

The Sanctuary of the Divine Palikoi: Cult Activities and Economic Activities around the Sacred Lakes

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The Sanctuary of the Divine Palikoi was the main cult center of Sicily's indigenous Sikel people. It was known to Greek and Latin authors throughout Antiquity, and its location has been known to the scholarly world since the 16th century. Limited archaeological exploration of the site, called Rocchicella di Mineo, was conducted in the 1960s by Luigi Bernabo Brea and Paola Pelagatti, while consistent excavation and development of the site as a visitable location began in the 1990s (fig. 1).¹

The cult of the Divine Palikoi must have been a major presence in eastern Sicily and the source of major political power; according to evidence from the excavations and the information derived from the literary sources, it even was an economic focus for the centres in the Margi river valley.



Fig. 1: Rocchicella – Mineo, aerial view.

The core of the sanctuary was a series of so-called ‘boiling lakes’ that were located on the plain below the low hill. The built structures of the sanctuary were erected around and on these hills as a kind of service area. The natural phenomenon, which is described by several ancient authors such as Hippys of Rhegion and Diodorus Siculus, consisted in the movement of water that seemed to boil, although it was not hot, and emitted upward jets accompanied by noises similar to those of thunder. Other notable aspects were said to be the smell of sulphur and the danger of the vapours present in the surrounding area.²

The phenomenon was thought to be the manifestation of twin boys born of the nymph Thalia and Zeus, boys who had been hidden under the earth by their mother in order to escape the wrath of Zeus’ consort, Hera. The waters of the lakes were said to be used for *ordalia*, or capital trials, as they could determine the truth of sworn statements written on tablets thrown into the water. According to the ancient author Polemon, if the tablet floated, the statement was true; if not, it was false. The fame of the sanctuary was due to the sacrality of the oaths and the juridical validity of its trials. The sanctuary was also considered to have oracular powers consulted at times of drought, and in Roman times the sanctuary offered asylum to fugitive slaves.

Geologically the phenomenon is a combination of vulcanological activity along the interface between the African and the European tectonic plates and the dissolution of limestone beneath the ground surface that produces carbon dioxide.³ While dramatic graphic illustrations and photographs of the lakes were made in the 18th and 19th centuries, today the water is completely missing, and instead the phenomenon is used as an economic resource that provides carbon dioxide for bubbly beverages and other purposes. The archaeological structures, which were built at a safe distance and a discretely higher elevation from the lakes, are preserved as an archaeological park.

The archaeological reality is actually quite complex and rich. The sequence of occupation runs seemingly without interruption from the Mesolithic period through the Middle Ages. Not many locations can boast that long a history! The areas of occupation include the gentle slope that extends below a large grotto, the area in front of the grotto itself, where there are the remains of the sanctuary’s service structures, and the upper region of the Rocchicella, where there is a small settlement and another sanctuary. The two areas, one above and one below, are connected by a long, monumental stairway.

The site is perhaps best known for its monumental buildings of the 5th century BC, and, in a very prominent position, a *hestiaterion* (fig. 2). In Hellenistic times, a monumental platform was built in front of this building, and the platform must have given a fantastic, panoramic view out toward the lakes. The monumental buildings of the Classical period, which obliterated a preceding complex dating as early as the 7th century BC, could well be attributable to an historical figure, whom Diodorus calls ‘Douketios’. This leader created a league of Sikel cities that for a time asserted their independence from the colonial Greek cities, such as Syracuse and Agrigento. The monumental buildings, which now have been excavated almost completely, are all part of a larger layout with



Fig. 2: Rocchicella – Mineo, *hestiaterion*.

common axes that extend to the boiling lakes and even to the settlement to the east, Mineo, which was said to be the hometown of Douketios. (fig. 3)

Diodorus' account shows us that the sanctuary and its buildings were still quite functional at the outset of the Roman Empire, but excavation tells us that by the later 3rd century AD the *hestiaterion* had been transformed into a farm structure. By the 6th century AD, the building was covered by an apsidal chapel and a new, Byzantine settlement had been built over much of the area on the gentle slope below.⁴

