette même tradition est en grande partie responsable d'une approche de l'architecture qui se concentre sur la reconstruction des bâtiments et leurs aspects conceptuels, au détriment d'une recherche interdisciplinaire visant non seulement à reconstruire la biographie et les réutilisations post-antiques des bâtiments, mais aussi et surtout les dimensions culturelles et rituelles qui leur sont associées, grâce à des fouilles stratigraphiques ciblées et à l'étude de la culture matérielle et des vestiges archéozoologiques et paléobotaniques, aujourd'hui révélés en grande quantité par les nouvelles fouilles de la mission de l'Institute of Fine Arts de la New York University et de l'Université de Milan, en accord avec le Parc archéologique local de Sélinonte, Cave di Cusa et Pantelleria.

Mots-clés : architecture grecque, histoire de la recherche, sanctuaire urbain, Sélinonte, récits de voyage.

My paper focuses on the rediscovery of the main urban sanctuary of Selinunte in the nineteenth century.¹ My aim is to show how early explorations of this sacred area have influenced the study of the sanctuary by subsequent generations of scholars, up to the present.

First, some remarks about the sanctuary, currently under investigation by a joint mission of the Institute of Fine Arts–NYU and the University of Milan, in collaboration with the local Archaeological Park (fig. 1).

We refer to this space, enclosed by a peribolos wall and spanning about two hectares, as the “main urban sanctuary” because it appears to be the largest sacred area within the city walls before the Carthaginian destruction of Selinunte in 409 BCE.² The sanctuary stands out not only for its massive size but also for its grand structures, which in the Archaic and Classical periods included two peripteral temples and several other buildings, such as oikos temples, altars, stoas, banqueting halls, and theatral areas.³ Later, between the last quarter of the fourth century and its abandonment in 250 BCE, Selinunte came under the firm control of Carthage and mostly served as a military outpost against Syracuse. In this period, the urban area was restricted to the acropolis, and the main urban sanctuary was consequently occupied with domestic architecture and commercial buildings, with the area in front of Temple C serving as the new civic center.⁴ Although the area of the sanctuary was still used for cult activities (most notably in association with Temple B), it had now lost its original significance. Consequently, my analysis will focus on the Orientalizing, Archaic, and Classical phases.

Particularly in the Archaic and Classical periods, the placement contributed to the impact of the *temenos* within the urban landscape. Located in the southern half of the southern urban hill (known as the acropolis), our sanctuary dominated the promontory formed by the mouths of the two rivers, the modern Modione and Cottone, flanking the north and south urban hills (fig. 2). Thanks to this location, the mass of the sanctuary and the upper parts of its buildings—whose lower parts were largely concealed by the *peribolos* wall—were a spectacle for sailors approaching Selinunte from the east, an impression that we can now gain through 3D modelling, with far more precision than in the evocative reconstructions published more than a century ago in the volume on Selinunte by Jean Hulot and Gustave Fougères (fig. 3).⁵

No less significant was the placement of the sanctuary in relation to the urban plan and the street system. Two of the main avenues, SA and SB, run along the west and south sides of the sanctuary, respectively. SA, an impressive processional way, connected the southern urban hill with the agora, while SB connected the mouths of the two rivers and the harbors. In addition, a major street, Sf, also connecting the harbors, runs along the north side, whereas the eastern terracing system connected the sanctuary with the Gorgo Cottone harbor.⁶

The position of the sanctuary in relation to the two urban hills may depend on the location of the original Greek settlement, for which there is presently little archaeological evidence but which scholars

1 I would like to thank the organizers, Daniela Lefèvre-Novaro and Corentin Voisin, for inviting me to participate in this conference and present the results of the ongoing excavations by our mission of the Institute of Fine Arts–NYU and the University of Milan in the main urban sanctuary of Selinunte. We are particularly grateful to the Archaeological Park of Selinunte, Cave di Cusa and Pantelleria, and its director, Felice Crescente, for the continued support of our operation. This project would not be possible without the generous support of the Institute of Fine Arts–NYU, the Università degli Studi di Milano, the Malcolm Hewitt Wiener Foundation, the Samuel I. Newhouse Foundation, and our private donors, to whom we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks.

