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ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREA OF AGRIGENTO

"[...] What future / can the Doric well read to us / what memory? The bucket / comes up slowly from the bottom and brings grass and faces we hardly know. / You turn, ancient wheel of disgust / king melancholy who prepares the day / attentive at all times, who reduces to ruins / angelic images and miracles / who throw the sea into the narrow light / of an eye! The telamon is here, two steps away / from Hades (suffocating and immobile murmuring) / lying in the garden of Zeus."

Tempio di Zeus ad Agrigento, Salvatore Quasimodo

It is a hymn to beauty that has been handed down for centuries, in the shade of thousand-year-old almond, citrus and olive trees, on the rocky plain where, in 580 B.C., a group of settlers from Rhodes and Crete founded the monumental Akragas. The "most beautiful city amongst those that are hotels for men", as the poet Pindar defined it, was conceived to impress all those who approached it by sea and land with its splendour: the architecture stood out against the sky in its sober magnificence, defended by a city wall which, with the building of the grandiose Doric temples, became a holy perimeter. And the gods blessed Akragas; the fruit of its earth, full of vineyards and olive groves, travelled along the routes of the Mediterranean from the port, while people from all over and great thinkers animated the city's cultural life. Empedocles wrote of his fellow-citizens that they built temples as though they were never to die. However, the word "end" came by the hand of the Carthaginians who in 406 B.C. defeated the people of Akragas. It will then be the arrival of the Romans, in 210 B.C. which created the conditions for a new golden age of the city, which was reborn as *Agrigentum* and had its ancient ruins restored.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 831
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: NAPLES, ITALY
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CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: An extraordinary example of Greek civilisation, the ancient colony of Akragas grew and prospered until it became one of the most influential cities in the Mediterranean; today it is protected by UNESCO precisely for the encounter of cultures of which it was the stage and for the excellent state of preservation of its temples, among the most extraordinary representations of Doric architecture.



MAP



“The tabernacle of the Temple of Concordia is small, [...] a tiny cabin, a belly with soft and porous walls: a blind god, distant but gentle. [...] The ancient crispness of the Agrigento valley sets the mind at rest, the earth of white shadows: the Ephebe of Akragas, his left leg cut off at the knee, his neck strong but his smile hesitant; or the intimate pain of Phedra, portrayed among her handmaidens on the slab of a bas-relief.”

This is how Enzo Siciliano, returning from a holiday in Sicily in the company of Alberto Moravia, Monica Vitti, Dacia Maraini and Cesare Garboli (in 1963), describes the Valley of the Temples, in a sort of travel diary published in three parts in the magazine *Il Mondo*. Guided by the sensation of light and serenity that these lines exude, get into your car to discover some of the treasures of Agrigento and its surroundings.

Start from the smile of the Ephebe of Agrigento, who is waiting for you in all his marble solemnity in the **1 Archaeological Museum**: a preliminary visit to the museum lets you understand the history of Akragas and admire, among the many exhibits, the gigantic sculpture of the telamon which was part of the Temple of Zeus (the one on the site is a copy). Then go to the **2 Valley of the Temples**, about which Maupassant writes, in *Sicily*: “[...] offers the most surprising ensemble of temples that man has ever been able to contemplate. Along the long stretch of naked stony coastline, which is a fiery red, without a single blade of grass or a shrub, and which dominates the sea, the beach and the port, the great

stone profile of three superb temples stands out against the hot country blue sky. They seem to be suspended in the air, in the middle of a magnificent and desolate landscape”. After your visit, get back into the car and head for the coast. Travelling down the main road, you will go through the hamlet of Caos, where Pirandello was born, and Porto Empedocle, Camilleri’s city, then you can stop at a small gem: the **3 Villa Romana di Durruegli**. The seaside residence of the wealthy Publius Annus, a sulphur entrepreneur who lived in the 1st century A.D., the large villa had two wings, one for living in and the other for thermal baths, and included a garden with a courtyard marked off by a portico, of which some columns

remain and many mosaic floors are still intact. After this “plunge” into history, it is time to dive into the waters of the Mediterranean: conquer the delightful beach of the wild **4 Natural Reserve of Torre Salsa**, run by the WWF. Refreshed by the sea breeze, set off again to take the road back, knowing however that there is still one marvel of the Agrigento area which awaits you: the **5 Scala dei Turchi**. The iconic wall of dazzling white rock, which is almost blinding in daylight, is the ideal spot to enjoy the sun setting into the Mediterranean. Spend the evening in **6 Agrigento**, for a stroll along Via Atenea as far as the colourful Scalinata degli Artisti (Via Neve).



