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New Evidence for Early Greek Settlement on the Acropolis of Selinunte
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In 2006, the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University started a new project of topographical, architectural, and archaeological investigation of the main urban sanctuary on the so-called Acropolis of Selinunte. In our first ten years of work, we have been focusing on the southern sector of the sanctuary, including Temple B and its altar, Temple R, the southern portion of Temple C, the peribolos wall, and the South Building [Figure 1].² This new investigation has included the systematic documentation of the structures in the area, their block-by-block analysis, and the excavation of a series of trenches, mainly in correspondence of their foundations.

The southern sector of the main urban sanctuary was repeatedly investigated and excavated between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (especially by the Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti in Sicily in the early nineteenth century, by Francesco Saverio Cavallari in 1876, and by Ettore Gàbrici in the early 1920s), and we did not expect to find much stratigraphy left, since the buildings had been excavated down to the level of their foundations. However, our excavations have shown that the foundations of Temple B, its altar, and the South Building were laid not on the bedrock but on layers of earth and sand, for various possible reasons, including antiseismic considerations. As a result, with our very first trench, against the back of Temple B, it became immediately clear that in our area, a thick (up to about two meters deep), untouched stratigraphic column is still preserved. This column is closely comparable to similar sequences excavated in other areas of the sanctuary, particularly by Gàbrici,³ but this is the first time that we seem to gain a clear understanding of the succession of layers and phases.

Our current thinking is that this stratigraphic sequence, confirmed by our excavation inside the cella of Temple R, includes ten phases [Figure 2]. The first (Phase 1) corresponds to a layer of red sand against the bedrock. This layer has produced prehistoric, mainly Bronze Age material. This earliest stage, which ended between the close of the 11th and the first half of the 10th BCE, is followed by a period of apparent abandonment (Phase 2), marked by the absence of indigenous material of the Early Iron Age. The next steps correspond to the foundation of Selinus by the Greeks of Megara Hyblaea and Megara in Greece (Phase 3), followed, around 610 BCE, by the construction of the early structures presented below (Phase 4). These first buildings were dismantled with the construction of Temple R around 590–580 BCE (Phase 5). The temple had an undisturbed life for almost a century, before being damaged by fire and being subsequently renovated between the end of the sixth and the early fifth century BCE (Phase 6).

¹ I would like to express my deepest thanks to Elena C. Partida and Barbara Schmidt-Dounas for this opportunity to honor Richard A. Tomlinson. For our work in Selinunte, we are particularly grateful to the Archaeological Park of Selinunte and the Superintendency of Trapani and to the institutions and individuals that have been supporting our work, especially the 1984 Foundation, the Malcolm Hewitt Wiener Foundation, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and the Samuel I. Newhouse Foundation.

² Preliminary publications include Marconi 2012; Marconi 2014; Marconi and Scahill 2015; Marconi, Tardo, and Trombi 2015.

³ Gàbrici 1929, 97–101.

This was at the same time that the South Building (likely, a theatral area) was erected within the context of the general reorganization of the sanctuary that had started around the mid-sixth century. Towards the end of the fifth century BCE, Temple R suffered further damage, presumably within the context of the Carthaginian sack of Selinus in 409 BCE (Phase 7) but was soon refurbished, presumably under Hermocrates (Phase 8) and was still in use for part of the fourth century (Phase 9). On top of these layers is the last documented phase (Phase 10), corresponding to the present ground level, which consists of a thick fill, including transport amphorae at the bottom and tiles at the top, upon which were built Temple B and its altar. This last layer, misidentified by Gàbrici as a generic Graeco-Roman phase, represents a large leveling dating to around 300 BCE, which includes our entire area of operation and possibly (based on Gàbrici's reports) other parts of the sanctuary. This major intervention corresponds to a dramatic restructuring of this part of the settlement under Carthaginian political dominance.

