

SICILIAN ODYSSEY

An Illustrated History of Sicily

SICILIA

JOSEPH STURIALE

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The Unhappy Island

“The island of Sicily is the largest in the Mediterranean. It has also proven, over the centuries, to be the most unhappy. The stepping-stone between Europe and Africa, the gateway between east and west, the link between the Latin and the Greek, at once a stronghold, observation point and a clearing house, it has been fought over and occupied in turn by all the great powers that have at various times striven to extend their dominion across the Middle Sea. It has belonged to them all – and yet has properly been part of none; for the number and variety of its conquerors, while preventing the development of any strong national individuality of its own, have endowed it with a kaleidoscopic heritage of experience which can never allow it to become completely assimilated.

Even today, despite the beauty of its landscape, fertility of its fields and the perpetual benediction of its climate, there lingers everywhere some dark brooding quality – some underlying sorrow of which poverty, Church influence, the Mafia and all other popular modern scapegoats may be the manifestations but are certainly not the cause. It is the sorrow of a long, unhappy existence, of opportunities lost and promises unfulfilled; the sorrow perhaps, of a beautiful woman who has been raped too often and betrayed too often and is no longer fit for love or marriage.

Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Spaniards and French – all have left their mark. Today, a century after being received into her new Italian home, Sicily is probably less unhappy than she has been for centuries; but though no longer lost she seems lonely, seeking always an identity which she can never entirely find.”

Quote by John Julius Norwich from his book “The Normans in the South”, 1967



*A Sicilian Woman; painting by
Johann Victor Krämer, circa 1900*

Sicilian Identity

The island of Sicily has had a very long and troubled history. A succession of conquests over two thousand years by a series of either repressive or neglectful foreign rulers has left its imprint on the psyche of the Sicilian people and their identity, which survives today. In recent history Sicilians have consistently been portrayed as being extremely passionate, violent, immoral, dangerous, backwards, superstitious, and lazy. These vulgar and bigoted stereotypes ignore the root cause of the historical Sicilian condition, the island's long, continuous cycle of neglect, abuse and corruption at the hands of foreign rulers, governments, and by the Mafia.

The ability to endure great suffering through the millennia has been the universal trait of the Sicilian people, which most defines them. This ability sets them apart from all other peoples and cultures in Europe. With the possible exception of the Hebrew people, no other ethnic group within Europe has endured such a sustained, unbroken cycle of brutality and repression as the Sicilian people. It is the keystone of their collective soul, the force that binds all Sicilians to their ancestors throughout time, and a unique identity which supersedes their nominal nationality as Italians.

The Story of Sicily

The story of Sicily at its core is the tale of an ancient people forever striving to attain a home, a place of safety and tranquility, where they could raise their families in peace and prosperity. During their protracted odyssey, the Sicilian people have endured many centuries of profound loss, suffering, and abuse, all in their quest for the happiness of a permanent home. Like the torturous journeys of King Odysseus in Homer's epic poem, Sicilians have often been the helpless victims of the capricious whims and malevolent ambitions of all-powerful beings, yielding absolute power over their fate. Whether by the gods, tyrants, kings, emperors, ecclesiasts, nobles, or criminals, the Sicilian people have long been the helpless playthings of their oppressors throughout most of their unhappy history.

The story of Sicily is also one of enduring hope in the face of unbearable torment and despair, forever finding the strength to endure, clinging to an inextinguishable faith that life will be better tomorrow. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Queen Penelope steadfastly rejects the matrimonial advances of her rapacious suitors, laying waste to the kingdom of Ithaca, as she yearns for her happiness at the return of her husband, Odysseus. This capacity to persevere, the refusal to surrender to a profound sense of hopelessness, is another core characteristic of the Sicilian identity, one which has endured throughout time.

In the end, the story of Sicily is one of a broken, subjugated people, refusing to live forever on their knees, who eventually find the strength to rise and cast off the shackles of their all-powerful oppressors, freeing their homes, protecting their families, and recovering their long-lost dignity and honor. As Odysseus slaughtered the wicked suitors, who ravaged his homeland and threatened his family, thus would the Sicilian people rise and symbolically slay their own tormenters, freeing themselves from their long insidious domination by the Mafia.

Joseph Sturiale

Introduction

I am a proud Sicilian-American, born in Santa Teresa di Riva, a coastal town in eastern Sicily, around 25 miles south of Messina. My parents and I emigrated to New York in the mid-1960s shortly before my second birthday. I grew up very much American, but my immigrant roots have always been an integral part of my upbringing and my identity.

While always very conscious of my Sicilian heritage, in my youth I became aware of my profound ignorance of the history and true culture of my ancestors. I grew up watching American television and movies like everyone else, which insinuated a close connection between Sicilians, violence, and organized crime. I distinctly remember watching *The Godfather* film at age ten, when it first aired on television. I recall that I enjoyed this thrilling movie very much and was shocked by the brutality of the violence, but it also confused me greatly. Neither my family's lifestyle, nor those of any of my Sicilian relatives, bore the slightest resemblance to the characters portrayed in the movie. Every member of my extended family worked honest, blue-collar jobs, as tailors, barbers, landscapers, bartenders, deli owners, factory workers, and such. In my entire extended family, both in Sicily and in the United States, there was not a single mafiosi.

As I grew older I came to understand that the sensationalized portrayal of Sicilians in the American media had always been bigoted, erroneous and grossly defamatory. In my youth, the activities of organized criminal gangs seemed to dominate the daily newspaper headlines, and Hollywood put out a long string of blockbuster films which glorified the American Mafia lifestyle. At any casual mention of my Sicilian heritage, I would invariably be met by a harmless but insulting wisecrack about me having Mafia connections. Although I found these thoughtless comments to be infuriating, I kept my composure for I knew they were born of ignorance, not malice.

Many years ago, I read a book which opened my eyes and inspired an insatiable curiosity into my Sicilian heritage. The brilliant two-volume history, *The Normans in Sicily*, written by John Julius Norwich, told the story of the rise and fall of the magnificent Norman Kingdom of Sicily. This Sicilian kingdom was the richest, most culturally advanced, and enlightened nation of medieval Europe. These stories of the glory and splendor of this great Sicilian kingdom, and its grand cultural achievements, instilled within me a renewed pride in my Sicilian ancestry, one which I sincerely desired to pass onto my children.

I never held ambitions to write a book for sale to the public. My early motivation was to create a single volume history of Sicily, exclusively for use by the members of my family. I wanted to produce a clear, easily readable account of the proud, but often tragic, history of the Sicilian people, providing a true picture of their cultural heritage, not one poisoned by the distortions and lies, promulgated by a profit-driven media. However, while writing the book I became motivated to tell the story of the Sicilian people to a much wider audience. In nearly every history book that I have read about Sicily, most historians tend to write about kings, princes, popes, and the Mafia. The sad tragic story of the Sicilian people is often either neglected or else barely mentioned. The real story of Sicily, the one which runs like a binding thread through each era of Sicilian history, is that of its people.

I am neither a writer, a historian nor a researcher. I am a self-proclaimed “history nerd” who has devoted a lifetime to reading hundreds of books, written by many brilliant historical writers from modern times all the way back to antiquity. My greatest historical interests have been for the stories of Western Civilization, from the ancient empires, to medieval and modern Europe, leading into our own marvelous American story. However, my singular passion over the last twenty-five years has been the consumption of every book I could find, written in English, concerning Sicilian and Mediterranean history.

My original intent was to write to a family audience with very limited knowledge of ancient and European history. I tailored my writing style and content to convey the complex story of Sicily into a comprehensive, but readable single volume history, which required no extensive prior historical knowledge to understand. To keep the book to a manageable size, without sacrificing the rich diverse story, I added hundreds of color and b/w photos, illustrations, maps, and charts to supplement the narrative and to bring it to life.

My book contains no original research; all historical information presented has been entirely derived from the many eminent and scholarly historical texts, written in or translated into English, which are detailed within the bibliography. *Sicilian Odyssey* represents my summarized retelling of the rich complicated story of Sicily and her people to a new non-scholarly audience. As a result, I have elected not to annotate the body of the narrative with endless footnotes, identifying specific sources for each tidbit of information. While this is essential to preserve the integrity and accuracy for new researched historical works, I find it can be distracting and often interrupts the flow of the story. However, I sincerely hope that professional historians will look past the lack of specific annotated sources, and judge the work on the accuracy of the storytelling, rather than the unconventional format. With that said, I take full responsibility for any errors or unintentional inaccuracies contained in my book.

As mentioned earlier, I am not a historian and my book does not look or read like a typical work of history. I have endeavored to tell the powerful tale of Sicily in a clear, direct and steady cadence, as if reading a story to a loved one. Even if I had failed to mention my Sicilian heritage up front, this fact would be readily apparent in the tone of the story. While I have endeavored to speak in the dispassionate voice of an impartial historian, at various points in the book I have failed to do so. When detailing some of the horrid abuses inflicted upon the people of Sicily, particularly by a series of villainous 13th century popes, my opinionated outraged Sicilian voice bleeds into the otherwise objective and historically accurate narrative. For this I make no apologies, but merely beg the readers’ indulgence for these momentary lapses of objectivity.

I hope that the book will encourage individuals of Sicilian descent to discover the remarkable story of their ancestors, and that it challenges all of its readers to reevaluate their prior conceptions of Sicily, its people and their true heritage.

Joseph “*Giuseppe*” Sturiale
February 2026



*Photo of the author's
parents, taken shortly
after their arrival in New
York, circa 1966.*

This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Carmelo Sturiale and Lucrezia Ando. They grew up in Sicily, children of Mussolini's fascist Italy during the terrible war-ravaged years. In their youth they experienced great hardships: famine, disease, and post-war economic ruin.

My parents, along with a dozen other family members, left their homeland during the turbulent decades following the Second World War. Their immigrant stories were very common ones. They all came to the U.S. with the same determined goal: to work as hard as necessary to give their children all the opportunities that they were denied. In the pursuit of that single minded purpose, there was no labor too great, no burden too heavy, and no personal or financial sacrifice too costly, that could deter my parents from achieving their goal of a quality education, career success, and happiness for myself and younger sister, Grace. All the blessings and achievements of my life I owe to their sacrifices and the outstanding examples they set during their lives, as loving, kind, honorable, hardworking people.

Joseph Sturiale
May 2026

Evolution of the Names of Cities and Towns

Modern Name	Ancient Greeks	Ancient Carthaginians	Ancient Romans	Arabs / Saracens	Medieval Period
Agrigento	Akragas	Akragas	Agrigentum	Kerkent	Girenti
Catania	Catane	Catana	Catana	Balad-al-Fil	Catania
Enna	Hennaion	Hennaion	Castrum Hennae	Qaṣr Yānih	Castrigiovanni
Erice	Eryx	Eryx	Eryx	Gebel Hamed	Monte San Giuliano
Giardini-Naxos	Naxos		Naxus	Al-Kusus	Schiso
Lentini	Leontina		Leontini	Al-Lintini	Lentini
Marsala	Lilybaeum	Lilybaeum	Lilybaeum	Mars'Allah	Marsala
Mazara	Mazar	Mazar	Mazaro	Mazara	Mazara
Messina	Zancle	Zancle	Messana	Musaynah	Messina
Milazzo	Mylai		Mylai	Melaz	Milazzo
Mozia	Moyta	Moyta	Moyta	Mozia	Mozia
Palermo	Panormous	Ziz	Panormous	Bal'harm	Palermo
Santa Croce Camerina	Kamarina		Camarina	Qawqana	Camarina
Selinunte	Selinus	Selinus	Selinus	Ramuxara	
Solanto	Soleis	Kphra	Soluntum	Solanto	Solanto
Syracuse or Siracusa	Siracusae		Siracusa	Saraquasah	Siracusa
Taormina	Taurus	Tauormenion	Tauormenium	al-Mu izzyyah	Taormina
Termini Immerge	Himera	Himera	Thermae Himerenses	Taramin	
Tindari	Tyndaris	Tyndaris	Tyndaris		Tindari
Reggio Calabria	Rhegion	Rhegion	Rhegium	Riyyah	Reggio

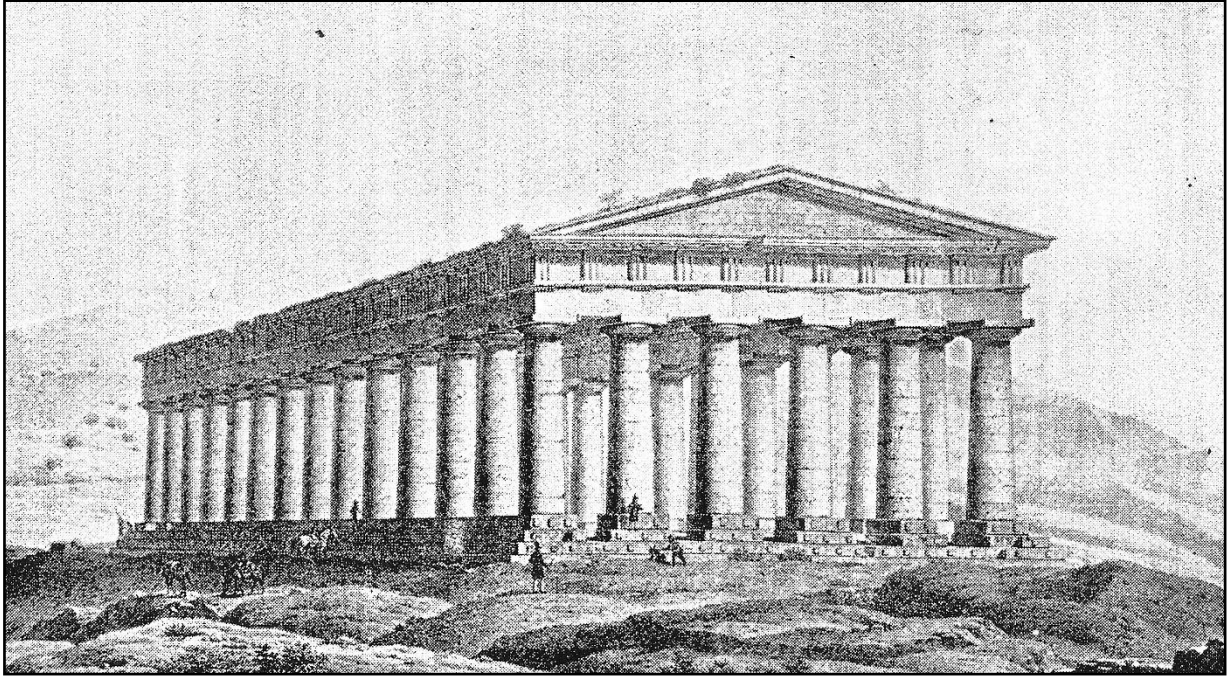


Cathedral at Palermo; 19th century engraving by John Le Keux (1783-1846), circa 1840

