

Economy of the Cult in Messapia

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Various Types of Evidence

The study of the economic aspects of cult practices in Messapia must necessarily take account of the geographical context of the Salento peninsula, a middle ground between the Ionian and Adriatic seas and a space of interaction between different cultures, in which the Greek settlements on the eastern shore of the Strait of Otranto, along the coasts of Albania and on the island of Corfu, played a fundamental role. To the west of the Salento, the large Hellenic colonies on the Gulf of Taranto, such as Taras and Metapontum, also developed very close relations with the indigenous peoples of Puglia.

In the last few decades, extensive international collaboration, promoted by the University of the Salento, has enabled the research into the settlements of Messapia to make significant progress and has made it possible to reconstruct the landscapes and settlement dynamics of a period from the early Iron Age to the mid 3rd century BC, when this region was conquered by the Romans.¹

Within the systems of occupation and use of the territory, which gave rise to economic activities on various levels, manifestations of the sacred were structured in relation to the dynamics of agricultural production and mechanisms of exchange, the latter evident in coastal settlements in particular. The Messapian settlement system underwent radical transformation during the shift from the Archaic and Hellenistic periods, when a new cantonal organisation of the territory began to take shape, with the gradual emergence of a settlement hierarchy centred on the dominant towns. The latter were located inland but were linked to ports along the Ionian and Adriatic coasts, including Ugento, the port for which was Torre S. Giovanni, and Muro Leccese, with a port in Otranto.²

It should however be pointed out that in seeking to reconstruct the economic dimension of the cults in Messapian contexts, we do not have the same wealth of epigraphical documentation as is available for the sanctuaries of Greece. Indeed, in Athens and the *Heraia* of Samos and Argos for example, the inventories of the temple and the lists of expenses incurred for carrying out major building work show that the sanctuaries played a significant economic role, representing for the *polis* a fully-fledged financial fund. Indeed, the sacred properties (*hiera chremata*) were used in banking transactions, reflecting the close relationship between “the economy of the gods” and “the economy of humans”.³

The Italiote *poleis* of Magna Graecia are characterised by the same shortage of epigraphical evidence concerning the economic dimension of the sacred, which is in no way comparable to the discoveries of Greece proper. Indeed, the famous bronze Tablets of Heraclea and the complex of bronze plates belonging to the sanctuary of Zeus in Locri Epizefiri represent exceptions. The former refer to ownership of land by the sanctuaries of Dionysus and Athena, while the latter record the granting of loans,

in accordance with procedures that were however completely different from those of Greek sanctuaries, such as Delos, which contained very harsh prescriptions regarding the repayment of sums to the treasury of the temple.⁴

Extremely scarce in this regard are epigraphical attestations in the Messapian language. On a slab from a tomb in Carovigno is the term *argorapandes*, translated as “monetary magistrate”, while the decree of Brindisi and the figured relief in Salve contain the term *argorian* (silver-coin), considered to be a calque from the Greek *argyron*.⁵

For this reason the economic dimension of the places of worship in Messapian contexts can only be investigated via other types of documentation, first and foremost archaeological, by means of traditional approaches, but also with the tools of ethnoanthropology, which highlight the mobilisation of social labour by means of communal rituals where individuals participate in ceremonial activities such as the *travail-fête*. The latter term is used by Michael Dietler to refer to the practice in African societies of holding feasts, in which the distribution and consumption of alcoholic beverages enables the mobilisation of a labour force, with which to perform work of collective interest.⁶ It is in this perspective that the ceremonial contexts discovered in the Salento should be considered. These include Muro Leccese, where ritual practices involving sacrifices and communal meals, designed to strengthen social bonds and relations with the dominant figures, took place.⁷ In the Archaic period, the residential complex of Castello d'Alceste in S. Vito dei Normans had a central communal space with an altar composed of a simple pile of stones.⁸ The consumption of wine during these commensal practices has been highlighted by Grazia Semeraro, particularly in her study of the distribution of commercial Greek amphorae inside the Archaic settlement of Cavallino.⁹ In addition, chemical analyses of residues found in matt-painted Iapygian ceramics indicate that they contained alcoholic beverages such as beer, obtained from the fermentation of cereals.¹⁰

