

THE PRIVATI SHRINE AT CASTELLAMMARE DI STABIA (BAY OF NAPLES, ITALY)

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RESUMO

Em 1984, no bairro Privati de Castellammare di Stabia, um depósito votivo foi descoberto contendo cultura material que poderia ser ligada a um edifício de culto nas proximidades. Devido à dimensão limitada da escavação, a estrutura em si não foi descoberta, apesar de elementos arquitetônicos, como *antefixes* confirmou a sua existência. O santuário foi construído no século IV a. C., no extremo sul da antiga Stabianus, em uma localização topográfica chave. Os achados foram datados a partir de meados do século IV até o fim do segundo século antes de Cristo. Entre as terracotas, a descoberta mais significativa foi a Athena carregando um escudo e usando um barrete frígio. A ausência de armas implica que a deusa era uma divindade protetora benevolente, talvez uma Athena Ilias. A iconografia reflete a identidade política e cultural das populações locais durante um momento político crucial que deve ser visto no contexto da romanização. As últimas descobertas indicam que o local foi abandonado no primeiro trimestre do primeiro século a. C., talvez ligada à destruição de Stabiae por Sulla. Marcadores graves são evidências de que num período subsequente, entre o século I a. C. e o século I d. C., a área do santuário foi usada como uma necrópole.

Palavras-chave: Culto; Athena; Stabiae; Privati.

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ABSTRACT

In 1984, in the Privati neighbourhood of Castellammare di Stabia, a votive deposit was discovered containing material culture that could be linked to a nearby cult building. Due to the limited extent of the excavation the structure itself was not uncovered, although architectural elements such as antefixes confirmed its existence. The shrine was built in the fourth century BC at the southernmost end of the ancient ager Stabianus, in a key topographical location. Finds were dated from the mid-fourth century to the end of the second century BC. Among the terracottas, the most significant find was a standing Athena carrying a shield and wearing a Phrygian cap. The absence of weapons implies that the goddess was a benevolent protective deity, perhaps an Athena Ilias. The iconography reflects the political and cultural identity of the local populations during a crucial political moment that should be seen within the context of Romanization. The latest finds indicate that the site was abandoned in the first quarter of the first century BC, perhaps linked to Stabiae's destruction by Sulla. Grave markers are evidence that in a subsequent period, between the first century BC and the first century AD, the shrine area was used as a necropolis.

Key words: cult, shrine, Athena, Stabiae, Privati.

The discovery of a votive deposit in the Privati neighbourhood of Castellammare di Stabia was one of a series of chance finds that took place in the mid-1980s during construction works on a tunnel for the SS145, the Sorrentine state road² (see Miniero, 1987, 179-185; Miniero, 1997, 11; Bonifacio, 2001, 109; Miniero, 2002, 11-12; Fig.1).

² The excavation was overseen by P. Miniero (then Director of Stabiae Archaeological Site) between April and June 1984.



Fig.1. General view of the excavation area: the remains of the votive deposit can be seen in the centre.

The shrine was strategically located in a key position overlooking both the road that led to the Sorrentine Peninsular³ and the internal route that led through the Crocelle pass to the Amalfi Coast⁴ (Fig. 2). The cult site was found at the southernmost end of the ancient *ager Stabianus*⁵, on the slopes of Mount Coppola (one of the peaks of the Lattari mountain chain, which also includes Mount Faito) and to the west of a deep natural valley, down which flows the Calcarella torrent⁶.

³ The route was lined by necropoleis from the second half of the fourth century BC, these were discovered in 1932 near to the medieval castle of Pozzano and in the Scanzano neighbourhood in the eighteenth century, see Maiuri, 1933, 332-336; Di Capua, 1935, 166-173; Senatore, 2001, 26-27. On the reconstruction of the possible road route, see Russo, 1998, 27-29. In the 1990s two archaic tombs were discovered in the Carcarella neighbourhood, not far from the Privati votive deposit; cf. Sodo, 2010, 77-85.

