Sicily and the Sea in Prehistory

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## CONTENTS

### PREFACE

6

### INTRODUCTION

8  Sicily and the Mediterranean World  DIEDERIK BURGERSDUK

### CHAPTER 1

14  Sicily’s Geological Archive  JOHAN MEULENKAMP

### MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY

18  Marble-Laden Ships  SEBASTIANO USA

### CHAPTER 2

20  Archaeological Cultural Underwater Routes  ALESSANDRA DE CARO

### SICILY IN PRE- AND PROTOHISTORY

28  Sicily and the Sea in Prehistory  JORRIT KELDER

### CHAPTER 3

32  Phoenicians in Sicily  ELEFTHERIA PAPPA

### TRADE AND COLONISATION

38  Sicily and the Birth of Rhetoric  CASPER C. DE Jonge

### CHAPTER 4

46  Sicily, Land of Cyclops’ Songs  JACQUELINE KLOOSTER

### CARTHAGE AND ROME

52  Demeter on Sicily  Kees NEEFT

### CONTENTS

56  Between Rivers and Seas:

62  Aquatic Images on Greek Coins from Sicily  PAUL BELIÉN

65  Archimedes’ Mastermind  ANDRÉ KLUKHUHN

68  Temples and Community in Greek Sicily  FLORIS VAN DEN EIJNDE

72  The Shipwreck Gela I  NICOLÒ BRUNO

75  The Shipwreck of Capistello (Lipari)  ADRIANA FRESINA

78  The Shipwreck Panarea III  ROBERTO LA ROCCA

### TARANTO AND POWER

82  The Shipwreck of the Ancient Port of Scauri on Pantelleria  ROBERTO LA ROCCA

### THE LEVANZO I SHIPWRECK

91  Sicily under Roman Republican Rule:

97  Roman Province and Slave Kingdom  DAVID ENGELS

100  Sicily as a Refuge  WILLEM VAN MAANEN

104  Sicily as a Stage in Virgil’s Aeneid  SIWARD TACOMA

107  The Fragmentary Voices of the Sea:

112  Sicily in The Rape of Proserpine by Claudian  PIET GERBRANDY

114  Sicily and the Sea  ROGER J.A. WILSON

116  The Wrecks of Camarina  GIOVANNI DI STEFANO

118  The Late-Roman Shipwreck of the Ancient Port of Scauri on Pantelleria  ROBERTO LA ROCCA
CHAPTER 5

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

CHAPTER 6

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

CHAPTER 7

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

CHAPTER 8

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

200 FURTHER READING

202 AUTHORS

204 CREDITS
CHAPTER 2
SICILY IN PRE- AND PROTOHISTORY
Sicily and the Sea in Prehistory

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

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

Slightly more can be said about the Final Palaeolithic and Mesolithic period, at which point both wall paintings and carvings not only demonstrate the early islanders’ artistic prowess, but also their connections with regions elsewhere. The earliest rock paintings known thus far are found in a cave at Cala dei Genovesi on the islet of Levanzo, near the tip of western Sicily. The paintings at this site date to c 9000 BC and are comparable with rock art elsewhere in southern Europe (such as Lascaux). Yet another thousand years later, we encounter the remarkably expressive rock carvings in the Grotta dell’Audaura, close to the city of Palermo. These carvings depict various human figures as well as figures of horses, deer and bovids, and provide a first glimpse of how the early Sicilians perceived their world. The exact interpretation of these early carvings, especially the depiction of two masked (?) human figures with what looks like ropes around their necks, is unclear. It has been suggested that this may be a depiction of an initiation rite, although more extravagant hypotheses—including one suggestion that the carvings show acrobats, or even an early homoerotic scene—have also been put forward. Regardless of the precise nature of the human figures in these carvings, the presence of bovids and equids demonstrates that hunting was an important aspect of daily life. The hunt was not only a terrestrial affair: archaeology shows that fishing was important, too. Indeed, the presence of dolphin bones in the Mesolithic cave of Uzzo, on the Sicilian west coast, suggests that the early Sicilians already possessed boats that were sufficiently large to sail out into the open sea.

