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SYRACUSE AND THE ROCKY NECROPOLIS OF PANTALICA

“Then we went to Pantalica, one of the most beautiful spots in the world. It is the Sicily of 600 years before Christ, when the inhabitants – we don’t know who they were – created a city like New York with all the apartments in the immense walls of this quarry. You have to walk, climb and clamber over the stones. If you don’t go up and down the caves, then you can’t understand what Pantalica is.”

Viaggio in Sicilia, Simonetta Agnello Hornby, a programme by Rai Cultura, directed by Riccardo Mastropietro

The UNESCO site of “Syracuse and the Rocky necropolis of Pantalica” is composed of two extraordinary separate nuclei, containing exceptional remains dating back to Greek and Roman times: the Necropolis of Pantalica on the one hand, with over 5000 tombs cut into the rock near open stone quarries, most of them dating from the 13th to 7th centuries B.C.; and the ancient Syracuse on the other, the undisputed queen of the Mediterranean, including the spectacular Ortigia, the oldest nucleus of the city, founded by the Corinthian Greeks in the 8th century B.C. Syracuse is a waking dream, which is translated into ancient Greek ruins standing out in the middle of perfumed orange and lemon groves, baroque squares, medieval alleys and a turquoise sea that beckons you to dive in. The largest centre of the ancient world is here, before your eyes, to be admired in all its splendour. Syracuse and Pantalica offer essential evidence of the development of the Mediterranean civilisation over three thousand years, a piece of history immersed in unforgettable panoramas.



CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 1200

PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2005



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The sites and monuments of Syracuse-Pantalica together form a whole which is a unique collection, as the extraordinary evidence of the cultures of the Mediterranean over the centuries and in the same space. Through its extraordinary cultural diversity, the whole of Syracuse-Pantalica offers an exceptional example of the development of civilisation in over three thousand years.



“I saw the grandiose landscape of Syracuse the first time when the sun was about to set, lighting up the whole area from the Ionian Sea to the mountains of Ibla, with those warm hues which can only be seen in Sicily. I cannot express in words the impression that this sight had on me [...]”

It was with these words that Ferdinand Gregorovius, the German historian and medieval specialist, described in *Wanderjahre in Italien* his surprise at being in front of the ostentatious and splendid beauty of Syracuse: ancient Greek ruins, picture-postcard baroque squares, orange and lemon groves, old cafés and the coast with a sea that was so blue as to seem infinite.

Among its many beauties, Syracuse can also boast of the **1 Archaeological Park of Neapolis**, a monumental area on the rocky slope of the hill where classic world enthusiasts can admire the famous Greek Theatre, dating back to the 5th century B.C., and capable of seating an audience of no fewer than 16,000 people, who would rush to see, for example, tragedies by Aeschylus. While exploring, do not miss: the **Latomia of Paradise**, a limestone quarry where the stones used for the ancient city came from; here there are numerous catacombs and the scent of magnolias and oranges and lemons can be smelt, and the **Ear of Dionysius**, a cave so called by Caravaggio, 23 m high and 65 m deep. The **Roman Amphitheatre**

hosted the gladiator fights and horse races, until much of it was destroyed in the 16th century, while the Altar of Hierone is a sacrificial altar from the 3rd century B.C. where propitiatory ceremonies were held. If, on the other hand, you are fans of catacombs, you will find the largest network of underground tunnels under the **2 Basilica of San Giovanni**, of hypnotic beauty already starting from the facade: a mysterious network of tunnels and tombs to be explored winds under the building. Other catacombs can also be visited under the **3 Basilica Santuario di Santa Lucia al Sepolcro**, which has stood since the 17th century on the spot where the patron saint of Syracuse was martyred. In the oldest part of Syracuse,

namely Ortigia, there is **4 Piazza del Duomo**, a large rectangular square framed by baroque town houses, on to which the Cathedral looks. It was built in the 7th century on top of what had been a Greek temple dedicated to Athena. Not far away there is the **5 Fonte Aretusa**, from which freshwater gurgles and in which spectacular papyrus plants grow: one of the most photographed corners of the city. If you want to treat yourself to an excursion outside the city, in 40 minutes by car, you can reach the town of Palazzolo Acreide and the **6 Archaeological Area of Akrai**, with a fascinating Greek theatre, some catacombs and the Santoni, a series of stone sculptures from the 3rd century B.C.



THE PEARL OF SYRACUSE

“Sacred precinct where Alpheus comes to rest and catches breath. Ortygia, child of famed Syracuse, bedstead of Artemis, sister isle of Delos, from you my sweet-voiced hymn proceeds to set forth great ainos of storm-footed horses, gifts of Aetnaean Zeus.”

The Odes, Pindar

Ortygia is a gem within the gem: only just one square kilometre, it is the oldest pearl of Syracuse, with delightful squares and ancient alleyways, but also restaurants and the hustle and bustle of tourists which livens up the days and instils a good mood. Many films and various series have chosen it as a set, given its innate appeal and there are many

events that make it a trendy place to be in. Everybody calls it an “island”, even though it is actually a peninsula because there are two bridges that link it with the mainland, it is bathed by a fantastically beautiful sea and its alleys include the Giudecca, to the south-east, where the Jewish community of Syracuse once lived in ancient times. Strolling through these alleys is a pleasant and fascinating experience, as is visiting an ancient *miqveh*, a ceremonial purifying bath according to Jewish tradition, used to cancel impurities and sins. There are still three in Ortigia: one under the church of St Phillip the Apostle, one at Palazzo Bianca in Via Alagona and the other under a private home in Vicolo dell’Olivo. The *miqveh* in Via Alagona is in the basement of a hotel and was discovered by chance during the renovation of the ancient building: to visit you go about 18 m below ground level, to discover a place where a very ancient ritual was once held.



