

April 2016

In Search of the Mother Goddess: Native Sculptures of Archaic Sicily (6th -5th Century BC)

Michael Lee, Bates College

Arcadia University has made this article openly available. [Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters. Thank you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/thecompass>

Recommended Citation

Michael Lee, Bates College (2016) "In Search of the Mother Goddess: Native Sculptures of Archaic Sicily (6th -5th Century BC)," *The Compass*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/thecompass/vol1/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@Arcadia. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Compass by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@Arcadia. For more information, please contact gordonl@arcadia.edu.

IN SEARCH OF THE MOTHER GODDESS: NATIVE SCULPTURES OF ARCHAIC SICILY

By Michael Lee, *Bates College*

When researching sculptures during the Archaic period in the 6th-5th Century BC, the literature focuses specifically on Greek sculptures. This is because of the large variety of Greek sculptures across Sicily varying in artistic ability and symbolic meaning. There is also a greater knowledge of the Greek culture, which leads to more interest in the life of the Greek Sicilians. This is due to Greece's colonization of Sicily, which brought an influx of art and culture that was deemed superior to the native Sicilians'. This concentration on the Greek culture has caused the culture and art of the Sicels, the native people inhabiting Sicily at the time of the arrival of Greeks, to be unintentionally neglected. This is mostly because there are very few known statues that are archaeologically significant. Through few statues remain, there is still more to learn from them about the religion, artistic ability, and culture of the Natives, who did not left behind any kind of written documents.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT & CASE STUDY

The majority of native statues come from the southeast portion of the island of Sicily. This includes the areas of Catania, Megara Hyblaea, and Syracuse in the 6th-5th centuries BC. These areas are at the crossroads of Corinthian, Chalcidian, and Megarian colonial expansions.¹ In the areas depicted in Figure 1 there was a strong relationship between the Natives and the Greeks, which allowed for the transfer of ideas including art and sculpting.

Greek sculpture of the Archaic period, ranging from 600 BC to 480 BC, was defined by the Kouroi and Korai, which were sculptures that represented young men and women. The Kouroi and Korai were some of

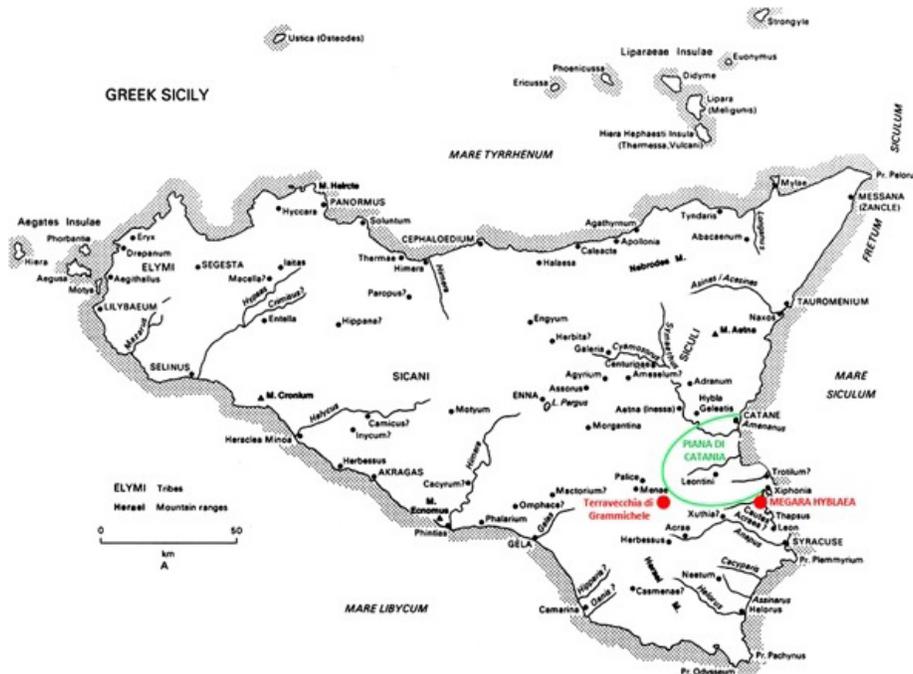


FIGURE 1. Map of Sicily with indication of the places cited in the text.

