



BRIEF
Guide

montagna dei cavalli

LERCARA FRIDDI

MEZZOJUSO

VILLAFRATI

BAUCINA

VILLABATE

PALERMO



HOW TO GET THERE

FROM PALERMO [Km 90 ca.]

Taking the Palermo-Catania Highway, A19, exit at the Villabate junction. Follow the SS 121/189, Palermo-Agrigento, up to Lercara Friddi. Then take the SS188, then the SP82 and, soon, you will arrive in Prizzi. Along the main high street, Corso Umberto I°, you can visit the Museum, and then reach, a few kms away, the site of Montagna dei Cavalli.

Museo Archeologico **HIPPANA**
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Among the ancient settlements of the hinterland of central-northern Sicily, Montagna dei Cavalli is one of the most important archaeological sites. Set in the heart of the green Monti Sicani and delimited by the river Sosio valley, the massif calcareous relief, 1007m high, was the seat of an important city of the Early Hellenistic Age, Ippana, located within the territory of the so-called "Punic Eparchy", an area that was, between the 4th and the first half of the 3rd century BC under the control of Carthage. Ippana was conquered by the Romans in 258 BC, during the first Punic War and then abandoned.

The several campaigns conducted by the Soprintendenza di Palermo on the Montagna dei Cavalli, have permitted to discover the double fortification line which protected the city and, above all, to start the excavation of the theatre, set on the highest part of the mountain. This building, still under investigation, is one of the most ancient architectural examples of Greek theatres in Sicily, having been dated to the second half of the 4th century BC.

With the Municipality of Prizzi, the current owner of Montagna dei Cavalli, there has been in the last decades an effective collaboration for the promotion of the site, even with projects of new roads and archaeological itineraries in the area of the town.

The Museum of Prizzi, set in a council building of the historic centre, in Corso Umberto I°, is also a result of the close collaboration between the local Council and the Soprintendenza di Palermo. Opened in 1999, it includes, besides the archaeological section, also a Paleontological one (fossils from Prizzi and from all over Sicily) and a Mineral section (with a rich collection of minerals from deposits in Sardinia).

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MONTAGNA DEI CAVALLI

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Guide



VIEW OF MONTAGNA DEI CAVALLI FROM PRIZZI

soprintendenza beni culturali ed ambientali
sezione per i beni archeologici | palermo

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montagna dei cavalli

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assessorato dei beni culturali e
dell'identità siciliana

Vassallo, Stefano <1955->

Montagna dei Cavalli: brief guide / Stefano Vassallo. - Palermo: Regione siciliana, Assessorato dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, Dipartimento dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, 2015.

ISBN 978-88-6164-355-0

1. Zone archeologiche – Montagna dei Cavalli <Prizzi> - Guide.

937.8234 CDD-22

SBN Pal0284619

CIP - Biblioteca centrale della Regione siciliana “Alberto Bombace”

Introduction

Montagna dei Cavalli (Mountain of the Horses) is located in the territory of Prizzi, along the upper valley of River Sosio, in the heart of the mountainous massif region of "Monti Sicani" (Sikans Mountains). The beauty of the place, still covered by vast areas of conifer and oak woods, typifies a traditional natural context with breathtaking panoramic views, still unscathed by the violent changes, making this archaeological site one of the most enchanting archaeological sites of central-western Sicily.

The excavations conducted by the Soprintendenza of Palermo, brought to light very limited areas of the ancient settlement and structures linked above all to the living phase of the early Hellenistic Age (from the 4th to the mid 3rd century BC),







6 when there was a rich and thriving community identified as the ancient town of Ippana. During the excavation campaigns the fortification walls and some buildings on the acropolis were identified, the most important one being, without any doubt, the theatre. The wish is that the archaeological excavations on Montagna dei Cavalli may start soon again, to continue the promising season of discoveries and to better understand in more depth the history of the site, but also to contribute to a global valorisation of the Monti Sicani territory, which with its archaeological sites, landscape and historical towns, constitutes one of the most extraordinary districts for a wider proposal of cultural tourism use.

The close collaboration between the Soprintendenza and the Municipality of Prizzi has given good results even for its promotion; as a matter of fact, not long ago, a small Archaeological Museum was opened in the town centre where it is possible to have a complete view of the excavations carried out, through the exhibition of an interesting group of finds coming from the Montagna dei Cavalli and from the surrounding territory.

The overall geographical context and the site

Montagna dei Cavalli is located in a territory very important from a strategic point of view for the connections between the different areas of central-western Sicily; in fact, the Monti Sicani territory spans from East to West and is a natural link not only between the Mediterranean and Tyrrhenian seas, but also between two very important areas for the history of the island, the valleys of the Platani and Torto rivers to the East and to the West the Left Belice river valley. Therefore, the site is in an area of inland Sicily of great strategic importance, since prehistory, for the connections of inland western Sicily and the Tyrrhenian coasts, in the North, and the Mediterranean in the South. Besides this, not so far away from the mountain was the first Roman road attested by historical sources, the Palermo - Agrigento, built by the consul Aurelius Cotta in 251 BC, during the First Punic War which marked the Roman conquest of most part of the island.



The mountain, also known since the Middle Ages as San Lorenzo, because of a church dedicated to the saint nowadays in ruins, is a calcareous relief, with an irregular triangular shape, delimited by deep and tight valleys of the upper river Sosio and by the streams that flow into it.

The ancient town is on the eastern part of the hill which is the highest point (1007m), accessible from the western side where the vast and rich necropolis was, nowadays almost totally destroyed by tomb raiders who, since the 1950s, have plundered thousands of tombs, looting an enormous amount of archaeological finds nowadays scattered around Italy and abroad.



