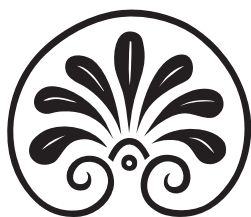


The Architecture of the Ancient Greek Theatre

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Edited by

Rune Frederiksen, Elizabeth R. Gebhard and Alexander Sokolicek



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The ‘South Building’ in the Main Urban Sanctuary of Selinunte:

*A Theatral Structure?**

CLEMENTE MARCONI AND DAVID SCAHILL

Abstract

This essay focuses on the “South Building,” one of the larger structures in the main urban sanctuary on the “Acropolis” of Selinunte, and with a prominent position. Several elements suggest the identification of the South Building as an impressive theatral viewing area, simple in design, yet monumental in scale, with a capacity of ca. 500 seated people. This identification of the South Building as a theatral area, first proposed by Thomas Becker, followed by Dieter Mertens and Clemens Voigts, has been confirmed by our new analysis of the structure, which also points to its dating towards the end of the sixth century. Our building belongs to that interesting group of theatral structures found in close association with sanctuaries and agoras in various regions of the Greek world. Considering the general configuration of the southern part of the sanctuary at the time of the construction of the South Building, and the ritual activities documented for this area by the new excavations of the Institute of Fine Arts – NYU, it is proposed that our building may have served for viewing any sort of ritual performance in the open space between Temple R, possibly of Demeter Thesmophoros, and the access to the sanctuary: one would think, in particular, of processions reaching the sanctuary and the temple for sacrifice, contests, and festivities.

Introduction

In the literature on Selinunte, ‘South Building’ is the conventional name for one of the larger structures in the main urban sanctuary on the ‘Acropolis’ (southern hill). Bigger than Temples B and R, and comparable in size to the

monumental altars set in front of Temples C and D, the South Building is also notable for its prominent position within the sacred space. From the time of its discovery (1876), its scale and prominence have attracted scholarly attention, and since the late 19th century, the South Build-

* Special thanks go to Dr. Caterina Greco, the Director of the Archaeological Park of Selinunte, and to the Superintendency of Trapani (in particular architect Giuseppe Gini and Professor Sebastiano Tusa, the two Superintendents between 2006 and 2011, and Dr. Rossella Giglio, Director of the Archaeological Unit). We are particularly grateful to the institutions that have been supporting our work in Selinunte, including the Malcolm Hewitt Wiener Foundation, the 1984 Foundation, the Kress Foundation and Victoria and Si Newhouse. The two authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to Marya Fisher, for her invaluable help in all the phases of study of the building.

ing has played a significant role in discussions about the spatial articulation and cults of the main urban sanctuary of Selinunte.¹

In 2006, the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University began a new project of topographical, architectural and archaeological investigation of the main urban sanctuary, which, in the years between 2006 and 2012, focused on its southern sector, including Temple B and its Altar, Temple R, the southern portion of Temple C, the peribolos wall and the South Building (Fig. 1). This new investigation included a systematic programme of documenting the buildings in the area, their block-by-block analysis, and finally the excavation of a series of trenches corresponding with the foundations. The study presented here summarises our current thinking on the South Building, the most likely function of which was as a theatral structure, built to accommodate spectators of cultic performances associated primarily with Temple R, possibly a temple of Demeter Thesmophoros.

Description of the Remains and Reconstruction of the Building Phases

The South Building derives its name from its placement along the southern end of the main urban sanctuary (Figs. 1-2). To the north it faces Temple B and its Altar, both on the same axis and both built in the Hellenistic period, around 300 BC. The construction of Temple B dates to a time when Selinus, then characterised by a mixed population of Greeks and Punics, was under the control of Carthage. The temple was more likely associated with Demeter, a cult shared by the Greeks and Punics that formed the local population.² To the east, the South Building is bordered by one of the entrances to the sanctuary. This entrance was modified in the Hellenistic period, when a drain was created, yet it is generally

dated in its original phase to the Archaic period, and with good reasons. Not only does its position in relation to the sacrificial area between Temple C and its altar suggest a date in this period, but the entrance was evidently taken into account in the design of the east side of the South Building, which bends slightly towards the west so as to be parallel to the so-called Oikos A, situated on the opposite side of the alley.³ To the south, our structure abuts the southern stretch of the peribolos wall and one of the main east–west avenues (SB) articulating the Archaic urban plan on the Acropolis.⁴ The peribolos wall is preserved here to a height of four courses, and it was clearly built independently of and before the South Building, which was erected against it. Finally, to the west the building is bordered by a narrow street which, from the east–west avenue, gave access to the area between Temples B and R, and to the southern flank of Temple C: this street was created in the Hellenistic period as part of the new development of this part of the settlement, for both residential and commercial purposes.⁵

