

**ISMAELLI, TOMMASO**

Archeologia del culto a Gela. Il santuario di Predio Sola. Beni Archeologici – Conoscenza e Tecnologie
Quaderno 9. Bari: Edipuglia, 2011. 266 pages, 39 figs., 38 col. pl. ISBN 978-88-7228-634-0. € 40.00.

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In recent years, archaeologists have increasingly realized the importance of a phenomenon, which Francesco d'Andria in the preface to this volume calls “excavation in storage”, that is to say, the systematic reexamination of archaeological complexes excavated several decades ago. Without a doubt, such work is useful, especially in cases when initial publications of archaeological discoveries are incomplete. Yet, with solid and up-to-date methodological preparation, ‘excavating’ museum storerooms can achieve more: It can reintroduce previously unknown or understudied materials into current scientific debates by reevaluating them with current theoretical interests and goals in mind.

This is exactly what Tommaso Ismaelli accomplished in the present volume, which develops the research conducted for his MA thesis submitted to the University of Perugia in 2003. In his thesis, Ismaelli reexamined the votive deposit of Predio Sola in Gela, excavated by Piero Orlandini in 1959 and published partially in 1962.¹ Ismaelli now offers a complete catalogue of the material discovered at the site half a century ago, together with a concise but thorough reconsideration of its find context, topography, and stratigraphy, which leads in turn to the reconstruction of cult practice and the religious behavior of its participants.

The book is clearly organized, providing a good overview of the facts and logical arguments. After a short introduction, the first chapter briefly reviews the location of Predio Sola within the topography of ancient Gela in light of recent evidence for the extension of the settlement and the possible position of the city walls. He rejects one of Orlandini's basic assumptions, that the site was an “extraurban” sanctuary. According to Ismaelli, there is no need, either on topographic or typological grounds, to consider this sacred area as being outside the city. Indeed, he questions the whole concept of “extraurban” or “suburban” sanctuaries, which played a major role in interpretations of Greek cult places in the second half of the 20th century. Ismaelli's reconsideration of the topographic position of Predio Sola is an important contribution and it results in an original interpretation. The following two chapters give a summary of the excavated structures, strata, and material, as given in the archival documentation of Orlandini's survey. The Predio Sola find consisted of a small, L-shaped construction and two stratigraphic units rich in votive objects and corresponding to two successive phases.

A discussion of previous publications dealing with incomplete material introduces the exhaustive presentation of the finds. The archaeological evidence shows that the area was in use from around 640 B.C. to the end of the 5th century B.C., which extends the chronological limits hypothesized by Orlandini, who thought that ritual activity at Predio Sola ceased in the first half of the 5th century B.C. According to the chronology of the finds, the first phase of the sanctuary spanned from ca. 640/630 B.C. to the middle of the 6th century, with some noteworthy changes in the quantity and composition of votive offerings towards 600 B.C. The second phase started shortly after 550 B.C. and is characterized by a peak in the last quarter of the century, followed by a gradual reduction in offerings.

The finds consist of 752 items, most of which (643) are pottery, in addition to a consistent group of votive terracottas. Each class of objects is catalogued according to current publication standards and illustrated with good quality color plates. Ceramic finds are dated and attributed to production centers (Corinthian, Attic, East Greek, Laconian, and local) on the basis of an exhaustive and up-to-date bibliography, which also permitted some statistical considerations about provenience, generally confirming the situation usually encountered in other Sicilian centers of this period.

The 86 figural terracottas do not equal the quantities yielded by many other western Greek sanctuaries, where these mass-produced works of art often totaled in the hundreds or thousands. However, they constitute a significant testament to Sicilian coroplastic production, principally because of their quality and variety. Most of them were already well known to specialists before the publication of this volume. After Orlandini's first selective publication, the Orientalizing pieces were studied by Emma Meola in 1971,² while the complete corpus of protomai was included in Jaimee Uhlenbrock's book on Geloan protomai in 1989.³ In his catalogue, Ismaelli usually summarizes previous conclusions.

