

SICILY AND THE SEA

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# SICILY

## and the Sea

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# CONTENTS

6	<b>PREFACE</b>
8	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>
9	Sicily and the Mediterranean World DIEDERIK BURGERSDIJK
14	Sicily's Geological Archive JOHAN MEULENKAMP
	CHAPTER 1
18	<b>MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY</b>
19	Maritime Archaeology in Sicily FLORIANA AGNETO
20	Archaeological Cultural Underwater Routes ALESSANDRA DE CARO
22	Marble-Laden Ships SEBASTIANO TUSA
24	Sicily's Submerged Structures FRANCESCA OLIVERI
26	Methods and Techniques in Maritime Archaeology STEFANO ZANGARA
	CHAPTER 2
28	<b>SICILY IN PRE- AND PROTOHISTORY</b>
29	Sicily and the Sea in Prehistory JORRIT KELDER
32	Phoenicians in Sicily ELEFThERIA PAPPA
	CHAPTER 3
38	<b>TRADE AND COLONISATION</b>
39	The Greeks in Sicily CAROL ATACK
46	Sicily, Land of Cyclops' Songs JACQUELINE KLOOSTER
52	Demeter on Sicily KEES NEEFT
56	Between Rivers and Seas: Aquatic Images on Greek Coins from Sicily PAUL BELIËN
62	Sicily and the Birth of Rhetoric CASPER C. DE JONGE
65	Archimedes' Mastermind ANDRÉ KLUKHUHN
68	Temples and Community in Greek Sicily FLORIS VAN DEN EIJNDE
72	The Shipwreck Gela I NICOLÒ BRUNO
75	The Shipwreck of Capistello (Lipari) ADRIANA FRESINA
78	The Shipwreck Panarea III ROBERTO LA ROCCA
	CHAPTER 4
82	<b>CARTHAGE AND ROME</b>
83	Sicily and the Punic Wars JONATHAN PRAG
87	Carthage and the Spoils of the Sicilian Wars ROALD DOCTER
91	Sicily under Roman Republican Rule: Roman Province and Slave Kingdom DAVID ENGELS
97	Sicily as a Refuge WILLEM VAN MAANEN
100	The Fragmentary Voices of the Sea: Sicily as a Stage in Virgil's <i>Aeneid</i> SIWARD TACOMA
104	Sicily in <i>The Rape of Proserpine</i> by Claudian PIET GERBRANDY
107	Roman Sicily and the Sea ROGER J.A. WILSON
112	The Wrecks of Camarina GIOVANNI DI STEFANO
114	The Late-Roman Shipwreck of the Ancient Port of Scauri on Pantelleria ROBERTO LA ROCCA
116	The Levanzo I Shipwreck JEFFREY ROYAL

CHAPTER 5

120 **NEW POWERS**

- 121 Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity LEONARD V. RUTGERS  
124 Syracuse in the Byzantine Period WIM AERTS  
128 The Arab Conquest of Sicily MAAIKE VAN BERKEL  
131 Medieval Sicily: an Island open on all Sides DAVID ABULAFIA  
135 Dreams of Harmony: Multiculturalism and Norman Sicily DAVID RIJSER  
140 The Marausa Wreck ANTONELLA TESTA  
143 The Medieval Arabo-Sicilian Shipwreck of Cala Galera at Favignana FABRIZIO SGROI  
146 The Medieval Shipwrecks of Western Sicily PHILIPPE TISSEYRE

CHAPTER 6

150 **THE EARLY-MODERN PERIOD**

- 151 Tommaso Fazello: The Sicilian Livy RICHARD CALIS  
153 Sicily's Role in Art History: the Case of Antonello da Messina MARIEKE VAN DEN DOEL  
156 Pirandello's House: Between Movement and Standstill HARALD HENDRIX  
158 Michiel de Ruyter in Sicilian Waters RONALD PRUD'HOMME VAN REINE  
162 The Risorgimento and the Sea ASKER PELGROM  
166 The Artillery Cargo of the *Parissona Grossa*, Discovered at Sciacca ELIANA MAURO

CHAPTER 7

168 **SICILY IN THE ARTISTIC IMAGINATION**

- 169 Uncovering, Preserving and Presenting the Past:  
Sicilian Archaeology and Heritage ALEXANDRA SOFRONIEW  
173 In Another Country: Sicily on the Silver Screen ARTHUR WESTSTEIJN  
176 Rossini's Aria that Celebrates the Love for the Fatherland HEIN VAN EEKERT