The quality of the stone was carefully selected in relation to its placement on the South Building, based on both structural and aesthetic considerations. Thus, the material used in the inner foundation courses is a soft, yellowish-brown limestone, verging on conglomerate. The outer courses of the foundations, and those foundations that would have been exposed, are composed of a slightly harder, light grey limestone with a smooth finish.

The foundations comprise two alternating courses of headers and stretchers laid against the peribolos wall to the south and extending c. 6.8 m to the north. In total length, the foundations extend c. 23 m east to west: more precisely, they extend 23.36 m at the northern end, and 23.78 m at the southern end, because of the slight trapezoidal plan of the building. The level of the upper front step of headers is approximately the same as the preserved

1 Main literature: Cavallari 1876, 105, 108 (excavation); Puchstein 1893, 23 (altar); Koldewey & Puchstein 1899, 92-3, fig. 65, 188-90, 204, pl. 7 (altar, with no relationship to any of the temples in the main urban sanctuary); Gàbrici 1929, 76, 109-10, pl. 2 and Gàbrici 1956, 213-4, fig. 2, 218, 224-5 (altar, contemporary to, and associated with Temple C); Di Vita 1967, 40-1 (altar, contemporary with Temple C, but dedicated to Artemis); Coarelli & Torelli 1984, 93 (altar); Di Vita 1984, 34 (altar); Bergquist 1992, 129 (altar, linked to Temple R); Mertens 2003, 85, 233 (altar); Claudio Parisi Presicce reported by Mertens 2003, 233, n. 802 (not an altar); Marconi 2007, 73 (altar); Becker 2003, 224-5 (grandstand for observing sacrifices at the altar in front of Temple C); Mertens 2006, 186 (theatron); Voigts 2011, 33-41 (theatron, 500-450 BC).

2 Marconi 2008; Marconi in De Angelis 2012, 189.

3 Gàbrici 1929, 76-7, 109-10; Gàbrici 1956, 224; Di Vita 1967, 40-1; Di Vita 1984, 34, fig. 18; Mertens 2003, 85, 240, fig. 349; Mertens 2006, 186, fig. 326; Voigt 2011, 41.

4 Urban plan: Mertens 2003, *passim* and Mertens 2006, 173-90. Peribolos wall: Mertens 2003, 80-8; Zoppi 2006.

5 Helas 2012, *passim*.



Fig. 1. Selinunte, southern sector of Main Urban Sanctuary on the Acropolis. Adriana La Porta, Filippo Pisciotta, Allyson McDavid and DAI-Atlas.

Fig. 2. South Building, state plan. Adriana La Porta and Filippo Pisciotta.





282 *Fig. 3. Southern Sector of Main Urban Sanctuary on the Acropolis: Aerial View. Eugenio Donato.*

level of the ca. 300 BCE altar of Temple B and the current first step of the staircase fronting Temple B. The original ground level around the structure in the Archaic period was lower, however, as will be discussed below. The courses of the foundations are uneven, especially at the southeastern section of the platform, presumably due to settling of the ground under the foundations. This can be seen in elevation cross sections through the foundations (Figs. 8-10). The peribolos wall, in fact, acts as a terrace for the layers of aeolian sand and red clay on which the foundations were set.

At the west end, especially at the southwest corner, the levels are more even per course. Above the top course of headers at the west end a course of headers to support the step course above remains *in situ*. In effect, this acts as a sleeper course to support the step blocks above. This can be seen in the profile section and in the elevation of the west end (Figs. 2-3, 8-10). The headers here are hard limestone, with softer conglomerate filling the gaps between blocks. Based on this information it is possible that the upper sections of foundations rising toward the south utilised blocks alternating either with softer infill of conglomerate or empty spaces between blocks, forming sleepers, as is commonly seen for foundations underneath paving slabs (Fig. 4). This would make sense to counteract an accumulation of immense weight on the foundations, and would be similar to the construction of a theatre cavea when not built into a hillside. In our building, a total of five steps are preserved, including the crepis in the north front. Still *in situ* are nine blocks from the second step and seven from the third; it remains uncertain whether the fragmentary blocks from the fourth and fifth steps are still *in situ*. The height of each step is c. 0.28 m, as indicated by the height of the preserved blocks at the west end. Each block is laid so that it overlaps the one below, leaving c. 0.61-0.62 m for a tread. The blocks of the second step are almost uniform in both their length (c. 1.14 m) and width (c. 0.67 m), and the same applies to those of the third, which show slightly different dimensions, however (length c. 1.10 m; width 0.72 m); also different are the dimensions of the only entirely preserved block of the fourth step (length 1.24 m; width 0.66 m). In spite of these differences, it is clear that an effort was made to keep the joints between these blocks regular.

