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Sommario

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Undoing the Myth of the Polizzi "Iside"

In the foyer of the Archaeological Museum of Polizzi Generosa, a medieval town in the Sicilian Madonie mountains, a curious picture is displayed: it shows three differently angled views of a standing figure draped in a long tunic and cloak, holding two snakes in one hand and a drum-like object in the other. The head has three faces: the one aligned with the front of the body is that of a young woman, the one on the left side is smaller and looks like a child's, while the bearded face on the right is like that of an old man. The picture is printed from an 18th-century engraving captioned as follows: «Statua di Minerva detta Sai da cui derivò il nome della città Atina, Satina o Sitana, oggidì Polizzi».[1] The smaller print on the last line has «Diod. Lib. 5. Polib. Lib. I», a reference to two antique sources presumably supporting the interpretation of the figure as the goddess Minerva and its connection with Polizzi. The idea is stressed by a reproduction (on the top left of the print) of a coin with the head of the goddess, apparently found in Polizzi by 18th-century local historian Francesco Caruso.

The engraving, made in 1720,[2] is the only visual evidence of a statue, now destroyed, said to have been found in a well in 1650 by the Chiesa Madre.[3] That would be the most ancient area of Polizzi, where, according to a legend, a pagan temple later turned into a mosque and then a synagogue once stood, prior to the building of the present church. The statue is said to have been placed inside the Chiesa Madre to support the holy water font, and to have remained there until 1764, when it was removed due to restructuring works to the building. When it came to re-installing the statue, Bishop Castelli, who was in Polizzi at the time,[4] decided that what he understood to be a pagan image had no business in a church; so he had it smashed to pieces. Four years later, a number of notable citizens of Polizzi gathered to sign a formal protest, however polite, against the bishop's action. Unlike the statue, this document has come

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[1] «Statue of Minerva called Sai, from which derived the name of the city of Atina, Satina or Sitana, the present-day Polizzi».

[2] The date is given at the bottom of the facsimile of the engraving published by the «Associazione culturale Naftolia». According to G. Curatolo, the engraver was friar Giacomo Nicchi and the picture was produced on behalf of Francesco Caruso and his brother and fellow-historian Giovanbattista. See G. CURATOLO, *Statua, dimmi chi sei?*, Tricase (LE) s.d.

[3] *Ibid.*, p.7.

[4] Mons. Castelli was bishop of Cefalù, to which diocese Polizzi Generosa belonged (and still does). He lived in Polizzi's Bishops' House for many years and died there in 1788. See C. BORGESE-I. RAMPOLLA DOMINICI, *Polizzi Generosa tra storia e memoria*, Palermo 1987.

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20 (gennaio-dicembre 2018), pp. 143-156

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down to us: it contains a detailed description of the lost artwork, probably based on the engraving rather than the original.[5]

The image itself actually presents a few problems in terms of its identification with Minerva, whose traditional attributes (military apparel, olive branch, owl) are absent. Instead, the Polizzi figure holds two snakes[6] and a rounded object. As to the two literary sources mentioned below the engraving, there is no explicit reference to Minerva/Athena in connection with Polizzi in either text.[7]

An attempt to reconcile the traditional, one-faced, Minerva with the lost dysmorphic statue is put forward in the citizens' *Protesta* as: «The most ancient marble statue of Isis Minerva». Even this double identity, however, does not bear comparison with ancient representations of either goddess: the closest association of Minerva/Athena with the number three is as part of a trinity featuring Jupiter/Zeus and Juno/Hera as *separate* seated figures; while the Egyptian/Carthaginian goddess Isis, also known as Hecate or Trivia, consists of three separate female bodies with separate, yet identical, female heads, representing Diana/Artemis, Lucina/Selene and Proserpina/Persephone, who preside over, respectively, the hunt, the moon and the underworld.

Syncretism with local deities accounted for, I have not found any directly comparable iconography in ancient Mediterranean statuary, though I cannot of course demonstrate that no other such images were ever made in the antique world.