We do not really know when the cult of the Divine Palikoi came into being. It is attested as a presence as early as the 7th century BC, but there was much cult activity before that, too, as early as the Copper Age (*facies di Malpasso*). In the area in front of the grotto, ten pits have been identified in the compact soil of an area bordered on the south by a mighty double wall (fig. 4–5). The pits had inside them grindstones and vases, in particular ribbed cups on high feet, and carbonized animal bones. It seems plausible that if the cult activity in historical times was derived from the presence of the geological phenomenon of the boiling lakes, then the same phenomenon may have prompted similar activities also during prehistoric times. The end of the cult seems likely to have come with the creation of farm facilities within the former *hestiaterion* and the subsequent renaming of the boiling lakes as the *Laghi di Naphtia*, as they are known today.

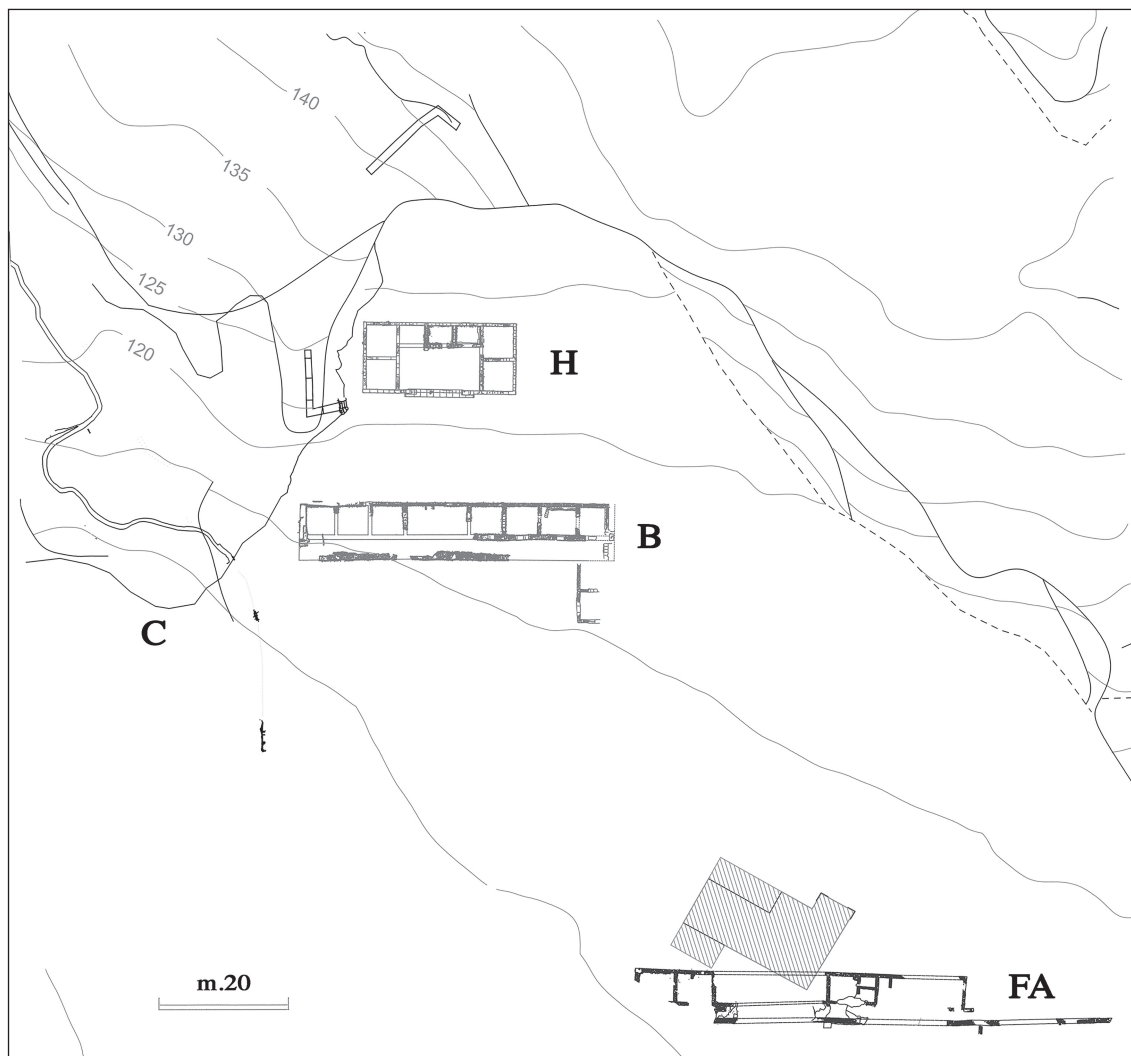


Fig. 3: Rocchicella – Mineo, *hestiatērion* (H), *stoai* (B, FA), and canali (C).