This essay honoring Richard Tomlinson, who has greatly contributed to our understanding of Greek sacred architecture and Greek sanctuaries, focuses on our new evidence for the early settlement of Selinus and its early cult. That our area was occupied by Greek settlers from early on is clearly indicated by the discovery, in the area of Temple R, of some amount of Protocorinthian pottery, including a remarkable conical oinochoe, unusually large, featuring two animal friezes. At present, only the lower main body of this vessel is preserved. It was found halved and reused in the foundations of the floor inside the cella, one part to the left of the entrance and the other towards the middle of the main chamber.⁴ Leaving aside two LG fragments (presumably heirlooms) found in an early sixth century context in our trenches, this oinochoe may well represent the earliest-documented Greek vase with figured decoration from Selinunte. Cornelius Neef⁵ provisionally labels the piece as transition MPC II to LPC, that is 650–640, noting how the presence of a conical oinochoe earlier than the foundation date⁶ should not come as a surprise, considering how the shape was relatively popular in Megara Hyblaea.

Presumably, this Protocorinthian oinochoe represents one of the earliest dedications in our area, dating back to the time of Selinus' foundation. To this same phase appear to belong other offerings found in Trench Q, particularly a miniature hydria from Megara Hyblaea with a hole in the bottom, a bone pin, and especially three iron spearheads planted blade-first into the ground, and of which two crossed [Figure 3]. The latter may be seen as an appropriate dedication to the warrior goddess of Temple R (to whom numerous offensive weapons were offered at the time of the construction of the building and on the occasion of its late sixth-early fifth century renovation): yet, the action of planting a spear in the ground (not simply embedding it horizontally, as in the later examples) may also be seen as having a symbolic meaning, of the taking possession of the new land by the Greek settlers.⁷ There are no remains of structures associated with this early phase, for which one may posit an open-air cult. The same applies to the layer immediately above, where two small and very thin clay floors have been identified in Trenches M [Figure 4] and Q, which can hardly be associated, however, with buildings.

⁴ Marconi, Tardo, and Trombi 2015, 327–328.

⁵ Email of February 20th 2017.

⁶ Concerning the vexed question of the date of foundation of Selinus (and supporting the indication by Thucydides [628–627 BCE]) see Dehl-von Kaenel 1995, 32–42; Meola 1996–1998, I, 293–296; Marconi 2007, 61–66; Neef 2012, 489–490.

⁷ On the (mainly later) theme of the spear-won land, see more recently Barbantani 2007.

It is precisely above this level that we seem to have uncovered the first evidence from Selinunte for architecture safely datable within the first decades of the life of the Greek settlement.

In excavating the area east of Temple B, we found no evidence for seventh-century buildings. But such structures became apparent as soon as we moved westward toward Temple R.

In essence, three features can be related to early structures from the area west of Temple B. The first, found in Trench L, consists of the remains of a rectangular structure with an east-west orientation, with a clay floor and foundations made of chips of stone 40 to 50 centimeters thick [Figures 4 and 5]. Parts of both the east and the south wall are preserved, the latter for a total length of 2.60 meters. On top of the stone foundations, we found remains of dissolved clay, which strongly suggests the reconstruction of a mud-brick elevation. The first temple of Malophoros (particularly its north, west, and south sides) offers the closest comparison for the structure and dimensions of the foundations of our building and the materials of the elevation.⁸ Unlike Malophoros I, however, our oikos does not have a front made of ashlar blocks, which in the case of the temple at the Gaggera presumably supported a pediment. Architecturally, this speaks to an earlier date for our building. The foundations excavated in Trench L are located only 60 centimeters under the present ground level. The fact that they lie under the ground level associated with the construction of Temple R (c. 590–580 BCE) and also under the foundations of Temple B (c. 300 BCE) explains why, unlike the elevation, they were not destroyed in subsequent construction work in the early sixth and late fourth centuries. Interestingly, two iron spears were found on top of these foundations, deposited within the context of the construction of Temple R. This could indicate that the structure to which they belonged was ritually buried on the occasion of its dismantling.

The second feature associated with early Greek architecture from our excavations consists of the remains of a thick (ca. 15 cm) floor made of hard-pressed clay found in the area of the adyton of Temple R [Figure 6] (Trench P). This floor is comparable to the one found in Trench L and it is located at the same altitude of ca. 27 meters above sea level. This floor found in Trench P was cut by the foundation trenches for the north, west, and south walls of Temple R. In addition, this floor appears to have been pierced by at least four postholes (two similar postholes have been excavated in Trench O, corresponding to the southeast corner of the cella of Temple R). David Scahill has associated these postholes with lifting devices for the construction of Temple R. Considering contemporary architecture in Greece, one is reminded of the postholes in the Oikos of the Naxians on Delos,⁹ which have also been associated with the lifting of blocks or columns. Returning to our clay floor, no evidence for it has been found in Trench O and in Trench Q, the latter corresponding to the middle of the cella of Temple R.