Another problem, however, is that the style of the statue as seen in the engraving does not suggest an Archaic, Classical or Hellenistic model, let alone an Egypto-Punic one. In fact, when I first saw the picture in the Polizzi museum, the curvature of the figure and the dancing movement of the skirt's folds immediately made me think of a late medieval design. However, considering the archaeological museum's display case a rather unlikely setting for such an item, I attributed my impression to the draughtsman's inability to provide an accurate depiction of an antique. On second thoughts, though, the style of the figure did not show an 18th-century bias, either. Hence, its impression of the lost artwork could be assumed to be rather faithful.

While in Milan, a few months later, I visited the Portinari Chapel, in the Sant'Eustorgio church complex. The monumental tomb of Saint Peter Martyr in the chapel is surrounded by the statues of eight virtues, one of which, Prudence (the

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[5] A. Gagliardo, di Casal Pietra, *Protesta dei cittadini di Polizzi Generosa: scritta l'anno 1775 dopo la perdita dell'antica statua d'Iside Triforme e facsimile della medesima / pubblicata per cura del cav. Antonino Gagliardo di Casal Pietra*, Palermo 1880.

[6] The snake could admittedly be associated with Athena, goddess of wisdom, who is said to have adopted Erichtonius, sometimes represented as a snake or in half-human, half-snake form. Accordingly, Athena is sometimes accompanied by a snake in antique sculpture. The lost colossal statue of Athena Parthenos is described in detail by both Pausanias and Pliny the Elder: while the snake is mentioned and named by both, no hint is there about the goddess being three-faced.

[7] Diodorus Siculus goes as far as mentioning Athena (whose aspect or attributes are not described) as the focus of a cult in the Himera region but Polybius does not include any references to Minerva/Athena, Sai, Atina, Satina, or Sitana, let alone Polizzi or its location.

name is carved above), is represented by a female figure with three faces, respectively an old woman's, a young woman's and a girl's, attached to a single head. The old woman is veiled, the young woman wears her long hair gathered in a thick plait, while the girl's hair is loose. The figure holds a bundle of books in one hand and a round mirror in the other: at least, this is what the object looks like, as the woman's face appears to be intently focusing on it. The Milan statue, made by Pisan artist Giovanni di Balduccio between 1336 and 1339, can thus provide a clue as to why a strange three-faced figure was placed in Polizzi's Chiesa Madre, whether or not it was originally made for that church.

A remarkably similar three-faced Prudence, in fact, decorates the shrine of St Augustine (1362) in San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro, Pavia, and is also attributed to Giovanni di Balduccio. Her right hand seems to hold a mirror, as the young woman's gaze is directed that way. Like the Milan statue, but unlike the Polizzi one, the old face is that of a woman. This interesting iconography exemplifies the conflation of the Aristotelian idea of the Three Ages of Man[8] with the so-called *vultus trifrons* (three-faced form or appearance), which might indeed be derived from antique images of the three-formed Isis/Hecate and then (controversially) applied to the Christian Trinity or to other allegories. A seated version of three-faced Prudence is inlaid in the pavement of Siena Cathedral and dated around 1406: besides having three differently aged faces, the figure holds a set of books in one hand (like its Milan and Pavia counterparts) and a snake in the other. Andrea Pisano's relief (mid-14th century) in *Giotto's Campanile*, Florence, of a woman holding a snake and a mirror, has two faces, one young, one old; the third one is not shown, perhaps only for lack of three-dimensional space, as neither of the visible ones is frontal. In fact, there are several examples, though usually later, of two-faced Prudence, a simplification of the original idea, which was also easier to reproduce and allowed subtler visual effects.[9]

A famous biblical reference provides material for interpreting a more distinctive symbol of this virtue: «Be as prudent as snakes» (*Matthew* 10:16). Accordingly,

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[8] Youth, middle age and old age. *Rhetoric* 2.I2-I4.