⁴ This ancient landscape is indicated by the discovery of structures related to a *villa rustica* dating back at least as far as the first century BC cf. Miniero, 1988, 231-292.

⁵ For an alternative interpretation, see De Caro, 2002, 146.

⁶ The votive deposit was discovered about 2km from the Varano plain, the location of the pre-Roman Stabiae cf. Camardo, 1989, 9 and bibliography.



Fig.2. Aerial view of the southern part of the ager Stabianus in AD 79. In yellow are the hypothesized routes that connected Stabiae to the settlements on the Sorrentine Peninsular and the Amalfi Coast.
Image: Google Earth with details added by the author.

Once the volcanic material from the AD 79 eruption of Mount Vesuvius was removed, a terrace was revealed. It was bordered on two sides by *opus incertum* walls (A - B); although they did not run in parallel they both lay on a general east-west orientation⁷ (Fig. 3). The foundation trench of another masonry structure abutted the northern structure and its excavation led to the discovery of two rectangular grey tuff blocks laid as if for a course of headers and stretchers (C). These were interpreted as part of a previous structure, reused for the construction of the *opus incertum* walls (Miniero, 1997, 12; Miniero, 2002, 13).

⁷ Only a small part of the shrine was uncovered within the 15 x 12m trench.

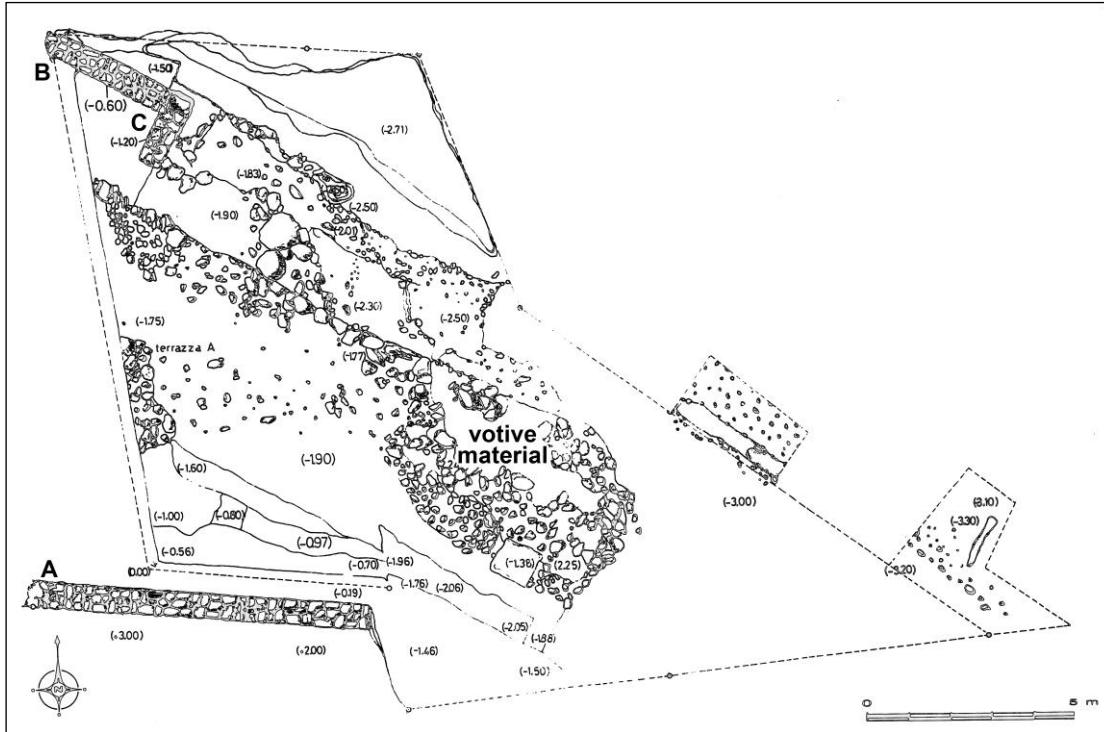


Fig.3. Plan of the excavation area. The *opus incertum* walls are indicated with the letters A, B and C. In the centre is a pit where the votive material was deposited. Image: Miniero 1997.