History of the archaeological research

The existence of important archaeological ruins on the Montagna dei Cavalli did not escape the first scholars who were studying the history of central Sicily in the mid 19th century. In 1836, for first, Giuseppe Crispi reported the site, then known locally as “Pana”, probably a corruption of Ippana, publishing a drawing of a bronze object in his possession and found on the mountain, which he interpreted “as a kind of sceptre”, which had two writings in Greek: IPA (abbreviation for Ippana) and DAMOSION (public). This find, which would have been decisive for the identification of the site with Ippana, was unfortunately lost.

It was only in 1962, after more than a century, that Vincenzo Tusa conducted the first excavations, searching for the ruins of the theatre, managing to have the first important results to hypothesize its existence. The first systematic excavations were carried out between 1988 and 1991 by the Soprintendenza of Palermo, with



very positive results for the knowledge of the main historical phases of the town. Finally, a prolonged digging campaign in 2007 enabled the Soprintendenza to confirm the presence of the theatre on the peak of the mountain, identifying its basic features.

The living phases of the town of Montagna dei Cavalli

The Archaic and Classical Ages, the indigenous settlement

For the time being, the earliest occupation of the site is recorded for the period that goes from the end of the 7th century to the beginning of the 5th century BC. In this period a group of indigenous Sikan people settled on the mountain attracted by the favourable environmental conditions: a naturally well defended mountain in a favourable context for agro-pastoral exploitation and rich water springs. Probably the town developed on the highest peak of the mountain and along its

slopes; the only archaeological evidence belonging to this phase is that of potsherds of indigenous production found in several parts of the town, dated between the 7th century and the 6th century BC. Even though few in numbers, this evidence has allowed the researchers to hypothesize the existence of a town, quite big, which lived above all between the mid 6th century and the beginning of the 5th century BC, having a discreet economic development.

The foundation of indigenous settlements in the Sicilian inland between the second half of the 7th century and the beginning of the 6th century, is a fact which is not unique in this part of Sicily and probably reflects a phenomenon linked to the reaction of the Sikans to the foundations of the Greek colonies along the coasts (Himera, Selinus, Akragas). The political and cultural strength, inherent in the existence of these great colonies, not separated from a progressive controlling action of the inland territory, made the local population, who mainly lived in houses spread out in the countryside, create strong settlements where to gather and defend themselves, starting a process of very deep social change followed by an opening of contacts and of forms of exchange with the Greeks. These relationships are attested in Montagna dei Cavalli by the finding of imported pottery from the Greek colonies, dating from the first half of the 6th century BC; together with “Greek” goods were traded indigenous goods char-





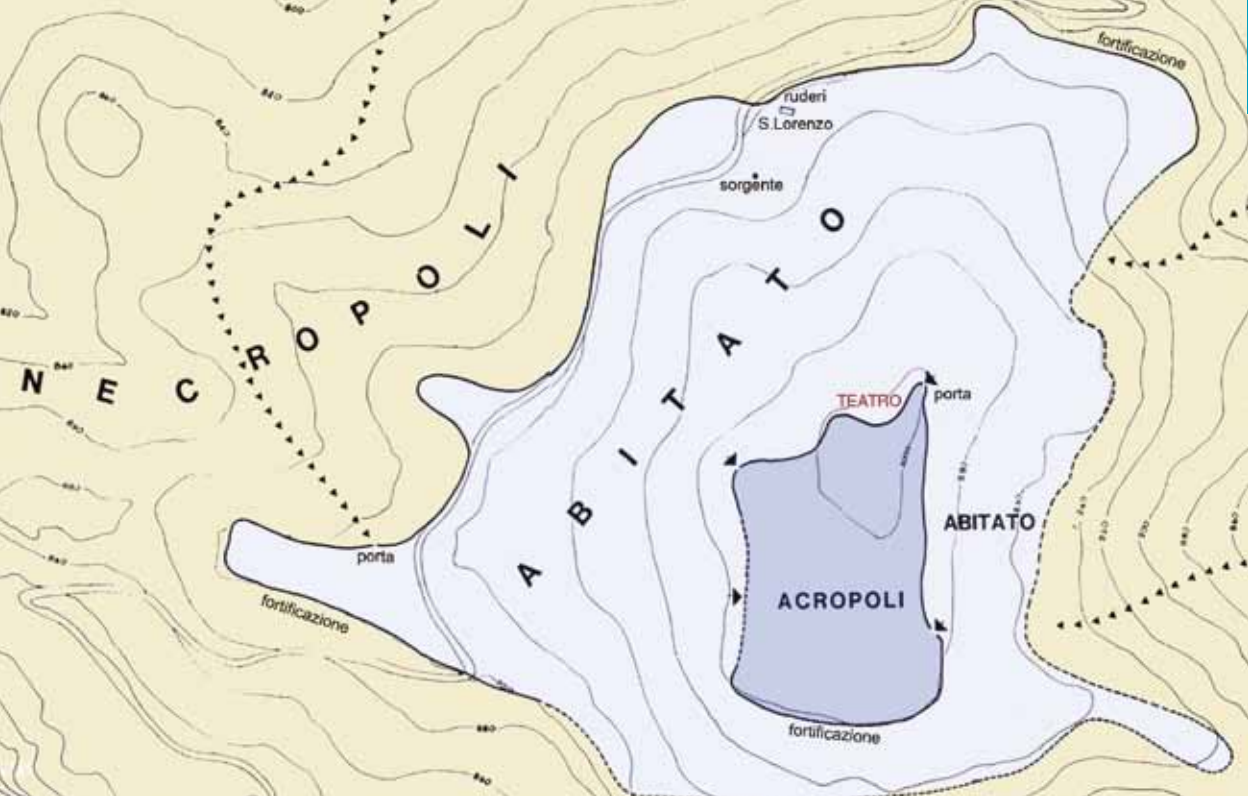
acterized by a beautiful geometric painted or incised decoration on the surfaces of the pottery. The settlement of the Montagna dei Cavalli must have had the same features as many other indigenous settlements that developed in the Archaic Age in central-western Sicily; among those that are quite near are Cassero of Castronovo di Sicilia, Polizzello near Mussomeli and Colle Madore close to Lercara Friddi.