[9] On a 15th-century Florentine cassone featuring the *Seven Virtues* (Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama) a boldly captioned Prudence looks into a mirror, the profile of a second face being half-concealed in the veil draped around her head. Another example is Andrea della Robbia's glazed terracotta relief where the long hair of Prudence's girlish face seems to naturally develop into the old man's beard on the opposite side (c. 1475, New York, Metropolitan Museum). A tiny and easily overlooked two-faced Prudence is painted on the back of Piero della Francesca's famous double portrait of the Dukes of Urbino (Uffizi): positioned at the front of Federico's float together with the three other Cardinal Virtues, her female face looks into a mirror while her older, bearded one is turned towards the seated Duke. Examples of two-faced Prudence reach at least as late as the 18th century, a seminal source being Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* manual, especially the illustrated edition of 1603. Among the later examples of three-faced Prudence, the most famous is perhaps a painting by Titian in London's National Gallery, showing three differently aged male heads facing different directions and surmounting a trio of animal heads: a lion's, a wolf's and a dog's. The image is explained by an inscription, now barely legible, on the background: EX PRAETERITO-PRAESENS PRUDENTER AGIT-NI FUTURAM ACTIONEM DETURPET, i.e., «drawing on the past, the present acts prudently, lest it should defile the future».

the snake is a regular attribute of the personified Prudence, usually together with the mirror, as we have seen, for the mirror represents self-knowledge, as well as enabling rear view. The rounded object held by the Polizzi «Isis» could therefore be a mirror, although, unlike in other representations of Prudence, it is held well away from her gaze. Alternatively, this object might be a sieve, another, if less frequently seen, attribute of Prudence, pointing to her ability to discriminate between valuable and worthless things. In a drawing by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Prudence holds a large convex mirror in one hand while balancing a sieve atop her head.

In the Middle Ages, "prudence" had the broader meaning of "wisdom", and to this virtue a whole book in the Old Testament is dedicated; this is why in some illustrations she carries one or more tomes. She may be accompanied by Solomon, the supposed author of the *Book of Wisdom* and, proverbially, the wisest man in history. But in Scheggia's *Seven Virtues* the man sitting at Prudence's feet is Solon of Athens, clad in yellow and charged with holding her book.

Going back to the three-faced head, of particular interest is a small marble bust from New York's Metropolitan Museum, the unfinished work of a 14th-century Tuscan artist, where each of the three more or less identical faces shows a triangular shape at the top, just like the Polizzi figure. Such triangles, sometimes looking more like little diadems or even flames, often grace the foreheads of angels or virtues in medieval and Renaissance art: a Western abbreviation, or misinterpretation, of the central, bejewelled section of the headbands or ribbons that tie the hair of Byzantine female or angelic figures. Among the *Seven Virtues* painted on Scheggia's wooden chest, Prudence, clearly captioned as such, has only one face but a four-petalled flower displayed on her forehead, recalling the one carved above the woman's face in the Polizzi statue. The only other virtue on the *cassone* to present this feature is Justice, while a triangular diadem (a probable allusion to the Trinity) is the attribute of Faith, seated in the middle. Viewed in this new context, the flowered triangle on the girlish forehead of the Polizzi statue, which had also aroused much speculation as yet another Minerva/Isis connection,[10] only confirms the statue not to be an antique goddess but a medieval virtue, whose attributes of snake and mirror are definitely those of Prudence.

In *Purgatory XXIX*, Dante describes three dancing women as being led by a fourth, whose head had three eyes. The four women are none other than the cardinal virtues of Temperance, Justice, Fortitude and Prudence, who is the three-eyed one. Could the triangle be the third eye?[11] The idea of Prudence as the leading virtue is

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[10] Especially on part of Francesco Caruso, who allegedly draws on Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* (though the quotation is probably from Porphyry). See C. Borgese-I. Rampolla Dominici, *Polizzi Generosa*, cit., p. 193, including note 16.

[11] Da la sinistra quattro facean festa,
in porpore vestite, dietro al modo
d'una di lor ch'avea tre occhi in testa (*Purgatory XXIX*, 130-132).

From the left hand four came in festive guise/ Dressed up in purple, following behind/ The one of them whose head featured three eyes (my translation).

derived from Thomas Aquinas.[12] Elsewhere, Dante gives a definition of this virtue, equating it with wisdom: «It is therefore good to be prudent, that is, wise: hence, it is necessary to have good memory of things seen, good knowledge of things present and good foresight of those to come».[13] Dante's definition may come either from Aquinas or directly from Cicero, who identifies three faculties as combining to form the virtue of prudence: *memoria, intellegentia and providentia*, i.e., memory, understanding and foresight; he associates them with present, past and future,[14] hence the conflation with the Three Ages of Man[15] – not to mention the triangle.