Abutting our structure at the east end on the north

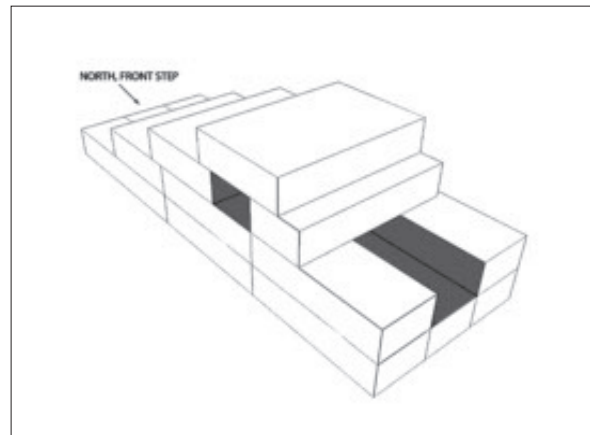


Fig. 4. South Building: steps. David Scahill.

side is a rectangular casing of orthostates resting on a toichobate (2.46 m long and 1.64 m wide), now mostly underground (Figs. 2, 3, 5). Since the ground level at this end should rise to just below the top of the toichobate, the toichobate should provide evidence for the ground level at least at the time it was built against the South Building; and based on stratigraphic information from excavation in front of the structure (Trench E), the original ground level in the Archaic period was approximately at this lower level.

The foundations are rather thick and therefore strong, which would only be necessary if there were a high construction of stone on top of the platform. This supports the theory that there was a stepped construction on top, requiring additional courses of foundations to raise the height up to 2.7 m against the peribolos wall on the southern side (see more below).

This brings us to the considerations in support of the identification of the South Building as a theatral structure, first argued by Becker, and supported by both Mertens and Voigts. We are mainly dealing with arguments of exclusion. The presence of steps *in situ* at a distance of c. 3.25 m from the northern front speaks against the identification of the South Building with a lesche. Instead, it was clearly some kind of stepped facility, the only two alternatives left being either an altar or a theatral structure. The clues against the identification with an altar are several, and can be summarised as follows.

The first piece of evidence is the abnormal orienta-



Fig. 5. Trench E.
Clemente Marconi.

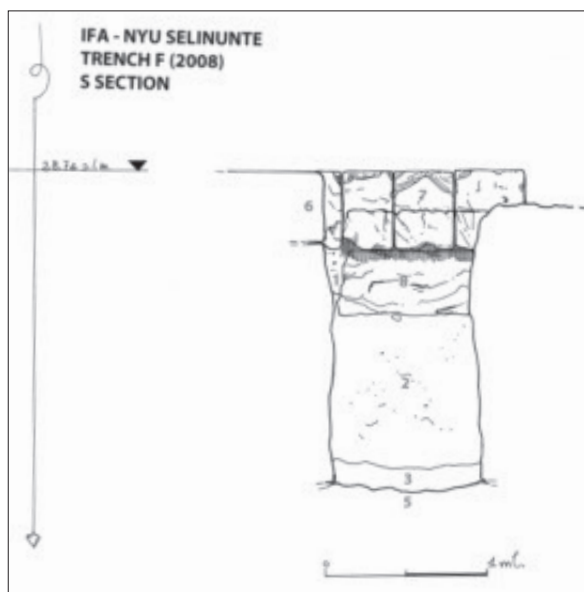


Fig. 6. Trench F. Filippo Pisciotta.

