

## 5 A very brief history of Sicily

Mortimer Wheeler wrote that “Dead archaeology is the driest dust that blows,” and he was right. If you don’t know where the things you’re digging up fit into a historical picture, then you’re just moving dirt—very slowly, and not getting paid for it. Knowing what the issues are and how our discoveries can answer major questions transforms the experience of doing archaeology. This section is meant to do two things. First, it provides a quick orientation to the history of Sicily across the last 13,000 years. Try to get some sense of where our site fits into the larger historical picture. Second, it gives you an overall context within which to read the more detailed studies we recommend in section 13 below.

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*Table 1 Basic chronology*

<u>Period name</u>	<u>Years</u>
Early Bronze Age	2500-1500 BC
Middle Bronze Age	1500-1200 BC
Late Bronze Age	1200-900 BC
Early Iron Age	900-734 BC
[sometimes called the Sant’ Angelo Muxaro period in western Sicily]	
Colonial/archaic period	734-480 BC
Classical period	480-323 BC
[Athenian siege of Syracuse, 415-413; Dionysius I, 406-367]	
Hellenistic period	323-241 BC
[First Punic War, 264-241]	
Roman Republic	241-31 BC
Roman Empire	31 BC-AD 476
Gothic occupation	AD 476-535
Byzantine period	535-827/902
Arab period	827/902-1060/1093
Norman/Swabian period	1060/1093-1266
Angevin, Aragon, Bourbon dynasties	1266-1860
[Sicilian Vespers, 1282; Black Death, 1347-50; Etna eruption and earthquake, 1693]	
Garibaldi lands in Marsala	May 11, 1860
Fascist period	1922-1943

### Notes on periodization

1. The “Bronze Age” and “Iron Age” phases are based on archaeological evidence for the kinds of metal in use. The idea of successive stone, bronze, and iron ages goes back to early 19th-century Danish archaeologists. Not many archaeologists nowadays think that the metal in use is the best way to characterize ancient societies, but the names are now a convenient short hand.
2. The archaic, classical, and Hellenistic periods take their names from phases of development in the political history of Greece. They partly correspond to important changes in Sicily (the beginning of Greek colonization in 734, the battle of Himera in 480, the end of the First Punic War in 241), but like the Bronze and Iron Ages, they’re basically a convenient short hand. You shouldn’t interpret them as meaning that ancient Sicilian history was more or less the same thing as Greek history.

3. The Arab and Norman conquests of Sicily were drawn-out affairs. The dates given above represent the first arrival of the new rulers and the fall of the last stronghold resisting them. It's important also to bear in mind that these dates reflect military/political transitions; culturally, the transitions were much slower. There are still Byzantine Greek elements in eastern Sicily today, and Arab architecture and town plans can still be seen in Palermo. Sicilian cuisine has particularly strong Arabic elements.

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*Table 2*                      *Salemi highlights*

Halikyai (Salemi?) makes alliance with Athens, 418/17 BC  
Halikyai (Salemi?) narrowly escapes destruction by Dionysius I, 397 BC  
Castle rebuilt by Frederick II, AD 1210  
Chiesa Madre built, 1616-1740  
Church of Santa Maria dei Angeli (Crocifisso) built, 1622-23  
Jesuit College built, 1696-1705  
Garibaldi pronounces himself dictator of Italy in what's now the Mayor of Salemi's office,  
    May 14, 1860  
Earthquake, 1968  
New urban plan approved, 1978  
Sicilian-Scandinavian Archaeological Project begins, 1996  
Stanford arrives in Salemi, 2000  
Salemi is promoted from Commune to Città, 2001

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*5.1 Earliest prehistory*

The earliest traces of humans in Sicily are stone tools. None of these can be proven to be more than about 20,000 years old, although most archaeologists suspect that hominids have lived on Sicily for at least a couple of hundred thousand years. We found a stone tool at Monte Polizzo in 2003 that may be Palaeolithic (= Old Stone Age), but it hasn't yet been studied by an expert. There are hardly any traces of human activity in Sicily till the end of the last Ice Age, around 11,000 BC, even though it was joined to the mainland before then. We now know of several cave shelters dating around 10,000 BC, and there's some amazing rock art from sites like the Addaura, Genovesi, and Niscemi caves near Palermo, and on the little islands of Levanzo and Favignana, accessible by ferry from Trapani (makes a good weekend trip). These date from about 9000-5000 BC. By this time, permanent villages based on cultivated crops and deliberate herding of animals had begun in what's now northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey, but it took another 3000 years for these to reach Sicily. Stretto Partanna, near Salemi, has some of the earliest evidence for pottery technology in Sicily (5th millennium BC).

*5.2 Bronze Age Sicily*

Cities, writing, metal use, and permanent inequalities in wealth appeared in southern Iraq, Egypt, and India by 3000 BC. The west Asian civilizations were organized around temples and palaces, often run by priest-kings employing large scribal bureaucracies that tried to control land and other basic resources. They expanded steadily for nearly two thousand years. As early as 2000 BC somewhat similar societies were well established in what's now Syria and Israel, and were starting to take hold further west, on Crete. By 1500, palaces were flourishing in

Greece, and Near Eastern traders were visiting Sicily, southern Italy, and Sardinia. But the actual institutions of Near Eastern-style palaces and temples didn't take off in the west Mediterranean. The closest thing we know of is an unusually big building (about 450 m<sup>2</sup>) at Pantalica in eastern Sicily, dating around 1400. Archaeologists sometimes call this a "palace," but that's a bit misleading. By east Mediterranean standards it's tiny; you could comfortably fit the Pantalica building into the central courtyard of the palace at Knossos on Crete. But all the same, the Pantalica building suggests that big changes were going on in the previously non-hierarchical societies of Sicily by 1400 BC. There's also some evidence for Middle Bronze Age warehouses and Mycenaean Greek pots at Thapsos (now in the tremendous Archaeological Museum in Siracusa; well worth seeing), suggesting that by the 14th century eastern Sicily was being drawn into the east Mediterranean economic and cultural sphere. Had things carried on in this way, palaces of east Mediterranean type could well have been established in Sicily over the next few centuries.

But that didn't happen. Instead, around 1200 BC, most of the palaces in the east Mediterranean were destroyed by fire. We don't know exactly what happened; in fact, it's one of the greatest mysteries in history. Texts from Egypt mention migrations of "the Peoples of the Sea," leading to destructions and great battles. The Egyptians called one of these groups of people the Shekelesh, which may well be an Egyptianized form of the later names Sikeloi and Siculi, which Greeks and Romans used for the population of Sicily.

Whatever caused the destructions, population fell sharply in Greece, Turkey, and western Asia, and a "Dark Age" set in. Contacts between the east Mediterranean and Sicily broke off in the twelfth century. But this period of isolation seems to have done no great harm to Sicilian society. In fact the period after 1200, the Late Bronze Age, saw the first large villages in western Sicily. One of the most important of these is at Mokarta, just a couple of miles from Salemi. Our colleague Sebastiano Tusa excavated there, and in 2003-04 Niccolò Bruno has renewed the excavations of his behalf, exposing a large part of the village. It covered an area about the size of two football fields, and perhaps 300-400 people lived there (it's worth remembering that ancient populations were very small; in the Late Bronze Age there were probably never more than a couple of thousand people living in NW Sicily). Professor Tusa found a group of large round huts. In one of them, which had been destroyed by fire, a woman's skeleton was found in the doorway. The life-size model of this hut is now on display in the Museum in Salemi, along with some of the best finds from Mokarta—if you can get in.

