

# SICILY'S RICH HERITAGE

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*Crossroads, Sicily, photo, Cetta Kenney*

To the ancients the Mediterranean Sea was literally “the middle of the earth,” and in the middle of the Mediterranean lies the island of Sicily, the crossroads of history. Such a natural intersection of many cultures and civilizations provides a wealth of sacred spaces spanning millennia.

Mycenaean, Minoan, Phoenician and Carthaginian had settled among the indigenous peoples of the island for centuries before the Greeks founded their first permanent settlement in Sicily c.735 BCE. Along with southern Italy, Sicily became part of “Magna Graecia,” – “Greater Greece,” a region which eventually became home to more Greeks than Greece itself. The Sicilian city of Siracusa (Syracuse) eventually came to rival Athens in power and prestige.

Sicily was home to such famous Greeks as Archimedes and Aeschylus as well as the mythological Daedalus and Persephone. So many of the adventures in Homer’s *Odyssey* were set in Sicily that it was described as “a journey around Sicily.” In that epic poem the island of Aeolus is actually Stromboli and Scylla and Charybdis personify the treacherous Straits of Messina. The Sirens lurked on one of the islands north

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of Sicily, as did Circe and Calypso on islands nearby. Three little islands north of Catania are still called the Cyclops. Sicily was also the setting for the utopian state Plato envisaged in *The Republic*.

As with many of the great Greek myths, some of the greatest Greek temples and amphitheatres – two forms of sacred buildings – are Sicilian. The area known as “The Valley of the Temples” in Agrigento is one of the most important archeological sites in the world and a UNESCO world heritage site. This series of seven temples erected during the 5th century BCE were set ablaze by the Carthaginians in 406 BCE, with evidence of the burning still visible on some walls. Three centuries later the Romans restored the buildings, respecting their original classic Doric style. The Temple of Zeus, one of the largest in the ancient world, had a sacrificial altar large enough so that 100 oxen could be sacrificed at one time. The Temple of Concord, one of the best-preserved temples from antiquity, provides an insight into the elegant and majestic symmetry of the other buildings. It has survived intact due to its transformation into a church in the 6th century CE.

Ancient Greek drama was originally performed as part of religious ceremonies. The great classical tragedies are still performed in the amphitheatre at Segesta. Aeschylus’s *The Persians* was first performed in Siragusa’s Teatro Greco – one of the most impressive theatres to survive from antiquity and still in use. Taormina’s stunning amphitheatre on a height overlooking the sea and Mt. Etna retains its perfect acoustics and is now used for a variety of performance arts as well as an international film festival.

Greek culture continued in Sicily long after the Romans conquered the island and made it the first Roman province in 227 BCE. The new rulers, less refined, transformed the Greek theatres to accommodate gladiatorial combats and fights with wild animals. However, the Romans left scant trace of unique sacred spaces because they simply adopted the gods and mythology of Greece under new Latin names.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Vandals and then the Ostrogoths controlled Sicily for less than a century, ending with conquest by the Byzantines in 535 CE. Syracuse had already

*Temple of Concord, Valley of the Temples, Agrigento, photo, Gloria Callaci*



harbored a small Christian community when St. Paul preached there in 61 CE. Now Byzantine Christianity prevailed in Sicily and the Sicilian church was placed under the patriarch of Constantinople in 751. The few centuries of Byzantine rule were peaceful and prosperous with Byzantine cultural influence lasting well into the Arab and Norman eras.

Jewish temples had been founded in the port cities of Palermo, Messina and Syracuse about the same time that the first Christian churches were established.

Arab armies had advanced by the middle of the 7th century, was subject to frequent coastal raids by “Moors” or “Saracens.” By 858 the Arabs had conquered most of the island. In 878, with the fall of Siracusa, 1,500 years of Greek cultural dominance came to an end.

The former Greek capital was plundered and the Arabs established their capital at Palermo (Bal’harm), which became the city from which the Emir of Sicily ruled. In 973 an eminent Arab traveler described Palermo as



*Amphitheatre, Taormina; photo, Cetta Kenney*

Although always a minority, the Jews were part of the island's unique multicultural mosaic and lived undisturbed under successive regimes until the banishment of Jews from Spanish territories in 1492.