¹ Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, "An Outline of the Political History of the Greeks in the West," in *The Western Greeks: Classical Civilization in the Western Mediterranean*, ed. Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

the first large scale representations of human life made into a 3-D sculpture. These sculptures, however, were a poor representation of human life. This was because the Greeks were skilled at creating side profiles of a human face but did not know how to properly present the front view. Instead, they would try to link together the two side views through a series of arcs. This resulted in an attribute that is totally unique to the Archaic Period, the “Archaic Smile”. These types of coping techniques were ultimately led to the abandonment of Greek Archaic Period Sculptures.²

On the other hand, the native sculptures produced in the same period seem to have been influenced by the Greeks of Sicily. These sculptures were extremely different in artistic style, meaning, and capabilities. This will be demonstrated for the cases of the so-called Kourotrophoi (breast feeding women) of Megara Hyblaea, Terravecchia di Grammichele and Piana di Catania.

THE KOUROTROPHOS OF MEGARA HYBLAEA

The Kourotrophos of Megara Hyblaea (Fig. 2) was made out of limestone and found in over 300 pieces in a temple that was made for the Sicels.³ When it was found, it was thought to be an impossible project to reconstruct, so it was almost thrown away.

Luckily, an archaeological scholar reconstructed the whole Kourotrophos with the exception of the head, which was not salvageable. A Kourotrophos is defined as the “manifestation of the mother- or nursing-principle, or both as she enjoys special cults, rites, and offerings.”⁴ Usually, Kourotrophos refers to a Greek sculpture, but Archeologist Theodora Price claimed the Native sculpture could also be a Kourotrophos. Since the statue depicts a woman who is breastfeeding two children, Price’s⁵ claim is undeniably correct.



FIGURE 2. The reconstructed Kourotrophos of Megara Hyblaea nursing two children (Michael Lee). *Front view (left) and side view (right)*

Scholars have debated whether or not these children are twins. It is said that this particular sculpture was developed for the Sicel goddess Nyx (the Night) who is depicted holding and breastfeeding “Sleep” and “Death.”⁶ However, there have been almost no other scholars who have found evidence to support this claim. The story of this statue is still to be determined.

TERRAVECCHIA DI GRAMMICHELE

This sculpture (Fig. 3) was made out of clay and developed in the 6th century BC. Scholars believe it was found in

² R. Panvini and L. Sole. *La Sicilia in età arcaica. Dalle apoikiai al 480 a.C.* (Palermo, Regione Siciliana, 2009).; Nigel Spivey, *Greek Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³ Holloway, R. Ross. “Early Greek Sicily.” In *The Archaeology of Ancient Sicily*, ed. Ross R. Holloway. (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁴ Price, Theodora Hadzisteliou. “Introduction,” in *Kourotrophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities*, ed. Theodora Hadzisteliou Price (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ Holloway, *The Archaeology of Ancient Sicily*, 81-82.

a small Native village near Grammichele.⁷ Giovanni Rizza and Ernesto De Miro provide one of the only interpretations of the statue from Grammichele, identifying it as a representation of a “mother” goddess sitting on a throne.⁸

THE PIANA DI CATANIA

Less information is actually known about this unpublished piece in display at the Archaeological Museum of Catania (Fig. 4). All that is known is that it was crafted during the Archaic Period by a Sicel artisan and it is made out of clay. From an observational standpoint, the figure seems to have some type of article of clothing that is squeezing the breasts together.

This, coupled with the nipples showing could indicate the figure in the model is trying to nurse with the highest possible efficiency.

COMPARING THE CASES STUDY: IN SEARCH OF THE MOTHER GODDESS

Though these three statues seem very different, their mysterious nature and similarities indicate they could actually be representing a fairly similar deity. This section will provide interpretations and comparisons of each statue as well as a discussion on two small Greek statues and their relevance to the kourotrophoi and Native statues. I argue that the evidence indicates the possibility that these statues were all representing a similar goddess in the native region.

In regard to the Kourotrophos of Megara Hyblaea, at some point there also must have been a story to accompany this statue. According to Franco De Angelis, the statue was located on top of a tomb, as to imitate the Greek practice of placing Kouroi and Korai statues over the Archaic burials.⁹ In this case it is possible that the person buried in this particular tomb could have been a native minister of the cult of the mother goddess. The statue would have then emphasized the importance of this individual thus providing an example of religious native funerary rituals that date back to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age of Sicily.



FIGURE 4. The Piana di Catania, a bust of a possible Native Sicilian deity (Michael Lee).