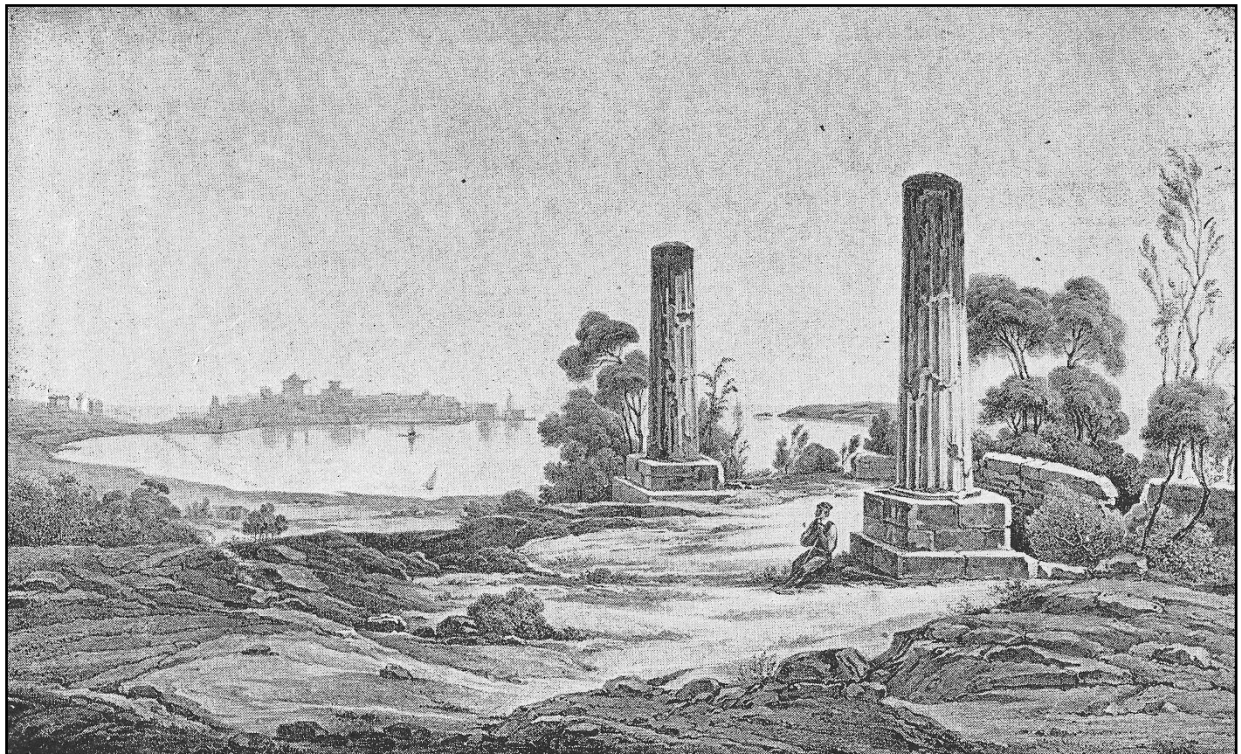
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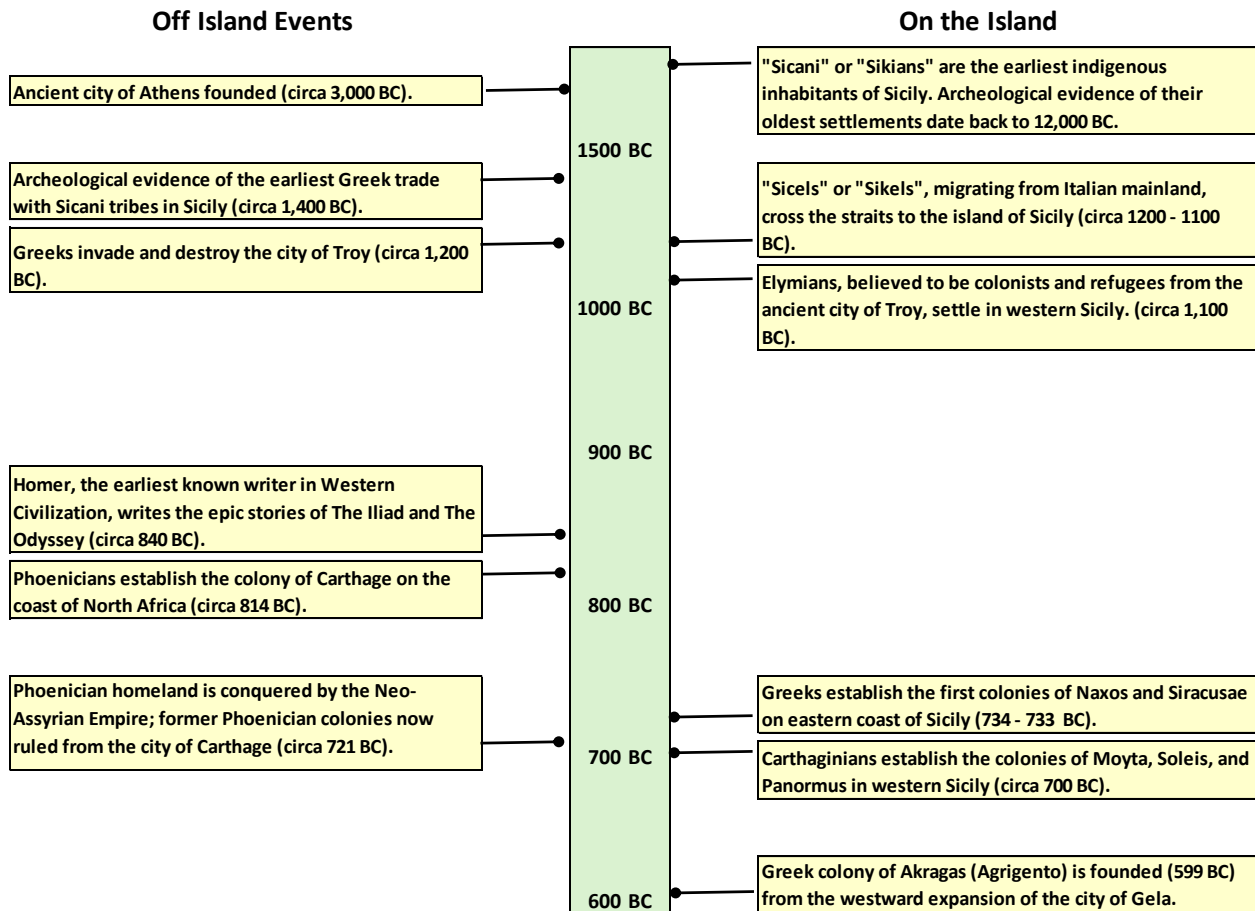
Ruins of the Temple of Segesta; 19th century engraving



Ruins of the Temple of Olympian Zeus, outside Siracusa in Sicily; 19th century engraving

CHRONOLOGY OF SICILY

Early Inhabitants - Greek and Phoenician Colonization



Abduction of Persephone; by Alessandro Allori; circa 1570

From ancient Greek mythology, the painting depicts the abduction of the goddess Persephone by the Olympian god, Hades, in central Trinakria (Sicily)

Chapter 1 – Earliest Inhabitants of Ancient Sicily

Impact of the Geography of Sicily on its History

From its earliest days, much of the history of Sicily has been predetermined by its geographical position in the world and by the features of its landscape. Sicily is a great island, the largest in the Mediterranean Sea. More importantly, it is a central island in a vast inland sea, which unites Europe, Africa, and western Asia. The island forms a breakwater between the eastern and western basins of the Mediterranean, creating a natural bridge connecting Africa to Europe.



Its curious central position has begged the question, where does Sicily belong? Should the island be a part of the continent of Europe or Africa? While Sicily has always been counted as a part of Europe, the island is in fact much closer to Africa than to central Europe. Does this great island belong culturally to the east or the west? Much of Sicilian history during the last three millennium has turned on these fundamental questions.

In ancient times, most of the peoples of Western Civilization resided on coastal lands around the Mediterranean Sea, which made Sicily the very center of the civilized world. Its central position invited trade and settlement from every quarter of this inland sea and its great size allowed the island to be settled simultaneously by various diverse peoples and ethnic groups from all three continents. This central accessibility, coupled with the great fertility of her lands, made Sicily a rich prize and attracted the covetous ambitions of conquerors throughout her long history.

Many of the greatest nations and empires of the western world have held dominion over Sicily at one time, turning the island into one of the greatest battlefields of history, not only by rival nations, but also by rival faiths. Through much of its history, Sicily has been a conquered land, and a plaything of the greatest powers and nations of Europe. Even as a dependent land in the dominion of great foreign powers, the history of Sicily continued to have profound impact on the history of the entire Western world.

Sicily was not always a dependent land; during one age it contained the greatest and most powerful city in the ancient world, and in another the island held the richest and most powerful kingdom in Europe. However, as the power centers of Europe shifted, during the late middle ages from the nations of the Mediterranean region to those of central Europe, the political, economic and military power of Sicily began to wane. The island went from being the center of the civilized world to being a sleepy backwater at the far edge of southern Europe. For almost the last eight centuries there has been no independent Sicilian nation and the island has been ruled by a revolving door of foreign overlords. During this long period of foreign domination, Sicily would lose most of its distinguishing and magnificent characteristics from her past periods of greatness, and be relegated to a subordinate component of the general history of Europe and of Italy.

Inhabitants before Greek Colonization

The story of Sicily begins with its earliest known native inhabitants. Archaeological evidence of the oldest settlements in Sicily dates back to the Paleolithic Period, around 12,000 years ago. The most famous of the ancient Greek historians, Thucydides, reported that the pre-Greek inhabitants of Sicily in the 8th century BC were comprised of three peoples:

- (i) *Sicani (aka Sicians or Sikians)* in the island's center,
- (ii) *Sicels (aka Siculi or Sikels)* in the east, and
- (iii) the *Elymians* in the west.



Native Sicilian inhabitants on the island, before the arrival of the Greek colonists in the 8th century BC; source: Wikimedia Commons

The history of these three nations is one without real dates, and almost without names. Most known facts have been deduced from the numerous discovered graves of these primeval inhabitants of Sicily, scattered throughout the island, buried deep within the limestone hills. The names of the first two peoples are so similar that the temptation exists to treat them as two forms of the same name, but ancient historians clearly speak of them as two distinct nations. Our knowledge of these early indigenous Sicilian peoples is limited, as none left any written history, and the available archeological findings from each show no material cultural differences between the groups.

Most of what we know about these groups has come down to us from the oral traditions and the written histories by the Greek colonists, hundreds of years after their contact with these pre-historic peoples.

The Sicani

According to ancient Greek traditions, the *Sicani* claimed to be sprung from the earth, meaning they are the original indigenous inhabitants about whom anything is known. The Sicani must have arrived on the island through some means of migration from the Italian mainland in an earlier unrecorded time. In historical times, they were located in the central and western portions of the island, but it is likely they once inhabited the entire island, but were driven from the east coast by the arrival of the more advanced Sicel people, sometime in the 11th-12th centuries BC. The Greek settlers who came afterwards did not borrow words or traditions from the Sicani, as they did from the Sicels. It is not known how the Sicani people disappeared, so most historians believe they were ultimately assimilated into the more advanced races on the island over time.

The Sicani left behind no sizable towns or settlements. All that is known of their story comes to us from an ancient Greek legend of a Sicani king named Kokalos, who ruled from a city of Kamikos, believed to have been located in the area surrounding the ancient Greek city of Akragas (modern-day Agrigento). In the legend, King Kokalos welcomed a visiting prince, Daedalus, who was forced to flee the Cretan kingdom of King Minos after committing a crime. Daedalus brought to the Sicani the knowledge and arts of the higher Minoan civilization. In gratitude to his welcoming host, Daedalus constructed the ancient Sicani city of Kamikos, which contained many great works. When King Minos hears that the fugitive Daedalus has been granted sanctuary in the Sicani lands, he dispatches his great fleet to Sicania to demand his return. Enticed by King Kokalos to a conference, King Minos is lured to Kamikos. While a guest of King Kokalos, Minos was enticed into a warm bath and then killed by the daughter of Kokalos, while the Minoan fleet was set ablaze in the harbor. Angered by this betrayal, the Minoans attempted to avenge their slain king and besieged Kamikos for seven years, before ultimately withdrawing and settling on the Italian mainland on the heel of the boot.

The Sicels

Like the earlier Sicani, the Sicels also left no writings. However, based upon certain surviving words from their language, it is clear that the Sicels were a less developed pre-Latin people with their origins on the Italian peninsula. Over time they were displaced by the pressures of other rival Italic tribes, pushing them south along the peninsula. According to ancient Greek historians, the Sicel migration from the Italian peninsula to the island of Sicily occurred around three hundred years before the Greek colonization. These reports, coupled with archeological evidence uncovered, place the estimated timing for the Sicel migration across the straits at around 1,200 - 1,000 BC.