A Typology of Places of Worship in Messapia

Our analysis of the economic aspects will therefore take account of the various types of places of worship, in which the surplus resulting from agricultural activities and commercial transactions was invested.¹¹ In these contexts the following factors will be assessed: the level of investment in the various building projects; the use of imported craft knowledge; the acquisition and accumulation of precious goods.

On the basis of the archaeological evidence available today, the following typology of places of worship may be proposed:

1) Sanctuaries linked to the agricultural sphere, structured in accordance with Greek customs: sanctuaries dedicated to Demeter, including those of Monte Papalucio near Oria and S. Maria di Agnano, near Ostuni.

2) Polyadic places of worship: this category includes the context on the acropolis of Ugento, where the bronze statue of Zeus, dated to the Archaic period, was discovered.

3) Ancestor cults, linked to individual family groups: the Iron Age place of worship in Roca; the ritual contexts of Fondo Melliche near Vaste (8th–3rd centuries BC).

4) Places of worship sited near coastal landing sites, linked to commercial exchanges with Greek sailors: particularly significant are those present on the Ionian, characterised by the cult of Artemis Bendis: Leuca, the Porcinara cave, Torre S. Giovanni near Ugento,¹² Mancaversa and Madonna di Altomare. Discovered in the landing site near Ugento were *ostraka* with texts in Greek, consisting of lists of numbers (perhaps regarding commercial accounts and loans). Evidence of a small community of Greeks who had settled there comes from the excavation of some tombs, in which the composition of the grave goods is similar to the funerary rituals of Taranto (excavations 2014–2016, Laura Masiello and Paolo Schiavano).

5) Cults in small caves, attested in the Murge hills, linked to grazing practices.

Given the abundance of material discovered in the excavations, for which published descriptions are available, the sanctuary of Demeter in Monte Papalucio near Oria provides significant clues for assessing the system of offerings, the investment of resources linked to cult activities and the ways in which the community's collective goods were accumulated and could be used as a financial reserve.¹³ An example is the presence in the sanctuary of Demeter of silver coins from the mints of Magna Graecia¹⁴ (fig. 1) and thin figured plates of gilded silver.¹⁵ These highly valuable items should not however be considered in terms of the ownership and accumulation in the sanctuary of objects of value which would thereby form a treasury; they should rather be seen in relation to the ritual sacrifice of these resources as offerings to the divinity (sacrificial consumption). Indeed, both the coins and the silver plates were discovered in ash-rich layers containing food offerings and the remains of sacrificed piglets that had been entirely combusted (i.e. as a holocaust). Like the imported ceramics, they were among the goods that were set aside for votive depositions, reserved for the divinity, thereby removing them from the dynamics of circulation and financial management to the benefit of the sanctuary.

The Athenaion of Castro

A highly distinctive case is that of the Athenaion of Castro where, unlike other contexts in Messapia, the arrangement and complexity of the cult site can be recognised as clearly belonging to the Greek world rather than the indigenous culture, in which the investment of the community's collective energies in the construction of sanctuaries was rather limited. Indeed, Messapian places of worship consist of open-air structures surrounded by a perimeter wall, small structures inside caves, and areas marked by



Fig. 1: Oria. Archaeological Museum of Oria and the Messapians. Silver coins from the sanctuary of Monte Papalucio (Archaic period).