FIGURE 3. Terravecchia di Grammichele a front (left) and side view (right) (Michael Lee).

Sadly, the sculpture’s head could not be reconstructed making it almost unidentifiable and there is no real evidence pointing to the myth behind this deity. Regardless, the myth must have been fundamental to the Sicel population. Many other Native sculptures, that will be discussed shortly, depict a woman who seems to symbolize motherhood or nursing, but almost no other case depict a woman nursing two children who seem to be twins.

The native sacred area was put in Megara Hyblaea more or less as a friendly reminder that the land was given to them by the Natives. The woman in the statue could depict the fertility of the land, native women, or nature in general,

⁷ Panvini and Sole, “La Sicilia in età arcaica. Dalle apoikiai al 480 a.C.”, 220.

⁸ Rizza, G., De Miro, E. “Le arti figurative dalle origini al V secolo a.C.” *Sikanie. Storie e civiltà della Sicilia greca*, ed. Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli (Milano: Garzanti, 1986).

⁹ Franco De Angelis, *Megara Hyblaea and Selinous: The Development of Two Greek City-States in Archaic Sicily* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press 264).

but the main concept in all of these explanations is the presence of a deity giving life. This statue could then be a representation of one of the Sicels' most valued deities symbolically giving them life. This would explain one of the children. Using this same logic the other child could be the representation of the Megarians. This theory proposes that there is a constant reminder that the Native deity not only gave the Sicels life, it also gave the Megarians life. As such, I interpret the temple and the statue as a symbolic reminder to the Megarians that they should respect the Sicels as well as their deity. This would help explain the extremely unique case of the Kourotrophos of Megara Hyblaea.

It is also important to emphasize that the concept of twins has a long tradition in Sicilian prehistory and native history. Noteworthy is the bronze figurine depicted two twins dated back to the end of the 8th century BC, found

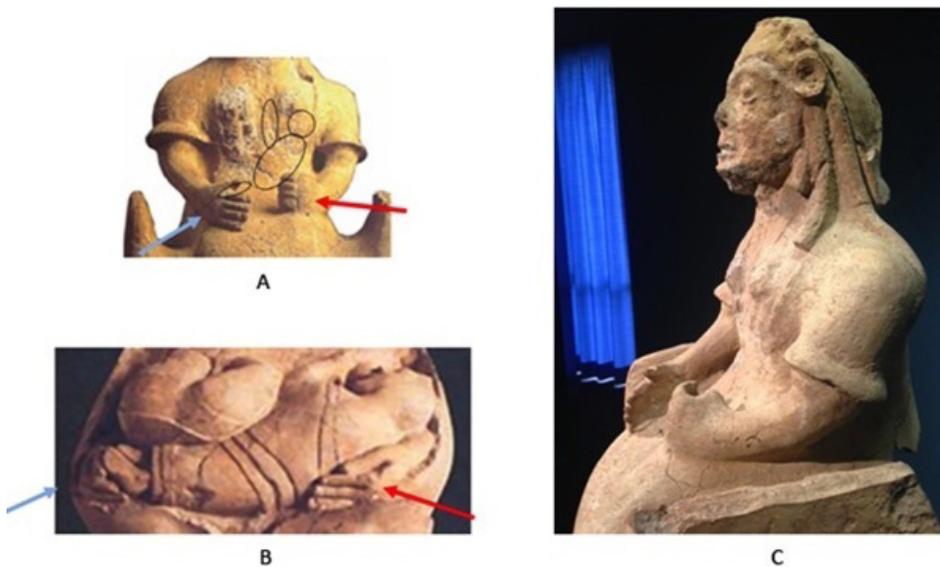


FIGURE 5. A-B) Diagram showing the similarities in and placement of the Kourotrophos and Statue of Grammichele; **c)** Grammichele statue where the left shoulder is leaning slightly back and the lap region seems slightly concave (author's graphic elaboration).

were for support.” The scratch marks across the chest indicate that something missing in the statue, something there before that is no longer there now. My hypothesis is that this something could have been, at some point, a child, since the hand placement is almost identical to the Kourotrophos’. The only difference is there would have been only one child. The natives may not have known how to properly depict the other hand, so they depicted it as a fist (Fig. 5a-b). This particular type of coping technique is not necessarily new for the Archaic period. The Greeks would do this in order to eliminate the sculpting of difficult hand positions. The only thing I would add to the previously mentioned description of the Statue of Grammichele is that the left shoulder is also tilted slightly back as if to support a head of a child (Fig. 5c). Since Megara Hyblaea was a very unique historical case in which the Sicels gave land to the Greeks, they needed two children. This would not have been the case for Grammichele so just one child would have been represented.