2 In general, on Selinunte’s urbanism in the Archaic and Classical periods, see MERTENS 2003 and MERTENS 2006.

3 For a comprehensive discussion of the main urban sanctuary, still missing, see MARCONI forthcoming b.

4 HELAS 2011 represents the standard study of this phase of Selinunte. See also more recently CHIARENZA 2018–2019.

5 HULOT & FOUGÈRES 1910.

6 See CHIARENZA 2020, p. 49–58, for a recent discussion of Selinunte’s street system in the Archaic and Classical periods.

tend to place near the tip of the southern urban hill.⁷ This early settlement, according to Mertens,⁸ would have had an orthogonal plan, with the main urban sanctuary occupying the northeast quadrant. Having identified the earliest phases of use of the sanctuary, our excavations bring support to this theory. They confirm that the area served cult purposes since the time of foundation, and they show the existence of buildings of c. 610 BCE which had the same orientation of avenue SB, thus prefiguring the great urban plan of c. 570 BCE.⁹

It was in accordance with the new urban plan that the definition and monumentalization of the sanctuary proceeded. Our excavations show how the peribolos wall dates to around the same years, c. 570 BCE, that saw the construction of the earliest cult buildings.¹⁰ From then until 490 BCE, the sanctuary was a large construction site with a dozen structures (fig. 4). Comparisons with later periods show how construction and cult activity could occur together. Thus, it would be a mistake not to consider this area as rich in ritual performances throughout the Archaic period. Our excavations attest to this clearly, by providing evidence for libations, votive offering, animal sacrifices, banqueting, music performances, and dancing.¹¹

The few available inscriptions suggest the existence of more than one cult in our sanctuary, starting with Apollo and Athena.¹² The large number of altars¹³ and the entrances on each side of the sanctuary strongly suggest that this area was used for multiple cults and ritual actions. Many of these cults must have been of particular concern for the members of the elite, whose two-story houses made of ashlar blocks tend to cluster near our sanctuary.¹⁴



Fig. 1 : Selinunte, main urban sanctuary, c. 410 BCE. Digital reconstruction by John Goodinson and Clemente Marconi. © John Goodinson.

7 See most recently RESTELLI *et al.* 2023.

8 MERTENS 2006, p. 83-85.

9 MARCONI 2019.

10 SALEM & MINNITI, to be issued.

11 MARCONI forthcoming a.

12 DUBOIS 1989, p. 60 no. 51.

13 VOIGTS 2017.

14 MERTENS 2006, p. 323-331.

Today the discovery by our mission of the sanctuary's Orientalizing, Archaic, and Classical layers of use are bringing the ritual dimension to light. But if we now increasingly see the temples as part of a multifunctional area serving a plurality of cults and ritual performances, this was not always understood.

Out of the numerous examples available in the literature, I will mention only two. In 1996, in an article about the semantics of Doric temple architecture, Christian Höcker, analyzing the case of Selinunte, wrote of a real construction boom in Doric temples. This boom, according to Höcker, had a pronounced show character, and it was predicated upon little involvement of the buildings in cult and ritual activity. Höcker saw this as a common phenomenon among the western Greeks of Southern Italy and Sicily.¹⁵

On a different note, in 1992, in reviewing the evidence for Archaic Greek sanctuaries in Southern Italy and Sicily, Birgitta Bergquist presented our sanctuary as a partial exception to a rule according to which the western Greeks were less concerned with the worshippers' comfort, through the construction of "nonessential" buildings.¹⁶

The contribution by Bergquist is significant in that it consisted of a systematic review of the existing literature, which at the time mostly focused on "essential buildings," namely temples and altars. In the case of Selinunte, this approach was clearly the product of nineteenth-century scholarship.

From 1992, we now go back to 1823, which is the year when Selinunte first made headlines in archaeological research. This was due to the work of two British architects, William Harris and Samuel Angell. In investigating the temples of Selinunte, they found the remains of the carved metopes once decorating the main fronts of Temples C and F. The metopes of Temple C were notable for the time, being among the earliest available evidence for Greek sculpture, thought to reveal the strong influence of Egyptian art. This discovery of the carved metopes was somewhat incidental, for Harris and Angell were in Selinunte to document temple architecture according to a higher standard than in previous publications, an approach that required excavations to document even the smallest details.¹⁷