cippi and *stelae*.¹⁶ In contrast, the Athenaion of Castro can be interpreted with reference to the settlement's function as an emporium in a territory controlled by the indigenous inhabitants: given its strategic position, controlling the entrance to the Adriatic Sea, it became a meeting place for various peoples, Illyrian and Greek, from both the opposite shore of the Adriatic and the Hellenic colonies of the Gulf of Taranto. The site's topography, with the inlet dominated from above by the settlement's acropolis and the temple of Athena, also reflects the typical structure of an emporium. That it was a place of accumulation of wealth is explicitly confirmed by the testimony of Strabo (VI, 3,5), who writes: "entauta d'esti kai to tes Atenàs hieron plousion pote uparxan". The excavations, conducted in successive campaigns since 2000, have brought to light a haul of evidence consisting of both materials and structures that have taught us a great deal about the investment of resources in the sanctuary, which is seen in both the extraordinary architecture and the accumulation of wealth. The evidence also sheds light on the sacrificial consumption of collective resources in offerings and sacrifices, which unfolded in ways that are similar to the practices associated with Hellenic divinities. Indeed, in the words of Chankowski, the Greek divinities are "consommateurs de sacrifices" and "manieurs d'argent".¹⁷

Economic Activities Recognisable in the Sanctuary of Castro

Architectural Structures and Works of Sculpture

Considerable resources were destined to the construction of buildings, in accordance with approaches that have parallels in the building complexes of the colonial Greek world, whose economic characteristics were delineated in an important paper by Roland Martin, presented at the Taranto Conference of 1972, dedicated precisely to the theme of Economy and Society.¹⁸ The monumentalisation of the acropolis of Castro can be seen in this light: considerable quantities of calcarenite blocks were used to create the system of terracing and defence, inside which the structures of the temple and the altar, also built of stone, were located. Indeed, the creation of the sanctuary appears to have been closely linked to these major fortification works. By way of example, for the walls of a Messapian settlement of 60 hectares, it has been calculated that 65,000 m³ of blocks, equivalent to 8000 truckloads, would be required.¹⁹ The creation of the sanctuary of Athena in Castro, with the *temenos*, the altar and the temple, should be seen in relation to the construction of the walls. The bronze plates of Locri also state that to finance the construction of the fortifications and to produce weapons for the defence of the *polis*, resources drawn from the treasury of the temple were used.²⁰

A further aspect of this ambitious building project in Castro is the cost of bringing in craftsmen from Magna Graecia, particularly from Taras, who are credited with building the only temple of the Greek type present in Messapia. The façade, about 6 m wide,



Fig. 2: Castro. The triglyph in the pediment, reconstructed in wood (second half of the 4th century BC).

has a pediment with a central triglyph, a characteristic typical of the western Greek world, although to date it has been known only from scale models of temples and representations in figured terracottas and ceramics (fig. 2).²¹ A considerable financial commitment must also have been required for the creation of the cult statue of Athena, more than three metres high, consisting of two large blocks of *pietra leccese* building stone from the nearby quarries of Maglie-Cursi (fig. 3). The left arm that held the spear was attached to the shoulder by a lead-seated iron dowel, while the shield was created separately, perhaps in metal. A large commitment of resources was also needed for the series of sculpted slabs that formed a wall, interpreted either as forming a perimeter around the area of the altar or, more plausibly, as marking the top of the terrace of the sanctuary. About 1.50 m high and 1.85 m long, they bear reliefs with “peopled scrolls”, typical of the art of Taras in the 4th century BC, which are also found in Apulian red-figured ceramics and the sculptural decoration produced in the workshops of the Laconian city. Despite their considerable stylistic quality, the rather hurried rendering of the statue and reliefs suggests that the Greek craftsmen were required by their clients to complete the work in a limited period of time.²²

But with what resources were all these works financed? The phenomenon can be more readily understood with reference to the site’s function as an emporium and the intense interaction between the Messapian *principes* and the Greek community. It is plausible that tariffs were levied on the trade that took place in the port and paid to



Fig. 3: Castro. Virtual reconstruction of the cult statue of Athena Iliaca.