In the area of the Grotto, the 5th century BC complex includes the *hestiatērion* and the *stoai* (Stoa B and Stoa FA). Diodorus uses the term ‘*stoa*’ in his description of the site, and the *hestiatērion* is likely to have been the principal building that he calls ‘every kind of amenable lounging-place’. The structure (fig. 2) has been identified because of its four dining rooms, two on each side of a central foyer, that are of standard Greek dining room dimensions (5 × 5 m) and have off-centre doorways for the arrangement of dining couches along the walls. There may even be a portion of one couch structure preserved in one of the rooms. An important use of the *hestiatērion* may well have been political rather than religious. The sanctuary was probably also the seat of the league of Sikel cities created by Douketios, and it seems likely that this structure served as a place of meeting and deliberation, albeit in smaller groups.⁵

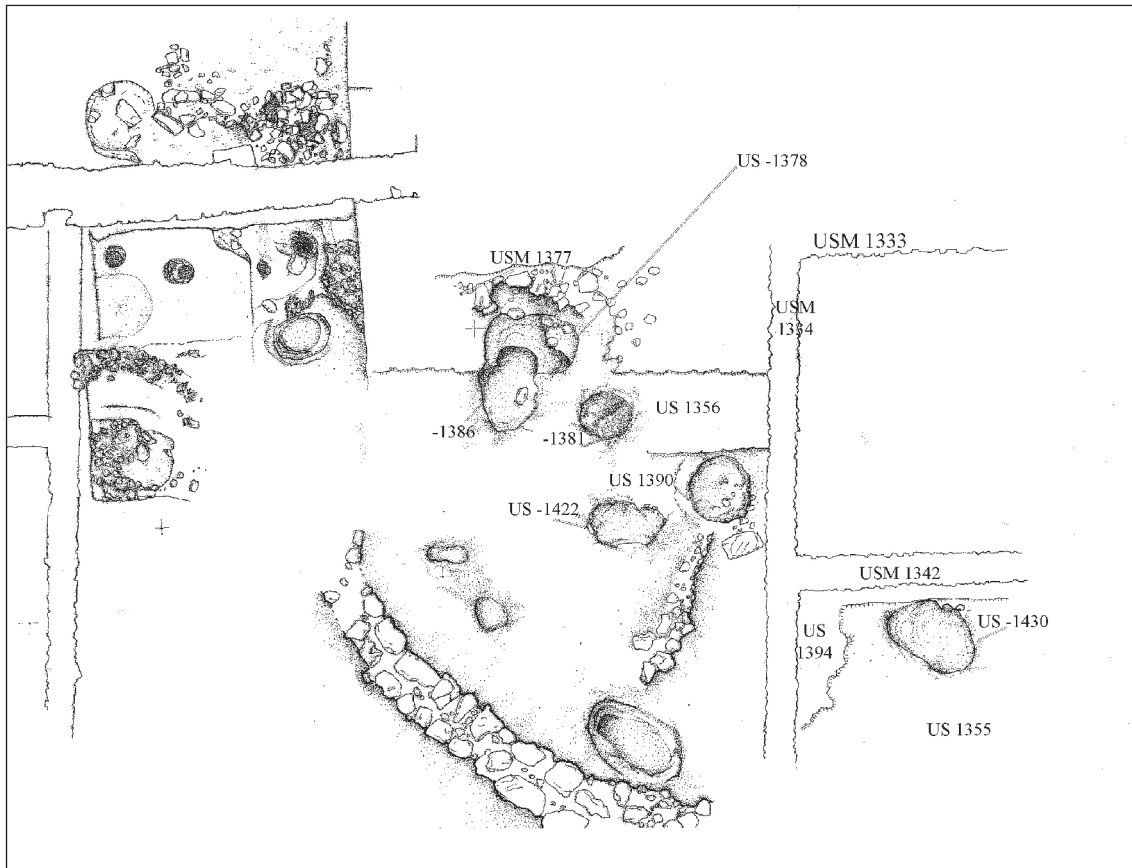


Fig. 4: Rocchicella – Mineo, Copper age structures and pits.