tion of our structure towards the south, contrary to the common practice of orienting altars towards the east.⁶ This norm is regularly followed at Selinunte in a number of cases,⁷ including the large monumental altars placed in front of the Temple at Triolo N, the Temple of Malo-

phoros and Temple M to the west, as well as Temples A, B, C and D on the Acropolis; the same applies to altars without an explicit link to a temple, such as the altar north of that of Temple C and the altar with triglyphs in the northeastern sector of the main urban sanctuary. Basically, at Selinunte, all the main, securely identified monumental altars face east. To explain its abnormal orientation, it has been argued that the unusual placement of the South Building would depend on the fact that it served the cult of Temple C, and was built before the extension of the terrace in front of that building in the second half of the 6th century BC, which made room for the construction of a monumental altar. However, chronological considerations aside, in looking at the altar placed rather abruptly against the southeast corner of Temple D, one would conclude that even before the expansion of the terrace there would have been enough room to build an altar in front of Temple C.

A second piece of evidence concerns the foundations. Unlike the other large, monumental altars at Selinunte, the foundations of the South Building consist of one massive, continuous platform: there is no distinction between the area of the steps and that of the sacrificial table; at the same time, the foundations are not limited to the outer perimeter of the structure. In Sicily, during the Archaic

⁶ Bergquist 1967, 72-80; Höcker & Prayon 2002.

⁷ Cp. Voigts 2011, *passim*.



Fig. 7. Trench K. Lillian Stoner.

and Classical periods, the altar in front of Temple L at Agrigento (c. 450 BC) provides another example of such massive foundations.⁸ They may be explained here by the particular size and elaboration of this altar, but the parallel is enough to make structural considerations inconclusive, in our case.

Yet, there is one last clue, first noted by Voigts, against the idea of the South Building as an altar: its steps are, in comparison with other monumental altars at Selinunte, of

normal height (0.28 m), but unusual depth (0.61-0.62 m): in contrast, one may mention the steps leading to the altar in front of Temple D, with a height of 0.36-0.38 m but a tread of only 0.48-0.52 m.⁹ Voigts has explained this unusual ratio between height and tread of the steps with the need to accommodate seated viewers, as well as to create room for the feet of the spectators seated on the next row.¹⁰ On the other hand, the height of our steps, only c. 0.28 m, is relatively low for theatre seating,¹¹ and it

⁸ Marconi 1933, 99-102; Mertens 2006, 397-8.

⁹ Voigts 2011, 51.

¹⁰ The minimum depth needed for such an arrangement is generally calculated as 0.5 m: see Becker 2003, 257.

¹¹ This is generally above 0.3 m: see Becker 2003, 257; see also Hollinshead 2012, 28.

is equally possible that any audience was meant to stand rather than sit. Be that as it may, in our building, the need to accommodate a considerable number of people can be seen as a fairly good reason for the unusual depth of the steps.

All in all, we have only vague clues to suggest that the South Building was a monumental staircase; yet this interpretation appears much more likely than the alternative, namely that the South Building represents a monumental altar. In accordance with this identification of our structure as a theatral structure, we would propose the following phases.

In the first, original phase of construction, the foundations of the South Building were laid with an upper course of overlapping blocks forming steps that rose from north to south, to the peribolos wall (Fig. 8). With a step height of c. 0.28 m and tread of c. 0.61–0.62 m, there is room for eleven steps in total rising up to the back peribolos wall, counting the first header course as the first step. The question of why the first step should be a header course might be cause for concern, but there are cases of header courses exposed as krepidoma courses in other buildings at Selinunte, such as Temple D. With eleven rows of steps, our building would have had a total height of c. 2.7 m from the lower front crepis to the top step. The back peribolos wall most likely rose at least another metre to a metre and a half with a capping geison course on top, comparable to that found in association with the peribolos wall of the Sanctuary of Malophoros.¹² Along both the east and west sides of the steps it is likely that there were balustrades, with capping courses rising perhaps in a stepped fashion. Today, the upper portions of the flanks are entirely missing. Dividing the total length of the South Building, 23 m, by 0.5 m per person, there is room for 46 people per row.¹³ Multiplied by 11 rows, there would be room for 506 people seated (we refrain from providing a total for standing people, figures concerning the space required for a standing person being quite variable).

For the dating of this original phase, a first indication is provided by the relationship of the South Building to the peribolos wall, which offers a *terminus post quem* after the construction of the latter, *i.e.* after c. 550 BC. A second

indication comes from the materials found in Trench K, against the peribolos wall and the southern half of the west side of the South Building: the complete absence of Attic red-figure pottery in the excavation of this trench would seem to speak against a dating of our structure within the 5th century BC. Considering that the system of support of the seats is first documented at Selinunte in association with the foundations of the cella of Temple F, and that the use of header courses exposed as krepidoma courses finds a good parallel in Temple D, it is most likely that the South Building was built at the same time as the general restructuring of the sanctuary in the last decades of the 6th century BC.