The indigenous settlement must have enjoyed a discreet wealth up to the beginning of the 5th century BC; after this period no evidence whatsoever of life has been found on this site; probably due to the upheaval of the geopolitical system of the time that happened in western Sicily after the great battle of Himera in 480 BC, between the Greeks and the Carthaginians, many inland settlements went through a period of deep economic and demographic crisis.

The Early Hellenistic Age (mid 4th century to 258 BC)

Around the mid 4th century BC, the town of Montagna dei Cavalli lived a renovated phase of prosperity; it is plausible that the new town, Hippana from the sources, was re-founded on the spot of the ancient archaic town. The identification with this town, mentioned by the historian Polybius when it was conquered in 258 BC, seems to be now certain on the basis of written sources and evidence from the excavations.

The excavations have highlighted a system of new buildings, built on the ruins, by then nearly all abandoned, of the structures of the earliest phase, a general rebuilding of the entire urban space. To defend the town two distinctive imposing fortification walls were built; the lower one, further down in the valley, protected the entire town, the other one protected the upper plain of the acropolis, probably destined for buildings with public functions. Besides this, right near the peak they built the theatre, evidence that the town was growing, and that it was quite wealthy. But also the probable coin minting activity with the writing IPA (Ippana) is a tangible sign of a busy town, which enjoyed a certain autonomy, even if it is



located within an area, that of western Sicily, of the so called Punic Eparchy, and Therefore that in these decades and up to the mid 3rd century BC, under the direct Carthaginian political influence. The development and the prosperity of Hippana are attested by the finding of several coins; bronze Punic coins prevail featuring the kind with a horse and a palm tree, but many are also those coins that arrived in this town from the most important mints of the island, evidence of a flourishing economy supported by the rich circulation of coins for the daily trade. Further evidence of prosperity of the people and of a good cultural level is the discovery

of valuable objects, such as tiaras, found in the western necropolis. The richness of Ippana continued up to the mid 3rd century BC, only in the years between the end of the 4th and the first decades of the 3rd century BC the town seems to have been victim of a violent episode, probably to be linked with the deeds of the Syracusan leader Agatocles against the Carthaginians or with the coming of Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, in Sicily, attested by the different interventions of modification of the upper fortification or on buildings excavated on the acropolis.

Around the mid 3rd century BC in all the areas of excavation there is further evidence of a violent destruction which was followed by the abandonment of the site. The archaeological evidence matches perfectly well with the historical event, which happened in 258 BC, of the conquest of Hippana, during the first Punic war. Polibius tells us (I, 24) that “the Roman armies... after the arrival of the new consuls Aulus Attilius and Caius Sulpicius moved against Panormus, because there the Carthaginian troops spent their winter. Reaching the sight of the city the consuls placed their troops in battle order but the enemy did not move: then they addressed all their impetus against the town of Ippana which they assaulted and then they conquered Mittistratus, which for a long time had resisted the siege, defended by the roughness of the place”. At the end of the First Punic War in 241 BC, with the whole of Sicily under the control of the Romans and with the changing of settlements of the island after the *pax romana*, the town of Montagna dei Cavalli was soon and finally abandoned, as it is revealed by the absence of findings datable after this date.

The Archaeological excavations

Land surveying has giving some of the most important data of the urban topography of Ippana; a settlement extended for over 30 hectares along the rocky slopes of the mountain on terraces, some of which manmade, which are laid out in concentric circles around the higher part, the acropolis, which occupies the top flat surface, wide about 3 hectares at about 1000m asl.



Ippana's defensive system and its fortifications

Besides the presence of its natural defences due to the roughness of the place, the town was given an imposing defensive system datable to the second half of the 4th century BC. The lower fortification encloses the mountain on all its sides, at 900m asl, except on its eastern side where the high steep rocky side, overhanging the river Sosio, made superfluous any artificial defence. The wall, on average 2m wide, was built in blocks of local limestone placed on the outsides and then filled up in between with big stone splinters, probably the waste of the same stone blocks of the wall. On the western side a large gate, 4,10m wide, was discovered protected by a square tower, made in very good technique which in one place is preserved up to 4 rows high.

The upper fortification goes all around the edge of the flat surface of the acropolis, to defend this important part of the town, creating a second barrier in case the lower one failed. This fortification wall had at least three gates, on the West, SE and NE, where the ruins of a tower controlling the northern side of the town have been entirely brought to light. The building, divided into 4 rooms, has been dated to the whole life span of Ippana, between the 4th century and 258 BC, even if there is evidence of restructuring probably due to its devastation around the end of the 4th century BC. The destruction of the tower was caused by a violent episode as witnessed by the presence of objects inside and by the many coins found on the pavement.