The third feature is quite intriguing: about 80 fragments of pale reddish-brown material identifiable as mud plaster, finished on both sides and containing a significant amount of clay, a low percentage of sand, and vegetal matter [Figure 7]. Some of the fragments suggest that the mud plaster was partially fired, perhaps through burning this material or the building to which it belonged, rather than as part of the construction process. Fragments of this mud plaster have been found at various levels, from the late-sixth to early-fifth-century leveling corresponding to the renovation of the sanctuary (such as Trench A SU 5) all the way down to the layer of red sand covering the bedrock (such as Trench O SU 50). This last provenance would suggest the

⁸ Gàbrici 1927, 66–73; Gàbrici 1956, 238–245; Dewailly 1992, 8–21, fig. 5.

⁹ Gruben 1997, 316–318.

attribution of our mud plaster to structures earlier (Bronze Age) than those being considered here, but the fact that the largest concentration of this material has been found in association with the construction of Temple R suggests that at least part of this material belonged to the early Greek phase under discussion. Based on comparative evidence,¹⁰ this mud plaster is best associated with a mud-brick wall and thus the elevation of our early Greek structures.

The lack, in Trenches O and Q, of a clay floor comparable to those found in Trenches L and P, seems to exclude the possibility of one large structure, which would have been at least 21 meters long and 6 meters wide, and thus larger than its successor, Temple R. We seem to be dealing, instead, with two separate, relatively small buildings, sited near to each other, as also attested at Gela between the seventh and early sixth centuries.¹¹

There seems to be no doubt that these early Greek structures had a sacred function. This is indicated by the pottery found in and above the remains of the clay floors, including a large amount of fine ware and shapes associated with the consumption of wine, a staple of cult practice in our part of the sanctuary from the seventh all the way down to the fifth century. Also worth mentioning is the dedication of an iron spearhead embedded in the clay floor in Trench P, a form of foundation offering attested for Temple R.

As for dating this early architecture, the *terminus ante quem* is provided by the construction of Temple R. The rich foundation deposit under the floor of this structure, with Early Corinthian and Middle Corinthian pottery, suggests dating Temple R's construction to around 590–580 BCE. A safe *terminus post quem* is provided by the discovery of Early Corinthian and Greek Sicilian pottery in the preparation of the clay floor in Trench P. Based on the evidence currently available, the more likely dating of our early structures is to around 610 at the latest, their life lasting only one generation.

Our finds associated with this early phase datable between about 630 and 590–580 are of particular interest on a number of counts, the first being the location and form of early Greek settlement in Selinunte. As mentioned above, our evidence is potentially the first for a building at this site firmly dated within the seventh century.¹² There is, in fact, no safe evidence for other structures from this period on the rest of the Acropolis and Manuzza,¹³ and the scanty remains found by the DAI in Rome under the fortifications in the Gorgo Cottone valley can only be generically dated to before around 590–580.¹⁴

The fact that the earliest-documented structure in Selinunte is from the southern sector of the Acropolis lends significant support to the theory, especially argued by Antonino Di Vita and Dieter Mertens,¹⁵ that the original Greek settlement was located south of avenue Sf. In addition, the fact that our early structures have the same orientation as Temple R and run parallel to the east-west SB avenue (this is best apparent in the case of the structure identified in Trench L) supports Mertens's suggestion of a regular, orthogonal plan at the time of the foundation,

¹⁰ Wright 2005, 93–94; Malacrino 2010, 42–55.

¹¹ Lippolis, Livadiotti, and Rocco 2007, 814–816.

¹² For a discussion of the available evidence before our findings, see Mertens 2006, 85; and Mertens 2010, 97, 99.