The author's most significant achievement is undoubtedly his concluding chapter, which provided an occasion to exploit his theoretical and methodological background through a new reading of the archaeological finds of Predio Sola. Ismaelli takes a critical stance toward the older interpretative tradition, exemplified by Orlandini's publication of the site. In so doing, he indicates the importance of considering the entire repertory of finds and the necessity of thinking first about the human behavior revealed by the objects before trying to attach the name of a divinity to a sacred area. Thus, having rejected the categorization of Predio Sola as an “extraurban” sanctuary for topographic reasons, he also rejects the consequent, simplistic attribution of the site to the cult of Deme-

ter. Instead, he proposes a reconstruction of the ritual practice and the changes that can be observed in it during the lifetime of the sanctuary. The predominantly female character of the cult is confirmed through a series of object types associated primarily with the everyday life of women, such as perfume containers, objects linked to textile work, and figural terracottas, all female, which in the second half of the 6th century B.C. replace ceramic offerings. With respect to the generic female terracotta figurines, especially the much-debated protomai, Ismaelli embraces a theory presented in its most radical form by Arthur Muller and Stéphanie Huyssecom-Haxhi,⁴ that all terracotta figurines of humans without specific attributes must be considered depictions of worshippers. Applying this thesis to the specific case of the Geloan sanctuary, the author interprets the protomai as representations of devotees entering a particular phase of female life that the ancient Greeks called *nymphe*, which is to say, women who were marriageable or already married. According to this view, most of the votive offerings of Predio Sola – lamps, perfume containers, and figurines from the earlier phase and large, ornate protomai from the later phase – were all means of “constructing one’s gender,” with regard both to self-affirmation within the community and to reflecting the acknowledgement of the individual’s new status.

Ismaelli is not particularly concerned with identifying the patron deity of the sanctuary, a particularly risky enterprise when there are no written sources; he insists, rather, on emphasizing the aspects and functions of the cult. Thus, while he refuses to attribute the Predio Sola sanctuary to Demeter (partly based on convincing comparisons with Bitalemi, the only cult place in Gela securely attributed to the goddess), he considers the site’s several possible divine ‘residents’, such as Hera, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Persephone. One gets the impression that the author leans more towards the latter candidate.

Among the strengths of the book, the first to be mentioned is its extraordinarily thorough and extensive bibliography (it occupies almost thirty pages, pp. 237-266) and the author’s familiarity with it, which demonstrates Ismaelli’s deep involvement in the current debate concerning the archaeology and history of Greek religious practices. This sound research is combined with a remarkable attention to the human dimension of the reconstructed social and historical phenomena, which allows the author to discuss, for example, the meaning and use of protomai in an engagingly empathic way (pp. 221-223). In the catalogue chapters, the author’s sensitivity to artistic forms is apparent in his discussion of the stylistic comparisons and attributions of the figurines, with which the author of this review mostly agrees. It is unfortunate, however, that Ismaelli did not attempt a reconsideration of the stylistic and chronological classification of some of the terracotta types. Indeed, as far as the protomai are concerned, Ismaelli relies entirely on Uhlenbrock’s work, sometimes without making clear that his typological labels and dates are based solely on her hypothetical classification. Nevertheless, this detail cannot diminish the value of Ismaelli’s informative and innovative volume, which fulfills its main objective: a complex historical interpretation of the complete archaeological evidence related to a cult place of an ancient Western Greek city.

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NOTES

¹P. Orlandini, “La stipe votive arcaica del Predio Sola,” *MonAnt* 46, 1962, 1-78.

²E. Meola, “Terrecotte orientalizzanti di Gela. Daedalia Siciliae 3,” *MonAnt* Serie Misc. I.1, 1971, 8-85.

³J. Uhlenbrock, *The Terracotta Protomai from Gela*, Rome 1989.

⁴S. Huyssecom-Haxhi – A. Muller, “Déesses et/ou mortelles dans la plastique de terre cuite. Réponses actuelles à une question ancienne,” *Pallas* 75, 2007, 231-247.