Upon the arrival of the Sicels on the island, they came into direct conflict with the less developed, indigenous Sicani peoples. The Sicels overpowered the native Sicani and settled the eastern and northern coasts of the island, driving the Sicani to the central highlands. The Sicels were the earliest native peoples encountered by the first Greek settlers who arrived in Sicily in the mid-to late 8th Century BC. Just like the Sicilians before them, the Sicels were themselves driven from the most desirable coastal areas by the more advanced Greek populations. Many moved to the interior of the island to escape slavery and domination by the Greeks, where they dwelled on hilltop villages.

The Sicels who remained in the east became dominated by and then ultimately absorbed into the Greek populations in the generations following Greek colonization. History has recorded the existence of several known Sikel settlement sites before Greek colonization of Sicily. The Sicels were deprived by the Greeks of all their settlements on the eastern coast and some on the north coast. The most precious of the former Sikel towns absorbed by Greek colonization was the port town of Zancle on the straits, which retained its Sikel name after the takeover. Other former Sikel settlements absorbed by Greek expansion include Megara, Leontini, and Siracusae.

In time, the Sicels became assimilated Greeks and disappeared as a race. However, parts of the Sikel language and culture were adopted by the Greeks, who borrowed the names for their coins from the Sicels and adopted their system of weights and measures. The Latin Sicels largely adopted the mythology of Greece, while the Greeks learned to worship the Sikel gods and adopt them into their own mythology. The Greek settlers also reshaped many of the ancient legends of mainland Greece to better fit their new homes on Sicilian soil.

The Elymians

According to several ancient historians, the *Elymian* people were believed to be of mixed Trojan and Phokian (Greek) descent, either as colonists or refugees from the city of Troy after its destruction, arriving in Sicily around 1,100 BC. However, every tale that connects the origin of any city or people with the Trojan story should automatically be marked as suspicious. The Trojan story was the common resort of several ancient cities whose foundations were unknown but that desired a connection with any elder Greek city. That the Elymians claimed a descent that was partly Trojan and partly Greek showed that, either the Elymians had no clear tradition of their origin, or that they chose to willfully reinvent it.

The chief Elymian cities of the west were Eryx and Segesta. The Elymian settlers had no clear connection to the sea; neither of the two sites was developed along the seashore. The founders of Segesta, the oldest Elymian settlement, sought to keep far away from water. Its inland location was also considerably distant from other rival settlements on the western side of the island, including Phoenician cities of Motya and Panormus, and later the Greek settlement of Selinus. No trace of the ancient city of Segesta remains, but the well preserved remains of its famous hillside temple and theater have survived to present day. The other Elymian settlement, Eryx, was built high on a mightier hill, which overlooked the western coast of the island, but could boast no grand structures to compare with the temple and theater of Segesta.

Ancient Greek Myths about Sicily in the Homeric Era

The ancient Greeks referred to Sicily as Trinakria, meaning three-cornered island. They attributed the creation of the island to the gods of Olympus, specifically to three beautiful sea nymphs who danced all across the world. As they danced, they gathered handfuls of fruits, seeds, and earth from the most beautiful and fertile places on earth. One day, they arrived at a location with a calm sea and beautiful blue sky, and their dancing became more spirited and joyous. Here, the three nymphs

threw all they had collected into the ocean. The water bubbled, forming a rainbow, and up from the depths of the sea rose a new triangular-shaped land-mass, which they named Trinakria.

The ancient Greek symbol for the island of Trinakria (Trinacria in Italian) was taken from this legend. The three legs are those of the three female nymphs, representing the three capes of Sicily's corners; the wheat symbolizes the fertility of the island, and the Medusa snake heads symbolize the goddess Athena, the protectress of the island.



The ancient symbol for the island of Sicily, the Trinacria

Several other geographic features of Sicily are prominently featured in and explained by the immortal tales of Greek mythology:

- (i) the great volcano Aetna (Etna), rising nearly eleven thousand feet high was said to be the home of the god Hephaistos, son of Zeus and the god of the blacksmiths, and his great forge, where he crafted all the weapons of the Olympian gods. Following the epic battle between the Greek gods with the mightiest of the titans, Typhon, Zeus completed his victory by burying the creature deep beneath Mount Aetna. Hence the ancient Greeks believed that the frequent flame and smoke eruptions from the volcano were the fury of the defeated and imprisoned Typhon;
- (ii) the abduction of the goddess Persephone by Hades, god of the underworld, was believed to have occurred in the center of the island, near present day Enna; the goddess Demeter, mother of Persephone, created the seasons of the earth, winter for the half of the year when Persephone resides in the underworld and summer when she lives on the surface;
- (iii) the Aeolian Islands, north of Sicily, are associated with Aeolus, the Greek god of the winds;
- (iv) the famous fresh water, underground spring in Ortygia (Siracusa) was said to have been created when the nymph Arethusa attracted the desires of Alpheios, the river god, by bathing naked in his streams. As the river god pursued the nymph, the goddess of the hunt, Artemis, protected her by creating a cleft in the ground and transforming Arethusa into a fresh-water spring. Here, Arethusa flowed underground to escape the wicked, river god.

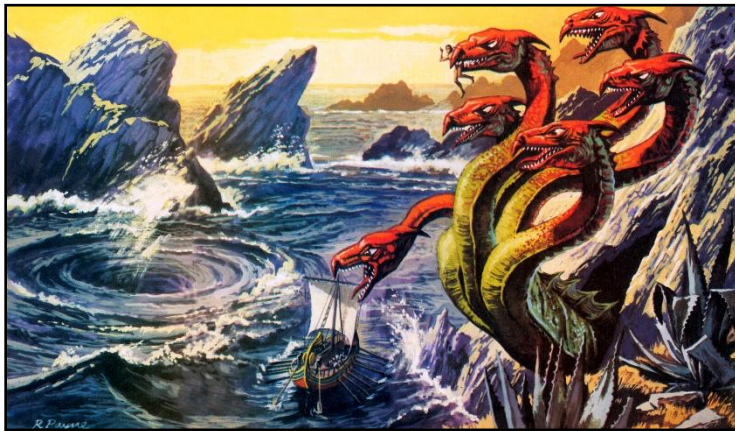
Homer, the earliest known author in Western Civilization, is believed to have written his epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, sometime in the mid-9th century BC, nearly a century before the Greek colonization of Sicily. For hundreds of years before Homer's time, ancient Greek sailors travelled to and traded with the Sicani peoples on the island of Trinakria. The rocky eastern coast of Sicily, coupled with the treacherous currents of the Straits (of Messina) resulted in countless

deadly shipwrecks over hundreds of years. The superstitious Greeks, seeking explanations for their lost ships, often attributed the wrecks to the wrath of the gods, who created giants and monsters that inhabited this mysterious and faraway island. Greek superstitions regarding distant Trinakria are prominently featured in Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey*, where the hero Odysseus faces many deadly challenges on his long, perilous journey home to Ithaca after the Trojan War.

The story has him sailing west, so the Greeks believed he landed in Trinakria. First, upon landing on the island Odysseus and his men were captured and imprisoned in a cave by Polyphemos, the giant cyclops beneath a huge mountain (Aetna). After blinding the beast, Odysseus and his crew escaped back to their ship and sailed away. In a rage, the cyclops blindly hurls mountain-sized boulders into the sea to try and destroy Odysseus's ship.



The cyclops, Polyphemos, hurls boulders at Odysseus' ship; painting by Arnold Böcklin, 1896



Scylla attacking Odysseus's ship; illustration by Roger Payne

Later while sailing through a narrow strait (Straits of Messina), Odysseus encounters two deadly evils, side by side, which he must pass. The first was a massive whirlpool, Charybdis, that sucked ships down to the depths of the sea. The second was a six-headed monster, Scylla, which lived in a cave and attacked ships from a massive rock on shore. The beast had long scaly necks with rows of sharp teeth in each mouth. Forced to choose which evil to face, Odysseus selected to fight past the Scylla, losing six of his men in the battle.

Odysseus and his crew make another landing on the island of the Greek sun god, Helios, where they encounter a field of immortal golden oxen. Oxen were sacred symbols of fertility in ancient Greek mythology. Odysseus was warned by the goddess, Circe, to avoid the island entirely, but at the very least to avoid any harm to the sacred oxen. After obtaining oaths from his crew not to disturb the cattle, Odysseus hiked inland alone to pray for the gods' assistance and fell asleep. In his absence, his irresponsible men feast on the oxen of the sun. Later, as Odysseus' ship sailed away, Zeus struck them with a devastating lightning storm, killing everyone except Odysseus.

Homer is believed to have written his epic works from Asia Minor (the west coast of modern-day Turkey). His descriptions of the monster infested islands in the Odyssey tale bear striking similarities to actual geographical features of the island of Sicily. Just off the eastern coast, outside modern coastal towns of Aci Trezza and Aci Castello, north of Catania, several large rocky outcroppings jut out sharply out of the sea, named the “scogli dei Ciclopi” (Rocks of the Cyclops), where Greek myths claim that Polyphemos hurled the giant boulders at Odysseus’ ship.



View of the Rocks on the Third Island of the Cyclopes; painting by Jean Pierre Houel, 1776.



Rock of Scilla in Calabria, Italy. source: photo by Gurgun Bakhshetyan courtesy of Shutterstock

In the Straits of Messina, near the Calabrian town of Scilla, lies a large pillar of rock where the shifting tides between the Tyrrhenian and Ionian Seas create a strong natural whirlpool, which often causes a navigational hazard to small boats. Lastly, the peninsula of Mylai (modern-day Milazzo), on the northern shore of the island, possesses a vast fertile coastal plain, which is believed to be the basis of the rich pasture lands described in the story of the golden oxen of Helios.

Given Homer’s fairly accurate incorporation of actual geographical features of the Sicilian landscape into his epic Odyssey tale, it can clearly be surmised that the ancient Greeks had frequent contact with the faraway land of Trinakria. Enough so that the ancient Greek world was quite familiar with key elements of the island’s coastal geography.

Trade and Colonization of Sicily

Greek goods were discovered by archeologists in ancient Sicilian settlements, beginning around 1,400 BC, a clear indication of trade and contact between the Greek city-states and the indigenous Sicani people, nearly seven centuries before the earliest Greek colonization. The island of Sicily sat along the principal Greek western trade route, which sailed up its east coast, through the narrow straits, up the coast of the Italian peninsula, and along the southern coast of the European continent.

The ancient Greeks were experienced sailors and traders who ranged in every direction across the Aegean, Black, and Mediterranean Seas for hundreds of years. In earlier times, the Greeks were content to simply trade with these foreign lands. Later, the Greeks saw colonization as a means to strengthen and protect their trade routes, so they established permanent coastal settlements in North Africa, Asia Minor, Cyprus, the southern Italian peninsula, and Sicily, spreading their language, customs, writings, and culture across vast areas of the Mediterranean region.

Magna Graecia, location of Greek colonies in Sicily and Southern Italy by the 6th century BC. source: Wikimedia Commons



Greek colonization was usually not undertaken for conquest purposes, but rather to facilitate trade and relieve the burdens of surplus populations and the lack of available land resources back home. Several of the independent Greek city-states would sponsor their own colonial ventures for their own people. The mother city would select a settlement site, assemble the best volunteers (or undesirables) for the colony, and appoint the initial leaders for the venture. Once the new colonies were established, they would be independent but maintain cultural and economic ties with the mother city for many years after its foundation. In referring to the collective colonies in Southern Italy and Sicily, they referred to them as “Magna Graecia” (Greater Greece).

Naxos

The first group of Greek colonists arrived in Sicily in 734 BC and founded the settlement of Naxos on the eastern coast, just south of the straits. These first colonial settlers were primarily Chalcidians from the city of Chalcis on the island of Evvoia, north of Athens, but also included residents of the island of Naxos. This new Naxos site possessed several key advantages, such as a small bay to shelter their ships, proximity to the straits, and a nearby small mountain, that they named Tauro, which could be used as a lookout point and possessed high ground which could be fortified. The Greeks drove out the Sicels, took their land, and began constructing a fortified town.

In exploring the lands, the Naxos settlers also discovered areas that provided clay of high quality for the making of pots and containers. The surrounding lands around the shore area, located in a valley below an active volcano, were known to be very fertile. These fields in Sicily provided the new settlers with far more arable land, capable of producing sufficient grain to feed their town and produce enough excess to export back to their mother city. The Naxos colonists were the first people on Sicily to plant grape vines for wine and the first to construct dwellings from stone.

The Naxos settlers erected an altar to Apollo, the first in Sicily. Because it possessed the first temple to Apollo in Sicily, colonists from other towns regarded Naxos as a sacred place and frequently stopped here to make a sacrifice to Apollo before sailing back to the homeland. In time Apollo was regarded as the patron god of all Greek colonization in Sicily.

The settlement of Naxos was very prosperous, attracting further residents from their homeland. In Sicily, each man had more land and food than their counterparts in the home country. Over time they became richer and less tied to the old-world traditions. Within five years the Naxos community had grown so large that it sponsored new settlement ventures further south along the coast into the valley of the great volcano and established the new colonial towns of Katane (Catania) and Leontinoi (Lentini). Over the next 150 years Greeks would emigrate to Sicily in greater numbers, establishing additional colonies that wrapped around the eastern, southern and northern shores of the island.

Siracusae

On the heels of the foundation of Naxos came the second settlement of Siracusae (Siracusa in Italian, or Syracuse in English) further south on the eastern coast of Sicily in 733 BC. The founders of Siracusae came from Corinth, one of the oldest and most powerful city-states in Greece. The leader of the expedition, Archias, came from the ruling family in Corinth, who left for Trinakria with a group of settlers.



Early Greek colonists in Siracusae.

This second recorded Greek settlement in Sicily was destined to achieve far greater fame and fortune than any other ancient city on the island. For a time, it would rise to become one of the foremost cities of the ancient world, surpassing those of the Greek mainland, both in prosperity and splendor, but its greatness was not destined to last.