### 5.3 *Colonial/Archaic Sicily*

In the ninth century BC, the east Mediterranean began to rebound from the long depression of the Dark Age. New dynasties of kings in Assyria raided over large areas. In the eighth century climatic changes and population growth forced people to compete more over basic resources. Sometimes this took the form of trade; others times, of war. The most famous traders came from Phoenicia (roughly the modern Lebanon). Their ships reached Sardinia before 850 and Tunisia before 800. They probably came to Sicily in the ninth century, though we have no direct evidence till about 720.

Sicily has always been connected to a larger world. At the height of the Ice Age, around 16,000 BC, it was part of the Italian peninsula. To the south, it was connected to Malta, and to the southwest, only a narrow strip of water separated it from Africa. Since then there have been constant population movements between the island, North Africa, and Italy. But all the same,

the eighth century marks a real change, as tens of thousands of people moved from the east Mediterranean to settle permanently in Sicily. The Phoenicians were the first to come. The Greek historian Thucydides, writing around 400 BC, says that Phoenicians set up bases on islands and promontories all around the coasts of Sicily, but adds that when Greeks started coming to Sicily in large numbers, beginning with a settlement at Naxos (near Taormina) in 734, the Phoenicians retreated to three sites in the west: Motya (modern Mozia), Panormos (modern Palermo), and Soloeis (modern Solunto). Phoenician Panormos and Soloeis are buried under the modern cities, but the little island of Mozia, just twenty miles west of Monte Polizzo and clearly visible from our site, has been extensively excavated. The oldest finds so far date back to about 720 BC: there are graves, remains of houses, and the *tophet*, a sanctuary where Phoenicians sacrificed babies to the gods (at least, this is what Greek, Roman, and Jewish authors said was going on; some archaeologists think that they may have misunderstood or distorted Phoenician religion. The museum at Mozia has a great display of the *tophet*). Greeks continued to arrive in Sicily through the eighth and seventh centuries. In 728, after wandering around for several years, a group of Greeks from Megara near Athens founded a small city called Megara Hyblaea, just north of Syracuse (in modern Siracusa's nasty oil-refining district; but it's the most completely excavated Greek site in Sicily, worth a visit). Our colleague Franco De Angelis has done important work showing how Megara's population increased ten-fold in one century, as a result of rapid natural population growth, continued Greek immigration, and also in-migration from the indigenous population. In 628 Megara set up a colony of its own at Selinous (modern Selinunte), 25 miles south of Monte Polizzo. This changed the course of development in this part of Sicily.

There's no evidence that Greeks and Phoenicians were enemies in the 8th and 7th centuries, although it's interesting that they hardly ever settled in the same areas. There's also little evidence for hostilities between Phoenicians and Sicilians; but the semi-mythologized accounts that Greeks later wrote about the foundation of their colonies often report wars with the indigenous populations. At Syracuse (modern Siracusa), founded in 733, the Greeks even reduced the local population to serfdom, and in the 6th century there were definitely wars between Greeks and Sicilians. Some of the best evidence comes from our part of Sicily, where the settlers at Selinous expanded inland, fighting with local people that the Greeks called Elymians.

In 1999-2000 Northern Illinois University carried out a systematic surface survey of ancient remains in the valleys around Monte Polizzo, Montagna Grande, and Mokarta. They're working on the publication now, but they presented some initial results at the 2002 meetings of the Society for American Archaeology in Denver. It looks as if there were a few small villages and farms in the Late Bronze Age, but in the Iron Age there were just a couple of main settlements—Monte Polizzo itself, and a smaller site at the east end of Montagna Grande. It's hard to date surface finds very precisely, but by the 6th century there were settlements on most hilltops in the interior of west Sicily. A 6th-century Greek inscription found at Monte Castellazzo (Poggioreale), just ten miles south of Monte Polizzo, is written in the Megarian dialect of Greek that was spoken at Selinous. This strongly suggests that the Greeks had taken control of all the coastal plain by this point, and had driven the indigenous peoples back into the hills. We suspect that by 600, the native west Sicilians were withdrawing to easily defensible hilltop settlements.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the increasing pressure from Selinous, the 6th century seems to have been something of a golden age in ancient western Sicily. There were more

settlements than at any other time in antiquity. By the late 6th century there were probably 25,000+ people living in the hilly inland area where we work (compared to half that number in Salemi alone today). Aigesta (modern Segesta), just five miles north of Monte Polizzo, was probably the biggest settlement, and Eryx (modern Erice) the second; but Monte Polizzo was not far behind, with a population of probably 1500-2000 people. Later Greek writers say that Segesta was the leading community of the Elymian people. They tell us that in 580 BC the Elymians and the Phoenicians on the coasts united to defeat a Greek attempt to found a colony at Marsala. Several inland sites show signs of destruction around this time, and it's possible that there was some general war. Some historians even link it to events in the east Mediterranean, but that's highly speculative.

Throughout the 6th, 5th, and 4th centuries, the hills around Monte Polizzo were one of the most hotly contested landscapes in the Mediterranean. Initial pollen analyses from the Swedish excavations suggest that there were very few trees in this area, and that the whole region was intensively cultivated. It was prime real estate. The late 6th century is particularly well represented at Monte Polizzo, and most of you will be excavating deposits or analyzing artifacts of this period. Possibly the Elymians were able to take advantage of their position midway between the Greek and Phoenician colonies to supply both, growing wealthy in the process. But it was a fragile balance. In 510, a Spartan adventurer named Dorieus tried to found another Greek colony, and provoked another successful Elymian-Phoenician alliance. But as we explained in section 4, by about 450 BC two-thirds of the rural sites in inland west Sicily had been abandoned. Some archaeologists have suggested that there was a massive economic decline and demographic collapse; but in our preliminary reports on Monte Polizzo, we've argued instead that there was a gradual concentration of population in a few large centers (Entella, Halikyai, Erice, and especially Segesta). The indigenous elites were getting richer and more powerful, building temples that rivaled the finest that the Greeks could manage at Selinunte. In the 460s-440s BC we hear about an indigenous Sicel chief in east Sicily, named Douketios, who fought back against Syracuse by concentrating the Sicels in one town and organizing it like a Greek state. We suggest that the same was happening in west Sicily somewhat earlier, around 500: resisting Greek incursions called for more organized military and economic power, which a few big towns like Segesta could provide better than a lot of small towns like Monte Polizzo. The result: the small towns were squeezed out, and, like Monte Polizzo, abandoned by 450 BC. We've also suggested that some of the differences in material culture between Monte Polizzo and larger towns like Segesta and Entella can be explained in terms of this process, particularly the conservatism of Monte Polizzo's religious practices and pottery styles. People in some of the old towns didn't want to get with the new program. They preferred traditional incised and grayware vessels to the new-fangled Greek stuff, and liked to carry on worshipping in small round hut-shrines, dancing around with antlers on their heads, instead of paying to build huge Greek-style temples.

We think the 6th-5th century was a time of intense conflicts, both between native peoples and Greeks and between native communities. We know very little yet about their internal organization, and this is one of our big goals for the dig—to get some sense of what kind of wealth differentials there were in Monte Polizzo, what these people believed in, how they fed themselves, how comfortable their lives were, and what kinds of boundaries they drew both within their own communities and between themselves and outsiders. But despite all the conflicts, this was also a high point for the indigenous peoples of Iron Age inland western Sicily: leaving aside the growth of Palermo into a super-city of 300,000 people in the 11th

century AD, rural west Sicilian towns wouldn't be so numerous, so large, or so rich again until the 19th century AD. The late 6th century also saw great changes in the Greek cities in Sicily. Several were taken over by individual rulers (what the Greeks called *tyrannoi*, from which our word tyrant comes), who succeeded in centralizing power in their own hands. In the 490s, Hippocrates, the tyrant of Gela in southeastern Sicily, created a short-lived but substantial empire. In the 480s his successor Gelon took over Syracuse, and became one of the most powerful men in the Greek world. In western Sicily Akragas and Selinous had their own powerful tyrants, who extended their territory and brought in new wealth. They began building the breathtaking series of temples that can still be seen in Agrigento and Selinunte—among the most impressive examples of Greek architecture anywhere.