This calls to mind the primary inspiration for Angell and Harris, namely the *Antiquities of Athens* project by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, whose fourth volume had come out only a few years earlier, in 1816.¹⁸ There was, however, a wider political and economic context for the presence of Angell and Harris on the island. This context was the British transformation of Sicily into a base of operation in the Mediterranean against Napoleon, which led to the occupation of the island from 1806 to 1815 under the guidance of Lord William Bentinck. In 1823, the political landscape had significantly changed, including in Sicily, which had now become part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Yet the island still saw a significant British presence. There were, in fact, large numbers of residents, especially at port cities, engaged in various economic activities, including wine production. This explains why the work conducted in Selinunte by Angell and Harris was the culmination of a journey started in Syracuse in 1822 and continued in Agrigento.¹⁹

Of this journey and the accompanying studies of local antiquities, we now have precious evidence from the publication online by the British Museum of about 200 works on paper, mostly preliminary drawings and sketches made by Angell and Harris in Syracuse, Agrigento, and Selinunte. These drawings mostly focus on temple architecture. There are notable exceptions, such as the amphitheater in Syracuse, but temples attracted most of the interest of the two architects. This is no surprise, given early-nineteenth-century architects' fascination with the Doric order and the essential role that Greek Doric temples played in architectural theory

¹⁵ HÖCKER 1996.

¹⁶ BERGQUIST 1992.

¹⁷ MARCONI 1995; MARCONI 2007.

¹⁸ KELLY 2016.

¹⁹ MARCONI 1995, p. 9-10.



Fig. 2 : Selinunte, southern urban hill. Drone photograph by Filippo Pisciotta. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.

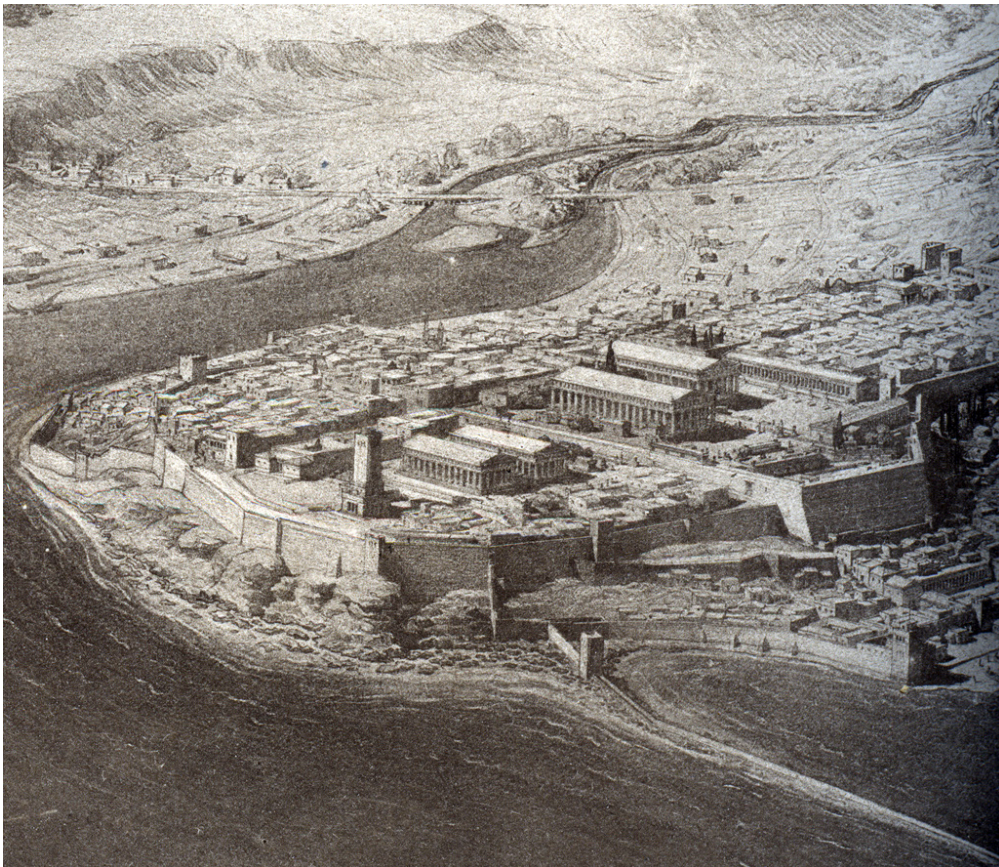


Fig. 3 : Jean Hulot and Gustave Fougères, view of Selinunte c. 410 BCE
(in HULOT & FOUGÈRES 1910)

of the time, starting with Julien David Le Roy.²⁰ Ultimately, it was precisely this fascination that helped to turn the attention of architects towards temples, singling them out within the surrounding landscape.