AROUND “GIRGENTI”

“One night in June, I fell like a firefly under a lone pine tree in a grove of Saracen olive trees on the edges of a plateau of blue clay overlooking the African sea.”

Information on my involuntary sojourn on earth, Luigi Pirandello

The light of that “firefly” called Luigi Pirandello, who in 1867 “fell” into the countryside half-way between Agrigento and Porto Empedocle, in a house which is now a museum, has never gone out. Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, the writer ploughed a furrow through his homeland, from which other great literary talents emerged. “Everything that I have

tried to say, everything that I have said, has always been for me about Pirandello as well”, said Leonardo Sciascia. Well-known for his thrillers about the Mafia, the latter was born in 1921 in Racalmuto, in the province of Agrigento, where he can be seen out for a “walk”, although not in flesh and blood: portrayed in a bronze statue, he is also remembered by the foundation and the museum-house dedicated to him. The third very successful writer born nearby, in Porto Empedocle, Andrea Camilleri, states very clearly, “We cannot not say that we are Pirandellian, those of us from this area around Girgenti” he said. “Girgenti” is Agrigento, its name until 1927. “Agrigento makes me think of fascism, Girgenti of Pirandello”, Camilleri explained. Many of his books are set in villages with imaginary names but recognizable as Agrigento. There is a statue of Camilleri sitting at a table in a bar in the town centre.



"THE WEE GIRL, WHO WAS CALLED LULLINA AND WAS NOT EVEN SIX, LOVED TO WALK IN THE COUNTRYSIDE WITH HER GRANDFATHER WHO EXPLAINED SO MANY THINGS TO HER, FOR EXAMPLE THAT THE CLOUDS WERE MADE OF WHIPPED CREAM AND THAT ONCE THE LEAVES WERE BLUE BUT THEY TURNED GREEN WITH ENVY SEEING THE COLOURS OF THE RAINBOW."

Like the little girl in the tale *Magaria* by Andrea Camilleri, you too can walk in the countryside of the Valley of the Temples, amid clouds of cream, green leaves and golden stones. Start from the **1 Temple of Juno** (Hera Lacinia), with its majestic colonnades and long archaic altar. The ancient Greeks would hold a pre-matrimonial rite here: the future couple would bring a lamb, which was washed in cold water, to the goddess; if the animal shivered, it was not a good omen and the marriage would not be celebrated. Stop at the top of the hill to admire the procession of temples of the Valley, before proceeding west. Along the road that joins the Via Sacra, notice the gnarled trunks of some centuries-old olive trees and a rocky wall in which various niches

with an arch have been dug out: they are tombs from the Byzantine period. Then go to the star of the site: the **2 Temple of Concordia**. This iconic building has remained practically intact since the time it was built, in 430 B.C., in part thanks to the fact that it was converted into a Christian basilica in the 6th century, in part due to the loamy soil on which it stands, which cushioned the earth's tremors. Here's a fun fact: have your children look at the UNESCO logo and then the façade of the temple: with a little bit of imagination, the two images can be superimposed, because the logo is a graphic reworking of the structure of a Doric temple. Then go up to the bronze sculpture by the contemporary artist Igor Mitoraj, *Fallen Icarus*, before treating yourself to a moment of relaxation in the greenery of the **3 Sensory Garden**, inaugurated in 2024. Here, lulled by the sound of water and immersed in the scents of the Mediterranean flora, children can read the panels which explain the history of the temples and run around in the shade of the trees. Then go back to the heart of the Valley, to see the **4 Temple of Hercules**, the oldest in Agrigento: it dates back to the 6th century B.C. Once there was the statue of the god, the strong and courageous hero, portrayed in all his might: it was so beautiful that, based on Cicero's account, we know that the faithful wore away the face of the statue with their kisses! Then cross the pedestrian bridge to admire the remains of the **5 Temple of Zeus**. It was to have been the largest Doric temple in antiquity but it was pillaged by the Carthaginians and an earthquake destroyed the rest of it. A copy of the eight-metre statue of the telamon lies in front of it. You can end the tour at the **6 Garden of Kolymbethra**: children will find it hard to believe that there was once a basin full of water with multi-coloured fish here! Take advantage of the picnic tables.