In 2003, most of you will be excavating in the 6th-century settlement, and particularly in zone A, Monte Polizzo's religious center. We've made great strides toward understanding native religion. Their cult involved the hunting, sacrifice, burning, and eating of deer; drinking wine; and some kind of ritual manipulation of deer antlers. We think the divinity was associated with nature and the earth, and may have been interpreted by the Greeks as a local version of their own goddess Artemis. We've excavated an altar where the 6th-century worshippers burned the deer, and an iron cleaver which they probably used to chop the carcasses up. We've also found the jawbone of a 12-14 year-old human. A site in Etruria called Pian di Civita has an interesting parallel to our zone A deposits: somewhat earlier (9th-8th century) these Etruscans produced large deposits of ash and red deer antler, and buried several children among them. The zone A bone may come from a similar child grave, disturbed in the 6th century BC. In 2004 we're going to expand the area excavated, go deeper in search of activity dating from before the round hut-shrine A1 was built, complete the excavation of building A5 on a terrace in the west side of the ridge, and hopefully get a better idea of how the area was used in the 7th century.

#### 5.4 *Classical Sicily*

By the late 6th century Carthage, a Phoenician colony near the modern city of Tunis, had become a major power in its own right. It made a peace treaty with Rome in 509 dividing up trade in the west Mediterranean, and it controlled much of Sardinia. In 480, Carthage sent a large army into western Sicily. We don't have an account written from the Carthaginian side. Some Greek writers claimed that back in 483 the Carthaginian leadership had held secret meetings with Xerxes, the ruler of Persia, and had planned to attack the Greek world simultaneously from the east and the west, though that seems far-fetched. More likely the Carthaginians were worried that the rulers of Syracuse were getting too strong a grip over the Greek cities of western Sicily, and planned a kind of police action, to restore the *status quo ante* by capturing the Greek city of Himera. In any case, the Syracusans destroyed the Carthaginian army outside Himera. One story says that the astounding Greek temples at Agrigento (definitely worth visiting: one of the world's great archaeological sites) were built largely by Carthaginian prisoners of war enslaved after the battle of Himera.

As we pointed out in section 4, this is just about the time that most of the indigenous sites in inland western Sicily were abandoned. Monte Polizzo was one of these: we have late 6th-century pottery from most places on the acropolis, but then almost nothing that dates between 500 and 350 BC. We want to know why our site—and most others in the area—went out of use. Most likely the Elymians retreated to Segesta, Erice, Entella, and Halkyai (probably under Salemi), commuting from these centers to farm the hills around Monte Polizzo. The

major native centers apparently flourished in the 5th century; in the 430s Segesta replaced its large 6th-century temple with the famous, spectacular Doric temple that you'll all visit, and became a major diplomatic force, playing the various Mediterranean great powers off against each other to preserve its independence. The Segestans did very well, but their maneuvers led to disaster for everyone else in the late fifth century.

A historian named Diodorus, a native of Sicily writing in the 1st century BC, tells us that in 416 BC

a war broke out between the Segestans and Selinuntines from a difference over territory, where a river [probably the Mazaro, which starts on Monte Polizzo] divided the lands of the quarreling cities. The Selinuntines, crossing the stream, at first seized by force the land along the river, but later they cut off for their own a large piece of the adjoining territory, utterly disregarding the rights of the injured parties. The people of Segesta, aroused to anger, at first endeavored to persuade them by verbal arguments not to trespass on the territory of another city; however, when no one paid any attention to them, they advanced with an army against those who held the territory, expelled them all from their fields, and themselves seized the land. Since the quarrel between the two cities had become serious, the two parties, having mustered soldiers, sought to bring about a decision by recourse to arms. Consequently, when both forces were drawn up in battle-order, a fierce battle took place in which the Selinuntines were the victors, having slain not a few Segestans. Since the Segestans had been humbled and were not strong enough of themselves to offer battle, they at first tried to induce the people of Agrigento and Syracuse to enter into an alliance with them. Failing in this, they sent ambassadors to Carthage to beseech its aid. And when the Carthaginians would not listen to them, they looked about for some alliance overseas; and in this, chance came to their aid. (Diodorus 12.82)

The chance that came to their aid was an alliance with Athens. Athens was the most powerful city in Aegean Greece, and was trying to build up a power base in Sicily. In 418 or 417, Athens made treaties with Segesta and Halikyai, which may well be Salemi itself. Fragments of inscriptions recording the actual terms have been found on the Acropolis in Athens.

Thucydides said that there had been earlier treaties, probably made in the 420s, and the 418/417 inscriptions probably merely renewed these. Like most great powers, Athens made a lot of treaties, but only honored them when it had something to gain. When Carthage refused to help Segesta in 416, the Segestans pulled one of the greatest scams in ancient history. They asked Athens to intervene, promising to pay for the war if Athens would attack Selinous. The Athenians, sensing a chance to establish themselves better in Sicily, sent ambassadors to check out the Segestans' claims to have great wealth, and the Segestans fooled them. They took them to the temple of Aphrodite in Erice and showed them chests which (they claimed) were full of gold and silver; but under the top layer, the chests were just full of rocks. They also took the ambassadors to dinner party after dinner party, with elaborate gold dishes at each one; but in fact it was just the same set of gold dishes being passed from house to house. The Athenians fell for it, discovering only when it was too late that Segesta didn't really have the money to pay for the war. But Athens had in any case set her ally's interests to one side. Instead of attacking Selinous, the Athenians used the Segesta-Selinous crisis as the pretext for a direct assault on Syracuse in 415. The two-year siege cost more than 50,000 lives, and ended in total Athenian defeat. Books 6 and 7 of Thucydides' *History* give an unforgettable account. It was a turning-point in Mediterranean history.

Segesta was in a tight spot after Athens' defeat in 413. In 410 Selinous attacked again and tried to take over even more territory; the fertile hills around Monte Polizzo and Salemi would once again have been at the center of the dispute. Ignoring the disastrous consequences of their previous appeal to outside great powers, the Segestans again asked Carthage to save them, and this time—for reasons we don't understand—the Carthaginians said yes. Prior to

410, the Phoenicians seem to have had little interest in actually taking over territory in Sicily (unlike the Greeks). Even in 480, Carthage was probably interested mainly in restoring the balance of power. But the Segestan call for help unleashed a huge series of wars. Armies marched from one end of Sicily to the other in 409, 406-405, and 398-396. The wars cost tens of thousands more lives. Selinunte, Himera, Agrigento, Gela, and Mozia were left in ruins, and terrible plagues ravaged Sicily and Carthage. Halikyai had a narrow escape from destruction in 397. A brutal tyrant named Dionysius seized power in Syracuse. He spent almost as much time using mercenaries to fight his fellow citizens as he did fighting external enemies, but he got most of Sicily and parts of southern Italy under his control by the 370s. The other big winner was Carthage: by the 370s it had established formal political control over western Sicily, dominated by the new city of Lilybaion, under modern Marsala.

The hills around Monte Polizzo were no longer a no-man's land. They now lay firmly within the Carthaginian sphere, and there are signs that rural population revived in the 4th century. Interestingly, a lot of the new sites have distinctively Punic (the word archaeologists use for Carthaginian culture in this period, derived from the Latin word for Phoenicians, *Poeni*) material culture. There's a spectacular example at Monte Adranone, near the south coast of Sicily between Selinunte and Sciacca. Monte Polizzo was no exception: a small shelter was built on the very top of the hill around 350 BC, and since 2001 we've found a Punic limestone stele, 10 Punic bronze coins, and 5 limestone dice. The 4th-century material culture from Monte Polizzo is very different from that of the 6th century.