The *stoai*, on the other hand, were multi-purpose buildings, which could have served a variety of cultic and economic functions. Both Stoa B and Stoa FA, the latter of which probably marked the edge of the built service area, were oriented together with the *hestiaterion* directly toward the lakes. Stoa B is marked by what appears to be an open, central room (Room 6, fig. 6), which was larger than the other rooms and had a *trapeza*; around this there were found Attic black glazed cups, an iron dagger, kitchen pottery, grindstones, the remains of meals such as shells, and a tub resting on a stone support.⁶

In a sector separated by a wall made of mudbrick, there is a *bothros* inside which we found *skyphoi*, two lamps, a fragment of a grindstone, carbon fragments from fir trees, the burnt bones of very young sheep and goats, and five coins of Camarina (two *tetrantes* and three *onkiaiai*). On the edge of the *bothros* inside a small pit there were four coins (two of Leontinoi and two of Gela), and on the floor of the room were three other coins, two of Camarina and one of Agrigento.⁷

In the *trapeza*, we can identify the *mensa* for the divinity according to *theoxenia*, a religious rite well documented in the literary sources and in Sicily at Selinunte by a lead inscription dating back to the first half of the 5th century BC.⁸ Divinities honoured with



Fig. 5: Rocchicella – Mineo, Copper age pit.

this practice include Apollo, the Dioscuri, and heroes in general. The practice included the preparation of a table spread with meat, focaccia, fruit, wine, and other drinks offered in cups, and it could be accompanied by blood sacrifices, in our case documented in the nearby *bothros*. In the pit we found the bones of sheep and pig and *skyphoi* that seemed to be broken in a ritual manner.⁹

The analysis of the arrangement of the finds allows us to hypothesize a ritual that included:

1. a purification with water, collected in the large *pithos* that was found next to the wall, using the *louterion* found next to the *bothros*,
2. a libation of liquids during which the *skyphoi* were used, then ritually broken, and abandoned on the ground or thrown into the *bothros*, and,
3. the killing of animals and the deposition of their remains.

The nature of the liquids offered on the table and/or poured into the *bothros* can be suggested by the tub and by the crushed grape berries found nearby. It is interesting to note that only *skyphoi* were used in the area of the *bothros* for the libations, while cups were used in the area of the *trapeza* for the preparation of the table. The iron dagger found on the floor under the *trapeza* may have been used during the bloody sacrifice. The pres-