The floor surface, dated to the same phase as the *opus incertum* structures, sloped slightly downwards following the orientation of the underlying ridge and had partly crumbled into the valley below. Surface cleaning revealed an irregular-shaped pit filled with the remains of votive material that could be linked to a female deity⁸ (Miniero 2001, 21-22 with the related materials catalogue on pp. 90-115), probably worshipped in a nearby cult building that unfortunately has not yet been discovered⁹ (Fig. 4).

⁸ The pit was 3m long and 2m wide.

⁹ The reasons why the excavation was not extended are given in Miniero 1997, p. 11 and note 4.



Fig.4. Close up of the material found within the pit. Two antefixes depicting Athena and Hercules can be seen in the centre, while a child's face in terracotta can be seen in the bottom right corner.

The deposit was probably created when the space was restructured or converted for its new purpose¹⁰ (Miniero, 1997, 14; Bonifacio, 2001, 109; Miniero, 2002, 15). This hypothesis is supported by the discovery of various architectural elements, in particular antefixes in the shape of the head of Athena wearing a Phrygian cap, associated with others showing the face of Hercules emerging from acanthus scrolls (Miniero, 1997, 11 and 18-19) (Fig.5). These find close parallels with others from Punta della Campanella, Pompeii and other sites in the Campania region and would seem to point to the existence in the area of a cult building constructed at the end of the fourth century BC (De Caro, 1992, 173-178). The discovery of these elements led Miniero to hypothesize that the shrine was rebuilt in the third or second centuries BC (Miniero, 1997, 14; Miniero, 2002, 15-16).

However, a re-examination of the excavation data allows a new interpretation to be put forward. In fact, the finds that provide a *terminus post quem* for the votive

¹⁰ Fragments of finds from various fills can be joined back together, showing that the deposit was created in the context of a complex re-organization of the shrine.

deposit all sit within the period from the end of the second century BC to the beginning of the first century AD (Miniero, 1997, 14 and 35; Bonifacio, 2001, 111). These were found as various fragments in a range of fills and can now be reassembled and associated with different antefixes (Miniero, 1997, 14; Bonifacio, 2001, 109). It therefore seems plausible to imagine that the decorative features were used until the shrine was abandoned at a time when the space was reorganized on a large scale.



Fig.5. Antefixes depicting the head of Athena with a Phrygian cap and of Hercules emerging from acanthus scrolls (end of the fourth century BC).

In the upper part of the fill, a block of grey tuff supported by two short pilasters made up of unmortared pieces of tile and stones were found in the middle of the pit and were interpreted as a small votive altar (Miniero, 1997, 12; Miniero, 2002, 15-16).

The material culture essentially cover a period from the mid-fourth to the end of the second century BC, with a distribution that is concentrated in two distinct periods: between the last quarter of the fourth and the beginning of the third century BC (Miniero, 1997, 11-56). The first cluster is characterized by miniature ceramics (Di Giovanni – Gasperetti, 1997, 35-39) and black glazed pottery (Bonifacio - Miniero – Sodo, 1997, 30-34) from Irnhi and Neapolis (Cantilena, 1997, 39-49); the second phase

instead includes a significant number of coins from Rome and Ebusus (Ibiza), evidence that the shrine was probably used by mercenaries (Miniero, 1997, 14; Cantilena, 1997, 39-49; Bonifacio, 2001, 111).

Some of the cult practices have been revealed by analysing the numerous votive terracottas. The recurring presence of *kourotrophoi* statuettes of varying sizes, from nearly life-size to miniature, show that the female sphere and, in particular, requests for fertility were key features. Miniero (1997, 14) also associated the pottery animals (interpreted as symbolic sacrificial victims) and Tanagra statuettes, votive gifts from women to the deity (D'Ambrosio, 1997, 19-27). The ceramics suggest that the ritual also included sacred banquets with offerings and consumption of food, related to the deposition of drinking vessels (Torelli, 2002, 141).