### 5.5 *Hellenistic and Roman Sicily*

Much is obscure about 4th-century Sicily. In the 370s Dionysius of Syracuse was perhaps the most powerful Greek alive. He directly or indirectly controlled all of Sicily except the area where we're working, and was busy fighting wars in mainland Italy, across the Adriatic, and in Greece. But after he died in 367 Syracuse tore itself apart in bloody civil wars. It remained a major center for a few years (this was the time when Plato showed up there to put his plan for philosopher-kings into action by educating the young Dionysius II, only to have the ungrateful student sell him into slavery), but by the 350s demographic collapse had set in all over Sicily. We really don't know why, though we can identify some important factors. One was disease: a plague broke out among the Athenians besieging Syracuse in 414, and returned in 405, 396, and several more times. A second was disorder: Greeks and Carthaginians alike hired large numbers of mercenary soldiers, especially from Spain and Campania in southern Italy, and just turned them loose (often without paying them) when they were done. Some ex-mercenaries became bandits; others took over whole towns. In 405 a group of Campanians captured Entella, just a few miles east of Salemi, and since the 1980s archaeologists have dug up an amazing series of inscriptions there showing that people were still using the Campanian dialect in the 280s BC.

Things got so bad that in 337 the Greek city of Corinth, which had founded Syracuse nearly 400 years before, sent a man named Timoleon to restore things. He chased off Carthage and brought more than 60,000 Greek immigrants to Sicily. By the 320s the Greek cities on the coast were flourishing once again. By this point, in sharp contrast to the situation in the 6th century, there's no real difference between the material culture that we excavate in the Greek sites and what we find in inland sites. The NIU excavations in Salemi in 2001-2003 found 4th-century levels dominated by Greek-style Black Glaze pottery, and neutron activation analysis has shown that it comes from different clay sources than the 6th-century pottery from Monte



Polizzo. This whole period is very obscure, and if we can cast any light on the mid-4th-century demographic collapse and subsequent Greek revival, that'd be a major contribution.

At the end of the 4th century a new Syracusan tyrant, Agathocles, began a series of wars that once again came close to uniting all of Sicily. In 307 he even put Carthage under siege, causing such panic that (according to Diodorus, writing 250 years later) the Carthaginians engaged in an orgy of baby-burning to appease their savage gods. They survived, and with Agathocles' death Carthage reasserted its power over western Sicily.

The 3rd-century Greek cities were wealthy and cosmopolitan. Sicily boasted some of the greatest Greek poets, like Theocritus, and scientists, like Archimedes. But politically, demographically, economically, and militarily, their days were numbered. Both the Aegean world and Italy had gone through great changes. Since 338, the kings of Macedonia had dominated the Aegean city-states, and between 336 and 323 Alexander had conquered the entire Persian Empire. This pulled the economic center of gravity of the Greek world to the east, and also generated previously unimagined levels of wealth among the Greek ruling classes. Meanwhile, Rome had conquered most of the Italian mainland, and some elements in the Roman elite were looking for ways to draw the Greek cities of southern Italy under their control. The struggles that began around 300 drew in more and more players. In 282 Rome went to war with the Greek city Taras (modern Taranto), which asked Pyrrhus of Epirus (modern Albania) to come to its aid. Pyrrhus saw a chance to get a toehold in Italy, and in 280-279 defeated the Romans twice. However, the Roman inflicted such heavy casualties on him that he's said to have told one of his soldiers "One more victory over the Romans and we are completely done for" (Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus* 21.9; hence our expression Pyrrhic victory). So in 278 he abandoned Taras and took his army to Sicily, thinking that Syracuse and Carthage would be weaker opponents than Rome. He captured Erice by storm (well worth thinking about what an accomplishment that was is you visit Erice, a great medieval town on top of a steep mountain). He caused a lot of trouble, but achieved very little. The main outcome of his raid was that in 276 Selinous and Segesta defected from their old alliance with Carthage to join Pyrrhus. After he abandoned them too, going back to Italy. A final defeat in 275 persuaded him to return to Greece, where a woman stunned him with a rooftile and a man stabbed him to death during a street battle in Argos.

Pyrrhus' invasion left Sicily in chaos once again, and this time Rome reaped the profits. Rome found an excuse to intervene in 264, when a group of ex-mercenaries seized Messina. The former government of Messina asked Rome to restore them. The Roman Senate decided that this was just (and would also be easy). The mercenaries holding Messina then made an alliance with Carthage, but Rome intervened anyway, beginning a terrible 23-year war. Most of it was fought at sea between enormous fleets; the casualties on each side ran well up into six figures. The last ten years of the conflict consisted of a Roman siege of Lilybaeum (modern Marsala) and a guerrilla war through the hills of western Sicily. From the top of Monte Polizzo you can see the entire theater of war. So far nothing from the First Punic War period has been found on the site, though it's probably only a matter of time before it does. The Romans won in the end by outlasting Carthage, raising more money and men. In 241 Lilybaion fell, and Sicily came under Roman control for the next 700 years.

The Roman conquest had a profound effect on life in Sicily. In the 2nd and 1st centuries BC Rome grew into a city of a million people, the largest that the world had seen up till that time, and Sicily was one of the major food-supplying regions. The NIU survey reveals a huge leap in the number of datable finds in the second century BC, and also a great shift in

settlement patterns. Back in the 6th century BC, most sites are on hilltops, like Monte Polizzo. In the 5th century, settlement contracted on a few centers; then in the late 4th many of these were reoccupied, gradually being abandoned in the third. In the 2nd century, settlement shifted drastically to lowland locations, which were easier for the Romans to control. This was a long-term, shift. The pattern lasted for 500 years. Population declined slightly in the 3rd century AD, only to peak again in the 5th century AD. The agricultural landscape had never been so intensively exploited before, and wouldn't see comparable levels of population and activity again until the 20th century. Much of the island was given over to vast estates (*latifundia*) producing grain for export, and worked by imported slaves. The estates were generally run by absentee landlords, and in 134 BC a Syrian named Eunus, who worked on an estate near Enna in the highlands of east-central Sicily, led a revolt. By 131 there may have been 70,000 rebels (Diodorus says 200,000, but no one believes him). It took several Roman legions to defeat the revolt. There was a terrible siege at the spectacular town of Taormina in eastern Sicily (a great place to visit after the dig). Diodorus says that the Romans "reduced the rebels to such indescribable famine and suffering that they began to eat the children, then the women, and were finally even driven to eating one another." The Romans climbed the almost vertical cliffs, captured the city by treachery, and crucified everyone in it. The end of the revolt came when the Romans stormed the equally formidable fortress of Enna, and Eunus and 600 picked men committed suicide rather than be captured (probably wisely).

After 131 BC the Romans reorganized production on Sicily. There was one more great slave revolt, which began in 104 BC, in the hills around Salemi; but this too was brutally crushed, and there were no more major uprisings. The other really famous episode in Roman Sicily came between 73 and 71 BC, when a man named Verres was sent to run Sicily as its proconsul. He was corrupt even by Rome's remarkably low standards, selling guilty verdicts, shaking down entire cities, and even crucifying one Roman citizen for refusing to pay bribes. But what made Verres stand out was that he actually got prosecuted, by a rising lawyer named Cicero. Verres packed the jury and manipulated the calendar to avoid trial till 70. To everyone's surprise he was found guilty, but, Rome being what it was, Cicero agreed to a mild penalty to avoid offending all the important people who had received favors from Verres. In his brief against Verres Cicero mentions rich landowners from Alicia (the Roman name for Halikyai, probably Salemi), with the Greek names Sopatros and Eumenides, and also tells us that another Alician had made a profit of 15,000 sesterces on tax collection in 71 BC. This was the happiest age for super-wealthy Sicilian landowners until the Bourbon regime in the 18th century.