Jacob Ignaz Hittorff reached Selinunte at the end of 1823, after Harris had died of malaria and Angell had gone back to London. The recent publication of Hittorff's album of drawings, *Sicile Ancienne*, in the library of the University of Cologne, shows the significance of Hittorff's travel to Sicily in 1823 and 1824.²¹ This was, simply put, one of the major chapters in the history of the modern reception of the antiquities of Sicily, largely unknown until only a few years ago.

Hittorff's tour of ancient sites in Sicily, starting at Palermo and moving clockwise, followed the canon shaped by antiquarian and travel literature, including the lavishly illustrated volumes by the Abbé de Saint-Non²² and Jean Houël²³ which clearly served as important sources of inspiration. Yet Hittorff's stated aim was to produce for Sicily what Stuart and Revett had produced for Attica, and to that effect, Hittorff partnered with two talented architects, Ludwig von Zanth and Wilhelm Stier. The result was a systematic documentation of Greek and Roman architecture on the island, on a scale and with a level of precision that were unprecedented and which only Robert Koldewey and Otto Puchstein could match, for the temples, at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁴

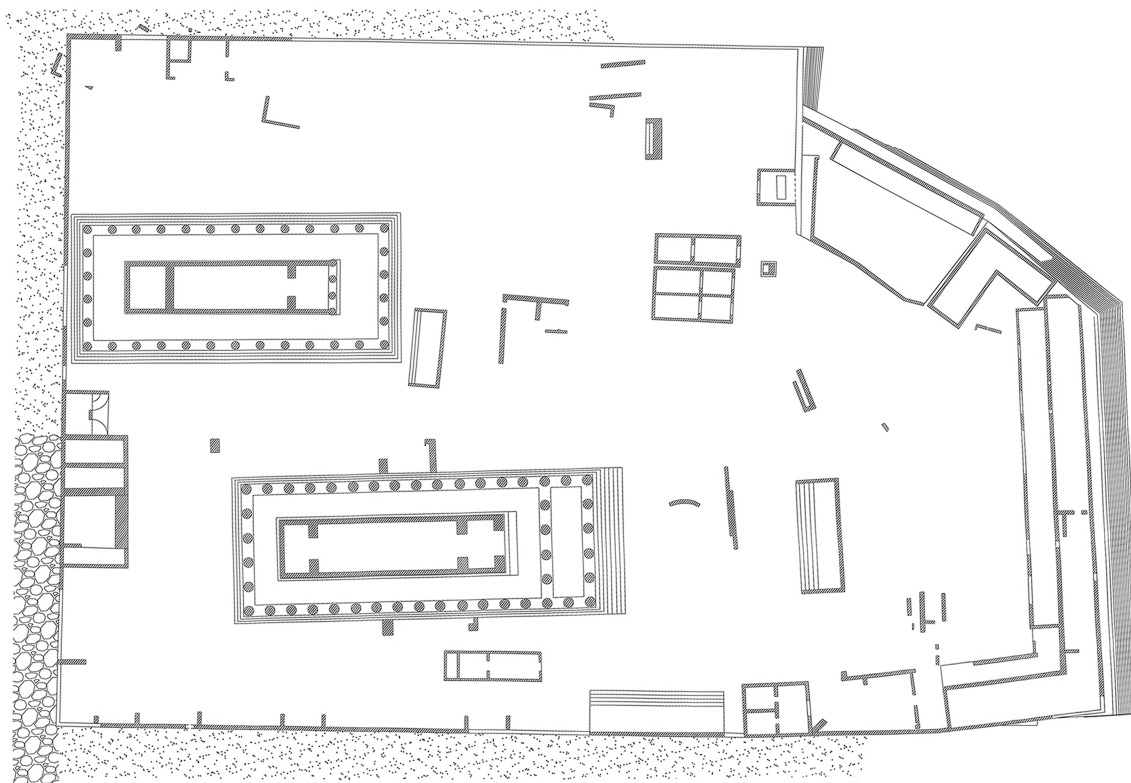


Fig. 4 : Plan of the main urban sanctuary with the buildings before 409 BCE. By Daniele Bursich and Clemente Marconi. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.