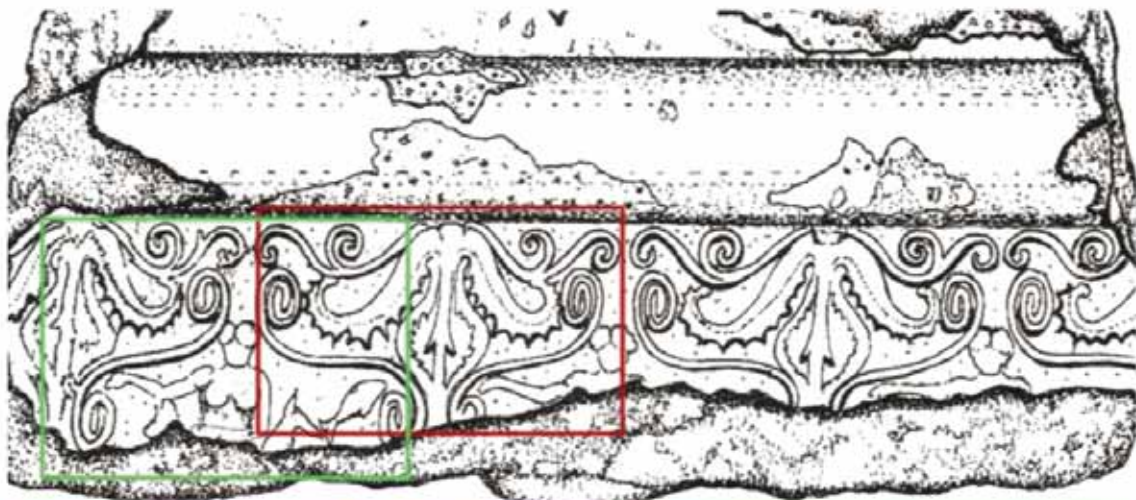
11 Female head
(end 4th - beginning 3rd century BC)



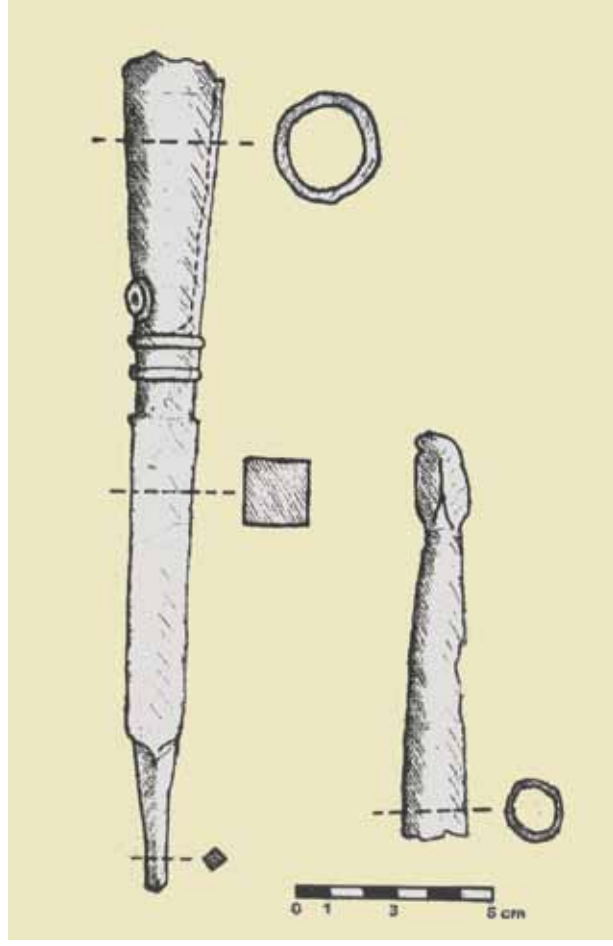
12 North-west corner of the upper fortification wall

13 Rooms of the north-eastern Tower of the upper fortification wall





14 Fragment of a louterion with the Scyllia monster in relief. Acropolis, NE Tower



15 Iron Javelin tip and spearhead. Acropolis, NE Tower, room 3



The Acropolis

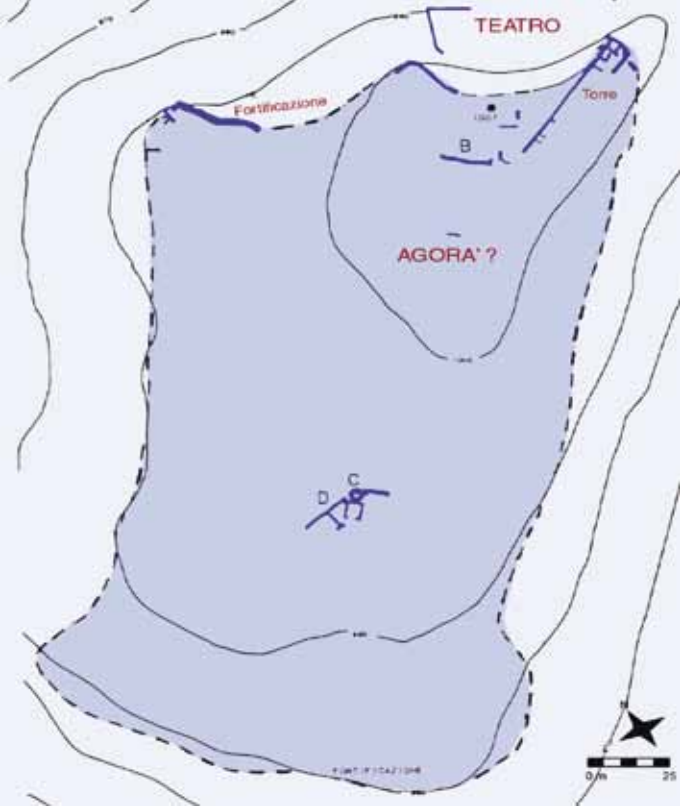
The peculiar aspect of the highest part of the mountain, featuring a flat surface sloping gently to the South, is well suited to function as a true acropolis. This centrality, both from a physical and urbanistic points of view, comes from different elements. The first one is probably due to the public role that these few buildings, investigated up to now, had on this plain (Edifices A and B, round building), the second element is suggested by the fact that this area was given its own fortifica-



16 The acropolis seen from West



17 Plan of the acropolis



tion wall, underlining the fact that this area was, from different points of view, the most important one of the town. On the acropolis is also located the *agora*, the public square, the central place of the town's life: it probably covered an area South of the peak of the mountain, where at the moment no ruins of buildings have been found and the bedrock seems to have been flattened artificially to create a functional and suitable area for a square.