There are big Roman villas with fine mosaics in Marsala, Palermo, and other west Sicilian towns. The major site in our area was Alicia. As noted several times above, this may be under Salemi, but there's been hardly any excavation in town. Back in 1893, Baron Antonio Salinas (a huge name in west Sicilian archaeology; the museum in Palermo is named after him) carried out the only systematic excavations of ancient material in Salemi till NIU began work there in 2001. In town he found a fine mosaic of the 2nd century BC (the inscriptions on it are published in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 33 [1983] 218 no. 744), along with parts of adjacent rooms from a substantial Roman town house. There are a few bits of literary evidence suggesting that Alicia did well under Rome. It had the privileged status of "free city," and it had citizens rich enough to attract Verres' attention. In the 1st century AD Pliny called Alicia a *civitas*, and it was still a recognized town in the 3rd century. Digs in the 1970s found pottery of the 1st through 4th centuries AD at several small sites around Salemi, and the NIU

survey has recovered a lot of artifacts from the whole period c. 200 BC-AD 500. There was a slight decline in the first two centuries AD, but even at its lowest point that number of Roman artifacts is far higher than at any other time in antiquity.

### 5.6 *The end of the Roman Empire*

In the 160s AD things began to go seriously wrong in the Roman Empire. Bubonic plague broke out, killing millions, and returned regularly for generations. At the same time, more and more Germanic peoples were trying to move into the empire. Sometimes they were welcomed. Population was in decline, and the Germans would be extra taxpayers and potential defenders of the frontiers. But sometimes they were uncontrollable, and disorder along the frontiers could turn into real wars. In the 3rd century the empire lost control, and security broke down. Central authority was restored in the 280s after fifty years of chaos, but things were never quite the same again. There had been a major shift in power, from the emperors to the regional aristocracies, and much of the peasants' surplus that had previously been drawn to Rome as tax now stayed in the local elites' hands as rent.

Population declined, pressure on the frontiers grew, and landlords squeezed more and more out of the peasantry. The emperors had increasing trouble keeping raiders out. Finally, the Romans lost control of things in the Balkans in 378 and a large band of Goths went on the rampage. Whenever possible the Romans bought them off, and when they couldn't do that, they hired other Goths to fight them. In 408 Alaric the Goth besieged Rome, and got a huge bribe to go away; but he came back in 410 and sacked Rome anyway—the first time anyone had done that in exactly 800 years.

Meanwhile, things were going from bad to worse. In 375 the Huns moved out of central Asia, destroyed a Gothic kingdom in the Ukraine, and started a snowballing population movement into the Mediterranean basin. The Rhine frontier collapsed on New Year's Day, 406. German tribes overran France. The Vandals moved on into Spain in 409. The next year, after his sack of Rome, Alaric moved into southern Italy, planning to cross to Sicily and north Africa, but died there. In 429 the Vandals invaded Africa and took Carthage, beginning a long series of raids on Sicily. In 455 they sacked Rome, deliberately destroying its art works (hence our word vandalism).

By this point, the western Roman Empire had effectively ceased to exist as a political organization. In theory there were still emperors, but Gothic warriors ran things. In 476, Odoacer, the most powerful of the Goths, simply deposed the young emperor Romulus Augustulus, and took charge for himself. This is usually treated as the symbolic end of the western Roman Empire. The eastern (Byzantine) parts of the empire were also struggling against Germanic and Persian invaders, but weathered the 5th-century storm.

The interesting thing is that despite political chaos, most parts of the Mediterranean experienced an economic boom in the period c. 300-550. Sicily was no exception. The NIU survey suggests that population was growing around Monte Polizzo (though there's nothing, as yet, from the site itself), and Salinas' 1893 investigations uncovered part of a church with 5th- and 6th-century mosaic floors at San Miceli, on the northern edge of Salemi. One of the fifth-century mosaic floors has Greek inscriptions on it, recording the names of two local Christians, Quodvultdeus and Maxima (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 36 [1986] 248-49 nos. 828-31). There was also a tomb, of to the presbyter Dionysus, probably dating soon after 500.

The San Miceli mosaics are still in place, protected by a locked building. They're quite pretty, and formed part of a larger complex, including a pottery kiln. There may have been a

separate village here through the whole Roman period, since Roger Wilson, the leading expert on Roman Sicily, says he saw 2nd-century AD sherds on the site. Some people in Salemi have been trying to raise money to restore them and set up a proper visitors' center, but at the moment to see them you have to talk to the owner of the Persian imports shop in the old town, who looks after the key. There's quite a bit of controversy over the date of the San Miceli mosaics, but they're probably just slightly later than the much grander examples at Piazza Armerina in east-central Sicily, which may have belonged to a Roman emperor. Piazza Armerina is a must-see. Its mosaics include the famous "girl in a bikini," one of the most-photographed images in late Roman art.

The basilica at San Miceli was a Christian structure. At the beginning of the 4th century, Christianity had still been a minority sect in the empire, but after the emperor Constantine converted in 312 (to get support in a civil war) the Church quickly became the richest institution in Europe. Syracuse had had a Christian community as early as 61, when Paul stopped there on his way to Rome, but it wasn't a major religious center in the Christianized empire of the 5th century (the Sees of Rome and Carthage were vastly more important).

### 5.7 *Medieval Sicily*

When Justinian took over as Byzantine emperor in 527, the Empire's finances had improved enough for an attempt to reconquer the western empire. His general Belisarius took control of Sicily in a single campaign in 535, and destroyed the Vandal kingdom in North Africa in a couple more years. By 553 Justinian had taken back most of Italy, and in 554 seized part of Spain. But these wars bankrupted Byzantium, and in 568—just three years after Justinian's death—a new group of Germans, the Lombards, overran Italy.

Between about 565 and 700 we can speak of a transition from the ancient to the medieval world. Very severe plagues ravaged the Byzantine empire. By 600 population was tumbling everywhere, and trade shrinking. In 610 a then-obscure Arab named Mohammed had a vision of the archangel Gabriel, and started preaching Islam (submission to the way of God). In 634 his successor Omar led armies into the Byzantine Empire in the first *jihad*. They took Damascus in 635 and Jerusalem in 638; in 642 they took Alexandria and overthrew the Persian Empire. The first Arab raid hit Sicily in 652. At this point the Arab fleet was tiny, but the Byzantines felt that the threat was real enough for emperor Constans II to come to the west in person in 662. He worried that if the Arabs overran Sicily and southern Italy, Byzantine Greece would be surrounded by Islam. Things didn't go well for Constans. Despite his presence, Mu'awiya ben Khudayj, caliph of Egypt, sent a much bigger raid in 667, which carried off tremendous plunder and slaves; and in the same year Mu'awiya ben Abi-Sufyan launched the first of many Arab assaults on Constantinople (modern Istanbul), the Byzantine capital. Beset by crises on all sides, Constans was murdered by his own troops in Siracusa in 668.

Things just got worse and worse. In 698 Arabs took Carthage, the last Byzantine stronghold in North Africa. A great Byzantine counterattack from Sicily failed in 702, and from that point on the initiative was firmly in Arab hands. The Byzantine Empire had been reduced to a rump around Constantinople, plus Sicily and southern Italy. All three areas were under constant attack. In 711 the Arabs invaded Spain and India; in the west, they were only turned back in 732, on the outskirts of Paris. Many Christians thought that the apocalypse was near, and things got very weird. Byzantine Christianity had long attached importance to beautiful religious icons, whereas Islam (following Judaism) banned artistic representations of

religious subjects. In the 720s a movement called Iconoclasm (“image-smashing”) caught on in Byzantium in an effort to recapture God’s favor, on the assumption that God preferred the Muslim rejection of representational art. Traditional religious authorities resisted this, and by the 740s Byzantine Christians were killing each other over iconoclasm almost as quickly as the Muslims were killing them.