When the Corinthians arrived, they planted their settlement on a low island which lie close to the coast. The island was named Ortygia, which was connected to the mainland by a short mole, later by a bridge. These Doric Greeks had selected the best site on the east coast of the island, located near the mouth of the Anopo River on the side of the Great Harbor. The site possessed many outstanding natural features: a sheltered harbor, freshwater springs, a defensible position, and access to vast fertile fields inland. The area was previously known to the Greeks as the ancient Myceneans and Cretans had set up trading outposts here hundreds of years earlier. After subduing the local Sicel population, the Greeks settled on an island between the two natural harbors, which they called Ortygia (from Greek word *ortyx* for quail).

The map illustrates the Argolid region, featuring the Argive Plain and the Argive Heraion. Key locations include Argos, the Argive Heraion, the Argive Heraion, and the Argive Heraion. The map also shows the Argive Heraion, the Argive Heraion, and the Argive Heraion. The map is titled 'Argolid' and includes a scale bar in English miles.

Map of Siracusae by the 5th century BC.

In the northern corner of the island in the center of the straits lies a curved peninsula, shaped like a sickle. The indigenous Sicel people had a community here, named Zancle (modern-day Messina), believed to be the Sicel word for port. The site had a great location at the foot of some low hills along the narrow strait. A sickle-shape peninsula jutted out from the mainland, which provided a strong natural port and a safe refuge from the shifting currents of the straits. Early settlers developed the town into a key port, which attracted sailors and traders of every nationality: Greeks, Etruscans, and Carthaginians.

The surrounding fields were less fertile than other areas of Sicily, so Zancle's principal economic activity was focused on commercial activity generated by its port. Around sixty years after its founding, a group of refugees arrived from the Greek Peloponnesus region, fleeing slavery by the

Spartans. These refugees, the Messanians, were to one day provide the city with its modern name, Messina. Over time the original Greek settlers of Zancle, seeking to expand to new territories, turned the northeast corner of the island and created a new settlement around thirty miles west of Messina on a long narrow peninsula of Mylai (modern-day Milazzo).

Although Zancle would always be prosperous, it never rose to the status of one of the foremost ancient Greek cities. The founding of the Zancle settlement completed the Greek colonization of eastern Sicily. With the exception of Mylai, no other Greek colonies existed on the northern or southern sides of the island, but that was about to change.

Around 648 BC, the residents of Zancle went on to found a new settlement on the north shore of Sicily, much farther to the west, named Himera. It stood on a modest sized hill near the sea by a river of the same name. For many years, Himera was the sole major Greek city on Sicily's northern coast, a sole outpost near the Phoenician territories further to the west of the island.

Gela and Akragas

The Dorian Greek residents from the islands of Crete and Rhodes were late to the Greek colonization of Sicily, founding their first settlement of Gela in 688 BC, 46 years after the first Chalcidian colonists arrived at Naxos. By this time the Ionian speaking Greeks controlled the eastern and northern coastlines from Leontinoi to Himera. The Cretan and Rhodian settlers were forced to sail south past Siracusae before turning west to arrive at a wide bay area where they would settle.



Gelan coin, the Didrachm, (c. 490 BC) depicting horse and rider on one side and a river god on the other.

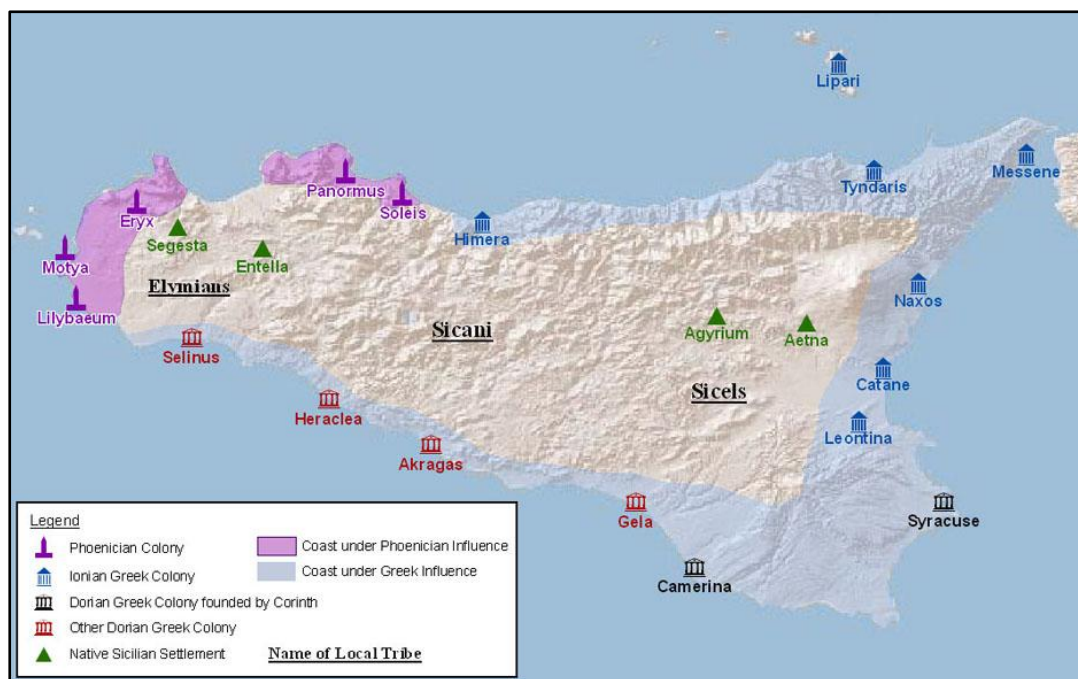
They chose a site between two rivers that bordered a narrow, four-mile-long, plateau about 100 feet high. This strip of plateau connected to the great Sicilian central plains to the north. The gulf lacked a true harbor, so the Greek settlers of Gela beached their ships. The Gelan settlers designated a sacred area on the plateau and constructed a temple to Athena, with additional homes nearby. The fields on the plains of Gela were renowned for their productivity of wheat and cereals, and its rolling hills were well suited for raising fine horses, which would be in great demand in Sicily and abroad for cavalry.

Gela would be the last of the Sicilian colonies founded directly from Greece. The Gelans later expanded further west and founded the settlement of Akragas (modern-day Agrigento) in 599 BC on a high plateau more than a mile north of the coast, where two rivers joined and followed to the sea. The residents of Akragas developed the acropolis on the summit of the hill, and the town gradually spread down from the hillside, but never reached the sea. The rivers cut through a large fertile plain. Although the Akragas settlement was prosperous and had considerable trade activity with the cities on the African coast, it never developed a powerful navy. In time, Akragas would grow into the second most prosperous and powerful city in Sicily, behind Siracusae. The lower ancient Greek city has been lost to time, but the ruins of the many temples of the acropolis still occupy the plateau (the Valley of the Temples) to the present day.



Ruins of the Temples of Agragas (Agrigento) in Sicily; painting by Pierre Henri de Valenciennes, 1750

However, it lay near the far western edge of Greek territory, close to the colonial cities of a rival people, the Carthaginians, who were the descendants of an ancient Semitic people, the Phoenicians. The Carthaginian/Phoenician settlements in the western area of Sicily had actually predated the start of Greek colonization in the east by several decades.



Map of Greek and Phoenician colonies established by the 6th century BC; source: Wikimedia Commons

Phoenician Commerce and Colonization

The Phoenicians were an ancient Semitic people who lived in independent city-states, similar to those of the Greeks, along a coastal strip in the Levant region of the eastern Mediterranean (modern-day Lebanon) in the cities that became known as Sidon, Tyre, and Arvad. The Phoenicians were renowned for their prowess in trade, seafaring and navigation, and dominated commerce in ancient times. In this manner, they spread through the Mediterranean region, where they developed expansive maritime trade networks that lasted nearly a millennium.

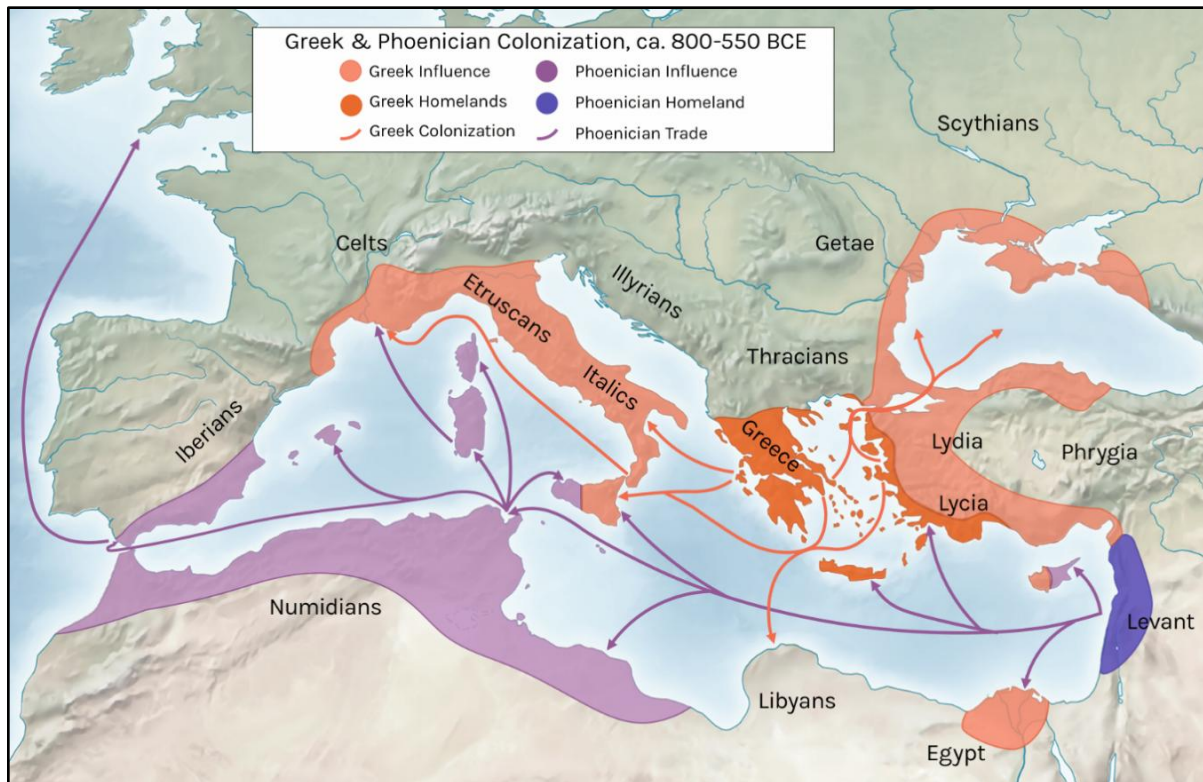


Phoenician traders used mastery of the seas to establish a maritime empire throughout the Mediterranean region; colored engraving, 1801

The Phoenicians' best-known legacy is the creation of the world's oldest alphabet, which they transmitted across the Mediterranean. It became the basis of the original Greek alphabet, and later, in turn, the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. The Semitic language of the Phoenicians was similar to Hebrew. They came from the land of Canaan in the Old Testament. In their language, they called their land *Chna* or *Canaan*, but our modern name for them came from the Latin *Poenus* or *Punicus* (not really their name), but perhaps described their land as having many palm trees.

Despite their many accomplishments, the Greeks still considered the advanced Phoenician people to be barbarians, albeit the most advanced of the Asiatic barbarians. At this early time, the Phoenicians were the more advanced peoples with respect to trade and sea-faring skills. However, ancient Greek culture was to surpass all others in the fields of art, politics, language and literature, which would forever influence the Western world

The principal lands of Phoenician settlement were along the northern coast of Africa, which included the cities of Carthage, Hippo, and Utica. From these earlier settlements the Phoenician influence would spread further west to the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain) and the larger islands of the Mediterranean (modern-day Cyprus, Sardinia, Corsica, Ibiza, and Sicily). Historians cannot determine a precise date for the foundations of most of these settlements and cities, or whether they were settled directly from the Phoenician homeland or from their earlier African settlements. However, many historians believe that Phoenician colonists from Tyre established the settlement of the ancient city of Carthage, located on the North African coast (in modern-day Tunisia) by around 814 BC.



Ancient Greek and Phoenician trade routes and colonies across the Mediterranean Sea (8th to 6th centuries BC). source: Wikimedia Commons

All the other Phoenician settlements were believed to have been established sometime between the 11th century BC and the beginning of Greek colonization in the 8th century BC. Phoenician civilization reached its heights in the 9th century BC but gradually declined due to the conquest and assimilation of its home cities by the Assyrian Empire, Achaemenid Empire, and later by the Persian Empire. In the period prior to and during the Greek colonization of Sicily, the Phoenicians were the primary economic and political rivals of the Greeks in the Mediterranean region.

Motya

Around 700 BC the Phoenicians and Carthaginians developed the island trade settlement of Motya (modern-day island of Mozia near Marsala) into a permanent colony. The shallow waters surrounding the small island made it easy to land and launch their ships. In time, Motya became a very prosperous community from several key industries developed within the colony. The waters around Motya were rich in fishing, particularly in tuna, caught in vast numbers. The Carthaginians also built massive offshore “cribs” in the shallow waters, where they extracted sizable salt deposits from the evaporated sea water, another great innovation introduced by the ancient Phoenicians. Salt was a valuable resource to ancient people used in the preservation of food. The residents of Motya also created a process of producing a very rare purple dye from the extracted glands of small, shelled sea snails, the murex. The quality of the dye was very high and would not fade from cloth. The production of the dye from these tiny sea creatures was a difficult and expensive process, making the purple dye affordable only to royalty in the ancient world.

Soleis

On the northern shore of Sicily on a rocky hill, forming the southern shore of a small bay, the Phoenicians established the town of *Soleis*, or *Solous* (site of modern-day Solunto). This was an important outpost to defend against Sicels, and later Greek, incursions from the east. No Phoenician ruins survived at the site to present day.