20 LE ROY 2004; ARMSTRONG 2012; ARMSTRONG 2016.

21 MARCONI *et al.* 2017.

22 SAINT-NON 1781-1786; COMETA 1999, p. 65-69.

23 HOUEL 1782-1787; COMETA 1999, p. 69-74.

24 KOLDEWEY & PUCHSTEIN 1899.

As with Angell and Harris, temple architecture of the classical period was the very heart of Hittorff's project. His own statements after concluding his trip to Sicily confirm this: in several letters, he is emphatic about his reconstruction of the fourteen best-preserved Classical temples on the island, which he was busy working on after returning to Rome in the spring of 1824.²⁵

These images had great public success, and Hittorff conceived them as complete reconstructions of the buildings, including not only the plan and the elevation but also the roof, the sculptural and polychrome decoration, and, finally, the cult and votive statues and other furnishings (fig. 5). The remarkable amount of speculation involved in these reconstructions led to charges that he had moved away from a scrupulous philological reconstruction in his visualization of Sicilian temples. Désiré Raoul-Rochette was the first to bring this charge against Hittorff, leading to the architect's troubled reception among archaeologists, particularly at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁶

Meanwhile, Hittorff's modern vision of Greek temples as *Gesamtkunstwerken* impacted the main urban sanctuary of Selinunte.

To explain this point, I must now introduce the Duke of Serradifalco, a prominent aristocrat in Palermo, disciple of Luigi Cagnola in Milan, with a deep knowledge of ancient architecture.²⁷ In a meeting with Hittorff in 1823 in Palermo, Serradifalco seems to have developed the idea of producing a project like the one by Hittorff for Sicilian antiquities. To that effect, in 1827, he created the Committee for Antiquities and Fine Arts for Sicily and started a campaign of topographic survey, architectural analysis, and, when



Fig. 5 : Jacob Ignaz Hittorff, reconstruction of Temple (in HITTORFF 1851).

