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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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Light on the new Salinas museum

Flavia Frisone

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In 2016, after years of work, four major Italian archaeological museums reopened (totally or partially) to the public. In April the Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria - where recently only the Riace Bronzes were visible - placed the totality of its collections on display. In July the Archaeological museum of Taranto completed a lengthy renovation and opened its entire second floor to the public (artifacts from Prehistory to the Hellenistic age). Again in July, after four years of work, the Archaeological museum of Palermo 'Antonino Salinas' reopened its lavish ground floor where the Selinunte treasures are displayed. Last but not least, the Archaeological museum of Naples opened two sections: in June, a section dedicated to the Oriental Cults in Campania and, in October, its most important Egyptian Collection. These have been truly crucial events for the Italian archaeological community and for the whole country. Archeostorie asked historian and archaeologist Flavia Frisone to describe the new Salinas Museum and how the citizens of Palermo welcomed its opening. Frisone describes how, with its new layout, the Salinas has transformed the old and dark rooms of the historic building in which it is housed - the Convent of the Filippini Fathers in Palermo - into a truly modern and luminous space.

No scissors on velvet cushions, ready to cut the customary ribbon. No red white and green sashes of Prime Ministers or Regional Presidents; no protesters at the door and no fanfare of promises inside. No, there was nothing like that in the evening of July 27th in Palermo for the official reopening of the Archaeological Museum 'Antonino Salinas'. Last summer was certainly one of many happy reopenings for institutions all around Italy, but the one I am about to recount to you has for me a special significance. I hope you won't mind if I tell you about it in this tone, as a story close to my heart.

First, the emotions I felt upon crossing the threshold while museum personnel - few in number - let in the guests: families with children, spruced-up ladies and gentlemen, kids in shorts and T-shirts. And smiles. The small cloister of the ancient house of the Filippini Fathers gradually filled with the colourful cheer and festive anticipation of the Salinas community.

Lots of people had been waiting for the new museum to open. Some were waiting so they could criticize - of course - the restoration work and the exhibition itself. But most were sincerely interested, stimulated by the lively and incisive digital communication strategy the social media manager Sandro Garrubbo has implemented in recent years, an effort that has paid off, providing the museum with a distinctive identity.

Thus many had begun to familiarize themselves with the museum from a distance and access it - little by little - thanks to a full schedule of seminars, conferences, meetings and, above all, temporary exhibitions. A 'small world', consisting of the only four accessible rooms, had been opened, as an attempt to provide a different and more thorough understanding of those parts of the collection that were difficult to appreciate in their original traditional settings. This has been a successful experiment, since in 2015 alone the number of visitors had reached five figures, more than 51,000!

Now, however, everyone was waiting for the 'grand reopening'; a partial reopening, with only the ground floor restored so far, but that is where the most significant and famous parts of the historical collection are displayed. For the remainder, we'll have to wait, in the hope that the words of the Regional Assessor for Cultural Heritage, Carlo Vermiglio, were not empty promises when he assured us that the funds necessary for the restoration would be sourced from a project - the 'Pact for Sicily' - financed by the Government. The process is not over yet, and it still needs our vigilant eyes.

But let's go back to 2009 when, after a lengthy wait and painful hesitations, restoration work began on the Salinas. It was a restoration designed not only to equip an old and outdated museum with suitable modern exhibition spaces and services, but also to restore luster to a building of great beauty. The museum is a monumental complex formed over more than four centuries, containing delightful cloisters and with numerous architectural gems which have been added over time.

With a budget of only 11.5 million Euros, sourced from various funds, there was no room - nor a real need - for a Starchitect project. The entire basic structure of the building needed to be consolidated, and the facilities renovated (including the recent addition of a life-saving air-conditioning system). The renovation process, which fell onto architect Stefano Biondo, has also added about 900 square meters of exhibition space, bringing the Salinas to a total of 5,130 square meters. Even though

his work is likely to become the target of sharp criticism from some of his colleagues, he is to be praised: as a public servant, he had to make use of whatever he could get - and did so with success.