'I HAD BEEN TO SIRACUSA FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 1950. [...] I REMEMBER THAT MY ATTENTION AND MY EMOTION WAS NOT FOR THE TRAGEDIES, BUT FOR SIRACUSA: IT SEEMED TO ME TO BE A VERY BEAUTIFUL CITY. NOT FOR ITS GREEK ANTIQUITIES, OR AT LEAST NOT ONLY FOR THOSE, BUT FOR THE MEDIEVAL AND BAROQUE MONUMENTS, FOR THE MODERN TOWNHOUSES, FOR ITS LIFE, ITS ATMOSPHERE,

ITS PARTICULAR GRACE AND ITS CIVILISATION [...].'

This is how Vincenzo Consolo, in *Le pietre di Pantalica*, speaks of Syracuse and its gentle beauty: it is a beauty that also affects the families on holiday and those travelling with children. There are many exciting places to stop at that even small children will love: for example the intimate Ortigia, where they can wander around its narrow streets and then go into the **1 Maniace Castle**, dating back to the 13th century, which is on the southernmost tip of the island and from where there is an unforgettable view. Children are always sensitive to the fascination of castles and the story of

emperors like Frederick II who wanted his manor here, offering posterity a fine example of Swabian architecture. The interior reveals the spectacular Hypostyle Room, with a cross vault and columns, in a play of lights and shadows that make it special, and then the exhibition rooms of the Antiquarium, with finds from the excavations, such as important majolica pieces and ceramics datable to between the 13th and 19th centuries. Still in Ortigia, there is one place that families absolutely cannot miss, the **2 Museum of the Pupi**, Sicilian puppets, which is in the Palazzo Midiri-Cardona. Perhaps not everyone knows that Syracuse contributed greatly to the birth of the *pupi*: a visit to this museum lets you discover the highlights of the history of the Vaccaro brothers, famous puppeteers from Syracuse, through the exhibits of *pupi*, puppets and stage props. Close by there is also the **3 Theatre of the Pupi**, where the marionettes can be seen at work: a waking dream for children and adults. Going back to the mainland, you can stop at the **4 "Paolo Orsi" Regional Archaeological Park**, where children and youngsters can discover an important prehistoric section and learn all about the foundation of Syracuse. At this point it is time to get into the car and go towards the **5 Rocky Necropolis of Pantalica**, the famous site of the Iron and Bronze Ages some 40 km north-west of Syracuse, on a vast plateau surrounded by the Valley of the Anapo, an ideal place for delightful excursions. You will also need hiking shoes to visit the Anakotron, i.e. the Prince's Palace on the acropolis, in a dominant position, and then the countless tombs: the northern necropolis is the largest, the one in the north-west is one of the oldest while the San Martino necropolis is very interesting as it is made up of beehive tombs from prehistoric times and Byzantine catacombs.



SYRACUSE AND THE ROCKY NECROPOLIS OF PANTALICA in books

Reading suggestions to get into the heart of Syracuse and the rocky necropolises of Pantalica.

- **The Odes**, Pindar (518 B.C. ca.-438 B.C. ca.). The Odes by Pindar praise the cities of Agrigento and Syracuse in all their beauty.
- **Wanderjahre in Italien**, Ferdinand Gregorovius (1856-1877). In this book, the German historian and medieval specialist describes his peregrinations through Italy and also takes us by the hand to Syracuse.
- **La Sicilia prima dei Greci**, Luigi Bernabò Brea (1957). Together with his *Ricerche intorno all'Anakotron* (1990), it helps to get to know in depth the history of Sicily before the arrival of the Greeks, i.e. the evolution of the cultures prior to the formation of Western

civilisation, which have left us evidence through burial places, rock paintings and archaeological finds.

- **Le pietre di Pantalica**, Vincenzo Consolo (1988). A combination of a historical account, a document, a letter and popular theatre, this is a collection of short stories in which the necropolis of Pantalica is taken as an example of a civilisation to be preserved.
- **Siracusa**, Delia Ephron (2016). This is the story of a holiday by four American friends under the blazing sun of Syracuse, with jealousies and secrets, dramatic turns of events and different versions of reality: a witty comedy with a vein of noir running through it.
- **Mistero siciliano**, Annalisa Stancanelli (2020). This novel is set in a marvellous Syracuse, which at the same time is being held hostage by criminals involved in trafficking women and archaeological finds. In this scenario, the opening of a sinkhole in a building site reveals an ancient burial place which could be the tomb of Archimedes, which

is widely spoken about but nobody knows where it is. Following this, there is a series of murders which will have to be investigated by the Deputy Police Chief Gabriele Regazzoni. In the background there is all the power of Syracuse with its ancient and fascinating history.

- **Note noir**, Armando D'Amaro (2023). *Pantalica* by Daniela Domenici is part of this collection of stories. Its main characters are Marco Frilli and his wife Nora, who during a tour of Syracuse visit the Valley of Pantalica; here, as well as being fascinated by the millenary history of the place, they will be involved in another discovery.

Children's books:

- **Le isole di Norman**, Veronica Galletta (2020). Elena lives in Ortigia with her parents; for years her mother has lived locked up in her room, surrounded by piles of books, until one day she unexpectedly leaves home. Elena sets out on an almost ritual journey for Ortigia, also trying to understand a traumatic event of her childhood.