Fig. 4. Castro. Archaeological Museum. Rear of the statue of Athena with the letter *gamma* carved on the shoulder.

the sanctuary.²³ But Greek sanctuaries had other sources of income, as shown by the inscriptions on the bronze plates of Argos, dated to the second half of the 5th century BC.²⁴ On the basis of this evidence, the *Athenaion* in Castro could thus have drawn on the following resources:

- a – tithes, perhaps paid by Messapian settlements inland.
- b – gifts from the kings of nearby regions (Epirus etc.).
- c – interest on money lent.
- d – sale of the hides of sacrificed animals.
- e – sale of animals from sacred herds.

The resources obtained are believed to have been used for the organisation of feasts, cult furnishings and building work, but also for herdsmen's wages and the salaries of the personnel of the sanctuary itself, which was thus "a large-scale employer".

Accumulation and Management of the Sanctuary's Goods

An important feature of the cult statue of the goddess Athena was the Greek letter *gamma* (about 6 cm high) carved into the back of the left shoulder, to be considered a numeral corresponding to the number three (fig. 4). The same numbering system is found in other statues, such as the bronze "Hellenistic Prince" discovered in the wreck of Punta del Serrone near Brindisi. These marks have been interpreted as inventory numbers indicating a sanctuary's goods.²⁵ Thus it seems that this way of



Fig. 5: Castro. Archaeological Museum. Ivory ram's head (4th century BC).

registering items of property was also used in the sacred context of Castro. Typical of Greek contexts, it represents one of the ways, in which the *hiera chremata* were accumulated and managed. The wealth of data yielded by the excavations in this context of the *Akra Iapyghia* also makes it possible to distinguish goods attributable to sacrificial consumption and votive offerings (such as ceramics used for ritual libations, iron and bronze weapons, etc.) from items that were part of the sanctuary's accumulated wealth (such as furnishings with metal appliqué, vessels and statues made of marble from the Cyclades, fabrics and garments). This field is apparently referenced by the testimony of Lycophron (Alexandra, 852–855), datable to the 3rd century BC, which tells of how Menelaos, once he had arrived among the bellicose Iapygians, made an offering to the goddess Athena consisting of a bronze krater of Tamassos (Cyprus), a shield covered in leather and the sandals of his wife Helen. The group of *keimelia* discovered in the Athenaion included objects such as the gold ring holding a piece of vitreous paste in which was carved a representation of Aphrodite Urania on a swan, or the extraordinary ivory protome of a ram (fig. 5), perhaps the extremity of a metal *patera* which has a parallel in a silver specimen from the Tomb of the Prince of Vergina.²⁶ Indeed, in Magna Graecia contexts, ivory



Fig. 6: Castro. Archaeological Museum. Mould and bronze statuette of Athena Iliaca (4th century BC).

objects are extremely rare. They were probably produced in specialised workshops such as those that operated inside the palaces of Macedonia, where the finest specimens have been discovered. The presence in Castro of these small precious objects recalls the patterns of accumulation of goods documented in Hellenic sanctuaries, in which chryselephantine sculptures, gold utensils, silver and bronze artefacts and contemporary coinage constituted a reserve of wealth for the entire community. Of extraordinary importance in this context is the presence inside the sanctuary of finds reflecting the production *in loco* of metal artefacts.²⁷ A limestone mould was used for casting bronze statuettes (13 cm high) that represent the goddess wearing the Phrygian cap (fig. 6); the inside of the mould corresponds perfectly to the small bronze figure of Athena Iliaca discovered in 2008. XFR analyses have made it possible to verify the absence of metal residues inside the mould: it must therefore be one half of a bi-valve mould used for making a wax positive of the statuette which could then be used to make a new mould of refractory clay, in turn used to make a solid bronze figure exactly like the specimen discovered in the excavation of the sanctuary.

Another significant discovery is that of fragments of moulds for making fluted *phialai*, probably of silver (fig. 7).²⁸ The production inside the sanctuary of these metal vessels practically conferred a monetary value on the *phialai*, which were kept in the sanctuary as a financial reserve, the *chremata* thereby constituting a treasury of wealth that could be released back into circulation in case of need (see the examples of Athens, Samos, Didyma and Argos).