Panormus

The greatest of the Phoenician settlements was established in a bay several miles to the west of Soleis. The site contains a large, shell-shaped, fruitful plain, fenced in by a curtain of nearby mountains. The center of the plain has a small inlet into the sea, flanked by two rivers with a tongue of land between them. The rivers provided an abundance of fresh water fed from the mountain springs, and the large level plain was very fertile, capable of growing a variety of crops and fruit trees. In time this location would be referred to as the *Golden Shell*, or *Conca d'Oro*. There could be no better site on the entire island to establish a permanent settlement. The Phoenician name of this town was not recorded, but the earliest name given to it by the Greeks was *Panormus*. This city, later known as Palermo, was destined to play a great role throughout the recorded history of the island, as the capital city of Arab, Norman, and modern-day Sicily.

Rise of Carthage

Following the conquest of Phoenicia by the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the 7th century BC, Carthage became an independent city-state and assimilated the trade routes and former Phoenician colonies in western Sicily, Sardinia, Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, making it one of the largest and richest cities in the ancient world. This commercial empire was secured by one of the largest and most powerful navies of the ancient world, and an army composed heavily of foreign mercenaries and auxiliaries raised from its colonial territories.

The great commercial success of the Carthaginian colonies in western Sicily resulted in rapid population growth and expansion of their commercial interests eastward, founding the new settlements of Lilybaeum to the south and the expansion of the settlements of Eryx, Panormus and Soleis to the north. By the end of the 6th century BC the entire coastal areas of Sicily had been settled by the Greeks and the Carthaginians. Members of the three pre-colonial nations, the Sicels, Sicani, and Elymians, not already assimilated into the Greek and Carthaginian communities resided in the interior of the island. The early Carthaginian settlements were primarily trading posts, however as they prospered, they attracted greater numbers of permanent settlers. Over time this Carthaginian expansion would begin to encroach on the territorial boundaries of their Greek neighbors to the east, ultimately leading to centuries of conflict.

Extended Period of Peace

The last new Greek settlement, created on the island, was Akragas (modern-day Agrigento), founded by residents of Gela in 599 BC. By this time Greek settlers had occupied large sections of Sicily's coastlines for more than 140 years. Around 580 BC, colonists from Knidos and Rhodes attempted to establish a last Greek settlement in the far west of Sicily, deep in Phoenician territory, but found the Phoenician settlers resistant to the intrusion. So, the Greeks sailed away north to the islands of Aeolus, between the north coast of Sicily and the Italian mainland. They eventually planted their colony on the largest island (modern-day Lipari), which looked to the Greek city of Knidos as its founding metropolis. Thus, the islands of Aeolus became Greek.

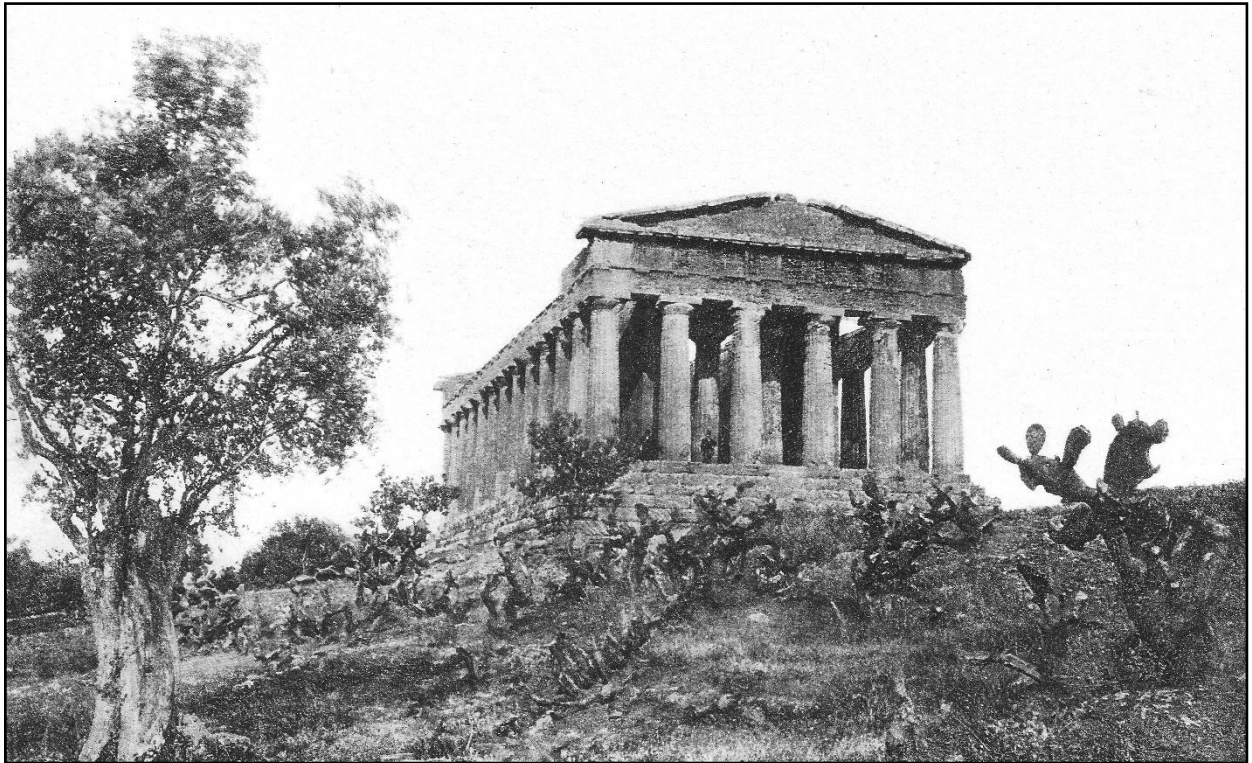
Sicily now experienced a century of relative peace, with no major conflicts between the two main rivals for the island, Sicilian-Greeks and the Carthaginians. The Greeks strengthened their hold on their possessions and extended their borders against the neighboring Sicels and Sicanians. Most of the Sicilian-Greek cities were independent city-states. In time, Siracusae alone had amassed a considerable number of inland territories until it occupied the entire southeast corner of the island, which made it the preeminent economic and military power among the Sicilian-Greeks.

During this long period of peace, the independent Sicels, Sicani, and Elymians kept to their own inland sections of the island. The Elymian people mixed with the Phoenicians of the west. The Greeks intermarried with the Sicels and Sicani to create a new people, the Sicilian-Greeks. In the original establishment of the early Greek colonies, land was distributed in equal shares to the settlers. However, the sharp rise in the prosperity of Sicilian trade led to the development of a wealthy, merchant oligarchy in most Sicilian-Greek cities, which demanded greater share of political power. This led to growing political division and intra-city conflicts between the landowning farmers and the wealthy merchant class.

In addition to internal power struggles, several Sicilian-Greek cities now began to come into greater conflict with one another over rival commercial and territorial expansion ambitions, similar to those in mainland Greek cities. On the Greek mainland, individual city-states were in a constant state of inter-city conflict, due largely to pressures arising from excess populations and limited available food supplies. These battles on the Greek mainland now began to spark conflicts between Sicilian-Greek cities as they chose sides in the faraway wars.

During this extended period of relative peace, the Carthaginians came to succeed Phoenician rule over their extensive colonial network throughout the Mediterranean region, including its possessions in western Sicily. Unlike the peaceful, trade-oriented Phoenicians, the Carthaginians were to build an empire. They were not satisfied to simply maintain their western corner of the island, and cast a covetous eye to the east toward Greek Sicily.

Before continuing with the remarkable story of the 250-year conflict between the Greeks and the Carthaginians for the dominion of Sicily, we must first briefly examine the great events occurring on mainland Greece, which would have a major influence on the course of Sicilian history, particularly on Siracusae in the 5th century BC.



Ruins of the Temple of Concordia in Akragas (Agrigento)

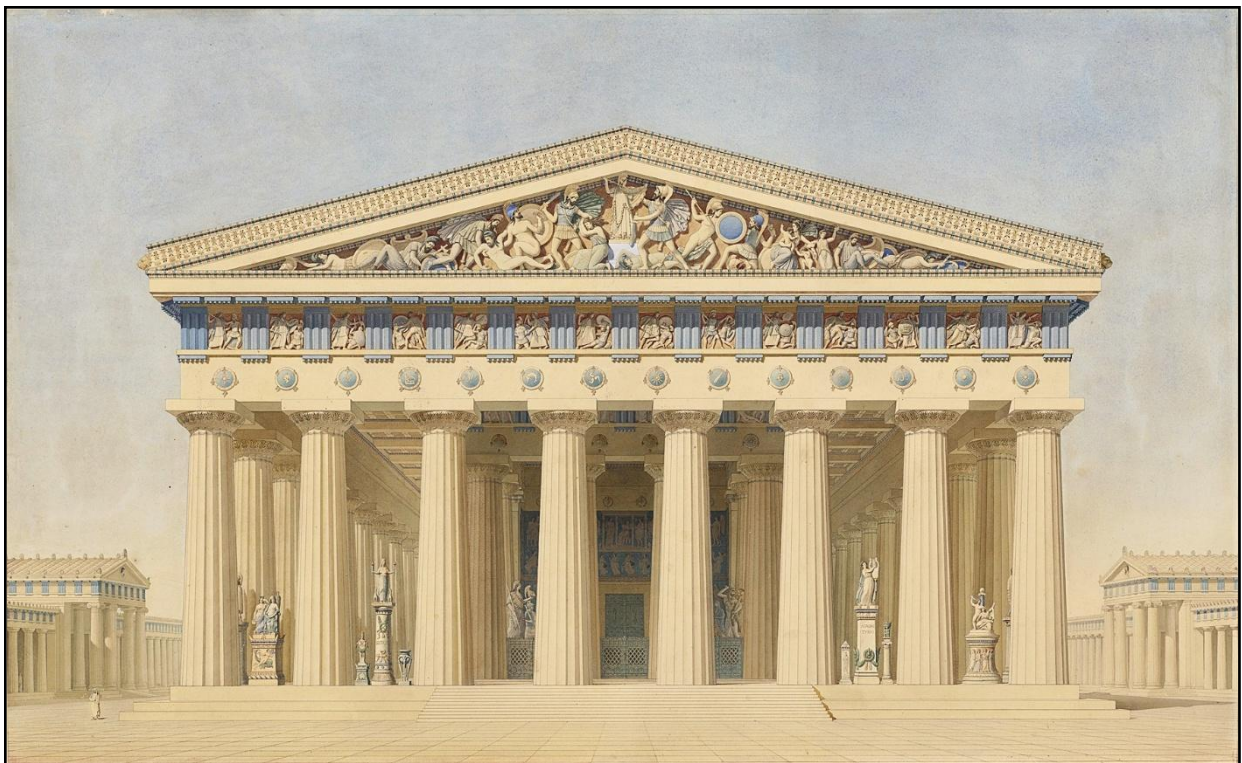


Image of the restored Temple "T" in Selinus (modern-day Selinunte); illustration by Jacques Ignace Hittorff

CHRONOLOGY OF SICILY

Golden Age of the Classical Greek World

Off Island Events

Democratic rule adopted in Athens (circa 510 BC).
First Persian invasion of Greece defeated by the Athenians at the Battle of Marathon (490 BC).
Second Persian invasion of Greece (480 BC); Athens is captured and destroyed. Alliance of Greek cities, led by Sparta and Athens, rout the Persians at the Battle of Salamis (480 BC) and the Battle of Platea (479 BC).
Reconstruction of the great Acropolis of Athens under the leadership of its greatest statesman, Pericles (circa 448 to 405 BC).
End of the sporadic Peloponnesian War on the Greek mainland, which began in 459 BC; Athens defeated by Sparta (404 BC).

500 BC

450 BC

400 BC

On the Island

The army of Siracusae under the tyrant Gelon defeats the Carthaginians invaders at the Battle of Himera (480 BC). Huge spoils of war finance massive building programs in Siracusae and Akragas.

Magnificent new temples to Apollo and Athena are constructed on the island of Ortygia in Siracusae. Around the same time, the great acropolis in Akragas is constructed (circa mid-5th Cent. BC).

Athenian invasion of Siracusae commences in 415 BC. The Siracusans led by the Spartan general Gylippus succeed in routing the Athenian invaders in 412 BC.



Ancient Acropolis of Athens, constructed between 448 – 405 BC; illustration by Roger Payne

Chapter 22 – Sicilian Life at the Turn of the 20th Century

The Man Farthest Down

Booker T. Washington (1856 – 1915) was an American educator, author, and orator. Between 1890 and 1915, Washington was the primary leader of the African-American community in the United States. Born a slave in Virginia, he was freed by U.S. troops during the Civil War. As a young man, he educated himself, working various backbreaking, grueling jobs to fund his college education. In 1881, he was named as the first leader of the new Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, an institution for black higher education. In 1901, Washington wrote his famous autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, and dined with President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House, the first black person to publicly meet a U.S. president on equal terms.

In August 1910, Washington travelled around Europe for several months to conduct a personal study of the poorer working classes, particularly in those regions from which an ever-increasing number of immigrants were coming to the U.S. each year. He visited them in their homes and talked to them where they worked, determined to find out all he could about their present situation, their future prospects, opportunities, hopes, and ambitions. As a man born to slavery in the U.S., who had toiled under harsh conditions for many years, deep in the coal mines of West Virginia, Washington brought a unique understanding of their plight, which he could compare to the human condition of African American workers in the Deep South of the United States. In 1913, he released his detailed observations of various poorer working populations of Europe and shared his conclusions in his book, *The Man Farthest Down*.