The statue reportedly found in the Piana di Catania is culturally, much easier to compare to the Kourotrophos

in the native settlement of Licodia Eubea.¹⁰ Also, within the religion of the Greeks of Sicily the Paliokoi, the twin gods of geysers and sons of Mount Aetna and Zeus, were believed to be the Hellenized version of an unknown native divine couple.¹¹

When observing the statue from Terravecchia di Grammichele, the deity’s hand placement looks strange, but familiar. Sole Panvini stated, “...la mano sinistra aperta e la destra chiusa a pugno, quasi per sostenere qualcosa.”¹² This roughly translates to, “The left hand is open and the right is closed in a fist, almost as if it

¹⁰ V. La Rosa, “Bronzetti indigeni della Sicilia,” *Cronache di Archeologia* 7 (1968): 7-136.

¹¹ Fabio Caruso, “Passage to Tartarus, pillar of the sky. Images of myths and legends in the Etnean region.” in *In Ima Tartar. The prehistory and legends of the etnean caves*, eds. F. Privitera, V. La Rosa. (Palermo: Regione Siciliana, 2007).

¹² Panvini and Sole, “La Sicilia in età arcaica. Dalle apoikiai al 480 a.C.,” 220.

of Megara Hyblaea. This is because, like previously stated, the sculpture is wearing something around its breasts with the nipples showing. This would indicate that there is a strong need for nursing. Though this particular sculpture is just a bust, by portraying it in this manner it develops the same symbolic meaning as the Kourotophos of Megara Hyblaea and the Statue of Grammichele which is the “manifestation of the mother- or nursing-principle, or both...”¹³

A little more information can be scavenged from the location of this particular piece. Piana di Catania simply means the countryside of Catania. With no known Native settlements in this area, it can be assumed that this particular sculpture may have belonged to a rural Native cult. If this is true, this tells us something about the natives in this area as a whole. The same types of qualities, in this case fertility, were being worshipped no matter what the Native settlement was or what the deity looked like. The idea of fertility must have been instrumental to worship and important in the lives of all Natives in this area.

In search of comparisons for the three Native sculptures discussed above, it is possible to focus on two similar clay statuettes of Greek kourotophoi, the chronology of which is later than the Native pieces: the Kourotophos of Camarina (Fig. 6)¹⁴ and that from the Biscari Collection at Catania (Fig. 7).¹⁵

The fact that these statuettes came after the Native statues of Megara Hyblaea, Piana di Catania, and Grammichele is a fairly puzzling circumstance. There is at least one possible explanation. It is possible that the Greeks created a proper statue of a Kourotophos in a real scale of which we no longer have evidence. This would insinuate that the three Native statues were an imitation of an original Greek statue, as the character portrayed was compatible with a goddess of their pantheon. In other words, it means that the Greeks and Natives depicted the same type of deity around the same time, but in a different artistic manner. More than likely ideas would have been exchanged between the Natives and the Greeks about the same deity, these ideas would have then been portrayed in the artwork of both cultures. Whatever the reason may be, there is a particular Greek and Native interest in the depiction of kourotophoi.

Within this depiction, whether it be Greek or Native, the same motifs are recycled. The most relevant for this case study is that the child is on the left side. This standard would then further confirm the peculiar hand positioning of the Statue of Grammichele. The child in the Statue of Grammichele would not have been depicted facing away with its arms straight down as in the Kourotophos of Camarina (Fig.6).¹⁶ It more than likely would

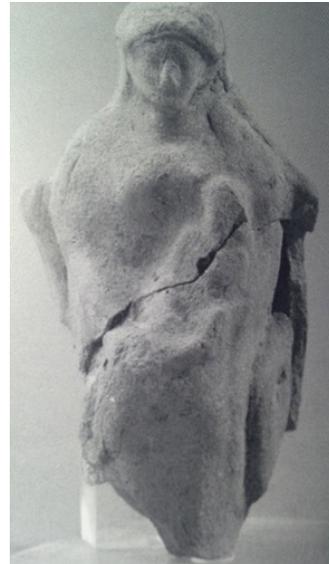


FIGURE 6. Greek Kourotophos Statuette, from Camarina (Panvini – Sole 2009).