Edifice B

Few ruins of walls concerning the foundations confirm the presence, near the highest part of the mountain (1007m), of a building with a rectangular plan, with an EW orientation and at least 17m long, with a small room on its eastern side, where a small hoard of Sicilian/Punic bronze coins with the little horse and palm tree type was found, dated to the mid 3rd century BC, in the years when it was destroyed. From the same room comes a beautiful gilded silver plate, decorated with a three headed male face in relief. Considering the important position of Edifice B and its plan, it can be hypothesized as having a sacred function, of a very simple typology with a rectangular plan not so different from the one discovered in Adranone, near Sambuca di Sicilia (on the western part of the Monti Sicani) within a context similar for its date, end of the 4th century – first half of the 3rd century BC, and for the political and cultural sphere, close to the Punic Epicracy.

18 Punic bronze coins with little horse and palm tree (1st half 3rd cent. BC)



19 Plate with a three headed male face



The Circular Building

On the southern side of the acropolis the excavations have unearthed the foundations of a building with a circular plan (5m diameter) which was part of a wider structure yet to be explored, made up of other rooms abutting it on the eastern



and southern sides. Although not rare, as attested by excavations on the nearby site of Mount Adranone, circular plan structures are not so widespread in Sicily in the Early Hellenistic Age, and probably even in this case intended for a public function.



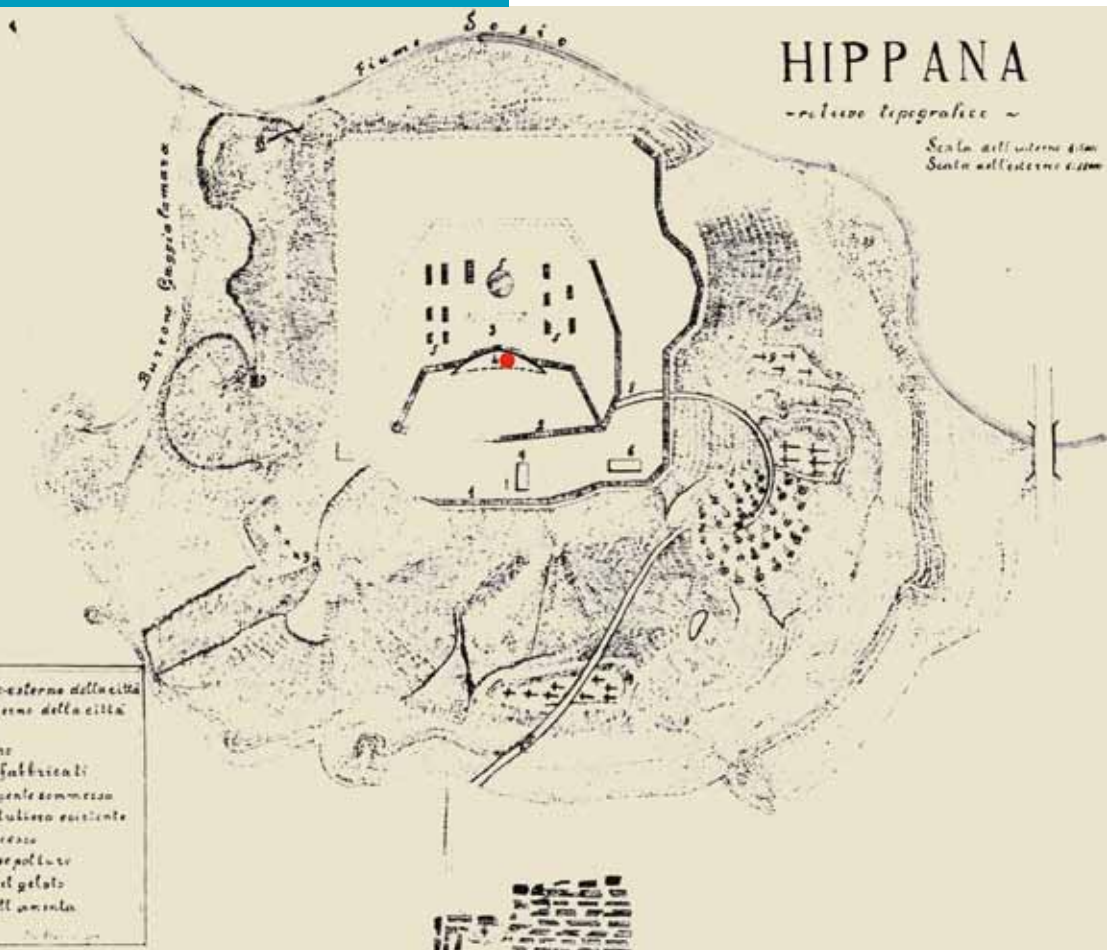
The Theatre

The most important building that has been discovered on Montagna dei Cavalli is the theatre, which covers a place of great importance, right under the peak of the mountain, on the northern side, and just outside the fortification walls of the acropolis. Its presence, several times suggested by scholars, has been definitely confirmed during the 2007 excavations, when the surviving part of the orchestra and the lower rows of the cavea (seating area) were totally excavated. For ages, for the people of Prizzi, that depression with a semicircle shape, well visible even from the town some kilometres away, evoked in a suggestive way the profile of



the cavea of a theatre, so much so that it had been indicated also in a planimetry, not quite reliable from a cartographic point of view but full of information, carried out in 1946 by a local surveyor, Francesco Cerami, and published in 1971 in an important article by Paolo Collura, about the identification of the site of Montagna dei Cavalli with Ippana. On this plan, although spoiled by evident deformations, there where it has always been and with the right orientation, a building, peremptorily defined as “theatre”, is drawn.