¹³ Fourmont 1981 and in Tusa 1984–1985, 559 does not provide a specific archaeological dating for the Archaic structures (which could still be dated within the early sixth century) found in her excavations north of Sf (such as the wall 1981 fig. 7a); Rallo 1976–1977, 722–723 does not indicate the alleged remains of indigenous huts in her state plan and does not publish sections of her trench.

¹⁴ Mertens 2003, 226, 320; Mertens 2006, 84.

¹⁵ E.g., Di Vita 1996, 282; Mertens 2015, 375–376.

generated by the SB avenue and the north-south SA avenue [Figure 8].¹⁶ It seems likely that the seventh cemetery excavated by Rallo in the agora area served this early settlement, before the dramatic expansion of Selinus in the first quarter of the sixth century.¹⁷

Last but not least, the discovery of votive material datable to the third quarter of the seventh century strongly supports the theory, first advocated by Gàbrici,¹⁸ that the area of the main urban sanctuary was chosen as a sacred space at the time of the foundation of Selinus. This should not come as a surprise, based on the available archaeological record for Archaic Greek settlement in the West.¹⁹

Also, there is sufficient evidence to attribute Temple R to a goddess, and there are good reasons for thinking, although only hypothetically at this stage, of Demeter Thesmophoros (a less likely alternative being Artemis).²⁰ The fact that this goddess was closely connected with the foundation of Megara²¹ and that the cult of Demeter could be one of the most ancient in Selinus would offer an intriguing correspondence between *metropolis* and *apoikia* at the religious level.

The detailed approach to stratigraphic excavation of our mission, combined with the sifting of the entire excavated deposit and the retention and analysis of all the artifacts and faunal remains, not only gives a clear sense of ritual practice and its development from the Orientalizing all the way down to the Early Hellenistic period. But it also means that we have a clear sense of the larger development of material culture and a reliable statistical base for a number of more general considerations.

On the side of material culture, probably the most important acquisition involving this early phase of Greek settlement in Selinunte concerns the evidence for indigenous pottery. The presence of pottery from indigenous settlements in western Sicily was immediately noticed while excavating our first trench in 2007.²² Today, now that the difficult task of quantification of the pottery found in trenches A–P has been completed, we can offer some statistically reliable numbers. In essence, there is a sharp difference between the amount of indigenous pottery documented for the period between 590–580 and 500, only 0.6 percent of the total, and the amount of pottery documented earlier, between 630 and 590–580, when indigenous pottery represents roughly 2.5 percent of the total and appears thus four times more frequently.

The evidence concerning indigenous pottery from our excavations is comparable with the situation at Himera.²³ The highest rate of indigenous pottery is found in association with the early phase of life of this Greek settlement on Sicily's north coast. At Selinunte, the new data demonstrate that the presence of indigenous pottery was indeed marginal within the larger context of the material culture of the Greek foundation. But that considerably higher rate in the early phase of life of Selinus undoubtedly points, as for Himera, to a significant degree of interaction with the hinterland at the time of foundation. We hope that our continued work will further contribute to an understanding of this thus far little-known but essential phase of life of Selinunte in antiquity.

¹⁶ Mertens 2006, 83–85.

¹⁷ As originally suggested by Rallo 1982, 216.

¹⁸ Gàbrici 1929, 97–112; Gàbrici 1956, 207–237.

¹⁹ Mertens 2006, 36–89; Marconi 2007, 29–60.

²⁰ Marconi 2014.

²¹ Bremmer 2011, 23.

²² Marconi, Tardo, and Trombi 2015.

²³ See, more recently, Vassallo 2014.

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Abstract

Since 2007, the excavations by the Institute of Fine Arts–NYU’s mission on the Acropolis of Selinunte have uncovered significant new evidence concerning the early phase of Greek settlement. This evidence includes architectural features such as clay floors and mud-brick walls on foundations made of rubble, plus numerous faunal remains and artifacts. The finds are concentrated in the area west of Temple B, and they most likely relate to two seventh-century buildings, datable to c. 610 BCE, which were systematically dismantled to make way for Temple R c. 590–580 BCE.

This new evidence contributes significantly to our understanding of the early phase of the Greek occupation of Selinunte. It supports the theory that the original settlement was located in the southern sector of the Acropolis and had an orthogonal plan. And it also suggests that this sector of the main urban sanctuary was in use as a sacred space since around the time of the Greek foundation. No less notable is the rich variety of material culture, including indigenous pottery, suggesting a particularly intense interaction with the indigenous hinterland at the time of Greek settlement in Selinunte.