From the sixth millennium BC onwards, the people of Sicily gradually adopted a Neolithic way of life. Most of the cave dwellings were abandoned in favour of proper settlements in the fields, and pottery made its appearance in everyday life. There are no clear arguments to suggest that this change in lifestyle was the result of the arrival of newcomers on the island (although this remains a...
Tombs cut into the limestone rock at the necropolis of Pantalica, near Syracuse. Pantalica was a major inland centre from the 13th to 8th centuries BC. Remains of houses and possibly even a palace-like structure have been found, but it is unclear whether they are prehistoric or belong to later periods. In view of the large number of the tombs (c. 5,000), the site must have remained important after the collapse of the Late-Bronze-Age system of international trade.

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

Towards the end of that period, overseas connections had multiplied and Sicily became a veritable gateway to the western Mediterranean for traders from the east.

Sicily’s increased importance to long-distance maritime trade had a profound impact on local culture and everyday life, especially in the eastern part of the island. The Middle Bronze Age on Sicily is marked by a notable increase in foreign, especially Aegean, Anatolian and Cypriot imports and the adoption of various Aegean symbols (e.g. the Minoan ‘Horns of Consecration’) and architectural features (such as the arched ceiling of a number of tombs, which is often thought to copy Mycenean tholos tombs). It is also a period of increased social hierarchy, with the emergence of local elites—who adopted these exotica as tokens of their wealth and power—and the development of a more centralised territorial (and probably political) organisation in the eastern parts of the island in which major, mostly coastal settle-
Mycenaean Stirrup Jar
Top of a Mycenaean stirrup jar, 16th–15th cent. BC. It was found in the sea near Filicudi, one of the Aeolian Islands north of Sicily. During the Bronze Age, trade flourished between Sicily and Mycenaean Greece. Apart from imported goods, traces of cultural influence are visible as well, e.g. in the appearance of tholos-like tombs on Sicily.

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

Mycenaean palace of Pylos in Greece: presumably the remains of a last great feast or ritual at the palace. Since kylikes are relatively rare outside the Aegean, they must have been connected to a specifically ‘Mycenaean’ way of drinking wine.

Thapsus, a site on an island off eastern Sicily, some 10 km north of Syracuse, seems to have been one of the places where immigrants settled and mingled with the native population. The settlement, with its remarkably well-organised grid of houses and wide streets, served as a centre of trade (in view of the numerous Mycenaean objects and architectural parallels with ‘Mycenaean’ sites on Cyprus probably especially with the Greek world) with resident foreign (Greek?) merchants and their families. In many ways, Thapsus can thus be considered a model for things that were yet to come: the Greek colonies of the eighth and seventh centuries BC.

The end of this period of extraordinary connectivity is marked by the downfall of the great states in the eastern Mediterranean. The causes of the destructions that marked the end of the palaces of Mycenaean Greece, the Hittite Empire in Anatolia, and the wealthy principalities in the Levant are still not understood, and it is likely that a number of factors (climate change, invasions, earthquakes?) played a role. Sicily, or rather its prehistoric inhabitants, may have played a role as well, for one of the monuments that report on these calamities, the so-called Great Karnak Inscription (a relief of Merneptah, king of Egypt from 1213 to 1203 BC), may bear the first reference to the island’s prehistoric inhabitants. Amongst a number of invaders is a group of invaders called S-k-rw-s—normally vocalised as Shekelesh. There is no way of being sure about this, but it has been suggested that this name may refer to the Sicels; a group of people who are known from Classical sources to have lived in especially the eastern part of Sicily in pre-Classical times. The fact that the Shekelesh are referred to as ‘coming from the sea’ only serves as a reminder of the close connection between Sicily and the sea.
The list below comprises books and papers of general interest, grouped per chapter. A more extensive overview of the available literature can be found at www.allandpierson-museum.nl.