The discovery of a small terracotta in the shape of a female head covered with a *polos* is evidence that the earliest use of the shrine dates to the fifth century BC¹¹. Some small bronzes can also be attributed to the same period, one of which depicts a discus thrower (perhaps forming part of a candelabra), which has close parallels to Etruscan finds (D'Ambrosio, 1997, 19-27). Although this material is isolated from the broader, later context and is not necessarily indicative of an archaic cult, it does in any case reveal important features that unite elements of Magna Graecia with others from the Etruscan world, as can also be seen in the contemporary burials found in the Madonna delle Grazie neighbourhood of Stabiae¹².

Much more indicative of the type of cult practices that took place in the shrine are the terracottas representing deities. The most common terracotta is a standing

¹¹ Miniero suggests a Locri production for it on the basis of autoptic analysis of the fabric; Miniero, 2002, 16.

¹² A brief overview of this necropolis can be found in Sorrentino – Viscione, 2001, 19-20 and the relative finds catalogue. The discovery of the Madonna delle Grazie necropolis to the north of the Pianoro di Varano would confirm a pre-Roman settlement at nearby Stabiae. Recently another “out of town” shrine has been found in the Petraro neighbourhood, near to the ancient settlement. This can be dated to between the fourth and the third centuries BC on the basis of the finds: see Bonifacio, 2004, 199-200.

Athena, wearing a Phrygian cap and carrying a shield¹³ (Fig.6). This type has been found in the *Athenaion* at Punta della Campanella (Russo, 1990, p. 236) and in some of the deposits at the Doric temple in Pompeii (D'Alessio, 1999, 38), where perhaps this type of Athena, in life-size dimensions, was used as the cult statue (Zancani Montuoro, 1990, 257-259). The absence of weapons shows the reassuring and protective nature of this goddess, and De Caro should be given credit for first associating it with the Ilias Athena, within the context of a political programme related to the Rome/Campania alliance of 338 BC (De Caro, 1992, 173-178).



Fig.6. Terracotta statuette of Athena wearing a Phrygian cap (third century BC).

This iconography, which is found in the architectural decoration of many sanctuaries in the Campania region from the second half of the fourth century to the beginning of the second century BC, denotes the political and cultural identity of the local populations in a crucial political moment, and should be seen as part of the broader phenomenon of Romanisation (Cerchiai, 2002, 32-33). Recent studies have explored the reasons for the spread of this iconography in a period that saw the assertion of *civitas sine suffragio* politics in Campania (Cerchiai, 2002, 32-33). The

¹³ On the iconography of the Athena with a Phrygian cap cf. De Caro, 1992, 173-178; Breglia Pulci Doria, 1998, 97-108.

Athena with a Phrygian cap, linked to the myth of the Palladium, seems evidence of the Roman and Capuan *syngeneia* with regards to their shared Trojan origin (Cerchiai, 2002, 33). On the other hand, the literary sources link the foundation of the Campanian town to the Trojan *Capys*, through a process that emphasizes the role of Aeneas (Cerchiai, 2002, 33). A tradition that can be linked to Athena's role as the protector of sailors proposed by Breglia¹⁴ and which Carlo Rescigno has recently reconnected to the town of Neapolis¹⁵ (Rescigno, 2010, 195-196). In the context of this discussion, the hypothesis that the Phrygian cap was associated with the aristocracy cannot be ignored (Torelli, 2002, 137-144), as Rescigno has made links to the Dioscuri in the context of Neapolis' influence (Rescigno, 2010, 196).