25 MARCONI *et al.* 2017.

26 RAOUL-ROCHETTE 1833; MARCONI 2008.

27 On the Duke of Serradifalco, see more recently CIANCIOLO COSENTINO 2004.

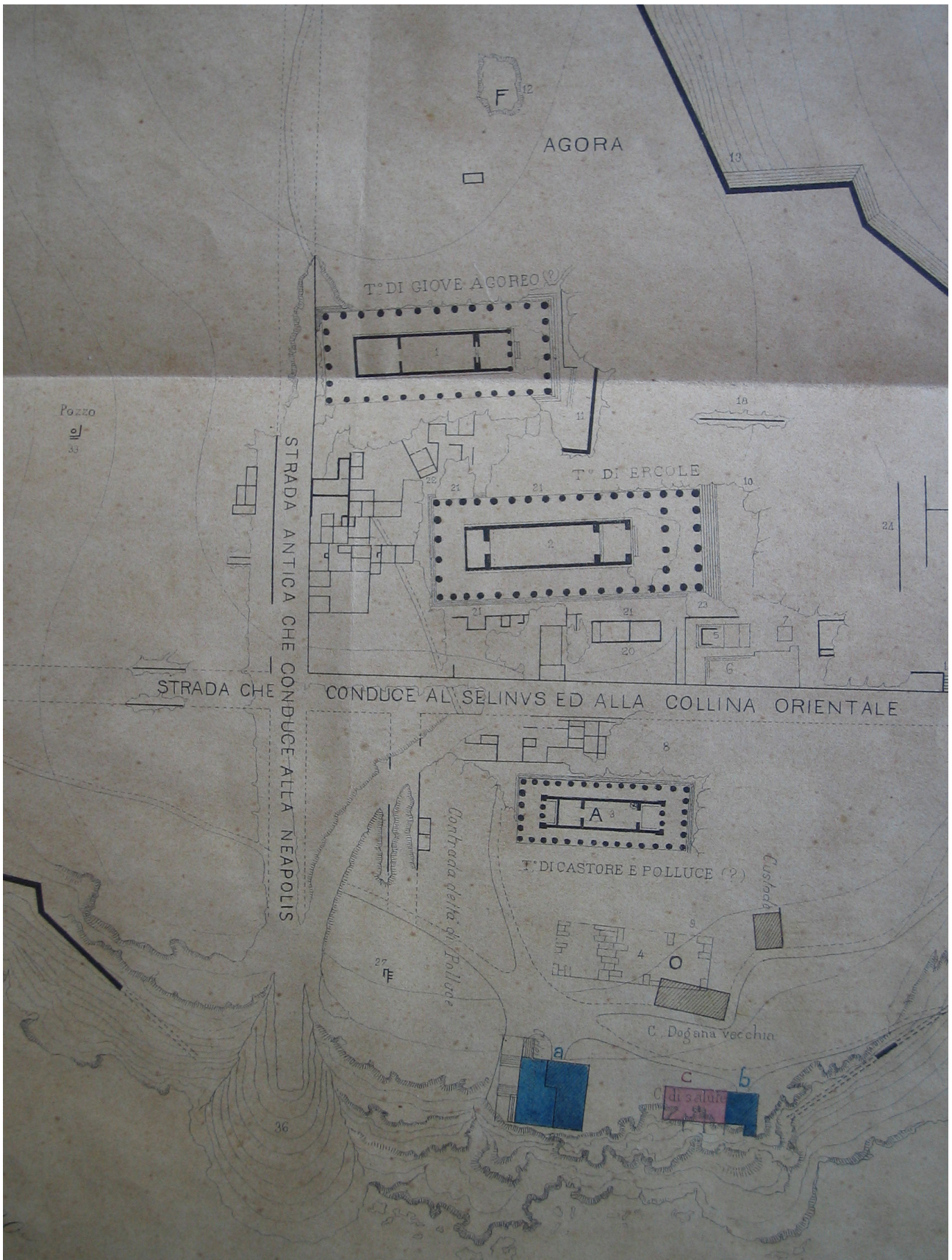


Fig. 6 : Francesco Saverio and Salvatore Cavallari, topography of the acropolis of Selinunte after the 1877 excavations (1881), detail of the main urban sanctuary. Palermo, Museo Archeologico "Antonino Salinas", Archivio Storico. Photograph by Rosalia Pumo. © Palermo, Museo Archeologico "Antonino Salinas."

needed, excavation in the main ancient sites on the island, starting with Segesta and ending with Tyndaris. Serradifalco published the results of this new research between 1834 and 1842 in a series of five volumes, aptly titled *The Antiquities of Sicily*.²⁸

The name of Serradifalco is best associated with the research, excavation, restoration, and publication of the theaters at Segesta, Syracuse, Acrae, Taormina, and Tyndaris. This was not a coincidence, since the duke was also the superintendent of festivals and spectacles in Palermo and had a true passion for the opera.²⁹ He worked in Selinunte, after Segesta, and in the main urban sanctuary, but that was mainly to tear down Hittorff's polychrome reconstruction of Temple B. Apparently, he spent little time in Selinunte when the committee was researching the site, according to a letter sent by Francesco Saverio Cavallari to Otto Benndorf several years later.³⁰

Nonetheless, Serradifalco was indirectly responsible for the next decisive round of research in our main urban sanctuary. This is because he hired a young Francesco Saverio Cavallari to serve as his draftsman for the plates of *The Antiquities of Sicily*. One can argue that the plates drawn and engraved by Cavallari for Segesta and Selinunte were copies of the drawings published by Hittorff and Zanth between 1827 and 1829;³¹ and it seems not too far-fetched to think that Cavallari's long acquaintance with Hittorff's work played a major role in developing his fascination for Greek temples. This included not only the use of buildings in association with cult but especially the aesthetics of Doric design.

The continuation of the biography of Cavallari is well known. After collaborating with Serradifalco between 1827 and 1842, he moved in 1857 to Mexico City, where he became director of the Academia de San Carlos. In 1864, he went back to Italy after being appointed director of the Committee of Antiquities and Fine Arts by Michele Amari, and in that function, he explored Selinunte, Agrigento, Syracuse, and Camarina.³²

The Selinunte excavations were the first archaeological explorations led by Cavallari in his new position. They had to be big, to show the interest of the new Italian state in the cultural heritage of Sicilian people, unlike the former Bourbon rulers.³³ As a result, the excavation was a massive undertaking, which involved not only a large portion of the main urban sanctuary but also Temples A and O to the south (fig. 6). The operation, which started in 1876 and ended in 1883 when Cavallari moved to Syracuse, mostly aimed at fully uncovering Temple C.³⁴ Cavallari attributed Temple C to Heracles and regarded the building as the most important cult place in Selinunte. And as a true inheritor of the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century tradition, he mainly aimed to reveal the beauty of its forms, something he pursued to a lesser extent with Temples D, A, and O, which he was the first to identify.