CHAPTER 8

180 **MODERN SICILY**

- 181 The Invasion of Sicily in 1943 MARCO POELWIJK  
184 Landing in Sicily: Signs of 'Operation Husky' EMILIA SALERNO  
188 The Messina Conference of 1955 GUIDO AS  
190 Modern Politics in Sicily MARC LEIJENDEKKER  
193 Sicily and its Fishes MAURIZIO D'ATRI  
196 Folk-tales: Musical Stories of People and Fish VINCENZO CASTELLANA

200 **FURTHER READING**

202 **AUTHORS**

204 **CREDITS**





CHAPTER 2

# SICILY IN PRE- AND PROTOHISTORY



# Sicily and the Sea in Prehistory

## MYSTERIOUS GRAFFITI

Rock carvings in the Grotta dell'Addaura near Palermo dating from the Mesolithic. They are among the oldest known representations of how the early Sicilians saw their world. Pictured here are human figures and a stag. These Mesolithic graffiti were discovered thanks to the accidental explosion of the explosives the Allies had stored in the caves after the invasion of 1943.

It has been suggested that the earliest human activity on Sicily may date back to the Lower Palaeolithic, at which point the island may have been connected to southern Italy by a land bridge. The possible presence of these early hominids on Sicily at that point of time is, however, controversial.

From the Upper Palaeolithic onwards, human activity is attested by the remains of stone tools which have been found at the site of Fontana Nuova di Ragusa in the south (dating from c.15,000–11,000 BC) and at various other sites across the island (dating from c.10,000 BC). By this time, at the end of the last Ice Age, the shape of Sicily would have looked more or less as it does today—a large island, separated from the Italian mainland by a narrow strait. Very little can be said about these early 'Sicilians', other than that they probably hunted wild boar, fox, goats, bovids, and possibly a wild predecessor of the donkey, the *Equus hydruntinus*.

Slightly more can be said about the Final Palaeolithic and Mesolithic period, at which point wall paintings and carvings not only demonstrate the early islanders' artistic prowess, but also their connections with regions elsewhere. The earliest rock paintings known thus far are found in a cave at Cala dei Genovesi on the islet of Levanzo, near the tip of western Sicily. The paintings at this site date to c 9000 BC and are comparable with rock art elsewhere in southern Europe (such as Lascaux). Yet another thousand years later, we

encounter the remarkably expressive rock carvings in the Grotta dell'Audaura, close to the city of Palermo. These carvings depict various human figures as well as figures of horses, deer and bovids, and provide a first glimpse of how the early Sicilians perceived their world. The exact interpretation of these early carvings, especially the depiction of two masked (?) human figures with what looks like ropes around their necks, is unclear. It has been suggested that this may be a depiction of an initiation rite, although more extravagant hypotheses—including one suggestion that the carvings show acrobats, or even an early homoerotic scene—have also been put forward. Regardless of the precise nature of the human figures in these carvings, the presence of bovids and equids demonstrates that hunting was an important aspect of daily life. The hunt was not only a terrestrial affair: archaeology shows that fishing was important, too. Indeed, the presence of dolphin bones in the Mesolithic cave of Uzzo, on the Sicilian west coast, suggests that the early Sicilians already possessed boats that were sufficiently large to sail out into the open sea.

From the sixth millennium BC onwards, the people of Sicily gradually adopted a Neolithic way of life. Most of the cave dwellings were abandoned in favour of proper settlements in the fields, and pottery made its appearance in everyday life. There are no clear arguments to suggest that this change in lifestyle was the result of the arrival of newcomers on the island (although this remains a



#### PANTALICA NECROPOLIS

Tombs cut into the limestone rock at the necropolis of Pantalica, near Syracuse. Pantalica was a major inland centre from the 13th to 8th centuries BC. Remains of houses and possibly even a palace-like structure have been found, but it is unclear whether they are prehistoric or belong to later periods. In view of the large number of the tombs (c.5,000), the site must have remained important after the collapse of the Late-Bronze-Age system of international trade.