The Byzantines were too busy fighting each other, the Arabs in the east, and the Slavs in the Balkans to do much for Sicily and Italy. Major Arab raids plundered the island most years between 727 and 753. The 8th century was a real Dark Age in Sicily, as it was in much of the Mediterranean. We know of so little activity on the island that some archaeologists suspect that there must be a technical problem that has prevented us from identifying 8th-century pottery correctly. But that is at most only part of the problem. 250 years of plagues and a century of Arab raids caused population and trade to collapse.

Habib ben Ubayda probably would have occupied Sicily in 740 had he not been recalled to fight a Berber revolt in what is now Algeria. Western Christians felt that they were on their own. The Bishop of Rome made a separate alliance with Pepin, king of the Franks, in 754, and from then on distanced himself from the Eastern Church. This finally drove the Byzantine emperor Constantine V to do something about the west. He sent a large fleet in 754, which defeated Arab plans to invade both Sicily and Sardinia. He also confiscated vast papal lands in Sicily. The political/religious situation was even messier in the second half of the 8th century than before, with Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Greeks scheming against each other.

Constantine V’s intervention stabilized Byzantine rule, and for roughly sixty years there were no major raids. But it was expensive to hold the Arabs off, and by 800 the Byzantines were cutting back, with disastrous results. In 812, only the loss of an Arab fleet in a major storm and a last-minute intervention by the Frankish emperor Charlemagne saved Sardinia and Sicily. In 826 there was a new crisis, this time entirely of Byzantine making. One account of the events says that Euphemios, commander of the Byzantine fleet in Sicily, fell in love with a nun named Homoniza. He forced her to marry him. Constantine, the general in charge of Sicily, was an enemy of Euphemios, and reported the matter to emperor Michael II. Michael ordered Constantine to end the marriage and to cut off Euphemios’ nose. Euphemios, not surprisingly, rebelled. He killed Constantine and occupied Siracusa. His troops declared him emperor. But another general, Balatas, then rose against Euphemios and defeated him in turn. Euphemios now fled to North Africa and offered rule over Sicily to Ziyadat-Allah, if he would agree to keep Euphemios, with his nose intact, as governor. There was heated debate in Cairo over whether it was just to break the treaty with Byzantium. The advocates of *jihad* prevailed, and in June 827 an Islamic army of Arabs, Berbers, Spaniards, Cretans, and Persians sailed for Sicily.

In 1789 a Maltese scholar named Giuseppe Vella published a text called the *Arab Diplomatic Codex*, which contained two letters dated March 26th and April 2nd 828, from Ahsed-ben-forat, the general in charge of the Arab force that took Marsala, to one Aadelkum-el-Kahbir. The letters told how after capturing Marsala, 20,000 Arabs marched inland and took Alicia after two days of fighting. 918 Arabs were killed, including Ahsed’s son Ahsed Saleiman. Alicia was renamed Saleiman (later corrupted to the form Salemi) in his honor.

This story links Salemi directly to Roman Alicia and Elymian Halikyai. Unfortunately, 19th-century philologists proved that the *Arab Diplomatic Codex* is actually a forgery. Genuine Sicilian texts, from the 16th century on, gloss “Salemi” as a corruption of an Arabic word

meaning “place of delights.” We still can’t be sure that Salemi was Alicia, although the NIU excavations may yet come up with proof.

The *Arab Diplomatic Codex* simplifies the story of the Arab conquest. The war was a see-saw affair. There were tensions between the Spanish and African Muslims, and several Byzantine victories. Things were up in the air in western Sicily till September 831, when the Arabs captured Palermo. After that it was clear that the Arabs were there to stay, and over the next 11 years immigrants from North Africa took over most of the land in the Val di Mazara. From 842 on the theater of war shifted to eastern Sicily. The Arab conquest of the west left many Byzantine fortresses in ruins, and a number of towns were rebuilt in typical Arab style. A small part of Salemi between the Jesuit College and via Bastone has a very Arabic-looking street plan, which may go back to the 9th century. Immigrants from North Africa (not actually Arabs, but Islamic Berbers from Algeria) continued to move into western Sicily. By 950, there were probably half a million Muslims living in the Val di Mazara. The area around Salemi and Monte Polizzo was thoroughly Islamic in the 10th through 12th centuries.

Arab rule in Sicily was tolerant, so long as Christians and Jews paid their taxes. Palermo grew into a major port under the Kalbite dynasty (940-1052), with a population of perhaps 300,000. Here Arabs from Spain and North Africa exchanged goods with Christians from Italy and France. The Arabs diversified Sicilian agriculture by introducing cotton from Syria, pistachios from Persia, and sugar cane, most often produced in western Sicily by slaves. Arab farmers improved irrigation and extended olive and citrus cultivation. Some experts think that ice cream was invented in Arab Sicily, and perhaps even spaghetti. The growth of Palermo, Mazara, Trapani, and Marsala in the 10th century improved markets for agricultural goods, and farming expanded. The NIU survey found evidence of an expansion of settlement in the Islamic period, and at Monte Polizzo, people returned between 950 and 1050 and built new houses, using the ruins of 1500-year-old Iron Age structures as their foundations. We know that this was part of the general Islamic economic revival, but we don’t know exactly what these new settlers were doing, or what they thought about the ruins that they renovated.

By 1050 western Sicily was ethnically and culturally quite distinct from central and eastern Sicily. It was overwhelmingly Muslim, and had large plantations run by slave labor, often producing sugar.

In the 11th century the various groups warring over southern Italy (Byzantines, Lombards, Popes, and local powers) started hiring particularly ferocious mercenaries from among the Normans. The Normans were descendants of Vikings who had settled in northern France in 896 and had received legal title there in 911. They only gradually converted to Christianity across the 10th century, and everyone wanted them as mercenaries. They fought and settled in Russia, creating the state of Novgorod; attempted coups in Byzantium; and colonized Iceland, Greenland, and (briefly) Newfoundland. In 1066, Duke William seized the throne of England for himself, and in southern Italy, his relatives realized that they were stronger than the states that employed them. In 1059 Robert Guiscard negotiated his own deal with the Pope and became Duke of Calabria and Apulia. In 1061 he took Messina, and in 1072 Palermo, destroying Arab power. The Normans formed a small but violent ruling class. They destroyed many of the Arab towns in Sicily, and very few physical remains survive from the Arab era. The La Kalsa neighborhood in Palermo, near the train station, has much of the plan and feel of an Arab city, but this isn’t a good area to be wandering round. Despite the Normans’ violence, they came to terms with the Arabs, enough of whom stayed in Palermo to

keep it going as a trading center. The small settlement at Monte Polizzo also survived the conquest.