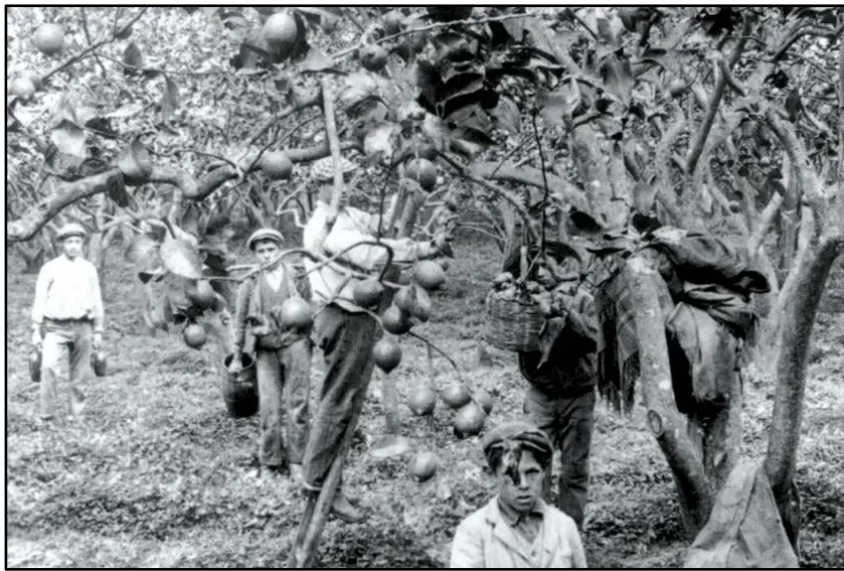
During his travels, Washington spent a considerable amount of time travelling throughout Sicily, meeting and interviewing poor working Sicilians engaged in various occupations across several villages, cities, and regions,. He left us an invaluable, impartial, first-hand record of the living and working conditions of the Sicilian working poor, as well as a glimpse into their hopes and aspirations at the turn of the 20th century, compiled by one of the leading American educators and scholars of his day. All quotations cited in this chapter have been taken from Washington's book.

Duality of Sicilian Life

As the capital of Sicily, Palermo more than any other city reflected the great chasm separating wealthy Sicilian society from the crippling poverty of the island's working poor at the turn of the 20th century. A visitor to Palermo in the late 19th century would undoubtedly have been overwhelmed by the opulence and magnificence of the city and the richness of its surrounding lands. The city boasted some of the finest palaces, parks, theaters, and public cultural works in all of Europe. But this same visitor could not help but be disturbed by the squalor and miserable living conditions to be found less than a mile away from the newer parts of the city, where the crowded masses of the urban poor lived in the filthy streets of the older quarters of the city.

Like many other great cities of Europe, Palermo was emerging from its older civilization into a new modern metropolis. The newer north end of the city, occupied by the wealthy elite classes, possessed grand villas and broad streets, traversed by elegant horse-drawn coaches. Social life revolved around glittering, magnificent parties and balls, which celebrated all the riches and culture of affluent society.

The neighborhoods and lands immediately surrounding the city consisted of miles of flourishing fruit farms, dotted with magnificent villas and palaces, each surrounded by high stone walls, guarded by iron gates and armed men. The villas possessed extensive waterworks, which provided a steady stream of fresh water and kept the area lush and green year-round.



Lemon picking at an orchard in the Conca d'Oro outside Palermo, circa 1906; photo from Library of Congress

The density of the lemon and orange groves was said to be so extensive, and the trees were packed so closely together, that the harsh rays of the Sicilian sun could barely find the ground beneath the nearly impenetrable canopy of their foliage. The fertile orchard lands surrounding Palermo were so rich that they became known as the *Conca d'Oro*, the Shell of Gold. These neighborhoods, and the coastal urban regions of the city, were the exclusive quarters of the wealthy elites of Palermo society.

In stark contrast to this great display of wealth, in the decades following Italian unification, much of Palermo remained in an extremely precarious hygienic and sanitary state. The city had experienced several cholera epidemics within its poorer quarters, primarily due to the lack of clean drinking water. Even after the outbreaks, city leaders failed to provide basic health services for its poorer residents; there remained a lack of adequate sewage facilities, clean drinking water, as well as shortages of decent housing, hospitals, schools, and an efficient road network. These failures to provide the most basic public health infrastructure for a modern city resulted in the needless annual deaths of thousands of its poorer residents from preventable diseases.

In the midst of multiple deadly public health crises, Palermo's city leaders ignored the immediate needs of their common citizens, instead prioritizing the whims of the aristocratic and upper classes, who desired the creation of new venues to host the celebrations of their great wealth and social status. Thus, in the late 19th century, Palermo embarked on large cultural building programs, utilizing the limited available public funds for the construction of, not one but, two of the largest and grandest opera theaters in Europe.

Agricultural Laborers of Sicily

Immediately outside of Palermo and many of the cities of Sicily, the estates of these rich coastal plains of the island were divided and enclosed within high stone walls, *baglios*, completely shutting out any view within. At sparse intervals, built into the walls, were little groups of stone houses in the form of windowless, one-room cells, lit only by an open doorway. These crude dwellings looked like prison cells, except for the sprawling presence of children and gossiping housewives, engaged in sewing or other household tasks, surrounded by goats and chickens. The prison-like appearance of these little stone cells at the farthest edges of the city was enhanced by the soldiers and police officers stationed in sentry boxes every hundred yards or so, along the roads surrounding the city. These were the customs officers stationed to prevent the importation of food and vegetables from the countryside into Palermo, without the payment of a municipal tax levied on every bit of produce imported into the city.

Immediately outside the limits of these guarded customs zones, the land was made up of farmlands with a scattering of straw-thatched huts across the fields. During the harvest season, these huts would be occupied by guards to keep thieves from stealing the crops. At a small farm, Washington introduced himself as an American interested in the agricultural methods in Sicily. The old farmer smiled and mentioned that he had a son working somewhere in America in a place called Chicago, and inquired of Washington whether he might have met him.



Sicilian family of farmers in the fields in front of their thatched-roof hut

The old farmer graciously invited Washington to share his meager meal of some black bread and tomatoes, and explained the operations of his farm. He was a tenant farmer who leased around two acres of land, where he raised tomatoes as his principal crop. The farmer paid an annual rent of about \$15 per acre, which included irrigation rights, and he worked the farm with several family members. He admitted that it was very difficult to make a dependable living anywhere in Sicily, but the people near Palermo were much better off than folks in other parts of the island.

When asked what he would do if his son were to return from America with a bag full of money, the old man's face lit up, and he said he would buy some land and have a little home of his own. In his travels through Sicily, Washington posed this same question to nearly every Sicilian peasant farmer he encountered. Every time the answer was always the same; the masses in Sicily all dreamed of one day working their own small plot of land.

Washington next boarded a train bound for Catania, which passed through the wild interior regions of the island, a bare mountainous zone with virtually no roads that appeared nearly uninhabited. He would occasionally spy a mule train winding its way up a rocky trail, carrying water and provisions to some lonely inland village or sulfur mining operation. He learned that in Sicily, less than 10% of the farm working class lived in the country, close to the fields. Nearly all peasants preferred the security of living together in villages, many miles from the fields where they labored. Most Sicilian farm workers walked great distances every day to work the fields and spent a large part of the year away from home, camped in flimsy little straw-thatched shelters in the fields, or among a nest of rocks in the open.

Most rural farm workers were forced to live off the land; their diet typically consisted of a piece of black bread and perhaps some soup made of green herbs of some kind. In the most remote parts of Sicily, the peasant people were forced to live on any sort of green vegetation they could find in the fields, frequently eating it raw, like cattle. In his travels, Washington heard the case of a local woman who was forced to support herself on the milk from a nearby herd of goats, after her husband had been sent to prison. Her daily earnings amounted to around \$.12 per day, not enough to feed herself and her four children. She picked up all sorts of green stuff found growing on rocks, carrying it home in her apron at night to fill their hungry mouths.



Sicilian peasant man and old woman; photo by Giuseppe Bruno, circa 1889

One of the principal staples of the diet of poor Sicilians living in the desolate interior regions was the fruit of a cactus plant, called the Indian Fig, which grows wild in all parts of the island. The fruit, about the size of a large plum, is contained within a tough leathery skin, and is soft and mushy with a sweetish taste. In his book Washington remarked about the desperation of these poor wretches of the Sicilian interior and the lengths they would go to put food in their stomachs.

Washington concluded that the dire plight of the Sicilian farm workers was due to the great majority of land being held by a small class of large landowners:

“who have allowed the ignorant and helpless peasants to be crushed by a system of overseers and middlemen as vicious and oppressive as that which existed in many parts of the Southern States during the days of slavery.”

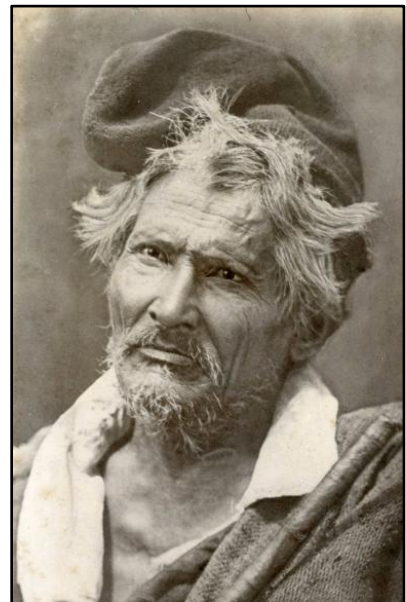
This class of middlemen, the *gabelloto* overseers, appeared to be the only group getting rich off the agricultural land in Sicily. Washington described a typical commercial transaction between the *gabelloti* and the large landowners. A *gabelloto* would lease a large land estate of around 2,500 acres for a term of six to nine years for around \$12,000. He might work a small piece of the land, but the overwhelming share of the estate would be subleased to poor Sicilian farmers.

Some parts of the land were typically subleased to a class of farmers, known as “*cash renters*”. This group likely possessed some small amount of capital, some livestock, and equipment, but could not afford a direct lease with the landowner for a large estate. In a good season, the cash renter could make enough from the sale of his crops to feed his family and perhaps save some money. In a bad season, a cash renter could lose his stock and his life savings, forcing him to borrow money from the overseer under usurious terms to purchase seed to plant the next year’s crop. In most cases, these unfortunate farmers who failed to pay off their debts to the *gabelloti* fell into the largest, most unfortunate class of farm workers, the “*share cropper*”.

This lower, more destitute class of Sicilian agricultural worker possessed no cash, livestock, or seed, and had to beg the *gabelloti* for the privilege of laboring on a small plot on his leased farm estate. The *gabelloto* would advance a small loan to the poor sharecropper to cover the purchase of seed and crude farm implements, again under usurious terms, not likely to ever be fully repaid. The sharecropper, in theory, was supposed to receive half the crop output of his tiny plot, with the other half paid to the overseer at harvest time. However, on settlement day, the *gabelloto* typically subtracted double or triple the amount of seed advanced in the spring, along with a fee for guarding the field from thieves, another fee for the grinding and storage of the wheat in his mill, and lastly for the interest accrued on the loan during that season. Once the *gabelloto* had taken his full cut, the poor Sicilian share cropper, “*who watered the soil with his sweat, who has not slept more than two hours a night during harvest time, and that too, in the open field, is happy if he receives as much as a third or a quarter of the grain he has harvested.*”

This system of exploitation was often repeated year after year, with the poor sharecroppers barely able to feed their starving families and rarely able to fully repay their debts from the previous growing season. In the end many of these trapped agricultural workers sank further down into the ranks of the Sicilian class of poverty, the day laborer. The day laborers could be found all over Sicily, tramping along the roads with sacks slung across their backs, carrying all their possessions. In his book, Washington went on to describe one such encounter with this most desperate class of beggars.

“I had a chance to look in his face and found that he was not the usual sort. He did not have the whine of the sturdy beggars I was accustomed to meet, particularly in England. He was haggard and worn; hardship and hunger had humbled him, and there was a beaten look in his eyes, but suffering seemed to have lent a sort of nobility to the old man’s face.”



Old man of Sicily; photo by Giuseppe Bruno, circa 1889

Washington inquired about the man's life and learned that he had been a farm laborer for his entire life. While the man had the look of intelligence, he could neither read nor write. He never married and lacked a family of any sort. Three years earlier, the old man became too old and sick to work on the farm. Since that time, he roamed the country begging and living off the charity of people who were nearly as poor as he was.

In his final analysis, comparing the plight of the Sicilian agricultural worker to the working and living conditions of African-Americans back home, Booker T. Washington concluded the following:

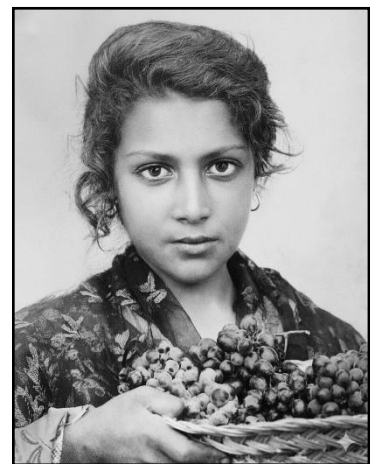
"The Negro is not the man farthest down. The condition of the colored farmer in the most backwards part of the Southern States in America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, is incomparably better than the condition and opportunities of the agricultural population in Sicily."

"In Sicily a few capitalists and descendants of the old feudal lords own practically all the soil and, under the crude and expensive system of agriculture which they employ, there is not enough land to employ the surplus population. The result is that the farm laborers are competing for the privilege of working the land. As agriculture goes down and the land produces less, the population increases and rents go up. Thus, between the upper and nether millstone the farmer is crushed."

Lives of Poor Women in Sicily

In late September 1910, Booker T. Washington travelled by train to the eastern port city of Catania. Above the city to the northwest loomed the great bulk of Mount Etna. The volcano's gentle slopes were covered with gardens and vineyards, which had been terraced quite far up the mountain. The wide fertile valley outside Catania descends from the volcano to the sea, appearing like a single vast vineyard. Having arrived in time for the wine season, Washington was present for all the interesting sights and activities.