possibility): the slow and piecemeal adoption of the Neolithic way of life rather suggests a local development, probably as a result of overseas contacts. Obsidian, which was mined on nearby Lipari (see p. 17) and Pantelleria and has been found on Malta, Sicily and in central Italy, doubtless was an important trigger for these contacts. Other goods such as wool may also have played an important role in the development of early contacts between Sicily and its surrounding areas. Regardless of the details it is clear that, during the Neolithic at the latest, the sea had become a defining feature of Sicilian life: it served as a source of food, but also as a connection to nearby Malta, the Aeolian Islands, and the mainland of Italy. It is very likely that these overseas contacts intensified and expanded as time progressed. Indeed, it has been suggested that the emergence of monumental, stone-built or rock-cut funerary architecture of the so-called Castelluccian culture—the designation for a number of regional and related cultures during Sicily's Early Bronze Age (2500–1500 BC)

—owed much to Sardinia's Bell-Beaker culture. Towards the end of that period, overseas connections had multiplied and Sicily became a veritable gateway to the western Mediterranean for traders from the east.

Sicily's increased importance to long-distance maritime trade had a profound impact on local culture and everyday life, especially in the eastern part of the island. The Middle Bronze Age on Sicily is marked by a notable increase in foreign, especially Aegean, Anatolian and Cypriot imports and the adoption of various Aegean symbols (e.g. the Minoan 'Horns of Consecration') and architectural features (such as the arched ceiling of a number of tombs, which is often thought to copy Mycenaean *tholos* tombs). It is also a period of increased social hierarchy, with the emergence of local elites—who adopted these exotica as tokens of their wealth and power—and the development of a more centralised territorial (and probably political) organisation in the eastern parts of the island in which major, mostly coastal settle-





#### MYCENAEAN STIRRUP JAR

Top of a Mycenaean stirrup jar, 16th–15th cent. BC. It was found in the sea near Filicudi, one of the Aeolian Islands north of Sicily. During the Bronze Age, trade flourished between Sicily and Mycenaean Greece. Apart from imported goods, traces of cultural influence are visible as well, e.g. in the appearance of *tholos*-like tombs on Sicily.

ments controlled a number of smaller inland sites. By 1400 BC at the latest, there is every indication that Sicily was now fully integrated into the eastern Mediterranean world of long-distance trade. There can be no doubt that Sicily's status as a hub for Mediterranean trade also attracted immigrants. Thapsus, a site on an island off eastern Sicily, some 10 km north of Syracuse, seems to have been one of the places where immigrants settled and mingled with the native population. The settlement, with its remarkably well-organised grid of houses and wide streets, served as a centre of trade (in view of the numerous Mycenaean objects and architectural parallels with 'Mycenaean' sites on Cyprus probably especially with the Greek world) with resident foreign (Greek?) merchants and their families. In many ways, Thapsus can thus be considered a model for things that were yet to come: the Greek colonies of the eighth and seventh centuries BC.

The end of this period of extraordinary connectivity is marked by the downfall of the great states in the eastern Mediterranean. The causes of the destructions that marked the end of the palaces of Mycenaean Greece, the Hittite

Empire in Anatolia, and the wealthy principalities in the Levant are still not understood, and it is likely that a number of factors (climate change, invasions, earthquakes?) played a role. Sicily, or rather its prehistoric inhabitants, may have played a role as well, for one of the monuments that report on these calamities, the so-called Great Karnak Inscription (a relief of Merneptah, king of Egypt from 1213 to 1203 BC), may bear the first reference to the island's prehistoric inhabitants. Amongst a number of invaders is a group of invaders called *S-k-rw-s*—normally vocalised as *Shekelesh*. There is no way of being sure about this, but it has been suggested that this name may refer to the Sicels; a group of people who are known from Classical sources to have lived in especially the eastern part of Sicily in pre-Classical times. The fact that the Shekelesh are referred to as 'coming from the sea' only serves as a reminder of the close connection between Sicily and the sea.

#### MYCENAEAN KYLIX FROM THAPSUS (SICILY)

The *kylix* was a type of wine cup that was probably reserved for special occasions. Thousands of *kylix* shards have been found in the Mycenaean palace of Pylos in Greece: presumably the remains of a last great feast or ritual at the palace. Since *kylikes* are relatively rare outside the Aegean, they must have been connected to a specifically 'Mycenaean' way of drinking wine.



The list below comprises books and papers of general interest, grouped per chapter. A more extensive overview of the available literature can be found at [www.allardpierson-museum.nl](http://www.allardpierson-museum.nl).

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