FIGURE 7. Another Greek Kourotophos Statuette, from Biscari Collection (Panvini – Sole 2009).

¹³ Price, *Kourotophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities*, 2.

¹⁴ Panvini and Sole, “La Sicilia in età arcaica. Dalle apoikiai al 480 a.C.”, 230 (VI/162).

¹⁵ Ibid., 402 (TA/38).

¹⁶ Ibid., 230 (VI/162).

have been depicted like the Kourotrophos of Catania (Fig. 7)¹⁷ with one arm across the chest of the deity, which would explain the scratches across the chest of the Statue of Grammichele.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Even though the Greeks were gaining total control of a majority of Sicily, some areas maintained relationships with the Natives. It is evident that the Natives in these areas became increasingly more Hellenized during and after the colonization of Sicily. This is seen in the development of the ethnic category that scholars call the “Siceliots”. The Siceliots are the product of the mixture of Greeks and Natives after generations. The result was something neither Greek nor Sikel. This was the beginning of a new ethnic group and territory in which the Native culture began to “disappear.”¹⁸

The literature suggests Kourotrophos of Megara Hyblaea, Archeologist Ross R. Holloway also states that “... this [is a] simple expression of maternal eternity...”¹⁹ Holloway’s statement overlooks the fact that symbolic meaning of ancient architecture, sculpture, or art can never be thought of as a “simple expression” of any sort. When sculptures were made during the Archaic Period, the person, place, or thing being depicting was either highly valued by society or valued enough by a rich individual that large sums of money were worth making it symbolically immortal. From an archeological perspective it would not make sense for a sculpture made in the Archaic Period to be a *simple expression* of “maternal eternity.”Holloway’s statement is the embodiment of the Native Sicilian neglect archaeologists are going through today.

In the Archaic Period, the friendly relationships between the Natives and Greeks resulted in beautiful and rare art. This is because the Native attraction to the Greek culture produced a short period in which there was a particular Native impulse to create sculptures. Statues, such as those in the case study, must continue to be investigated in order to discover more about the lives of the Natives. This could be the key to starting up the conversation about Sicilian natives within the field of Archaeology, especially in regards to their culture.

¹⁷ Panvini and Sole, “La Sicilia in età arcaica. Dalle apoikiai al 480 a.C.”, 230 (TA/38).

¹⁸ Dwight Cartwright, *Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Holloway, *The Archaeology of Ancient Sicily*, 91.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Caruso, Fabio. "Passage to Tartarus, pillar of the sky. Images of myths and legends in the Etnean region." In *In Ima Tartara. The prehistory and legends of the etnean caves*, edited by F. Privitera, V. La Rosa, 129-159. Palermo: Regione Siciliana, 2007.
- Cartwright, Dwight. *Historical Commentary on Thucydides*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- De Angelis, Franco, *Megara Hyblaia and Selinous: The Development of Two Greek City-States in Archaic Sicily*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2003.
- Holloway, R. Ross. "Early Greek Sicily." In *The Archaeology of Ancient Sicily*, edited by Ross R. Holloway, 82-83. London: Routledge, 1991.
- La Rosa, V. "Bronzetti indigeni della Sicilia." *Cronache di Archeologia* 7 (1968): 7-136. Panvini R., and L. Sole. *La Sicilia in età arcaica. Dalle apoikiai al 480 a.C.* Palermo: Regione Siciliana, 2009.
- Price, Theodora Hadzisteliou. "Introduction." In *Kourotrophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities*, edited by Theodora Hadzisteliou Price, 1-14. Leiden: Brill, 1978.
- Pugliese Carratelli, Giovanni. "An Outline of the Political History of the Greeks in the West." In *The Western Greeks: Classical Civilization in the Western Mediterranean*, edited by Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, 147-148. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- Rizza, G., De Miro, E. "Le arti figurative dalle origini al V secolo a.C." In *Sikanie. Storie e civiltà della Sicilia greca*, edited by Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, 125-232. Milano: Garzanti, 1986.
- Spivey, Nigel. *Greek Sculpture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Treziny, Henri. "Grecs Et Indigenes Aux Origines De Megara Hyblaea." *Roemische Mitteilungen* 117, (2011): 15-34.