At that time of year, the fields around Etna were overrun by multitudes of barefoot girls and women who rapidly stripped the vines of the fruit, piling the clusters into deep wicker baskets. Once filled, the girls lifted the baskets onto their heads and shoulders and carried them in a sort of procession line to the wine press room, where the grapes were dumped in a huge, round, shallow vat. Here, four or five men in stocking feet with trousers rolled to the knees trampled the grapes by foot, singing quaint, melancholy songs as they worked. Unlike the men, the women workers did not laugh or sing as they performed the most menial jobs. They worked under the gaze of a harsh overseer who directed them with a sharp switch that he carried in his hand. Washington remarked that the women moved silently with a monotonous precision, which reminded him of the labor gangs back home.



Portrait of a Sicilian Girl with a Bunch of Grapes, 1914



Sicilian girl carries water from a fountain in Taormina, circa 1900

Once or twice per year, during the olive and grape harvest seasons, these girls and women were brought down from their mountain villages to share the labors with the men who worked the fields. For these brief periods these country women would be organized into a work detail by an overseer. They would often wait for hours at the vineyard while the overseer conducted labor negotiations for their services with the vineyard owner. This brief period of employment during the harvest season would likely be the only opportunity for these country women to ever leave their villages and catch a glimpse of the outside world. For the balance of the year, they were rarely ever allowed to venture beyond the street or village where they lived. Throughout his travels across the island, Washington took note of the lives of women of the agricultural classes, living in rural villages.

In one such village, he described low one-story stone buildings, laid out in rows along a dirt street. In front of one such structure stood a woman holding a naked child, with another half-naked child beside her holding her shirt. Through the open door, he could see the single room in which the family lived. In the back of the room was a stall for the livestock. During the day, the women and children spent most of their time in the dirty, crowded streets with the pigs and chickens, while the men were nearly all engaged far away in the fields at work, and in many cases, returned home but once a month.

Trapped within these kinds of squalid living conditions, Sicilian women rarely worked outside their homes. Their daily lives revolved around the care of their children and any livestock maintained within their crude homes. Sicilian women were looked upon as inferior creatures, to be guarded like a form of property, and bound like prisoners within their own homes and villages. They were surrounded by a wall of ignorance, which shut them away from any knowledge of or contact with the outside world.



Sicilian mother and children in their one room stone shack, circa 1900

Here they lived in a near state of mental and moral slavery under the control of their husbands, and often under the dominion of ignorant, vicious village priests. This lowly status of the Sicilian woman had its roots in ancient Greek and medieval Saracen culture. Not surprisingly, literacy among women in these Sicilian country villages was virtually non-existent.

Urban Life of Skilled Workers

In his book, Washington described walking through the poorer quarters of the city of Catania. Tucked away in the winding narrow streets, one could find all manner of products for sale in the busy neighborhoods, where the small artisans lived and worked. The entire neighborhood was a hive of activity, where skilled workmen made everything by hand, which the rest of the industrialized world had long since made using machines.



Family of Sicilian cobbler in Taormina; photo by Giorgio Sommer, 1895 - 1905

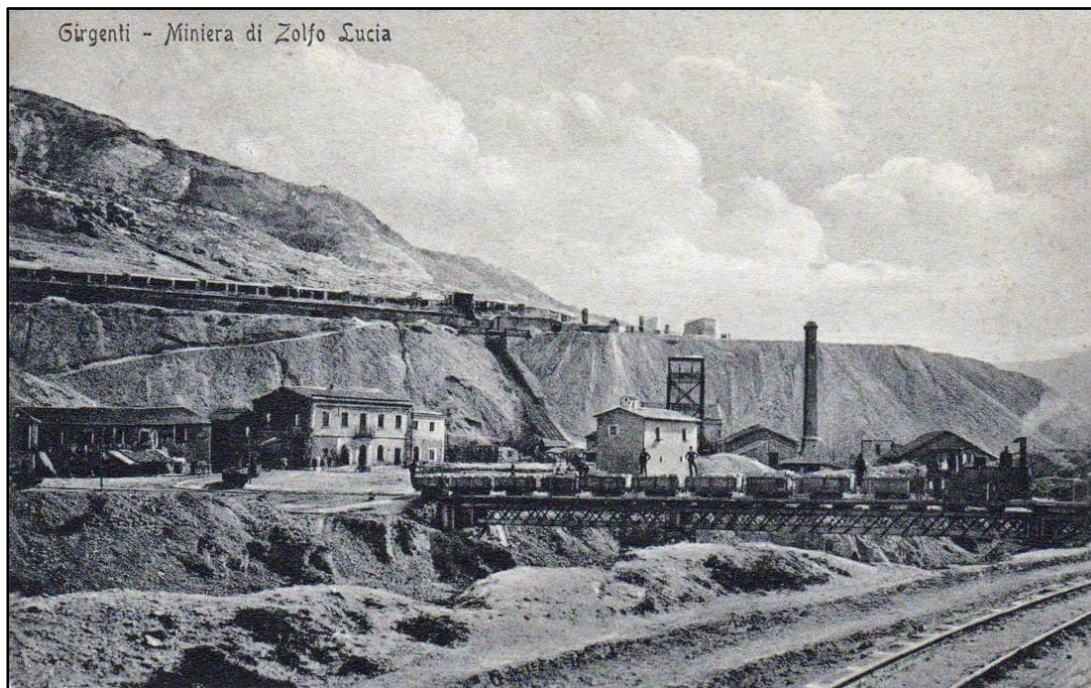
At one table, a man made macaroni by mixing water and flour in a box and forcing the doughy paste through a press, converting it to hollow tubes. At another doorway, an apothecary mixed all manner of herbs and sweet-smelling ingredients into medicines that he sold in small bottles. Another man constructed mandolins in a one-room workshop, which doubled as home for his family of five. The skilled work was performed by the boys, while a little girl, standing nearby, acted as a handy helper. The ceiling inside the workshop was hung with finished instruments, while the pavement outside was filled with instruments in various stages of completion. At one small plant, two men and three small boys, ages eight to twelve, mixed clay, forming it into octagonal-shaped tiles to be dried in the sun. In another instance, Washington stopped to watch a small boy of eight or nine years working beside his father and several other men engaged in constructing a boat.

These various scenes of skilled labor, performed by children, filled Washington with a dual sense of pity and admiration, and provided a historical sense of how these trades were carried out before the extensive use of machinery. Since the work was performed either in the house or in an adjoining workshop, the transfer of practiced trade skills from father to sons was a natural evolution. Thus, the male children were almost literally born into the trades of their fathers. Children saw their fathers and mothers hard at work from the time that they were born, providing a traditional industrial education for Sicilian children and preparing them for life.

Sulfur Miners of Sicily

Most rural latifundia farm estates throughout the island's interior were devoted to the production of wheat and cereal grains, which required only several months per year of agricultural labor, mostly during planting in early spring and at the fall harvest, but Sicilian families needed to eat year-round. The only major industry providing employment in much of the interior regions of Sicily was sulfur mining. By the end of the 19th century, there were more than 700 active mines in Sicily, employing a workforce of more than 30,000, under the most inhumane conditions.

Mining profits had been high during the first half of the 1800s, but began to decline following Italian unification due to increased foreign competition, which utilized more advanced technology to efficiently extract large ore deposits at lower costs than the Sicilian mines, which relied exclusively on manual labor. Even as profits declined in the latter half of the 1800s, output continued to soar, reaching a high of 39,000 workers and approximately 40,000 tons of sulfur ore extracted in 1901.



Lucia Sulfur Mine in Girgenti (Agrigento), Sicily

Outside of Sicily, the Italian government owned all sub-surface mineral rights, so various mining operations could be regulated and efficiently managed. In Sicily, each landowner held complete ownership rights to the land, including all mineral rights. Similar to the operations of the *latifundia*, the landowners would lease the mining rights out to *gabelloto* mining bosses for between 20% to 40% of the mining profits, which was another major factor in the poor profitability of Sicilian sulfur mining operations.

Similar to the use of primitive farming methods used on the *latifundia* estates, the abundance of cheap Sicilian labor practically ensured that sulfur mining operations would rely on manual ore extraction techniques. Inside the mines, digging was done by hand by adult men, *picconieros*, who were compensated based on the weight of sulfur ore they each extracted. However, the mining labor contracts were routinely organized by the local Mafia, which took a cut from each worker's meager pay. To maximize their output, these miners would employ young boys, "*Carusi*" (Sicilian word for children), to haul out the mined ore, carried out in sacks or baskets on their backs. These young boys carried loads of ore weighing 45 – 65 pounds during working shifts of up to 10 hours per day. A government commission tried to regulate child labor conditions, but Sicilian mine owners intervened and redrafted the first labor laws in 1879, allowing children as young as ten years old to work in the mines.

Impoverished families, unable to feed their children, would often resort to selling young boys, as indentured servants, to the miners under a system called “*soccorso morto*” (“*rescue of the dead*”). This financial arrangement involved an advance payment to the child’s parents, typically between 100 and 150 lire (approximately \$10 to \$20), and a later installment payment, which was rarely ever paid. This payment bound the children to a state of perpetual servitude, since the debt was almost never fully settled, and effectively made the children the property of the miners.



Carusi (children) at the mine entrance; engraving by E. Ximene, 1894

The young boys earned only a few cents per day, which ensured that it would be nearly impossible for the boys or their parents to ever redeem their debt and purchase their freedom. While highly illegal, the practice was widely tolerated, because of Mafia protection, which ensured that government enforcement of child labor laws remained virtually nonexistent. Once in the mines, the boys fell prey to all forms of physical and sexual abuse. Children who attempted to flee the horrors of the mines often did so at the risk of their lives. According to Washington:

“The cruelties to which the child slaves have been subjected, as related by those who have studied them, are as bad as anything ever reported of the cruelties of Negro slavery.”

“These boy slaves were frequently beaten and pinched, in order to wring from their overburdened bodies, the last drop of strength they had in them. When the beatings did not suffice, it was their custom to singe the calves of their legs with lanterns to put them again on their feet. If they sought to escape from slavery in flight, they were captured and beaten, sometimes even killed.”



Washington's book reported some child labor statistics of the period, which indicated a significant increase in child labor in the mines between 1880 and 1898. As of 1880, there were reported 2,419 children working in Sicilian sulfur mines, with the youngest around seven to eight years old. By 1898 that number had grown to around 7,032 children under the age of fifteen. After repeated efforts to do so, it was not until 1905 that the Italian government succeeded in passing child labor laws, which restricted the minimum age for work in the mines to fifteen years.

An old man and a caruso hauling loads of ore out of a Sicilian sulfur mine

The working conditions in the mines were inhumane, with workers routinely subjected to vicious punishments, often beaten, starved, and forced to work up to 16 hours a day. Average temperatures exceeded 100 degrees with humidity of 100%, forcing men and children to work naked and barefoot. The men routinely carried loads up to 200 pounds. The work of extracting sulfur ore was extraordinarily dangerous, and many miners were severely injured or killed by mine shaft collapses, fires, and gas explosions.



Sicilian mine workers moved sulfur ore inside the narrow mines by use of hand carts

Inadequate nutrition likely contributed to overall poor health and vulnerability to various deadly diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and malaria. Miners were constantly exposed to hydrogen sulfide gas and dust, leading to frequent respiratory problems, lung diseases like silicosis, black lung, and cancer. For miners who began working at age fifteen years, the life expectancy was around 49 years, nearly a full decade less than that of agricultural workers on the surface.

The lives of these miners were even more perilous outside the mines, where the men were housed in crowded hovels, often burrowed into the rocks. These mining camps were often lawless, Mafia-controlled hell holes that had the highest murder rates in all Italy. The camps were breeding grounds for all forms of criminal activities, including homicide, revenge violence, theft, sexual abuse, and child prostitution.



Sulfur miners and the Carusi front of their living quarters



Transport of processed sulfur by mule trains

The sulfur mining industry inflicted a much greater suffering upon the people, which extended far beyond the horrific abuses within the mining communities. The Sicilian method of extracting sulfur was to heat the ore in large kiln furnaces, great pots half buried in the earth, allowing the waste materials to melt and run off, leaving behind the refined sulfur. This process remained unchanged on the island since ancient times. The toxic emissions and pollutants released by this smelting process killed virtually all plant life for miles.

*Desolate landscape
surrounding the
sulfur mines of
Agrigento; photo by
Eugen Poppel, 1927*



The deadly runoff from the smelting process found its way into the groundwater, poisoning drinking wells and sharply reducing crop yields. Over time, the lands surrounding sulfur mining regions became infertile. As the farm workers were forced to abandon these regions, the lands devolved into uninhabited wastelands, devoid of life, which Washington described as follows:

“For many miles in every direction, the vegetation has been blasted by the poisonous smoke and vapors from the smelters, and the whole country has a blotched and scrofulous appearance which is depressing to look upon, particularly when one considers the amount of misery and the number of human lives it has cost to create this condition. I have never in my life seen any place that seemed to come so near meeting the description of the ‘abomination of desolation’ referred to in the Bible.”

“I am not prepared just now to say to what extent I believe in a physical hell in the next world, but a sulfur mine in Sicily is about the nearest thing to hell that I expect to see in this life. I could not picture an existence more miserable than the slow torture of this crushing labor in the hot, poisonous air of these sulfur mines.”

Observations of the Catholic Church

In his book, Washington commented on the all-pervading influence of the Church. In every city and town, the clanging of church bells could be heard. Everywhere, built into the buildings on virtually every street corner, and in all public spaces, were niches containing statues of the Virgin Mary. Sicily was one of the first lands where Christianity took root during ancient times, having hosted St. Paul, who preached and held mass in Siracusa for several days, before continuing his travels to Rome, where he was martyred. Thus, Sicily inherited the many religious traditions and splendid churches of the Roman Catholic faith over nearly two thousand years.

The Catholic Church exerted a great influence on the daily lives of Sicilians. At that time there were 104 days each year that the Church deemed sacred, and Sicilians expended vast sums of money on processions and other religious celebrations in honor of the local saints. This religious extravagance was a frequent source of complaint by reformers, who advocated for utilizing more of those sizable Church donations to improve education and living conditions within communities all across the island.