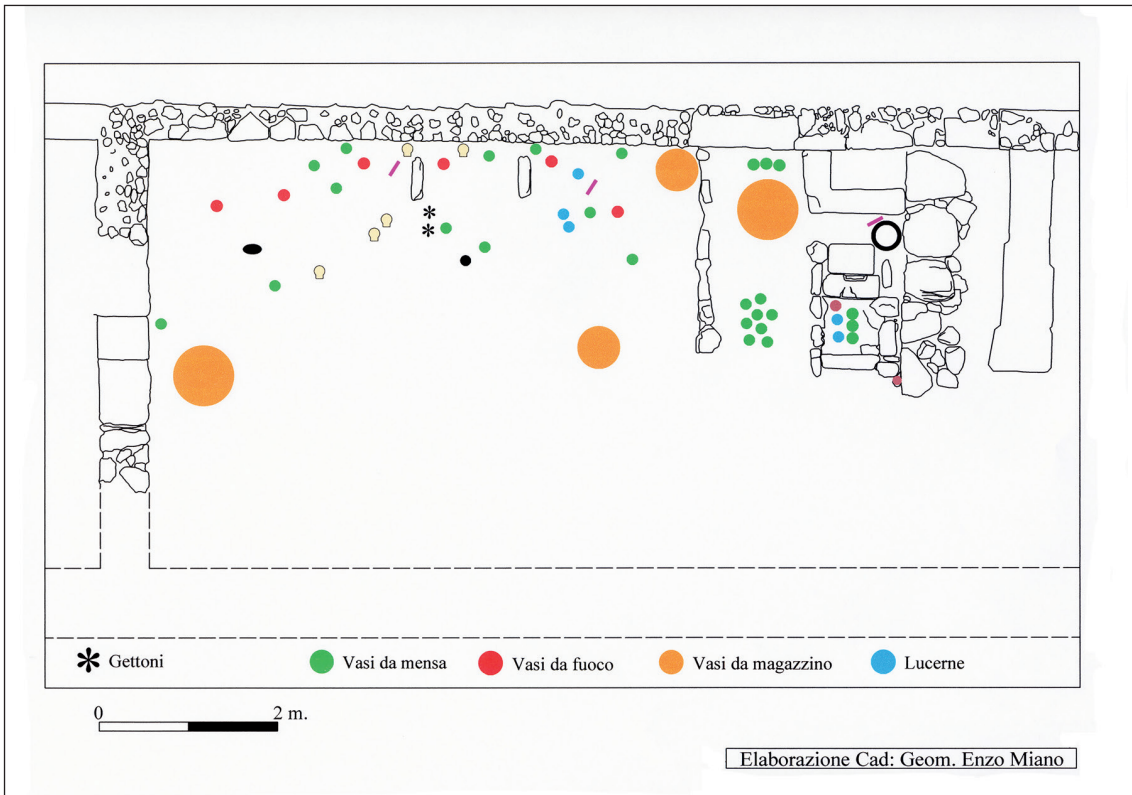


Fig. 6: Rocchicella – Mineo, Stoa B – room 6.

ence of lamps both in the area of the *trapeza* and in the *bothros* area suggests that these actions took place at night, or in any case after sunset, elements that refer to the ritual of offerings to chthonic deities like the Palikoi, divinized heroes strictly connected to the underground.

We know from Polemon (*FHG III* fr. 83) that in the ritual related to oaths at the Sanctuary of the Palikoi the accused would appear purified and crowned, dressed in a chiton without a belt and shaking a twig while approaching the edge of the crater (as Polemon called the lakes), from which the accused must read the formula of the oath. This oath involved not only the accused that was swearing, but also those that made him swear. It is unclear who the latter could be: accusers or judges? the priests of the sanctuary? It should be noted that those who swear have the obligation to provide guarantors that must cover the purification costs necessary in the event of perjury. Since the punishment consisted in the immediate death of perjurer, this death would result in a state of impurity of the sacred precinct that the deceased would not be able to correct. We can imagine, therefore, that the defendant making the oath, prior to its utterance, was expected to make the sacrifice or otherwise to provide the materials for the purification offering that could then be deposited by the priests, as we see in the *bothros* of Room no. 6. The discovery of the coins both inside the *bothros* and inside the little pit next to it suggest that this action was accompanied by the payment of a kind of purification tax.

Stoa FA was an architectural border between the area of the lakes and the built sanctuary. The commercial function of this stoa, which may have been two stories high, can be suggested by the decentralized location of the entrance door to the rooms so as to make possible the insertion of a window that could facilitate commercial activities: among the finds from the stoa and the area around are a bronze stylus and transport amphorae. The multiplicity of rooms available in both the *stoai* would suggest that multiple cultic and economic activities could have been incorporated into the physical structure of the sanctuary.

In addition to the construction of monumental buildings at the site, one must also consider the marvelous engineering that is displayed particularly in the management of water.¹⁰ The Rocchicella hill itself is a porous geological entity that holds water and offers water in the form of springs. Water came from many sources (some regularly, some intermittently), and a system was created, since Archaic times, both to gather and distribute this life-giving liquid. Sharply cut channels brought water down along the western edge of the grotto area and from above the area of Stoa B. They seem to flow down to the alignment of a much larger canal that runs along the western flank of the Rocchicella for approximately 330 m (fig. 7). This latter structure is of monumental proportions that can be seen in the vertical cuts in the rock that permitted the passage of a channel that was roughly one meter deep below a flanking walkway. The channel gathered water along the way and distributed it in several directions by means of an irregularly sloping base and a series of overflow points.