AGRIGENTO in books

Reading suggestions to learn more about the literary reworking, straddling myth and reality, of the Agrigento and Sicilian identity.

• **Sicily**, Guy de Maupassant (1886). As well as being an extraordinarily talented short story teller, Maupassant was also an adventurous traveller and author of travel accounts. His article *Sicily* is a realistic and at the same time lyrical description of the island; it has been translated into English by an art historian specialised in the history of French art and Paris.

• **The Old and the Young**, Luigi Pirandello (1909). "Beyond the grove, on the long brow of the hill, rose the remains of the famous temples, [...] the table-land, on which the ancient city had stood in its splendour and might, fell in a sheer and rocky precipice to the plain of San Gregorio, formed by the alluvial deposits of the Akragas: a calm, luminous plain, stretching out until it ended, far away, in the sea." *Girgenti* plays a leading role in this bitter novel, where the generational conflict between the old, who believed in the ideals of the Risorgimento, and the young, the children of a post-unification Italy, terminates in a double defeat, as both young and old are betrayed by a state that is incapable of changing society.

• **Complete Poems**, Salvatore Quasimodo (1960). For the poet from Modica, "in involuntary exile", Sicily is the poetic transposition of nostalgia; it is the land of memories, at times mythified into the sweetness of childhood memories, at times evoked with a realism which is not lacking in anxiety.

• **To Each His Own**, Leonardo Sciascia (1966). Inspired by a crime that took place in Agrigento, the novel is an atypical thriller in which the story is a pretext to investigate the Mafia mentality which pervades society: everyone is an accomplice, whether consciously or not.

• **Il re di Girgenti**, Andrea Camilleri (2001). This novel, entirely in Sicilian, is almost a medieval epic in the form of a book, which has the semblance of a historical story dedicated to the peasant Zosimo, who became the king of Girgenti, but is in fact a tale with grotesque nuances.

• **Le ceneri di Pirandello**, Roberto Alajmo, illustrated by Mimo Palladino (2008). The ironic pen of Alajmo lends itself very well to reconstruct the paradoxical story of the transfer of Pirandello's ashes from Rome to Agrigento, which due to a series of events, is transformed into an epic. The story is also a pretext to examine the relationship of Sicilians with death.

• **Il delitto di Kolymbetra**, Gaetano Savatteri (2018). In the enchanted landscape of the Valley of Temples, a cruel murder takes place which the "accidental detectives" Lamanna and Piccionello, on a trip to Agrigento to write an article about the UNESCO sites in Sicily, will reluctantly have to solve. The plot is narrated with irony and sarcasm and makes for a very pleasant read.

Children's books:

• **Magaria** (2013) and **Fiabe per picciriddi** (2023), Andrea Camilleri. The fervid imagination of Camilleri led him to write a number of tales for children, filled with magic and spells, which often have disappearances with a touch of the "thriller" as in his Montalbano novels. The backdrop to the stories are inevitably the sea, prickly pears and the blue sky of Sicily.

• **La Sicilia antica. Guida archeologica per ragazzi**, William Dello Russo (2015). The archaeological sites in Sicily reveal their world of marvels to children, through a narration which focuses on fun facts and legends.

• **Il tempio di Agrigento. Meraviglie d'Italia da costruire**, Stefano Trainito (2019). This illustrated book is full of fun facts about the Valley of Temples and characteristics of the Greek temples, but the highlight is the model of the Temple of Concordia, to be constructed following the detailed instructions.