At some point in time the rectangular casing, consisting of orthostates on a toichobate foundation, was built against the front foundations of the South Building at the east end (Fig. 9). The outer face of this structure, as revealed by the excavation of Trench E, was carefully covered with fine plaster. It is not clear whether or not this casing is a later addition or part of the first phase of construction, but it does not bond with the other foundations as one might expect if it were part of the original construction. As we have seen, the ground level around the orthostates would have been at the level of its toichobate. This level would coincide with the archaic level in front of Temple R. If this is so, then the rectangular appendage could still possibly belong to the Archaic phase of the building, although a later dating to the Classical period should be regarded as equally possible. The purpose of this rectangular appendage is not clear. In the literature, it has been variously identified with a staircase (Koldewey and Puchstein), an altar's wing (Gàbrici) and a statue base (Voigts). The theory that it was an altar's wing can be ruled out once it is concluded that the South Building had a different function. For a statue base, our appendage does not appear to be regular enough. More likely, the orthostate base was a casing for stairs leading up onto the stepped platform at the east end. Here it may be pointed out that sometimes stairs are not bonded with their buildings, as for example, at Selinunte, with the staircase of Temple B.

The next phase was around 300 BC, within the context of a larger reshaping of this area of the sanctuary. This

¹² Gàbrici 1927, 16–21, fig. 6.

¹³ Width per person in theatre seating varies between 0.36 m and 0.70 m: *cp.* Ginouvès 1972, 59, n. 3, 210, n. 1; Becker 2003, 259.