The 12th century was one of Sicily's richest periods. Palermo was the undisputed marketplace of the west Mediterranean, and Norman lords introduced still more new crops. Most Sicilian sugar was cultivated by imported chattels from Slavic lands (from whom our words "slaves" comes), but slavery was in fact growing increasingly rare in the Middle Ages. In its place, the feudal system had been evolving since the 10th century. Feudalism worked on the principle of superior lords delegating control over resources (particularly land and people) to inferior lords, in return for various obligations (particularly military). A minor lord would serve as a knight and provide foot soldiers for the king in return for lands and control over serfs. He might then grant some of these lands and serfs on to other lesser knights, or hold them directly himself. Feudalism produced a complex world, with overlapping chains of authority and loyalty. Often Church and personal ties so fragmented authority that it was hard to speak of a "state" at all. Sicily had an unusual version of feudalism, though. The Normans had conquered southern Italy by putting together alliances of dozens of ambitious lords, each of whom gave his allegiance only in return for a fief of lands and peasants. But when Robert Guiscard overran Sicily, he brought very few lords with him. This made his job harder, but once he got control, he kept more power in royal hands than was possible on the mainland. Sicily was probably the most centralized kingdom in Catholic Europe. An unusual number of Sicilian villages were autonomous, paying taxes to the king, but not belonging directly to a local lord. We don't know Monte Polizzo's status, but Salemi was part of the king's demesne, or personal holding.

The Normans built spectacular churches and palaces. You should definitely see the cathedrals at Monreale and Cefalù. Erice preserves a lot of its medieval character, and the Cappella Palatina and Palazzo dei Normanni in Palermo are the masterpieces of Arab-Norman architecture. The church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti in Palermo is a Norman-period building but looks much more Arabic with its red domes. The Castle in Salemi dates back to Islamic times, but the version we see now was built in 1210 (the chains and planks were added after the 1968 earthquake). The castle was officially reopened with a grand ceremony in summer 2002, and in 2003 was open reasonably often.

German (Swabian) kings replaced the Norman dynasty in 1194, but the dynastic change was less important than the social, economic, and cultural changes that were under way in the 12th and 13th century. Kings all over Europe were getting more control over their unruly barons and the Church, strengthening the institutions of the central state and capturing a larger share of the revenue flows within their territories. One way to do this was by demonstrating the superiority of state institutions over other kinds of institutions, by doing things that only the state was in a position to do. In 1224 Frederick II founded Europe's first state university, on the mainland at Naples; and in 1230 he drew up a new constitution, including Europe's first codification of civil law since Justinian, 700 years earlier. Naples and Palermo had wealthy, cosmopolitan, and educated elites, moving back and forth between French, German, Greek, Italian, Arabic, and Jewish culture.

A second way to demonstrate the need for greater state power was by persecuting internal enemies and persuading people to submit to central authority as a way to resist these threats. From England to Sicily there were crackdowns on heretics, Jews, lepers, and homosexuals. The Swabian kings put pressure on Arabs, and after a revolt at Mazara in 1221, expelled all Muslims from Sicily. That was a bad idea. The reign of Frederick II (1197-1250)

was in many ways Sicily's grandest period, but economic decline had already begun. Then in 1270 a Sicilian army brought back a new variety of the plague from North Africa, and a sharp demographic decline began. Tax documents record that Salemi was unable to pay its dues several times in the late 13th century. Monte Polizzo was abandoned again during the 13th century, like many rural sites. Calatafimi near Segesta lasted a little longer, but by 1400 Salemi was virtually the only town in the region.

Economic crises brought on political crises, and in 1266 Charles I of Anjou seized the throne in Palermo. This was a pretty good prize for a minor member of the French royal family, but Charles had even bigger things in mind. In 1204 French and Norman crusaders, supposedly on their way to Jerusalem, had sacked Constantinople and divided up most of what remained of the Byzantine Empire among themselves. In 1261 Greeks had recaptured Constantinople, but Charles retained a family claim on the throne. In 1268 he started organizing an army to assert his claim. He thought he had papal blessing—vital for getting legitimacy—but in fact the Pope had sold him out, and made his own deal with the Byzantines in 1274. Charles' mission evaporated, but in 1281 he got a new papal blessing, and started putting together an army and navy at Messina. His many enemies had been plotting for 15 years to kick him out of Sicily, and were terrified by the new situation. So the king of Aragon, Swabian exiles from Sicily, and King Michael Palaiologos of Byzantium formed a plot together. Michael bankrolled an uprising against the unpopular French rulers in Sicily. On March 30th 1282, the normal ringing of church bells for Vespers in Palermo was instead the signal for a bloodbath. Shouting "Death to the French," hundreds of Sicilians stormed the palace and slaughtered the court.

One result of the Vespers uprising was that a Spanish dynasty from Aragon replaced the French dynasty from Anjou. But there were more important results. The various Popes' disgraceful double-dealings were exposed, and the resulting decline in the papacy's already low moral authority seriously weakened the institution. Through much of the 14th century there were two Popes, one in Rome and one in exile at Avignon. By 1418 there were no fewer than three competing Popes; and a century later, Martin Luther began the Reformation. The Sicilian Vespers also provides much of the background to Dante's *Inferno*.

The economic disasters of 14th-century Europe, culminating in the Black Death of 1347-50, hit Sicily particularly hard. In 1377 all authority collapsed, and after a quarter-century of more bitter wars, the island's independent status ended. In 1412 it was incorporated as a province of the kingdom of Aragon, under a viceroy.

### 5.8 *Modern Sicily*

The viceregal system survived till 1713, and Sicily slid from being one of the wealthiest parts of Europe to being one of its poorest. Being a colonized province is rarely a good thing, but in Sicily things were made worse by the fact that Spain itself, after a huge economic boom fueled by American silver in the 16th century, collapsed in the 17th. The Spanish kings tried to milk Sicily for everything they could get. To cap it all, the decision to expel the Jews from all provinces of Spain did as much economic damage as the Norman expulsion of the Arabs.

The Spanish kings wanted tax revenue from Sicily and for the island to stay quiet, so they would not have to spend their own cash on policing it. In return, they were prepared to make all kinds of concessions to the Sicilian aristocracy. The Sicilian elite gave up all claims to political power and their long warrior tradition in return for virtually a free hand in governing their estates. During the 16th and 17th centuries a handful of families became virtual kings in



their own right, administering vast feudal domains in the countryside. With Spanish support they sucked wealth to the top of society. Their major concerns were competing with one another, through titles and precedence at the Viceroy's court, and through adorning the towns they controlled with ever more lavish churches and monuments. The most visible buildings in most Sicilian towns (including Salemi) belong to the 17th and earlier 18th century, the so-called "Sicilian baroque." A huge eruption of Mt Etna and accompanying earthquakes on January 9th, 1693, destroyed 23 towns in eastern Sicily. Some of these towns, like Noto, were quickly and completely rebuilt. If you like baroque churches, you'll love Noto, where you can see the Sicilian baroque in its most developed form. There are also many fine 17th- and 18th-century *palazzi* in Palermo. Some of the finest are in the suburb of Bagheria, but it's best to stay away from here, and stick to downtown.

Early-modern Sicilian history is a dismal story of rural poverty and governmental graft and incompetence. Sicily remained one of the most fertile parts of Europe, but nearly all its wealth now came from the export of wheat. The Viceroys were expected to deliver a fixed sum of cash to Madrid every year, and most of them were prepared to sell off control of the wheat trade to Sicilians in return for that amount (plus a little extra for themselves). The Sicilians who controlled the trade would then sell off exemptions from taxation to other nobles, making huge profits; and would impose enormous export taxes on everyone else. The result was constant complaints that large areas of good land were not being farmed, because the taxes on wheat were so high that the peasants would lose money if they brought it to market. The country spiraled into economic disaster and regular famines in the 18th century. The only parts of the island that the Viceroys took much notice of were Palermo and Messina, the two main cities. The urban guilds of workers often rose up in revolt in Palermo, and several times briefly ran the city as a kind of commune, though each time their leaders were co-opted and corrupted. As the wheat export trade declined, access to administrative posts and the bribes that went with them became the main source of aristocratic income, and so the location of the Viceroy's court was the most important economic fact in Sicily. The city governments of Palermo and Messina planned virtually open wars against each other over this question; the compromise solution was that the Viceroy would spend half each year in each city, requiring him to maintain two complete (but independent and antagonistic) bureaucracies and two Viceregal courts. Every year all the official records had to be shipped from Palermo to Messina and back again (until, inevitably, they were all lost in a storm). The regime's inefficiency, corruption, and incompetence are mind-boggling: 18th-century Sicily had one of the worst governments in the history of the world.