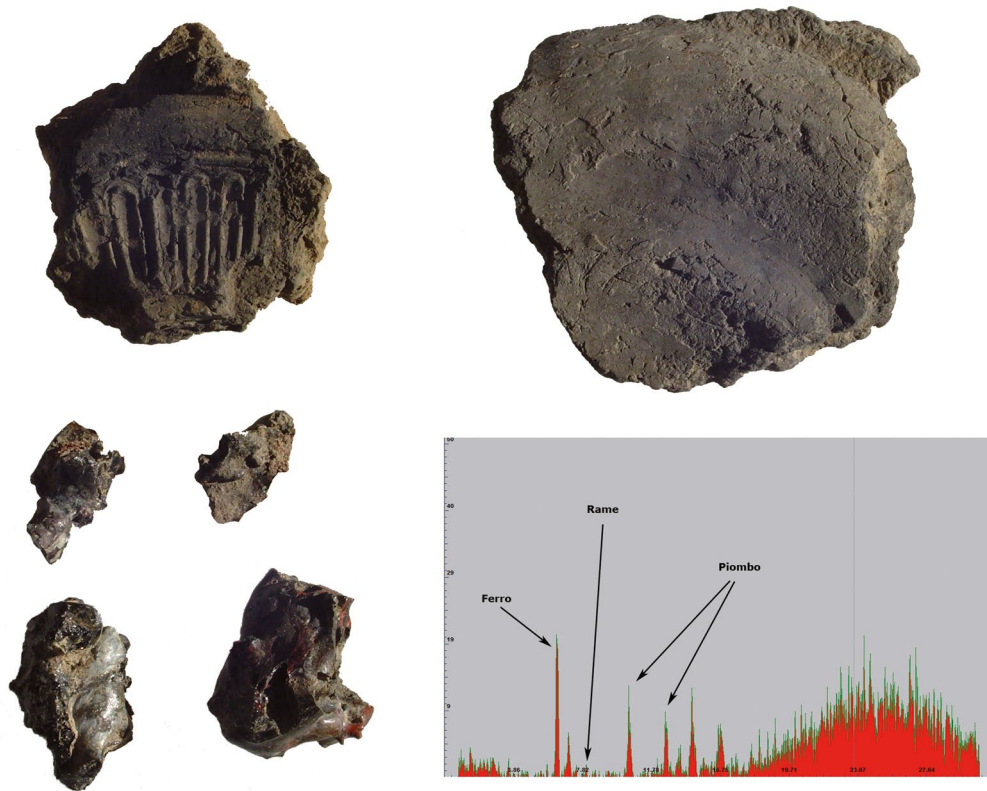


Fig. 7: Castro. Archaeological Museum. Fragments of casting moulds for metal *phialai*.

Sacrificial Consumption

The sanctuary also saw the sacrificial consumption of significant resources in the course of rituals in honour of the divinity. There may have been a direct link to local potters' workshops for the production of objects destined for the rite, especially the thousands of single-handled small bowls used for individual libations, but there was also considerable production of closed vessels and *trozzelle*.

Among the tributes paid to Athena were animal sacrifices that were partly reserved for the divinity and partly consumed on site, during collective banquets that served to strengthen the social bonds between the members of the Messapian communities, but also to confirm the alliance and interaction with their Greek counterparts. With its Doric frieze, the altar made of blocks, 3 m wide and presumably 8 m long, has the typical decoration and other features of a Greek altar. The discovery inside it of archaeological finds makes it possible to clarify aspects of the investment of resources and sacrificial consumption. Indeed, inside the altar, below the level of use, various faunal materials were deposited as part of a foundation sacrifice. They included bones belonging to numerous specimens of cattle, animals of greater value than the more frequently sacrificed sheep and goats. Arranged separately next to fragments of vessels, in a



Fig. 8: Castro. Athenaion, foundation deposit of the altar (second half of the 4th century BC).