All this religious activity appeared not to have had any practical connection to influencing the traditional moral lives of the people. It was said that the island of Sicily in the early 20th century supported nearly ten times the number of churches and clergy members as the entire nation of Germany, yet crime statistics of the period showed that the island suffered from more than eleven times as many murders and violent crimes as Germany. Washington made no suggested comparisons between religious life in Sicily and Germany, nor did he blame the Catholic Church for the heightened crime on the island. However, Washington did offer his opinion regarding the Church's possible responsibility for the troubled conditions of the Sicilian people, as follows:

"If the Catholic Church is in any way to blame for the existing conditions in Sicily it seems to me it is the fact that during the long period of years in which the education of the people has been wholly in its hands, the Church has held fast to the old medieval notion that education was only for the few, and for that reason has done little to raise the standard of intelligence among the masses. At this time (1910) the people of Sicily were not much better off, as far as education, than the Negro slaves at the time of emancipation."

The creation of the nation of Italy in 1860 closely coincided with the abolition of slavery in America in 1865. At that time, illiteracy rates among African-Americans were roughly equivalent to those of the Sicilian population, each at around 90%. However, the efforts to educate former slaves in the U.S. were far more effective than Italian programs to improve Sicilian education. By 1900, illiteracy rates of African-Americans in the U.S. had declined sharply to around 44.5%, while the Sicilian illiteracy rate remained around 70%. As a result of this forced ignorance among the Sicilian masses, not more than around 3.6% of the island's population was afforded the right to vote.

Taxes on the Poor

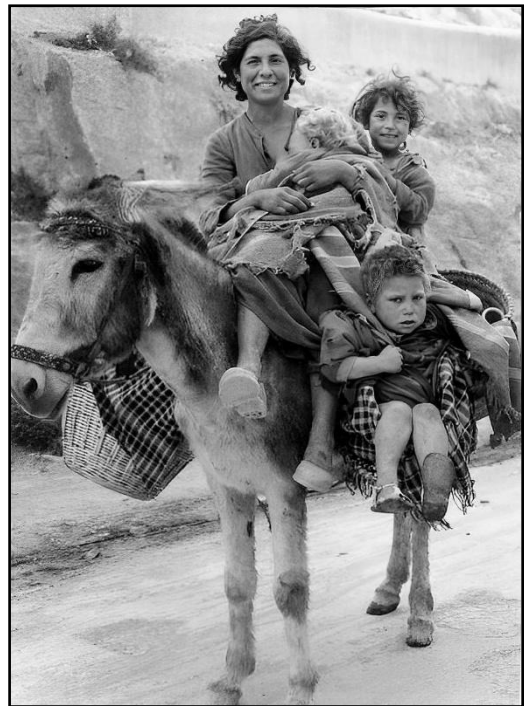
The great masses of the Sicilian people were disenfranchised, and denied representation in the local, regional, and national governments. As such, they had no voice in the government and no legal recourse to the discriminatory tax policies that specifically targeted their meager income and their ability to feed and support their families. Around the turn of the 20th century, the Socialist Party in Italy estimated that the average laboring man in Sicily paid around 54% of his meager annual earnings to the Italian state in the form of a variety of taxes, as compared to about 34% paid by the professional classes. The landed elite classes paid an estimated 12% in taxes on their considerable income derived from land rents and investments. It was said at that time that the nation of Italy had employed every possible form of taxation on the poor, that had ever been invented.



Ancient stone mill used for grinding Sicilian grain into flour

Among the most harmful taxes impacting the poor in Sicily were the municipal taxes on all kinds of foodstuffs, which absorbed between 20 and 30% of the income of every working family. The *macinato* tax on the grinding of wheat to flour taxed the daily bread of every Sicilian family. This tax amounted to a pittance paid by the wealthy classes, but resulted in great financial hardship and hunger among the poorest populations. It was the custom of the national and municipal governments to tax the Sicilian people, not on the basis of income or the ability to pay, but rather in a grossly inequitable manner that exploited the dire necessities of life of the working poor.

Another discriminatory tax on the poor was levied on donkeys, the sole means of transportation for poor Sicilians and an indispensable beast of burden required to work the farms. While the poor farmer was required to pay a tax for his humble donkey, the finely saddled horses, filling the stables, and pulling the elegant coaches of the landed elite, remained free from taxation. Fish was the cheapest, most abundant food available to poor city-dwelling Sicilians. Nevertheless, cities erected extensive fences and netting at great cost to prevent the poor from fishing the shores of coastal cities. These barriers were heavily guarded by an expensive army of municipal tax officials and police to collect a miserable little tax on another food staple and necessity of the poor. The salt monopoly held by the national government represented another way in which the Italian Parliament extracted yet another repressive tax on the poor working masses, the least able to pay. In order to protect its salt monopoly, the government in Rome employed guards along the entire sea coast to prevent the poor from “stealing” buckets of seawater to make their own salt.



Sicilian mother carries her children on the family's donkey

These kinds of repressive and deeply discriminatory forms of taxation on the basic necessities of life reinforced the moral convictions held by the Sicilian people that all agents of the government were enemies of the people, and were not to be trusted or obeyed. Early Sicilian immigrants to the United States carried these same attitudes of deep distrust of police and government authority with them. Once in the U.S., the great masses of Sicilian and Italian immigrants refused to confide in or cooperate with the police, which made them easy prey to the same exploitive Mafia organized criminal elements that followed them to the New World.

Mafia in Sicilian Daily Life

One of the most commonly held prejudicial beliefs held by northern Italians, and many outside Italy, about Sicilians was that they were an inherently violent and immoral people, and that they live by their own perverted moral code, which made them a menace to civilized society and public order. In spite of some attempts to improve the lives of Sicilians, the Italian government repeatedly failed to gain the confidence, respect, and cooperation of the Sicilian people. There was a growing feeling that the government, in league with wealthy landowners, was complicit in a corrupt system that denied the Sicilian laborer an adequate living wage for his crushing labors, and which forced him to steal to feed his family. Feeling trapped by a wicked system, rigged to exploit them, the Sicilian people developed their own diverse sense of morality regarding crime and justice. Stealing from the wealthy to feed one's family was not seen as a crime, but rather as an honorable and eminently justified response to resist oppression.

Because they so greatly despised and distrusted the government, the police, and the courts, the Sicilian people were left with only one manner in which to settle their disputes, the old-fashioned way, by use of private violence against those who had wronged them. As a consequence, small towns were often divided by tribal and family feuds, with outlaw gangs used by the people both for offensive and defensive purposes.

From these conditions of lawlessness and violence sprang the roots of the modern Sicilian Mafia in the late 1800s. In this lawless environment, agricultural fields needed to be defended by high stone walls, iron gates, and sentries posted at harvest time. Over time, these field guards began to form associations under leaders, who ruled over them like tribal chiefs. Landowners wishing to protect their crops were forced to hire these Mafia gangs. The physical guarding of the fields over time evolved into the practice of the Mafia groups demanding payment of "protection money" either to guard the fields or to avoid their threatened intentional destruction.

The Mafia was a largely Western Sicilian phenomenon. There was little Mafia activity in the eastern half of Sicily. By contrast, in the West, the estates tended to be smaller and thus did not require the round-the-clock attention of a guardian. Thus, it was cheaper for these estates to contract their protection to a mafioso rather than employ full-time guards. A mafioso in these regions could protect multiple small estates at once. The landowners in this region were also frequently absent due to business and social affairs and could not watch over their properties.

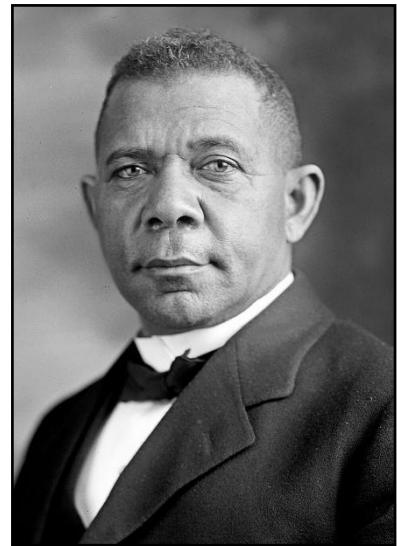
As a result, the early Mafia became deeply involved with the owners of citrus groves and cattle ranches, as these types of agricultural industries were particularly vulnerable to thieves and vandals and required constant protection. Citrus plantations had a fragile production system that made them particularly vulnerable to sabotage. Likewise, cattle were very easy to steal.

The Mafia, through its close connections to the criminal underworld, was also more effective than the police in investigating crimes and punishing criminals. By making itself both feared and useful in the community, the Sicilian Mafia began to involve itself in a wide range of activities in most communities. Thus, the old Mafia, which had historically been comprised of various outlaw brigand gangs, hiding in the interior, in time gained standing and respect in most communities throughout Sicily by exploiting the people's hatred of the government and class oppression.

Final Impressions of the Sicilian People

After weeks of traveling around the island and meeting Sicilians from all working classes and professions, Booker T. Washington summarized his unbiased personal observations of the Sicilian people in his book, *The Man Farthest Down*, with the following statements:

“I went to Italy with the notion that Sicilians were a race of brigands, a sullen and irritable people who were disposed at any moment to be swept off their feet by violent and murderous passions. I came away with the feeling that, whatever might be the faults of the masses of the people, they were, at the very least, more sinned against than sinning, and that they deserve the sympathy rather than the condemnation of the world.”



Booker T. Washington (1856 – 1914),
photo from 1905

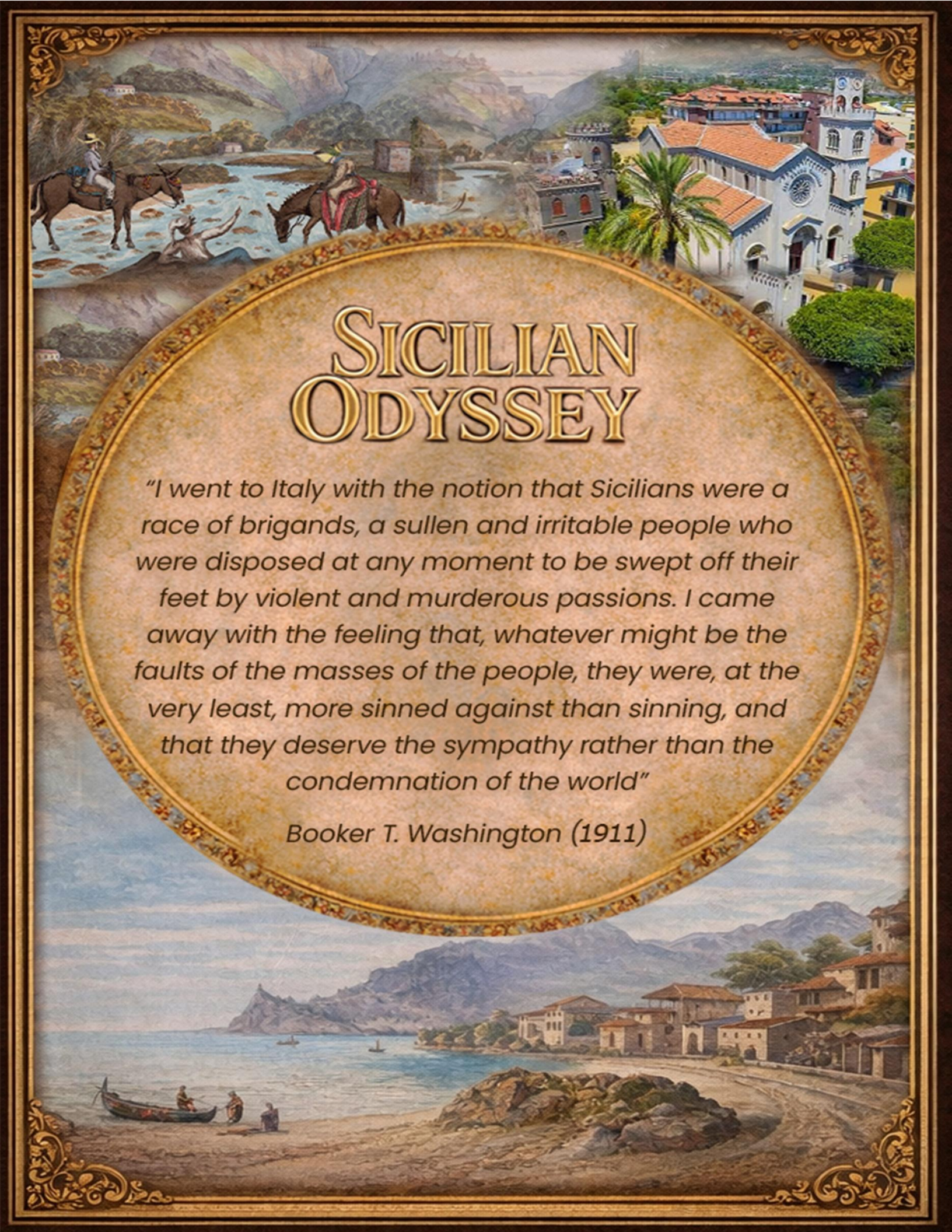
“I was never treated more kindly in my whole life than the day when, coming in as a stranger, without an introduction of any kind, I ventured to visit the region which has the reputation of being the most wicked, and is certainly the most unfortunate, in Europe. I mean the region around and north of Girgenti (Agrigento), which is the seat at once of the sulfur mines and the Mafia. I had read and heard so much of murders of the Mafia in Sicily, that for a long time I had a horror of the name Sicilians; but when I came in contact with them, before I knew it, I found myself trusting them absolutely to such an extent that I willingly followed them into the bowels of the earth. Every Sicilian with whom I came in contact in the sulfur mine treated me in the most kindly manner, and I came away from their country having the highest respect for them.”



The SS Batavia passenger liner in 1913 carrying 2,584 immigrants to Ellis Island, a record for the greatest number of passengers to arrive at NYC at one time



Mulberry Street, along which New York City's Little Italy is centered, circa 1900; by Detroit Publishing Co, available from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division



SICILIAN ODYSSEY

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Booker T. Washington (1911)