## INTRODUCTION

## 2 SICILY IN PRE- AND PROHISTORY

## 3 TRADE AND COLONISATION

## 4 CARTHAGE AND ROME

5 NEW POWERS
Theophanes Confessor, ed. C. de Boor, Munich 1883.

6 THE EARLY-MODERN PERIOD

7 SICILY IN THE ARTISTIC IMAGINATION

DVD. Milano: Feltrinelli.

8 MODERN SICILY
AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

GIOVANNI DI STEFANO (Leptis Magna), and in Syria. Participated in the preservation and restoration of a Punic shipwreck.

Harald Hendrix, director of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome, full professor of Italian Studies at Utrecht University. Research oriented towards the intersections of Italian literature, heritage and material culture. Forthcoming publication on the cultural history of Italian writers’ houses.


Jacqueline Klooster, post-doctoral research fellow in Classics at Groningen University; published on Hellenistic poetry, space in ancient narrative, and the evaluation of writing statesmen in Antiquity.

André Klukhuhn, chemist, philosopher, writer, was a teacher at the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences of Utrecht University. Writes for Concertgebouw magazine and HP/De Tijd, editor of the literary review Maatschap. Recently published on the history of thought and the boundaries of reason.

Roberto La Rocca, archaeologist, managing official at Soprintendenza del Mare, Regione Siciliana. His research focuses on maritime archaeology and the coastal landscape of the smaller islands, paying special attention to shipwrecks and fish-processing installations.

Marc Leijendekker is Europe editor for the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad and mainly writes about Italy. In his book Het land van de kuil (‘The Land of the Curl’) he describes his experience as a correspondent, the Italian character, political developments and culture.

Eliana Mauro, historian of architecture specialising in the preservation of architectural heritage. Taught at the Università degli Studi of Palermo, led the restoration of numerous monumental buildings, now responsible for the Sezione dei beni sommersi d’età moderna e contemporanea and for marine museums on Sicily.

Johan E. Meulenkamp, Emeritus Professor of Geology at Utrecht University, chairman of the Planet Earth Foundation. His research focuses on the Mediterranean, particularly the reconstruction of recent geological history.
AGOSTINA MUSUMECI, archaeologist at the Museo Archeologico Regionale ‘Paolo Orsi’, Syracuse. Published on the everyday objects found at a cave settlement in Lentini and on the Centuripe ceramics, now preparing publication of the materials excavated at the Syracuse Roman gymnasium.

FRANCESCA OLIVERI, archaeologist, various excavations on Sicily (Moza, Marsala, a.o.) and in Israel. At the Soprintendenza del Mare she coordinates research on the Moza causeway and the use of new technologies in the Stagnone di Marsala, a.o.

CORNELIS W. (KEES) NEEFT, Emeritus Assistant Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Amsterdam, specialises in Corinthian pottery; Projects in several Mediterranean countries, including Sicily (Catania, Camarina, Gela). Forthcoming publication on the Catania Thesmophorion votive deposit.

ELEFTHERIA PAPPA specialises in the archaeology of western Phoenician colonisation and East-West contacts during the transition from Late Bronze Age to Iron Age. Published Early Iron Age in the West: Phoenicians in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic (2013).

MARCO POELVIJK teaches Classics at the Barlaeus Gymnasium in Amsterdam, a well-known grammar school; together with his colleague Willem van Maanen he is working on a Dutch translation of Appian.

ASKER PELGROM, historian, now teaches History at Utrecht University, focusing on stereotypes in the presentation of Italy and in the cultural history of travel.

JONATHAN PRAG, Tutorial Fellow in Ancient History at Merton College, Oxford. His research focuses on Sicily and the western Mediterranean. He published extensively on Roman Sicily and is preparing a new digital corpus of inscriptions from ancient Sicily (I. Sicily).


DAVID RUSER teaches Classics and Cultural History at the University of Amsterdam. Published widely on the subject of Classical receptions in general and the cultural history of Italy in particular.