primary position, were the bones: the skull and the lower part of the legs, which are thus recognised as the parts of the animal set aside for the divinity (fig. 8). In contrast, discovered among the mass of votive materials outside the altar were faunal finds pertaining to the other parts of the sacrificed animals, particularly ribs and vertebrae, clearly the remains of the consumption of ritual meals by the faithful.²⁹

Together with the rest of the archaeological evidence, the archaeo-zoological research makes it possible to highlight hitherto neglected aspects of the economy of Messapian society, not only concerning the familiar themes of livestock rearing and food, but also more complex questions linked to the religious sphere.

Notes

¹ Ringrazio Corrado Notario per la redazione di testo e immagini, Vito Giannico, Amedeo Galati e Gianni Ruggiero per le foto dei materiali di Castro.

² D'Andria 1991, 393–478; Auriemma 2004.

- ³ Maucourant 2005; on the relationship between sanctuary and polis, see the recent and extremely useful summary by Rita Sassu (2014).
- ⁴ Dignas 2002, 25.
- ⁵ De Simone – Marchesini 2002, 23.
- ⁶ Dietler 1990.
- ⁷ Giardino – Meo 2016, 77–82.
- ⁸ Semeraro – Monastero 2011, fig. 1.
- ⁹ Semeraro 1997, 351–353.
- ¹⁰ Semeraro 2016, 359–362; the results of the analyses are presented in the appendix by F. Notarstefano; see also Notarstefano 2012.
- ¹¹ For a general summary of Archaic places of worship in Southern Italy, see Mastronuzzi 2005, 156–162, with specific references to Messapia.
- ¹² For a general review of the issues concerning the cult of Artemis Bendis near coastal landing sites and an account of the excavations in Torre S. Giovanni (Ugento), conducted by the present author in 1975, see Vitolo 2015–2016.
- ¹³ Mastronuzzi 2013.
- ¹⁴ Siciliano 1990, 283–285.
- ¹⁵ Guzzo 1990, 274–281.
- ¹⁶ The presentation of the early excavation campaigns can be found in D’Andria 2009.
- ¹⁷ Chankovski 2005, 10.
- ¹⁸ Martin 1973, 185–206.
- ¹⁹ These defence works required an extraordinary mobilisation of human resources. Consider that in 399 BC, to build the fortifications of Syracuse, Dionysius brought in about 60,000 men from the nearby indigenous settlements, but also from the Italiote poleis and Greece proper (Diod. XIV,41, 1–3).
- ²⁰ Sassu 2014, 306–307.
- ²¹ Ismaelli 2012, 141–168.
- ²² A preliminary study can be found in D’Andria 2018, 55–65.
- ²³ Sassu 2014, 353; Athens took 2% of the value of the goods exchanged in Piraeus.
- ²⁴ Kritzas 2006.
- ²⁵ Daehner – Lapatin 2015, 205: carved above the right collarbone are two Greek letters, kappa and ypsilon, which might indicate the number 25, referring to the inventory of the Sanctuary or some other collection of statues, perhaps from Greece.
- ²⁶ Andronicos 1984, 213 figs. 181. 182.
- ²⁷ See especially the metal workshops in Gravisca: Fiorini – Torelli 2008, 75–106. Fusion moulds and traces of metalworking are also present in the sanctuary of Punta Stilo in Caulonia: Parra 2011, 26 f. A sacred deposit discovered in Argos, dated to the second half of the 5th century BC, contained bronze plates with inscriptions. Discovered in the same area was a kiln for melting metal: Kritzas 2006; Sassu 2014, 295 f.
- ²⁸ Giardino 2011, 151–160.
- ²⁹ On the contribution of bio-archaeology to our knowledge of ancient rituals, see D’Andria et al. 2008.

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Figs. 1. 2. 4–8: Archive of Department of Cultural Heritage. Salento University – Lecce. – Fig. 3: Antonio Mangia.

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