Figure 1. State plan of the area of operation, with indication of trenches 2007–2017. Massimo Limoncelli, Filippo Pisciotta, and David Scahill. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU

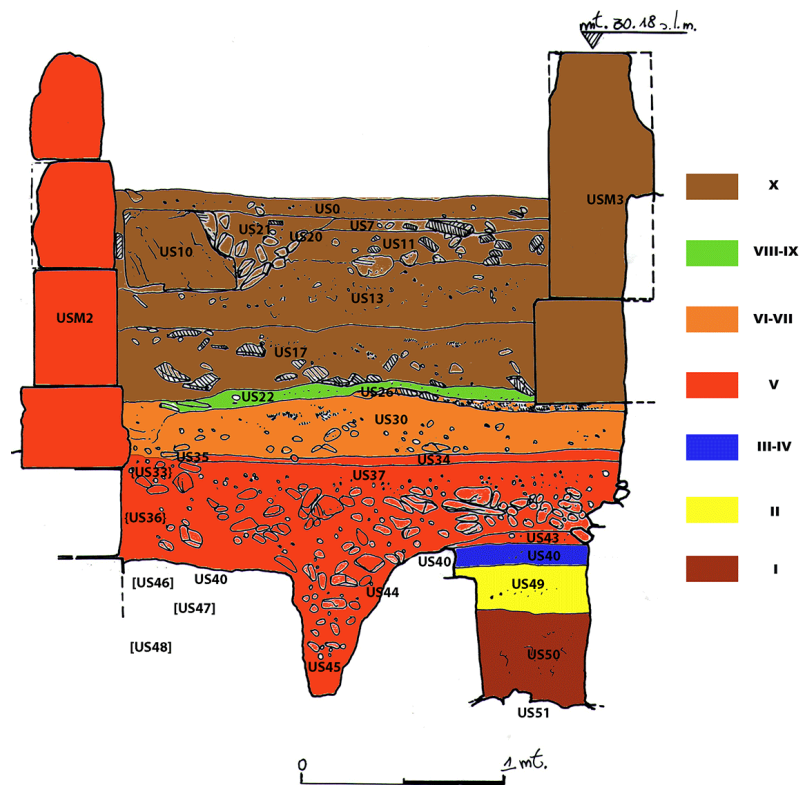


Figure 2. Stratigraphic sequence in the cella of Temple R. Drawing by Filippo Pisciotta. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.



Figure 3. Iron spearheads planted blade-first into the ground from Trench Q. Photograph by Raffaele Franco. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.

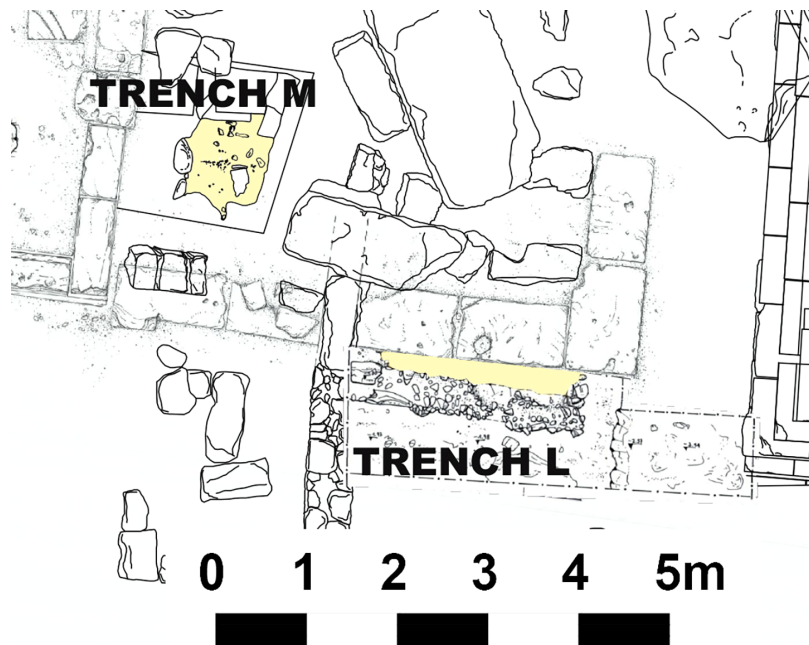


Figure 4. Area in front of Temple R, with Trenches L (2010) and M (2011) and indication of remains of early clay floors. Massimo Limoncelli, Filippo Pisciotto, and David Scahill. Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.