Initially, the closing of the museum for the renovations was gradual. The spaces were fully closed only in 2011. Amidst the sighs of a few nostalgic patrons, the frustration of scholars and the disappointment of tourists left outside the door, we saw the building disappear behind scaffolding, with no idea when we would see it again. At that point the Salinas Museum had become a piece of the history of Palermo and Sicily that the city had forgotten, buried in the dust of building work and, before that, in its own torpor. Lost in the middle of the traffic and besieged by nightlife, it had barricades around it that were metaphors for what could isolate it forever: a self-referential idea of public service - actually an excuse for its weak leadership - and the absence of any sense of the direction for the project. Even a closed museum - especially a closed museum, if it is one of the richest archaeological museums in Italy - needs strong leadership. And finally, thank goodness, that is what it found: the face of redemption, Francesca Spatafora, an expert archaeologist and a decisive and tenacious director. In the past three years, she has steered the project, providing direction in the decision-making process and the impetus to overcome obstacles, but she likes to point out how the successful fight for the re-opening is actually the fruit of a collective effort, the work of many both in and outside of the spotlight. And two thousand people have wanted to celebrate with her: come in, everybody, the Salinas is open!

Entering today for the first time, the impression is, first of all, of a welcoming monument of great beauty rather than a museum. The minor cloister, which could be made out behind the austere facade of Piazza Olivella, is now an appealing interface for the Salinas, with its multi-media information desk and services for the public overlooked by the beautiful portico. On the other hand, those who already know the building and the museum are immediately struck by the

transformed displays, designed by a highly respected scientific committee.

The archaeological finds housed at the Salinas are extraordinary and, in some cases, without parallel; but the old collection had become a chaotic hodgepodge of antiquities, arranged according to an outdated, nineteenth-century idea of museum. Now, instead, it is a place that can tell its many stories properly. These are stories about the past, archeological research being the main mission of the museum, but also of the institution's own past, the history of its various 'collections' and the acquisitions it made over the centuries. These mutually inclusive narrative souls of the museum now coexist successfully. Moving between the new spaces which open onto the gardens and courtyards as well as in and out of the deftly interconnected rooms around the large portico, visitors gather a sense of a more 'connected' experience, of a museum that has found its own Ariadne's Thread.

On the one hand, it has succeeded in the difficult task of displaying the nucleus around which the oldest museum institution in Sicily originated and grew, consisting of objects that have in themselves a story to tell. For instance, the story of how the museum of Palermo came in possession of a fragment of the Eastern frieze of the Parthenon. On the other hand, it has seized the unique opportunity to finally present findings from excavations in their archaeological contexts, offering visitors a perhaps unmatched richness of details about the life, death, cults and, in short, about the history of the westernmost of the Greek cities of Sicily, Selinunte.

The museological choices the curators made allowed an unprecedented number of artifacts to be displayed for the first time. Not all these choices may conform to the latest in museum fashion, but noblesse oblige: when you have things to show, you cannot keep them hidden. Thus the display cabinets in the rooms dedicated to the sanctuary of Demetra Malophoros, crowded with hundreds of votive offerings, appear to succumb to an exhibitional horror vacui. But this was the reality of the ancient cult: it reflected the entire cycle of

existence, by no means less than what is now happening around the sanctuary of Divino Amore.

The exhibitions that preserve these two dimensions of the museum's soul develop around the two beautiful cloisters. Along the portico of the Great Cloister, well-known works such as the large Roman statues, including the colossus of Zeus from Soluntum, return to their historical location, now more splendid than ever thanks to the restoration work. The cells of the northern corridor, where new exhibition spaces have been created, are now home not only to the precious Phoenician finds, but also to those from excavations promoted in the nineteenth century by the Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti (in Centuripe and Randazzo, including exquisite jewelry from Tindari), some of which have never been exhibited before. Attic red and white-figure pottery from the necropolis of Agrigento, along with other architectural sculptures and votive materials discovered within its sanctuaries, are also on display.