To make the mass of Temple C visible, Cavallari had to remove all the accumulation, up to 3.5 meters high, above the euthynteria level, an operation that ultimately resulted in erasing the Roman, Late Antique, and Medieval phases, which apparently had left conspicuous traces, particularly around Temples C and D.³⁵ This evidence rests now in the sea in front of the acropolis, thanks to a Decauville railway that carted it away from the area of excavation. Since Temple C fell to the ground because of an earthquake in the Middle Ages³⁶

28 LO FASO PIETRASANTA 1834-1842; see more recently MARCONI 2021.

29 MARCONI 2012.

30 Letter of Francesco Saverio Cavallari to Otto Benndorf, dated October 20, 1872: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek 637/2.

31 HITTORFF & ZANTH 1827-1829.

32 On Francesco Saverio Cavallari, see more recently CIANCIOLO COSENTINO 2007.

33 In general, for this approach by the new Italian government, see MARCONI 2021.

34 The main excavation reports include CAVALLARI 1876; CAVALLARI 1877; CAVALLARI 1878; CAVALLARI 1882; CAVALLARI 1884.

35 See more recently LENTINI 2010a; LENTINI 2010b.

36 GUIDOBONI *et al.* 2002; GUIDOBONI *et al.* 2016.

and the columns fell onto a ground level far higher than the Archaic and Classical ones, most of the work went on propping blocks under the columns and other architectural elements to keep them in their fallen position (fig. 7). Cavallari aimed to not only reveal the beauty of the forms of the Doric temple but also to preserve the beauty of its ruins, celebrated by generations of travelers.³⁷

These excavations by Cavallari find many comparisons in archaeological investigations of the time around the Mediterranean.³⁸ But rather than establishing parallels, I would now like to discuss the legacy that Cavallari's work left to subsequent generations of scholars working in our sanctuary.



Fig. 7 : Selinunte, area between Temple C and Temple B, props for keeping the architectural elements of Temple C in their fallen position after the excavation. Photograph by Clemente Marconi. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.

Concerning the sacred space at large, Cavallari produced an impression of the sanctuary as divided into two portions, corresponding, respectively, to Temples C and D. In the absence of any detailed analysis of the area north of Temple D, which takes almost one-third of the sanctuary space, there is the serious risk that this presentation of the area, taken up by Ettore Gàbrici in his excavations of 1921 and 1922,³⁹ is a misconception.

Concerning architecture, by giving visual emphasis to Temple C, Cavallari laid the ground for the anastylosis of the north colonnade of this building in the 1920s.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he directed the attention of later generations of scholars to peripteral temples,⁴¹ vis-à-vis oikos temples and the many other building types that were as significant within the ancient landscape and for cult practice.⁴² Cavallari was deeply

37 PUMO 2009; PUMO 2016.

38 See, e.g., the Grand Fouille in Delphi: ÉCOLE FRANÇAISE D'ATHÈNES 1992.

39 GÀBRICI 1929; see also the distinction between “main sanctuary” and “north sanctuary” in MERTENS 2006, figs. 326 and 328.

40 GENOVESE 2010; MARCONI 2016.

41 One of the most recent examples is AMICI 2009.

42 The longtime lack of a proper architectural study of the South Building (MARCONI & SCAHILL 2015; VOIGTS 2017, p. 48-57), a

interested in the latter, but his original interpretation of Temple R as mere terracing for Temple C⁴³ gives a clear sense of the problem.

Finally, by excavating the sanctuary down to a highly subjective ground level, mostly the middle of the Hellenistic fill that covered the area of the sanctuary during the phase of Carthaginian control of Selinunte (c. 300 BCE) and served as a base for the Punic settlement, Cavallari derailed later generations of excavators, starting with Gàbrici, who assumed the ground level at the time to coincide with the ancient one.

These comments about Cavallari are not intended as disrespect for a scholar who has given so much to Sicilian archaeology. At Selinunte, we can see better than the generations that preceded us only because we are standing on the shoulders of giants, and Cavallari is one of them. However, considering the short- and long-term effects of the work conducted at the time of the discovery of the main urban sanctuary represents a healthy exercise of disciplinary self-reflection which should always guide us in continuing our exploration of the sanctuary.

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significant theatral structure for performances associated with Temple R and Temple C, is indicative of this trend.

43 CAVALLARI 1876, p. 105.

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