Sicily was a bargaining chip for Spanish, Austrian, French, and Neapolitan kings throughout the 18th century, but by the 19th century this kind of medieval politics was clashing with nationalist sentiment. Feudalism was only legally abolished in Sicily in 1812, by Napoleon's regime. The first of many revolts against Bourbon rule broke out in 1820; and in 1848, when revolutions rocked virtually every country in Europe, the entire island rose. King Ferdinand II bombarded them into submission.

Giuseppe Garibaldi's successful campaign to unify Italy and drive out all foreign powers began in Sicily. In May 1860, at the head of 1000 Redshirts, he landed at Marsala. His men fought some skirmishes with Bourbon forces, and marched on Salemi, the regional center. On May 14th Garibaldi announced the formation of the Italian state, with himself as dictator, and Salemi as its first capital. He declared himself dictator in what is now Mayor Mastrangelo's office in Salemi. In March 1861 he handed over power to King Vittorio

Emanuele, who ruled from Rome, although the Papal States were only forced to join Italy in 1870. The Museum in Salemi has one of the best collections of Garibaldi memorabilia. This is well worth a visit. So too the battlefield at Calatafimi, where what passed for an army under the Bourbons failed to resist Garibaldi's untrained followers, and confirmed him control of Sicily.

1860 was not the end of Sicily's troubles, however. In the late 19th century northern Italy was rapidly industrializing, while the south (the Mezzogiorno) remained agricultural. Sicily in particular lost population to the north, and in the 1890s massive emigration to America began. Industrial growth was slow in Sicily, with the main non-agricultural activity being sulfur mining. This was done in horrible conditions, with most of the underground work left to children. The new Italian state introduced compulsory primary schooling and other social schemes, but class hostilities grew ever more severe in Sicily. In 1893-94 workers' leagues organized the Fasce uprisings, which disrupted food supplies and led to famines. In 1901 there were violent clashes between striking workers and police, and in 1920 there was a full-blown farmers' rebellion against landowners, in which kidnapping was first used as a political tool. Patterns of landholding were more unequal in Sicily than in any other part of Italy. The Mafia emerged as a major force in these years, being used to break up workers' organizations and to assassinate state officials. As if these political and economic troubles were not enough, on December 28th, 1908, an earthquake destroyed Messina and killed 10,000 people.

The right-wing Christian Democrat party, which was exposed in the 1990s for its close links with the Mafia, was founded in Sicily as the Partito Popolare in 1919. But this was relatively mild by interwar Italian standards. Socialist uprisings shut down Milan and Turin in 1920, and in 1922 Benito Mussolini's Fascists seized the government in a coup. Political repression was the norm, and in 1930 Mussolini sent a special prefect to try to stamp out the Mafia, who were helping Sicilian landowners fight the Fascists. Some of the main Mafiosi (including the notorious Lucky Luciano) emigrated to America; those who stayed became the main anti-Fascist group in Italy. Sicily was the bane of Mussolini's existence. People simply ignored his attempts to drag them into the 20th century. He was particularly upset about the southern tradition of hours-long coffee breaks and siestas, and insisted that all state employees (a high proportion of the male population in Sicily) work 9-5. The Sicilians ignored him, and some Mafiosi won a certain amount of respectability by organizing resistance to fascism.

Sicily suffered badly during the war. After the Allies chased Rommel out of North Africa in 1943, they bombed Palermo heavily. Parts of the city have still not been rebuilt, 60 years later. In July 1943 US forces landed in western Sicily, on beaches visible from Monte Polizzo, and thanks partly to assistance from Luciano's contacts, encountered little resistance. The British and Canadians landed in eastern Sicily, where the Mafia was much weaker, and had to fight very hard battles.

Postwar Sicily remained very troubled. Sicilian separatists waged an armed rebellion against Rome in 1944-46. Bandits, police, and Mafiosi fought pitched battles and also switched sides in complicated double-crosses, but all three generally united to suppress Communists, labor organizers, and peasant cooperatives. In 1947 the bandit gang led by Salvatore Giuliano fired machine guns into a village May Day celebration at Portella della Ginestra, just outside Palermo, killing 11 people and wounding 56. Giuliano then evaded arrest for 3 years, despite making himself available for dozens of press interviews and photo shoots, meeting with the US Army's advisor in Sicily (New York Mafia boss Vito Genovese), and spending Christmas Eve 1949 with a police inspector-general. In this complicated political landscape, the Truman

Doctrine, an American commitment to helping democratic European governments rebuild and fight Communism, led to very flawed outcomes. Most historians think that by 1950 a covert alliance had formed between the Christian Democrats, police, and the Mafia, with tacit American approval, in which preventing land reform in Sicily was the price of keeping the Communists out of power.

In 1968 a devastating earthquake at Gibellina, ten miles east of Salemi, killed 400 people. Half the houses in Salemi were damaged, and more than a third of the population left the area. It took ten years for a new urban plan to be approved, and for work to begin on the lower town. The ruins of Gibellina were turned into a monument (Ruderi di Gibellina). The artist responsible, Alberto Burri, covered part of the old town with a thick layer of white cement, with cracks running through it following the lines of the streets. A new town, Nuova Gibellina, was built in the 1970s, notable for two unusual utopian features of its planning. No block can have more than one commercial outlet, because the architects felt that downtown areas were a tool of subtle capitalist hegemony; and every few blocks there's a piece of monumental outdoor art. The most famous is Consagra's "Star of Gibellina," across the road to Salemi. It also has an excellent Museum of Modern Art. But overall the effect is depressing.

The rebuilding of Gibellina, Salemi, and other towns after the 1968 earthquake generated new scandals. There were accusations that politicians with Mafia connections had diverted the emergency funds into secret bank accounts, then delayed the construction so that they could keep the interest on the money. Up till the end of the 1970s the Mafia generally worked closely with politicians (especially Christian Democrats), even offering in 1978 to free Aldo Moro, the Italian Prime Minister who had been kidnapped and was then murdered by the Red Brigade. But in the 1980s a group of families from Corleone, about twenty miles east of Salemi, fought a bloody war with families from Palermo, and took control of organized crime. The Corleonesi increasingly acted independently from the politicians, and were more willing to use violence against the state. In 1982 they murdered the prefect of Palermo. Some state officials reacted by cracking down and getting top Mafiosi—often men who expected that they themselves would become victims of the Corleonesi—to turn state's evidence. In 1987 a maxi-trial in Palermo sentenced hundreds of Mafiosi to a total of 2600 years of jail time. The Corleonesi retaliated; in May 1992 they blew up the armored cavalcade of Judge Giovanni Falcone on the highway at Capaci, near the Palermo airport, and in July 1992 they blew up Paolo Borsellino as he visited his mother in Palermo. But this time they'd gone too far. A popular backlash toppled the Christian Democrats. Giulio Andreotti, the Prime Minister until 1992, went on trial in 1993 for corruption and in 1995 for murder. New maxi-trials in 1995 and 1996 broke the power of the Corleonesi, and to add insult to injury, Palermo's airport was renamed Falcone-Borsellino (don't panic if your tickets say Punta Raisi; that's the old name). Murders and kidnappings have drastically declined since 1992, though organized crime has hardly gone away. Andreotti was acquitted on both charges in 1999 (I saw him giving commentary on a soccer match on TV in 2001, which was very bizarre), and when in 2000 the UN held its first ever conference on organized crime, it chose the obvious location—Palermo.