Now the question arises of where exactly the Polizzi *Prudence* originally belonged. Her two Northern-Italian sisters supporting a sarcophagus suggest a similar placement.

In fact, like Sant'Eustorgio in Milan and San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro in Pavia, Polizzi's Chiesa Madre once housed an elaborately carved Gothic shrine: the Arca di San Gandolfo, commissioned in 1482, which seems to have included four small statues of the cardinal virtues; in the early 18th century these were documented as standing in front of the Sacrament altar. The church was then demolished in 1765 in order to be modernised. One year earlier, the sides of the sarcophagus had been destroyed and some of the sculptures embedded in the wall.[16] According to Gioacchino di Marzo, St Gandulph's tomb was «sumptuously adorned with a canopy with marble columns that included a number of small statues in white marble which, once the whole had been dismembered, were inappropriately set into the outer western façade of the same church. Here, therefore, eleven are still visible nowadays, of which one, rather larger, representing the Redeemer, and some of various male and female Saints, 90 cm in height, and others, rather smaller, 80-cm-tall, of symbolic figures of different Virtues, among which one of Prudence is seen represented with three heads (sic!) and a serpent in hand».[17]

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[12] «Prudentia est auriga virtutum», *II Sent.*, d. 41, q. 1, a. 1, ob. 3.

[13] «Conviensi adunque essere prudente, cioè savio: e a ciò essere si richiede buona memoria de le vedute cose, buona conoscenza de le presenti e buona provedenza de le future». *Convivio, XXVII:5.*

[14] *De Inventione*, II:53. The three-fold composition of prudence is actually older. See G. De Tervarent, *Attributs et symboles dans l'art profane, 1450-1600. Dictionnaire d'un langage perdu*, Genève 1958, p. 471.

[15] See note 8. Three-eyed Prudence as a leader, with a reference to a threefold temporal concept, is also mentioned by Florentine poet Matteo Frescobaldi, son of Dante's friend and fellow-poet Dino Frescobaldi:

Prudenza fate che sia vostra guida,

Che con gli tre occhi tre tempi governa.

Let Prudence be your leader, who with three/ Eyes the three parts of time rules (my translation)

[16] A *predella* with the Apostles was extracted from the wall in 1839. See V. Abbate, *La Venerabile Cappella di S. Gandolfo nella Chiesa Madre di Polizzi Generosa*, Bagheria 2014, p. 31.

[17] G. Di Marzo, *I Gagini e la scultura in Sicilia nei secoli XV e XVI. Memorie storiche e documenti*, 2 vols., Palermo 1953 [orig. ed. Palermo 1880-83], vol. I, chap. II, p. 93: «Avea sontuoso ornamento da un baldacchino o non so qual decorazione con marmoree colonne, di cui faevan parte non poche statuette di marmo bianco, che poi, scomposto il tutto, furono a sproposito collocate nell'esteriore

In short, a statue of Prudence that was strikingly similar to the Polizzi "Iside" was originally part of a set of four virtues decorating the Arca di San Gandolfo, which likens its function to that of her Milan and Pavia counterparts. Yet, according to the official Polizzi account, such a statue used to support the holy water font. So were there two? In fact, there has been talk of a similar statue made «of the same marble», in the house of the Cirillo family, whose heirs must have sold it off along with the rest of the property.[18] A second version has that the «pagan idol» was not destroyed but ended up in the Cirillo house.[19] A third version says that the Franciscan friar Gioacchino di Giovanni had proposed to make a wooden case, at his own expense, for the statue to be kept in the house of some nobleman but, as no nobleman cared either for it or for the «honour of the City», the statue was eventually «removed from the World».[20]