Fig. 8. *South Building elevation, 1st phase. David Scahill.*

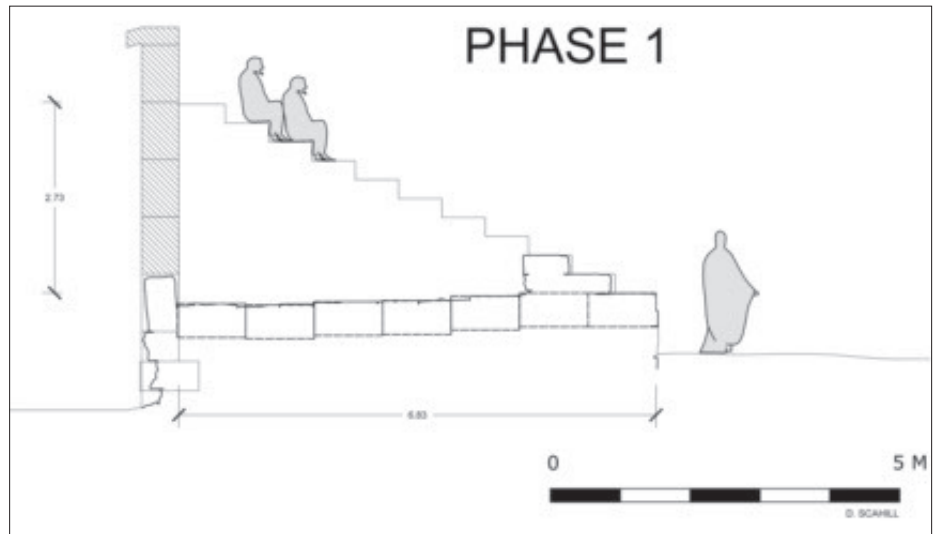


Fig. 9. *South Building elevation, 2nd phase. David Scahill.*

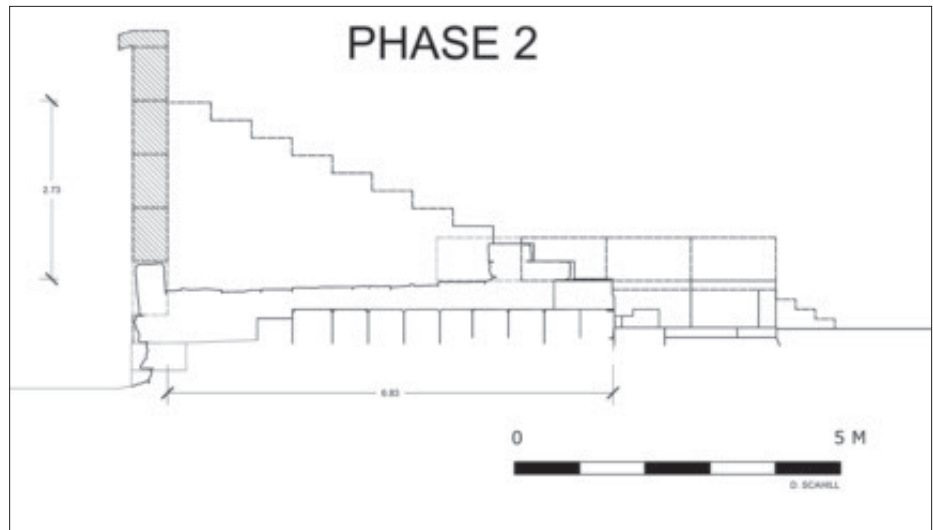
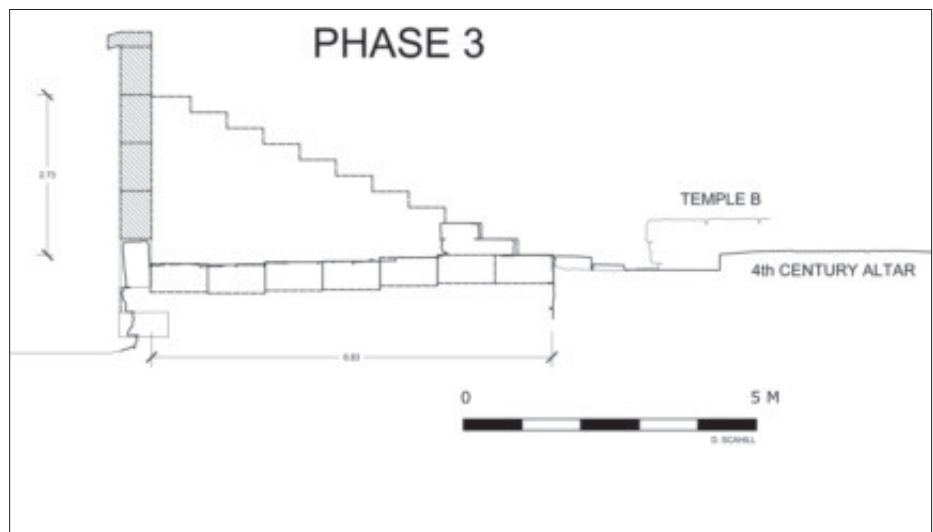


Fig. 10. *South Building elevation, 3rd phase. David Scahill.*



phase included the construction of Temple B and its altar, both built on top of a large fill including Archaic to early Hellenistic material. During this intervention, the ground level was raised almost to the level of the first step. On the same occasion, a course of blocks (most, if not all, reused: Fig. 5), consisting of three layers of stone at the east end, was laid across the front step from the east, starting at the rectangular appendage and ending at a point just in front of Temple B (Fig. 10). Presumably, this course of blocks was added after Temple B was constructed, as its stopping point to the west seems to be determined by the front of Temple B. To this same phase one would also attribute pry cuttings and two roughly rectangular cuttings seen on the north crepis course at the east end. These rectangular cuttings must have served as sockets for securing something heavy or tall to the crepis; one thinks of statuary, stelai or pillars for votive offerings. In any case, the pry cuttings and the sockets seem to go together and suggest a series of installations added to the front steps at the time of the transformation of the area in front of the South Building as the sacrificial space before Temple B.

This of course would suggest a shift in the function of the South Building in the Hellenistic period. Such a possibility is also indicated by the placement of Temple B right in front of its western half. For sure, our structure could hardly have served in this period as a grandstand for a large number of viewers as it did in the Archaic and Classical periods. This is consistent with the new demographics at the site in the Hellenistic period, which points to a reduction in the number of inhabitants.

In conclusion, several elements suggest the identification of the South Building as an impressive theatrical viewing area, simple in design yet monumental in scale, with a capacity of c. 500 seated people. The structure remained in use with slight alterations down through the 4th century while the area onto which it faced was altered. One cannot exclude the possibility of a post-Antique structure installed on its foundations, which made use of spolia taken from neighbouring buildings, including Temple B.¹⁴ Its final destruction and plundering for building material probably occurred in the Medieval or early Modern period.