The meeting point between the two dimensions, and their respective museum displays, is the extraordinary Selinunte section. Sculptures and architectural decorations from the great temples are displayed in a way that forms part of the museum's own history: one of those special - one may even call them spiritual - places that have shaped generations of archaeologists in their encounter with the history of ancient art. But now an attempt has been made to give a dynamic dimension to the architecture from this Greek city, famous for the magnificence of its buildings. Following an itinerary that takes us from the splendour of the places of worship to the tragedy of the city and its survival, one finds (at last) a single narrative thread also for the all-important section of funerary epigraphy, whose inscriptions are not only displayed in an accessible, coherent way but are also placed in direct connection with the burials and funerary objects from the town's rich *necropoleis*.

The superstars in the museum are, however, still the *metopes*: the most important examples of the art of Western Greece which,

for over one hundred and fifty years, have dominated the great hall (once the refectory of the Filippini Fathers). The new layout had no choice but to respect its historical setting (with some concessions to comfort, thank goodness!), but has reduced the surrounding sense of emptiness by enriching the space with new sculpture fragments and a substantial selection of architectural terracottas in their bright, original polychromy, as well as - finally - dedicating a space to the 'small metopes.' And - at the end of the itinerary - a spectacular turn of events: the third courtyard encircled by the eight Selinunte rooms is transformed into a kind of new agora by a glass roof. This space is destined - by next Spring, they guarantee - to spectacularly display the marble and terracotta architectural fragments that decorated the sumptuous temples of Himera and Selinus.

There is one further element of improvement in the way the museum welcomes its visitors that should not be passed over in silence: captions have been made more accessible throughout. It is a small step, but it may mark a significant turning point. Captions - the main language in which museums speak to visitors - have always been a sore spot for museum curators, and perhaps even more so for archaeologists, as they reveal infallibly what they think of themselves and their role within society. The Italian Ministry of Culture issued clear directives back in 2005. It's a good thing, then, that the new Salinas has aimed for simplification and inclusion in its new captions (though perhaps not always in certain 'auteur' panels). We hope that, once all captions and panels will be completed, they will leave the visitor with that same sense of clarity.

This, in any case, is the course that has been set, and the exhibition strategy would seem to corroborate the impression. An example? The famous Palermo Stone (an extraordinary inscribed Egyptian fragment donated to the museum in 1877 by a collector from Palermo) is now housed in a room in which other objects are exhibited, in an effort to narrate the

history of epigraphic writing in various ancient languages through the coordination of various pieces in the museum holdings. The beautiful Palermo fragment, containing the chronicles of about seven hundred years of the kingdom of Ancient Egypt (3100-2300 BC), is no longer considered or presented merely as an antique curiosity but becomes an important element in the history of that wonderful invention: the written word. And it makes sense that alongside it are now displayed - together for the first and hopefully not the last time - three of the eight decrees of Entella, the famous Greek inscriptions on bronze tablets which were reclaimed in the 1970s from the world of international antiquities trafficking.

Those who knew the old Salinas will remember how the main rooms gave the impression of an eery descent into hell. After a final glance at the magnetic eye of the Gorgon that stood out against a gloomy red background, one entered them only to advance along a maze of gloomy corridors in which, here and there, small, enigmatic, two-headed stelae emerged next to obscure inscriptions, leading to the cold vastness of the hall of the large Selinunte metopes and the penumbra of the Casuccini Etruscan collection.

Nothing could be more different from what it will be like in the east wing of the building which, overlooking the third courtyard, will be flooded with light. Light is actually already creating an airy atmosphere, bringing brightness and openness, to the spaces - those once dark and old warehouses - overlooking the garden of the Great Cloister. The beauty of this natural light, varying with the time of day and the seasons, brings a feeling of renewed vitality to the Salinas. It may not be the most fashionable museological option, but in the end, as Ecclesiastes says, "Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun" (Ecc.11:7).