The state of conservation of its structures and in particular of the lower seats are very poor, therefore they have been reburied to protect them and preserve them



from further damage and subsidings, awaiting a new and definitive intervention allowing to complete the exploration, consolidate and restore the building to make it functional for the visitors.

The theatre is set in a very scenic position, with the cavea facing North from which one can enjoy a wonderful view open to the mountains of the valley of the San Leonardo and Torto rivers, up to the Tyrrhenian coast. From an urban plan of view it is set in a strategic and central place, between the acropolis and the town, therefore it was easily reachable from the different areas of the town, fully answering to the functions of a building that must have had a very important role for all the citizens of Ippana, as a place both for shows and for a meeting place for the assemblies of the citizens.



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The area of the theatre during the excavations



The cavea is defined by solid walls of the *analemma* made of great limestone blocks; the floor of the orchestra was made of beaten earth while the tiers were made of simple stone plates just rough-hewn, by a simple technique showing the early chronology of the theatre.

Its construction has been dated to the second half of the 4th century BC, in a

A

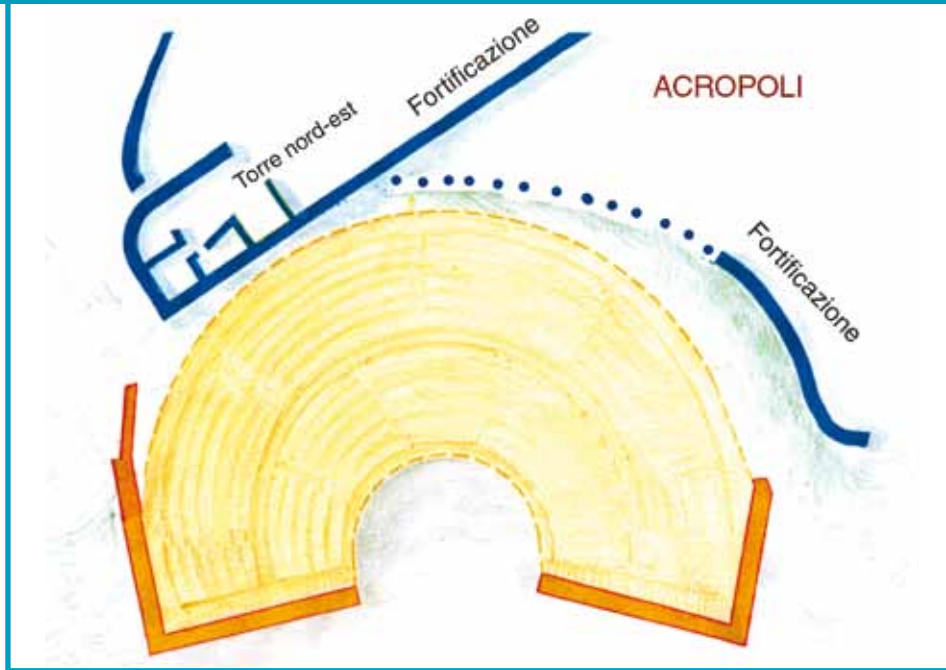


period when stone theatres in the Greek world were still in a experimental phase, both from a planimetric point of view and for the definition of its features. The diameter of the cavea, measured in the front part, between the external angles made up of the lateral *analemma* walls and the *pàrodoi*, is of 52m; the plan is wider than a semicircle, therefore the tiers envelop the circular space of the



27 The area of the orchestra of the theatre. On the background, Prizzi

28 The plan of the theatre related to the acropolis and to the fortifications



orchestra (14m diameter) for over half of its circumference. Up to now only the lower six tiers have been excavated, but it is possible to imagine, based on known elements, that there are up to 30 tiers, suggesting a capacity of 3000 people, based on studies of Sicilian theatres.

The cavea is divided into 6 sections or wedges (*kerkides*), separated by 7 radial staircases (*klimakes*) wide on average 60cm which allowed a functional connection between the different sectors of the tiers. As a matter of fact, through these



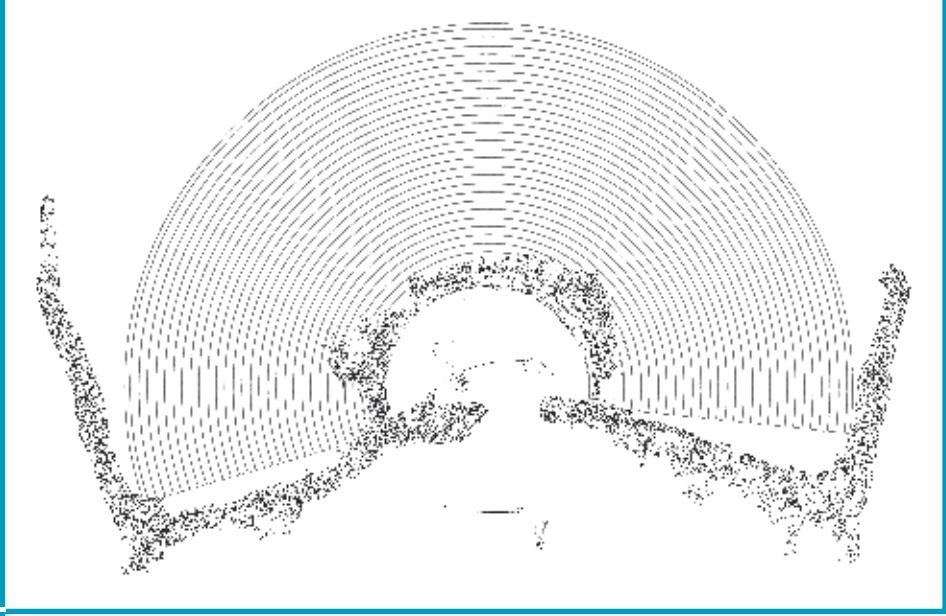
passages the spectators were able to reach or leave their seats in an orderly rapid way. If we consider the ideal circle at the base of the design of the cavea, it results divided geometrically in 10 segments or round sections, of which the actual space of the cavea covered 6/10ths.