Interpretation

Thus far, only one author has linked the South Building with Temple R (Bergquist). Indeed, preference amongst most scholars is usually given to Temple C. Yet, although part of our structure faces to the area immediately before the façade of Temple C, a good third of it is facing its south flank – not an ideal arrangement for observing sacrifices at the monumental altar in front of Temple C. In addition, our construction is at some distance (15 m) from that area between Temple C and the monumental altar. By contrast, the front of Temple R is much closer to our building (c. 8 m). Perhaps more importantly, the axial alignment of the front of the foundations of the South Building is almost the same as the alignment of Temple R. Moreover, the alignment diverges from that of Temple C.

Our series of excavations in the area of Temple B have made clear that there was no predecessor of the Hellenistic building in this area. It is actually possible that Temple B replaced Temple R, after the latter went out of use over the course of the 4th century. Be that as it may, in the Archaic and Classical periods the area in front of the South Building, the space immediately in front of Temple R, was clear. The location of this last building's altar remains uncertain: it was possibly placed to the east of Temple R, near to the west front of Temple B, judging from the discovery of a deposit of bones from animal sacrifice there.

Our excavations in the area of Temple R (c. 580-570 BCE) are contributing greatly to the understanding of the cult associated with this building, which possibly belonged to Demeter Thesmophoros.¹⁵ In 2012, two *aulos* fragments were found among the Archaic votive depositions against the interior cella walls. The presence of this instrument in the temple points to the performance of music and ritual dancing associated with the cult activity related to our building.¹⁶ Further reference to such activities might come from a series of Corinthian kotylai with *Frauenfest* iconography, found among the votive pottery.¹⁷ This is as far as we can go – for the moment – in reconstructing the ritual dimension of this area of the sanctuary.