To tangle up this already intricate story, it is not clear whether Di Marzo's «nowadays» refers to the time of his unspecified source or to his own days, which prompts the question of why a similar statue to the destroyed one, or even the same statue, could have been set in such a public space without raising controversy. Setting a time frame would be awkward to say the least: the statue is said to have been first found in a well in 1650, reproduced as the «Minerva» engraving in 1720, and seen in the church to support the holy water font until 1764; this was also the year when the original Arca di San Gandolfo was dismembered; the church was demolished in 1765 (presumably along with the holy water font) to be restructured «alla moderna»; finally, Di Marzo published his work in the early 1880s. Of course, if the statue Di Marzo refers to *is* the one that was destroyed, «nowadays» would have to be the time of Di Marzo's unknown source (pre-1720?), while the destruction of the same (or a similar) statue and the ensuing *Protesta* would have been unknown to both.

In his text, Di Marzo goes on to argue, on stylistic grounds, that the author of the San Gandolfo sculptures must be Domenico Gagini, the Lombard master from Bissone (by Lake Lugano) who had reputedly trained with Brunelleschi in Florence.[21] The Gagini family ran the most successful sculpture workshop in 15th-century Palermo, employing a number of highly skilled marble carvers and sculptors, some of whom also of Lombard, or other North-Italian, origin.

One of Domenico Gagini's associates was, at some point, Giorgio Brigno, also known as Giorgio da Milano, fifth in the list of marble carvers in the *Capitoli dell'arte di Palermo*, *1487*. Giorgio's work in the Madonie includes, by the way, the baptismal

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facciata occidentale del duomo stesso. Quivi pertanto sen vedono undici oggigiorno, delle quali, oltre una alquanto più grande e figurante il Redentore, ne sono alcune di vari Santi e Sante, alte m. 0,90, ed altre alquanto più piccole, alte m. 0,80, di figure simboliche di diverse Virtù, fra cui una della Prudenza si vede rappresentata a tre teste e con serpe in mano».

[18] See G. Curatolo, *Statua, dimmi chi sei?*, cit., p. 58, note 2.

[19] *Ibid.*, note 4.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 59, note 7.

[21] This is according to Filarete. See A. M. Finoli-L. Grassi (eds.), *A. Averlino, detto il Filarete, Trattato di architettura (1451-64)*, Milano 1972, p. 172.

font in Polizzi's Chiesa Madre. Of course, it would be hard to name a 15th-century craftsman on the basis of the 18th-century engraving of a defunct piece of artwork; but Brigno's marble Madonna delle Grazie from Naro and his Madonna del Soccorso from Modica have regular oval faces and somewhat simplified features, just like the Polizzi «Isis» and, in typical Gagini-esque fashion, also stand on polygonal pedestals. The Saint Barbara in Palermo's Museo Diocesano could be a sister to these Madonnas – and to the lost Polizzi «goddess».

The archaeological museum of Licata, near Agrigento, houses four 15th-century statues of virtues that recall, in their general design, the lost one from Polizzi. They are the work of Pietro di Bonitate, and were once part of a marble sarcophagus from the local Chiesa del Carmine. Pietro di Bonitate was yet another Lombard artist, who had trained with the Dalmatian Francesco Laurana and worked with him in Sicily and Naples. Another work by Pietro de Bonitate, made in collaboration with Laurana, was the Mastrantonio Chapel in the church of San Francesco d'Assisi, Palermo. In the same church, in a dimly-lit side chapel by the left transept, stand four Gagini-esque female figures. Despite their rather battered looks (the church was badly damaged by WWII bombing), their attributes identify them as the cardinal virtues: Prudence is two-faced and holds a book with a snake curled around it, as well as a small convex mirror the younger face is turned towards. The second face is bearded, like the one in the Polizzi engraving. There might have been a third face, corresponding to a swelling on the opposite side of the bearded one, and gone missing through damage; or it might have been omitted by the carver if the original position of the statue was too close to the wall to be viewed from that side. In fact, it is difficult to trace the original situation of the sculptures, which might have been part of a complex, possibly an altar or a funerary monument.

