

Archaic terracotta acroteria representing Athena and Heracles: manifestations of power in central Italy

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Introduction

Over a relatively short period (550-480 B.C.) many temples in central Italy were furnished with terracotta roofs which blazed with colourful decoration and rich imagery. Besides being places of worship, Archaic temples were also manifestations of local power. Temples occupied central locations in cities and their ornamentation usually included a set of conspicuous crowning statues in terracotta which no passer-by could fail to notice. The meanings of these statues are a subject of discussion, for there is a range of possible explanations, varying from a display of fashionable pictures from Greece to a representation of religious beliefs and local politics. Recently, and perhaps unfortunately, it has become fashionable to seek political allusions in the roof decoration of Etrusco-Italic temples, based on the Archaic temple of Mater Matuta and Fortuna at Sant'Omobono in Rome. Its acroterion representing the apotheosis of Heracles, with his divine protectress, has been read as straightforward political propaganda for the King of Rome. This article aims to re-open the discussion on the representation of power in temple decoration in Archaic central Italy, by showing that these acroteria were part of an iconographical code that fits perfectly within the culture of ostentatious power in a period characterized by deep political conflicts marking the end of the regal power structure.

My point of departure are the central acroteria representing Athena and Heracles, all dating from the third quarter of the 6th c. and decorating temples dedicated to goddesses of birth and light, in Rome, and in four neighbouring cities. By accepting the assumption that the choice of the subject of these acroteria was indeed deliberate, I intend to demonstrate that the explanation of the imagery must be sought not in their singularity as political propaganda for a specific tyrant (as has been done for the Sant'Omobono group) but in their popularity with the political élite all over central Italy. Finally, I will argue that a careful collection of all the primary data is essential to provide a clear starting point for any interpretation of imagery displayed on Etrusco-Italic temple roofs.

Athena and Heracles in Rome

Below the foundations of the small church of Sant'Omobono, on the site of the Forum Boarium, are the remains of a 4th-c. sanctuary. It consists of twin temples dedicated to the goddesses Fortuna and Mater Matuta. Livy and Plutarch tell that the 'good Etruscan King of Rome' Servius Tullius, who reigned between 578 and 534, dedicated a temple to Mater Matuta and Fortuna, again in the Forum Boarium. Under the eastern Republican temple, below the church, remains have been found of an Archaic temple with a slightly different orientation. It is quite possible that this temple too had a twin, dedicated to either Mater Matuta or Fortuna.¹ The Archaic temple was given a new roof under Servius Tullius' successor, the tyrant Tarquinius Superbus, the last King of Rome. Then, between 510 and 500, at the time of the foundation of the Roman Republic, the temple was ritually destroyed.²

The figurative decorations of the Archaic temple's terracotta roof were found by A. Sommella Mura who published them in 1977.³ The most exciting find was a terracotta group depict-

1 The Sant'Omobono temples are discussed in Coarelli 1988, 205-21, Colonna 1991, 51-59, and Holloway 1994, 68-81.

2 Plut., *QuaestRom* 36 and 74.

3 For the architectural terracottas see Sommella Mura 1977, 62-88; 1990, 15-20; 1993, 225-33. The most recent catalogue on the finds can be found in *Grande Roma* 1990, 111-45.