JEFFREY ROYAL, director at RPM Nautical Foundation, Adjunct Professor at East Carolina University. Directed projects on Sicily and other Mediterranean locations. Current research includes ancient warships, amphora morphology and overseas trade.

LEONARD V. RUTGERS, Professor of Late Antiquity at Utrecht University, is known for his work on the Jewish and Early-Christian catacombs of Rome, published in Nature and The Journal of Archeological Science. Now directing a project on the history of Jewish communities of the Mediterranean diaspora.

EMILIA SALERNO comes from Palermo, Sicily, where she received her Master’s degree in Classics and Ancient History summa cum laude. From September 2015 she will attend a Research Master in Classics and Ancient Civilisations at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam.

FABRIZIO SGROI, archaeologist, numerous maritime excavation campaigns around Sicily (San Vito Lo Capo shipwreck, Marusa shipwreck, Scari, Pantelleria, a.o.). Research and recoveries on various sites in the Agrigento province for the Soprintendenza del Mare.

ALEXANDRA SOFRONIEW, historian, was assistant curator of antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, now teaches Classical Archaeology at St John’s College, Oxford, and is curator of Sicily and the Sea.

FRANCESCA SPATAFORA specialises in prehistory and non-Hellenic cultures on Sicily. Was director of the Archaeological Park at Himera, now director of Palermo’s Museo Archeologico ‘Antonino Salinas’. Excavations and research on many sites in western Sicily (Palermo, Solunto, Moza, Mazara del Vallo, etc.).

SIWARD TACOMA, classicist, main interests: Classical reception studies, focusing on the Latin epic tradition and contemporary vernacular literature. Teacher at the Leiden Municipal Gymnasium and chairman of the Zenoia Foundation’s Organising Committee.

ANTONELLA TESTA, archaeologist at the Soprintendenza del Mare, specialises in Byzantine painting. She has published a.o. on Byzantine painting in western Sicily and on the imperial portraits of Pantelleria.

PHILIPPE TISSEYRE, maritime archaeologist, studied the Lipari port, the Acqualadroni rostrum, and numerous shipwrecks (Messina province, Catania, Trapani). Specialising in metallurgy and glass manufacture, he takes an interest in overseas trade in these artefacts in Antiquity.

MARIA TURCO, archaeologist at the Servizio Beni archeologici della Soprintendenza di Catania (Sicily). Specialises in local prehistory (necropoleis, funeral rites) and Catania’s rural settlements from Late Antiquity to Middle Ages.

AILBE TURLEY is an MA student at the University of Amsterdam and an intern at the Allard Pierson Museum. Her research interests are Bronze-Age trade networks, ceramics, and maritime archaeology.

SEBASTIANO TUSA, Research Fellow of Prehistory at the University of Rome ‘la Sapienza’ and Palermo, Professor of Prehistory at Palermo and Naples, Professor of Maritime Archaeology at Bologna and Marburg, Director of the Soprintendenza del Mare, conducted research and excavations in various Mediterranean and Oriental countries.

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FLORENT VAN DEN EIJNDE has been conducting research at Utrecht University since 2004. He specialises in early state formation and group participation in the early Greek polis. He is about to publish The Cults of Athens: The Archaeology of Attic Cult Sites (1000-600 BCE).

HEIN VAN EEKERT hosts the opera programme on the Dutch national radio station NPO Radio 4. He gives talks at the Dutch National Opera and the Royal Concertgebouw, writes for various magazines, and teaches Dutch in a grammar school.
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Amsterdam, National Numismatic Collection, Dutch National Bank: p. 57-61.

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Hamburg, Carthage excavations of Hamburg University bottom Decumanus Maximus (KAS86/120): p. 89.


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Philadelphia, dr. Kevin Furlong, Pennsylvania State University: p. 16A.


Syracuse, Museo archeologico regionale Paolo Orsi di Siracusa: p. 50 (Photograph by David Gowers).

Syracuse, Soprintendenza Beni culturali di Siracusa, Antiquarium Parco della Neapolis: p. 127 top.

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