Muslim interest in Sicily began with the first military expedition against the island only 20 years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. Sicily, so near to North Africa, where Muslim

“the city of 300 mosques.” In keeping with Koranic principles the religions of Jews and Christians, as “People of the Book,” were generally respected, although these groups were highly taxed and Muslims had far greater civil rights. The Muslims converted a number of churches to mosques, frequently with the help of Byzantine craftsmen, which the later Norman rulers often rebuilt as churches.



On the present site of Palermo Cathedral once stood Sicily's largest mosque, which had been preceded by a Paleo-Christian basilica. On one of the columns which flank the cathedral's main entrance can still be seen verses from the Koran. The column itself once supported the roof of a Roman temple. Palermo's Palatine Chapel is a magnificent showcase of Arab-Norman art. Its brilliant Byzantine mosaics forming an illustrated Bible are only rivaled by those in Ravenna and Istanbul. This eclectic architectural tradition was continued in modern times when the Archdiocese of Palermo gave a former church to the city's Muslim community for use as a mosque.

During the Crusades groups of Norman knights "discovered" and came to covet Southern Italy and Sicily. The Sicilian Muslims were enduring internal strife between Arabs (Sunnis) and Berbers (Shiites), fighting for dominance of the island throughout the 10th century. With the Arab emirate divided, the Normans invaded in 1061 – five years before their jealous countryman, William, conquered England to secure a realm of his own. Within 30 years the Normans had fought to

control of all of Sicily. The "Golden Age" of multicultural and multi-faith Sicily was to last throughout the Norman era (c.1070 – 1250).

In the bigoted medieval world Norman Sicily stood as an example of tolerance and enlightenment.

The Normans retained the efficient administration system of the Muslims and built upon the Arabs' rich intellectual, agricultural and scientific legacy. During the reign of the remarkable Roger II (1130--1154), Sicily became a unique center of both eastern and western scholars. So many Byzantines and Muslims served at Roger's court that he was called "a baptized sultan". Official documents were published in Greek, Latin, Arabic and sometimes Hebrew and Norman French. Palermo emerged as one of the wealthiest capitals of Europe, a city whose revenues exceeded that of the entire Norman kingdom of England.

Cultural coexistence is most evident in the architecture of Norman Sicily. Latin basilica buildings are capped by Greek cupolas and decorated on the interior by sumptuous Byzantine mosaics. The cathedral of Cefalu, built by Roger II, is a Romanesque basilica with a Latin-cross floor plan. Its Moorish style façade is framed by two towers and divided into two levels by arches and a portico. Arab craftsmen designed the décor with subjects drawn from esoteric themes in Persian mythology. Greek artisans trained native Sicilians in the art of mosaic while French masons mixed the style of Provence with that of the Saracens.

William II, grandson of Roger, sought to rival the splendor of Roger's

*Cathedral of Cefalù; photo, Gloria Callaci*



Palatine Chapel and Cathedral of Cefalù by building a cathedral, royal palace and monastery in Monreale, just southwest of Palermo. The two great towers of the cathedral's façade and the apses are Norman, while the exterior decoration is Moorish. In the interior Saracen-style pointed arches are supported by 18 columns with acanthus leaves and Corinthian capitals. Byzantines and Venetians crafted the luminous mosaics on a gold background which depict Bible stories through realistic and expressive figures. In the apse a majestic figure of Christ with outstretched arms blesses with one hand while holding the Gospel in the other. Adjacent to the cathedral the cloister, with its pointed arches and central fountain, resembles a Moorish courtyard.



*Capola, Sambuca di Sicilia; photo, Cetta Kenney*

After the Normans Sicily was ruled by a succession of Europeans – Germans, Spanish, Austrians, French – and in the 19th century became part of a unified Italy. But Sicily's cultural and religious heritage remains a unique fusion of European, African and Asian influences.