The importance of the theatre of the Montagna dei Cavalli is above all its chronology; built around the second half of the 4th century BC, it was functioning up to the destruction of the town itself, that is in the mid 3rd century BC; therefore it is, both



31 North-east corner of the theatre

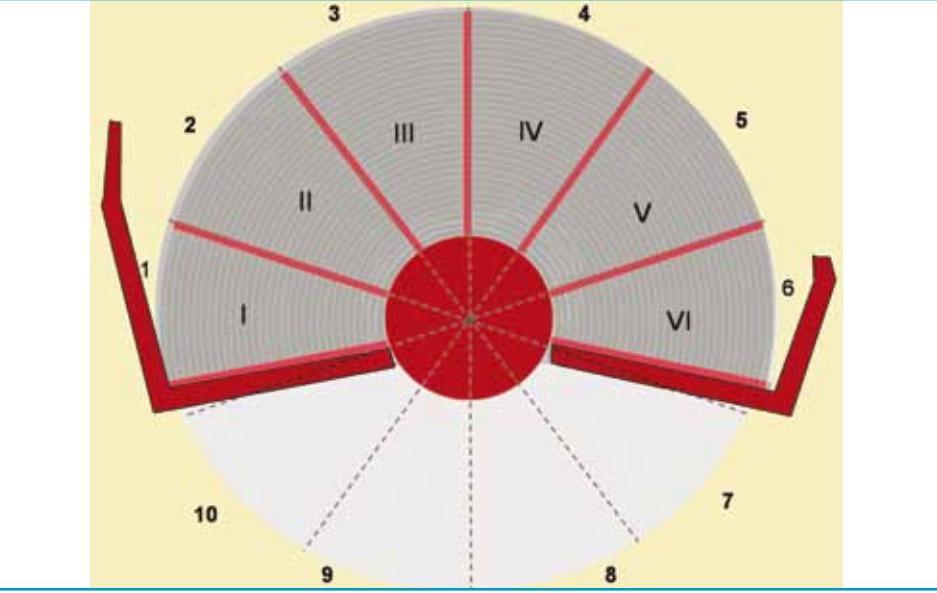
30 Plan of the theatre



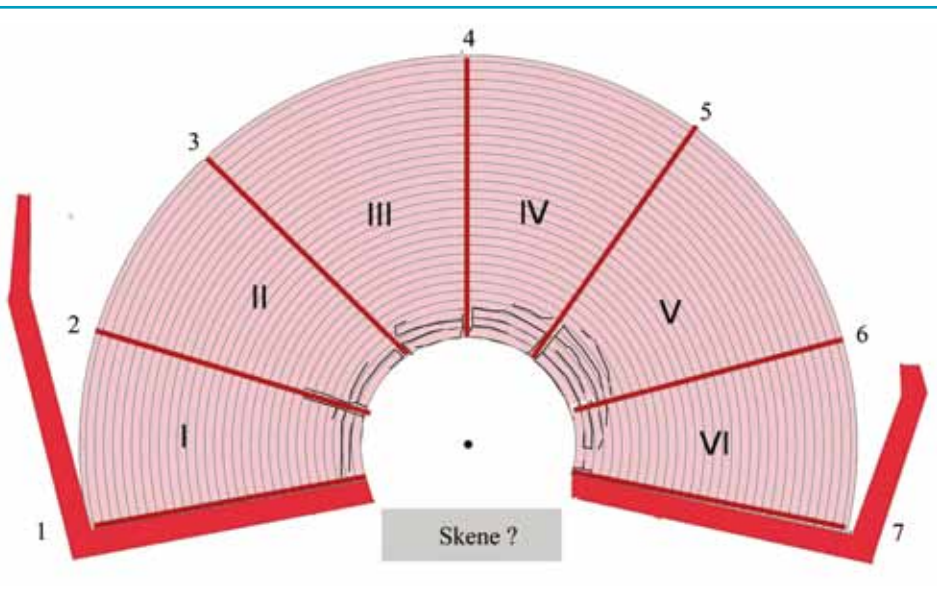


in Sicily and in Magna Graecia, the earliest model of a Greek theatre known up to now, since in all the other theatres known, after an initial building phase, followed other re-makings in Roman times which modified, even deeply, substantial features of the planimetry and of the original structural and decorative parts.

34 Geometry of the circle upon which the theatre was designed



33 Hypothesis of restitution of the plan of the theatre







The Museum

The Museum of Prizzi is in Corso Umberto I°, in a palace in the historic centre; made thanks to the collaboration between the local Council and the Soprintendenza of Palermo, it was opened to the public in 1999. Besides the Archaeological section, it has a Paleontological one (with fossils from the territory of Prizzi and of the whole of Sicily) and a Mineral one (with a rich collection of minerals from deposits in Sardinia).