An Athena Iliaca, alluding to the Palladium myth, seems to confirm the increased influence of this cult as Rome expanded into this area of Campania, where it was used as a tool for ideological propaganda, alluding to a common origin, with those populations who traditionally identified themselves with the Nucerian *ethnos* (Miniero, 2002, 19). In addition, it is generally agreed that the second half of the fourth century BC was a key moment in the Romanisation of Campania (Rescigno - Senatore, 2009, 415-462). In 316 BC the Nucerians allied themselves with the Samnites against Rome, leading a short time later to the invasion of the *ager Nucerinus* and victory against the Romans (310 BC). Only two years later the Roman army reacted to this affront, conquering Nuceria under the leadership of Q. Fabius Maximus Rullianus. The so-called Nucerian League was defeated and the communities of the Sarno Valley came under Roman control¹⁶.

The Privati shrine seems, therefore, to have been located within a local network that was relatively homogeneous in cultural terms, as shown by the figure of

¹⁴ On the relationship between Athena and sailors, in her role as protector of Odysseus, see Breglia Pulci Doria, 1998, 107.

¹⁵ This opinion is also shared by De Caro, 1992, 173-178; Scatozza, 2001, 223-310; Cerchiai, 2002, 29-36.

¹⁶ For a synthesis of these events related to Stabiae, see Senatore, 2001, 25-27. On the Nucerian League, see Senatore, 2001a, 185-266.

Athena with a Phrygian cap who characterized an area that included not only Punta della Campanella (Russo, 1990), Stabiae (Miniero, 1997) and Pompeii (D'Alessio 1999) but also the settlements of the Sarno¹⁷ and Sele plains, such as Fratte (Greco – Pontrandolfo, 1990, p. 65), Pontecagnano (Cerchiai, 1984, 250; Cristofani 1992, 61-66), Paestum (Cipriani, 2002, 37-46), and also the island of Ischia (Scatozza, 1997, p. 191 note 12) and even the town of Cuma (Rescigno 2010, p. 196, note 49). In this context the association between Athena and Hercules should be re-evaluated, as protective deity of *emporia* and the founding hero of these communities (Pontrandolfo 2002, pp. 147-152; Pesando 2006, p. 56). It is this very characteristic that seems to define these cult places as shrines in transition, rather than just shrines on the borders (De Caro 2002, p. 146).

Returning to the material discovered in the Privati shrine, alongside the Athena with a Phrygian cap, some female busts with *polos* were also found, which could refer to a particular feature of the cult linked to death and the afterlife, or rather to the sphere of the Kore-Persephone (D'Ambrosio 1997, 13-23 and in particular to table 10). It should be noted that in one example both Aphrodite and Artemis were found¹⁸ (Miniero, 1997, 16; D'Ambrosio, 1997, 24-25).

Among the finds that provide a *terminus post quem* for the final phase of the shrine's life are some Dressel I and III lamps (Miniero 1997, p. 35) and some Republican coins (Cantilena 1997, pp. 39-49) that provide a date for its abandonment in the first quarter of the first century BC, and can be seen in relation to the Social Wars and the destruction carried out by Sulla (Camardo, 1989, 9-11; Miniero, 1997, 14; Senatore, 2001, 23-38). Some *columelle* (stele in the shape of a stylised head) are evidence that

¹⁷ At Nuceria the only evidence for the Athena cult came from excavations of 1957-58. A *promachos* type was found where the goddess is depicted in the act of brandishing a spear with her right hand while holding a shield with her left hand. She wears a long chiton and on her head has a crested helmet; Senatore, 2001a, p. 237-239.

¹⁸ The presence of Aphrodite and Artemis should not be a surprise in a shrine where a female divinity was worshipped as a protector of fertility and birth. However, as Marici Magalhaes has already pointed out, the location of a shrine dedicated to the Venus Stabiana in this area should be ruled out. Cf. Magalhaes, 2001, 271.

the area that had once been occupied by the shrine was later used as a necropolis between the first century BC and the first century AD (Fig. 7). Of particular note are some freedmen of the gens Poppaea who were buried here after cremation, thus marking a clean break with the previous phase's forms and types of occupation (Miniero, 1997, 17; Magalhaes, 1999, 224-235; Bonifacio, 2001, 111).



Fig.7. Detail of a columella in the necropolis that grew up in the area that had previously been the site of the shrine (first century BC to first century AD).

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