Figure 5. View of Trench L and remains of early Greek foundations and floor. Institute of Fine Arts–NYU. Photograph by Lillian Stoner. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.



Figure 6. Remains of early clay floor in Trench P (2013–2015), in the adyton of Temple R, with remains of postholes associated with the construction of Temple R. The hole in the center of the floor represents the bottom of a looting pit dug in the adyton down to bedrock in 409 BCE. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.

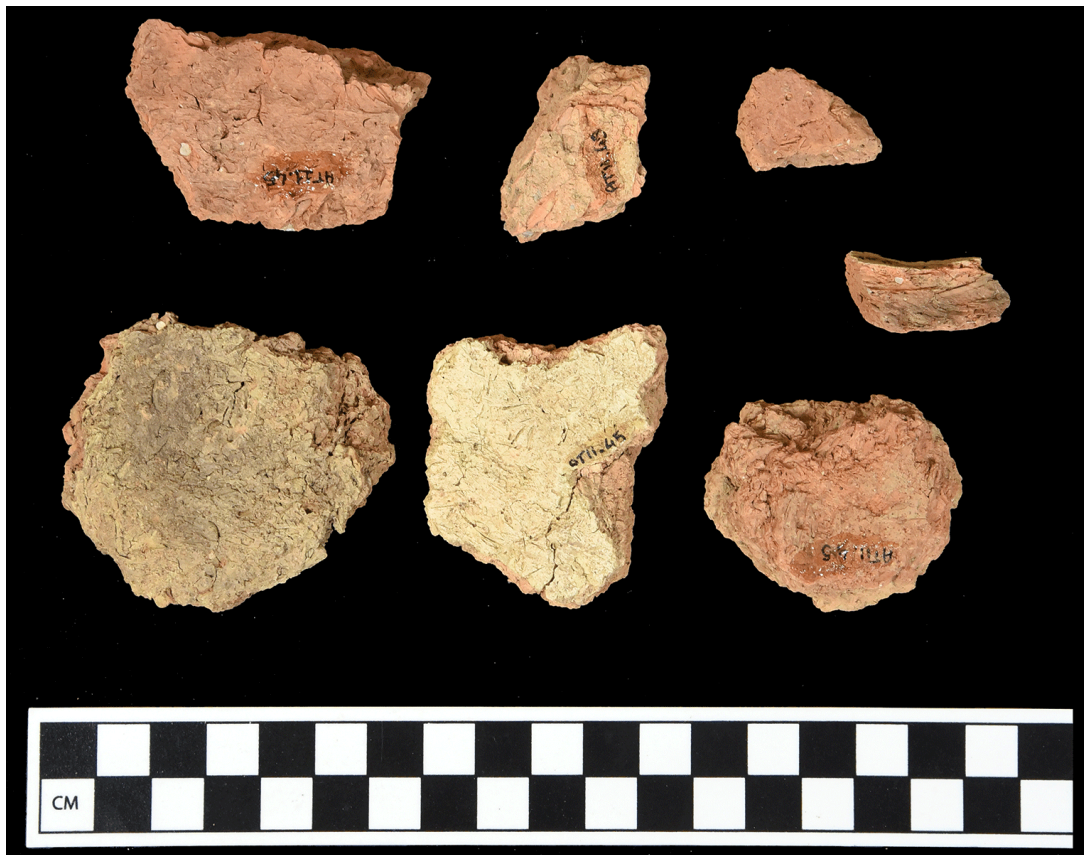


Figure 7. Fragments of mud plaster from Trench M. Photograph by Raffaele Franco. © Institute of Fine Arts–NYU.



Figure 8. Reconstruction of original urban plan of Selinunte (Mertens 2006). Courtesy of Dieter Mertens.