The Archaeological section shows, through didactic panels and a selection of the most interesting finds, the results of the excavations conducted on Montagna dei Cavalli. Above all two gilded silver tiaras or diadems, found several years ago by





38 Polychrome glass vase

39 Gilded silver tiara with scenes of the
Dionysian Thiasos

40 Bronze coin from Syracuse

41 Punic bronze coin with a female head

42 Silver coin from Corinth



Tombaroli (tomb raiders) in the western necropolis and recovered by the Soprintendenza, and a small medal collection where are exhibited all the coins found in the town. In the central room are on display several finds (plain and painted pottery, terracotta statuettes, cooking ware etc...) handed in by the citizens of Prizzi in the past decades, coming from illegal diggings in the necropolises of Ippana in the '50s and '60s.

Finally, some display cases have been kept for a selection of finds from other archaeological sites in the territory of Prizzi, which prove the continuity of life and the ancient history of this area.

In this guide we just want to show some of the most interesting finds among those found in the western necropolis, of which, unfortunately, because of the lack of any excavation data, it is not possible to reconstruct any of the original burial contexts.

- Gilded silver strips on bronze sheet (*figs. 36-37*). They are tiaras from illegal excavations of a burial in the western necropolis; the strips, both decorated with a refined motif of small palm trees and spirals, prove the circulation on Montagna dei Cavalli of luxury goods linked to a rich and wealthy production of jewellery which had great importance in Sicily and in Magna Graecia in the Early Hellenistic Age. Dated between the second half of the 4th and the first half of the 3rd century BC.





43

- Gilded silver tiara on a bronze sheet (*fig. 39*) (“Salinas” Archaeological Museum of Palermo) decorated in relief showing a scene of the *dionysian thiasos*: in the middle Dionysus and Arianna sitting on a rock, on the sides is the parade of satyrs and maenads. The tiara, from an illegal excavation in the 1950s, was found still attached to the skull of the deceased.



- Polychrome glass *alabastron* decorated with a thick series of white and yellow zig-zag lines on a blue base (*fig. 38*). It is a small perfume vase of Punic tradition, that could be placed among the funerary goods of the Sicilian necropolises, probably in female burials. Dated to the first half of the 3rd century BC.
- Terracotta female bust (*fig. 47*). Found in pieces on the ground in the western necropolis, of which only the face is intact with its hair pulled to the back, with a tress falling on her shoulder. It is an elegant Greek coroplastic product dated to the 4th century BC.
- Terracotta statuette of Aphrodite and Eros (*fig. 48*). The goddess is shown with a cloak in part covering her head and falling on her chest with wide folds held with her hands. On her left shoulder is Eros with wings. 3rd century BC.
- Terracotta statuette of a naked male sitting on a circular moulded podium (*fig. 49*). Its right arm is placed along its side, while its left one is bent upwards holding in



45



46

his hand a belly cup (*phiale mesomphalos*), a kind of terracotta plate used for libation also in sacred places. End of the 4th - beginning of the 3rd century BC.

- Black glaze terracotta feeding bottle (*Guttus*) (fig. 43), decorated in relief on its upper discus with a beautiful head of the Medusa. 3rd century BC.
- Red figure Lekanis (fig. 45). On the lid are two female heads among palm leaves. The heads show on their fronts a tiara and the hair is held in a *sakkos*. Second half of the 4th century BC.
- Red figure Pixides (fig. 44). The lid is decorated with a plant shoot. On the vase are shown: on side A, a woman sitting, wrapped in a cloak showing her breast, holding a cup in her right hand; on side B is a dancing satyr holding in his hand a cup. Second half of the 4th century BC.
- Two so-called terracotta bottles, decorated with black figures and with small palm leaves and geometric motifs (fig. 46). Second half of the 4th century BC.

47



48



47



49

AA.VV., *Ricerche Montagna dei Cavalli. Scavi 1988-1991 a Montagna dei Cavalli-Hippana*, in *Archeologia e Territorio*, Palermo 1997, pp. 275- 306.

P.G. Guzzo - S. Vassallo, *Oreficerie da Montagna dei Cavalli*, in *Rivista dell'Istituto Italiano d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte*, 62-63, 2007-2008, pp.33-52.

S. Vassallo - O. Zirone, *Il teatro alto ellenistico di Montagna dei Cavalli/Ippana*, in *Sicilia Occidentale. Studi rassegne, ricerche*, a cura di C. Ampolo, Pisa 2012, pp. 105-112.

Agorà: In ancient Greece it was the main square of the polis (city).

Alabastron: small container for unguents.

Analemma: in the Greek theatre they are the walls placed outside the cavea.

Lekanis: terracotta pot with a lid, usually decorated on the upper part of the vase.

Parodoi: in the Greek theatre, they are the side entrances to the orchestra.

Pax Romana: or *Pax Augusti* is the long period of peace imposed on the nations within the Roman Empire, 29 BC - 180 AD.

Pixides: terracotta vase with a lid, with its sides usually decorated.

Sakkos: in ancient Greece a cloth with which women would wrap their hair gathered.

Skene: the narrow high platform placed behind the orchestra of the theatre, in the centre of the space where the actors would act.

Thiasos: parade of satyrs and maenads who accompanied Dionysus.



Published by
Soprintendenza Beni Culturali ed Ambientali di Palermo

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREAS IN PALERMO PROVINCE



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dei cavalli



The Theatre of Montagna dei Cavalli



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ISBN 978-88-6164-355-0



9 788861 643550 >

assessorato dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana
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