Whether two- or three-faced, by the 18th century the Prudence iconography seems to have become increasingly obsolete, and eventually unrecognisable even by educated people such as Bishop Castelli and Polizzi's enlightened élite, both of whom assumed the statue to represent the ancient, three-formed goddess Minerva or Isis and, consequently, either loathed it to death or lamented its irreversible disposal, according to their respective agendas. In any case, the identity of the engraving's mysterious figure as Isis/Hecate/Trivia/Persephone/Artemis/Diana/Lucina/Selene/Athena/Sai/Minerva has been seldom doubted and never seriously investigated. Even the unsubstantiated etymology of the name Polizzi as *Polis Isidis*[22] has gained enough currency to be included in the official narrative of the city (http://www.comune.polizzi.pa.it/la-citta/cenni-storici, http://www.prolocopolizzi.it/la-storia). All that said, there could have been in the Polizzi area, as there was elsewhere in Sicily, a cult of the mother-goddess; but the antiquity of the two statuettes of Diana/Artemis Ephesia in the town's archae-

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[22] According to Francesco Caruso, see G. Curatolo, *Statua, dimmi chi sei?*, cit., note 1. Also see J. L. De Burigny, *Storia generale di Sicilia*, tradotta dal francese dal Signor Mariano Scasso e Borrello, 6 vols., Palermo 1787-94 [orig. ed. 1745], vol. II, p. 75.

ological museum, would not be comparable to that of an "Isis" always assumed to go back to the Egyptian-Carthaginian era. At any rate, that the victim of Bishop Castelli's zeal actually was the three-faced simulacrum of that goddess needs to be demonstrated with much harder facts than has been the case so far. In the words of Ida Rampolla Dominici, «[...] one can only wonder how come this cult, so important as to give its name to the town, was never mentioned by anyone before the statue was found».[23]

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[23] See C. Borgese-I. Rampolla Dominici, *Polizzi Generosa*, cit., p. 196.

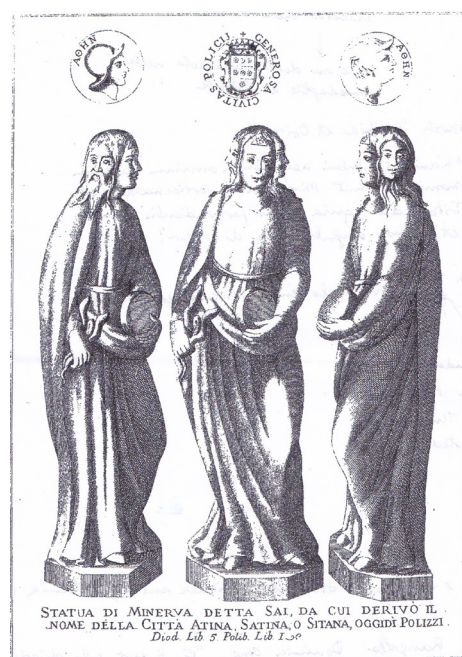Fig. 1 – The 18th-century engraving from Polizzi's Museo Archeologico.

Fig. 2 –The Three-bodied Hecate: a) Hecate Antalya, 3rd century A.D., Antalya Museum, Turkey; b) Hecate Triformis, from Byzantium, 3rd century A.D., British Museum; c) Hecate Trivia, Roman copy after a Hellenistic original, Vatican Museums.

Fig. 3 – Prudence, by Giovanni di Balduccio, 1336-1339, tomb of Saint Peter Martyr in Sant'Eustorgio, Milan.

STATUA DI MINERVA DETTA SAI, DA CUI DERIVÒ IL
NOME DÉLLA CITTÀ ATINA, SATINA, O SITANA, OGGIDÌ POLIZZI.
Diod. Lib 5 Polib. Lib I.º

Facsimile dell'incisione fatta nel 1720 per cura
dei Fratelli Caruso da Polizzi.

Fig. 4 – a) Saint Barbara, from Gagini's workshop, 1496, Museo Diocesano, Palermo; b) The Polizzi "Isis"; c) The Cardinal Virtues by Pietro di Bonitate, second half of the 15th century, Museo Archeologico, Licata.

Fig. 5 – Prudence, from Gagini's workshop, 15th century, San Francesco d'Assisi, Palermo.

Fig. 6 – Diana/Artemis Ephesia, 4th century B.C., Museo Archeologico, Polizzi Generosa.