Our building belongs to that interesting group of thea-

14 Cp. Koldewey & Puchstein 1899, 93 and caption to fig. 66; Becker 2003, 225.

15 On Temple R, see Marconi 2007, 77-8.

16 Marconi 2014b.

17 Marconi 2014a.

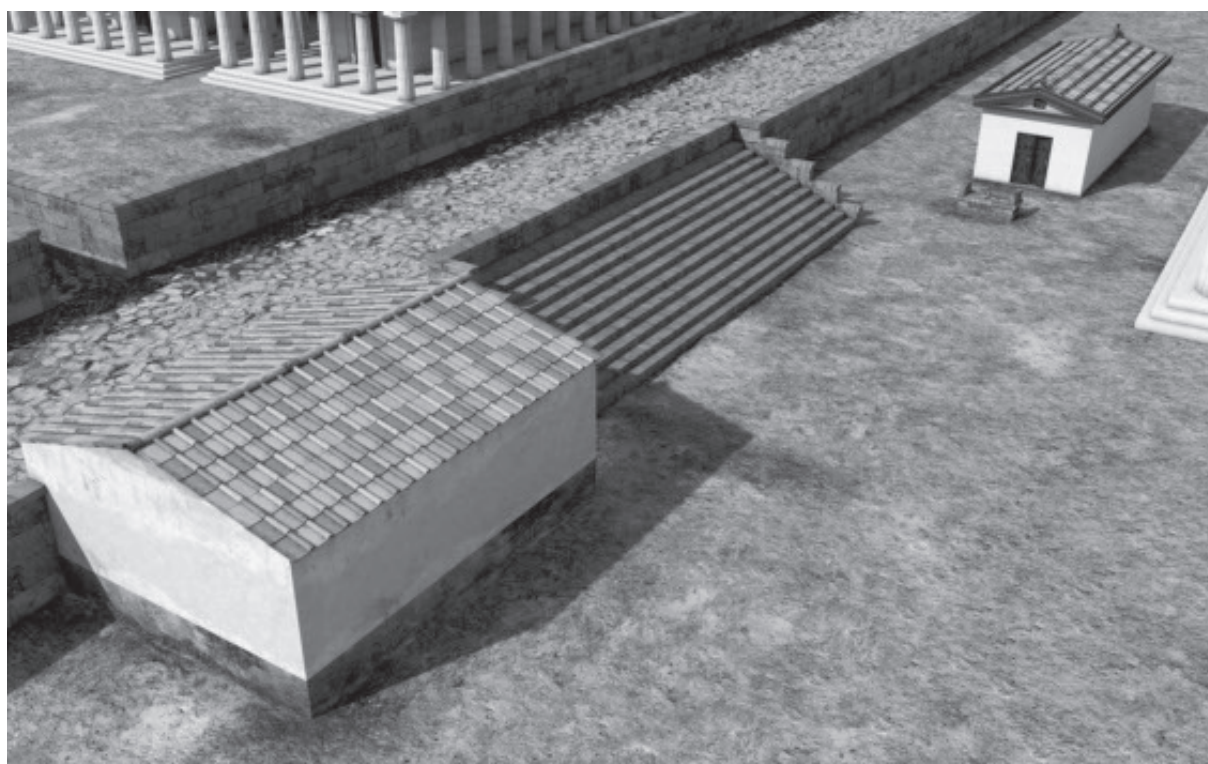


Fig. 11. South Building and Temple R: digital reconstruction. Massimo Limoncelli.

tral structures (meaning simple, non-canonical theatres, with linear and non-circular *theatra* and/or orchestras) found in close association with local sanctuaries and/or agoras in various regions of the Greek world, including the Peloponnese, Crete, Attica, East Greece, Magna Graecia, and Sicily (Syracuse, sanctuary of Apollo Temenites, late 6th–early 5th century; Morgantina, agora). It is a category of buildings first brought to the attention of scholarship on Greek drama by Anti in 1947, but first investigated in relation to religious contexts by Nielsen in 2002, in her important study on cultic theatres and ritual drama in the ancient world, which takes into account also canonical theatres.¹⁸

Given the placement of these structures in close association with sacred spaces, it would seem safe to assume they accommodated audiences (either seated or standing, as indicated by the height of the steps, which varies) during religious celebrations and festivals. That the spec-

tacle offered to these audiences was, specifically, a ritual drama is not always easy to tell, given the scarcity of literary sources attesting to that practice or material evidence (such as masks) from many sites. But drama of some kind surely must be kept as a possibility, along with the performance of hymns, sacrifices (when an altar is associated with the orchestra), music and choral dances. For theatrical structures, as for theatres and many other building types in the ancient Greek and Roman world, it is in fact important to consider their multiple functions and the variety of different activities taking place on different occasions, as indicated sometimes by the size of these buildings (such as the *ekklesiasterion* at Metapontum) and their placement with reference to the rest of the *temenos* space.

This brings us back to the configuration of our sector of the main urban sanctuary of Selinunte. It is very possible that the altar of Temple R was placed right in front of it (Fig. 11), with a configuration reminiscent of the

18 Anti 1947 and Nielsen 2002, 70–148; see more recently Becker 2003, 217–59 and Hollinshead 2012, 46–56.

Sanctuary of Demeter at Pergamon, in which the South Building would have served for viewing any sort of ritual performance in the open space between the temple and the access to the sanctuary; one thinks, in particular, of processions reaching the sanctuary and Temple R for sacrifices, contests and festivities.

If the South Building were a theatral structure related to Temple R, and the latter were a Temple of Demeter, it would not be surprising, considering how worship of Demeter included theatrical or performative aspects (and for theatral structures in sanctuaries of Demeter one needs only mention Corinth, Eleusis and Pergamon).¹⁹ In relation to Sicily, however, it becomes particularly suggestive, from a larger, cultural-historical perspective. Reference goes here to Polacco's theory,²⁰ followed more recently by

Barbara Kowalzig,²¹ of a close association of the origins of drama in Sicily with the cult of Demeter, rather than Dionysos, as is the case in Athens. This theory is mainly based on the physical proximity of cult sites to Demeter and theatres, documented at Heloros and Morgantina, and postulated for Syracuse and Agrigento. A more recent analysis of the literary and monumental evidence by Kathryn Boshier,²² however, argues for a more nuanced approach to the problem, pointing to the association of drama on the island with a range of gods including not only Demeter and Dionysos, but also Aphrodite and Apollo.

We hope that the progress of our research in the main urban sanctuary of Selinunte will shed further light on its monuments, providing more food for thought on this entire issue.

¹⁹ Nielsen 2002, 70-148; Mylonopoulos 2011; Boshier forthcoming, Chapter 2.

²⁰ Polacco *et al.* 1990, 119-59; see also Nielsen 147.

²¹ Kowalzig 2008; see also Todisco 2002, 29; Wilson 2007, 354.

²² Boshier 2013, 118-20; Boshier forthcoming, Chapter 2.

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