Fig. 7: Rocchicella – Mineo, canal.

Since at least one tract of the channel goes in the direction of the lakes, it is possible to think that this work could have served also to regulate the water level of the lake, which by itself could count only on the rain and some ground water as sources, and that it was important for the performance of the ritual there to have a certain amount of water. The great importance that the correct conservation of water had at the sanctuary can also be understood from the fact that in this sanctuary not only the water itself received worship but also that water was the main instrument of ritual. In addition to the purifying ablutions common to all sanctuaries, at the Sanctuary of the Palikoi the movement of water in the lake was the very reason for the rise of the cult and represented the fundamental element of the trials.

Water management was certainly important to every sanctuary, but particularly to sanctuaries of an oracular nature. For the climatic conditions of the Mediterranean, characterized by long summer droughts, water was important for hygiene. For this reason, water management was the responsibility of sanctuaries, which issued precise regulations and required certain fees to be paid to the sanctuary for the use of the water.¹¹ It was certainly in the interest of the sanctuary's authorities to create and develop a water system that would become a reference point for the district and its surrounding communities, and this is what our sanctuary seems to confirm.

To summarize, then, the cult activity at the sanctuary of the Divine Palikoi had economic significance in several respects. Water management may have permitted the sanctuary to control the rich agricultural resources of the surrounding territory. The "purification tax" required for ritual offerings and the information from Polemon on the guarantee that had to be given before trials suggests an economical value connected with the rituals themselves. Diodorus tells us that slaves that had succeeded in escaping from *latifunda* in his time and who made their way to the domain of the sanctuary were able to receive protection and obtain favourable treatment from their cruel masters through 'assurances' that were given to the sanctuary. This exchange seems to stand as some kind of payment, and the sanctuary administration must have held considerable temporal power or at least religious cache in order to exact it.

Although Diodorus Siculus talks of a town that was laid out at Palikè by Douketios, there is no known settlement other than the one on the plateau of the Rocchicella, which is laid out with streets but without recognizable public buildings. Effectively, the Sanctuary of the Divine Palikoi stands as a rural center, again, much akin to a medieval monastery. Nevertheless, the presence of the sanctuary must have served as an economic focus for activities in the many centres that are found in the hills surrounding the Margi river valley, including Monte Catalfaro, Montagna di Ramacca, Occhiola, and Mineo itself. The Sanctuary of the Divine Palikoi would have been the focus of activity long before Douketios brought these centres together in a Sikel league, and the socio-economic reality that it represented was likely what kept it in existence long after the political demise of Sikel unity. Only the long-term, Mediterranean-wide changes in socio-economic organization that came with the evolution of the Roman Empire in Late

Antiquity would bring an end to the significance of the Sanctuary of the Divine Palikoi as a cult-center in its own territory. Continued exploration not only at the sanctuary itself, but also in neighbouring areas should help to clarify the nexus of cult activity and the lifeways of the Sikel heartland.

Notes

¹ Excavations by the “Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali di Catania” under the direction of Laura Maniscalco have been made with funds from the Regional Sicilian Government and from the European Community, and work continues to this day through a Florida Atlantic University project under the direction of Brian E. McConnell. See Maniscalco 2008; Maniscalco – McConnell 2003; and Maniscalco – McConnell 2015.

² Detailed analyses of the ancient sources are found in Bello 1960 and Cusumano 1990.

³ Caracausi et al. 2003.

⁴ Maniscalco 2008, 27–36; Cirelli 2008, 257; McConnell 2008.

⁵ Maniscalco – McConnell 2003, 170–177.

⁶ Maniscalco 2008, 58. 114–118; Randazzo 2008, 187–198, figs. 138–142.

⁷ The coins have been identified by Orazio La Delfa, who is studying the numismatic finds of the area.

⁸ Brugnone 2003.

⁹ Maniscalco 2008, 115–120; di Patti – Lupo 2008, 396.

¹⁰ La Fico Guzzo et al. 2015.

¹¹ Crouch 1993; Panessa 1983.

Image Credits

Fig. 1, 2, 5–7: photos and images by authors. – Fig. 3: dis. M. Puglisi – M. G. Currò, riel. Miano. – Fig. 4: dis. M. Puglisi – M. G. Currò.

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