

# The Greeks in Sicily

---

Dr Nicholas Vlahogiannis, Fellow, History Department, The University of Melbourne

This essay has appeared in a number of *Australians Studying Abroad's* tour handbooks.

## Introduction

In ca 825 BC,<sup>1</sup> merchants from the Greek island of Euboea established an entrepôt on the banks of the river Tiber near Rome to sell their wares to the Etruscans. Meanwhile, at the other end of the Mediterranean, other Euboeans had settled in Al Mina, a Syrian town on the mouth of the Orontes river, to trade in metal and luxury goods with the native kingdoms of Asia. Although unintended, these actions initiated the movement of peoples that lasted three centuries and scattered Greeks throughout the Mediterranean basin, from the Straits of Gibraltar to the easternmost reaches of the Black Sea. Wherever Greeks settled, they established cities and built new communities, which, over time, served as conduits for the dissemination of Greek culture.

## Sources of Information

Although there are many references to long-lost histories of ancient Greek cities, the existing literary material concerning the colonisation process and its human context is very limited. What exists is gleaned from snippets of material recorded by a number of ancient authors. These however are often clouded by mythology, such as the Homeric retelling of Odysseus's wanderings around Malta, Sicily and Sardinia, or the fabulous adventures of Jason and his Argonauts hunting the Golden Fleece in Colchis.

The main historian for the colonisation of Sicily is Thucydides, the Athenian who chronicled the war between Athens and Sparta (431-404). His interest in Sicily was background to the Athenians' ill-fated decision to invade Syracuse in 413, and his primary contribution is a chronological framework for the colonisation of Sicily. Important contributions from the lost histories of Ephorus of Cymae (405-330) and Timaeus of Taormina (350-260) are recorded in the histories of Polybius and Diodorus Siculus.

Archaeological investigations over the last hundred years in Italy, Turkey, Southern Russia, France and elsewhere, have provided most information about the colonisation movement. But there are limitations to archaeologists' ability to discover and gain access to material culture. For example, Syracuse's oldest occupation site on the Island of Ortygia is covered by millennia of later habitation, and part of it lies underwater. Many ancient colonies founded on the Black Sea coastlines of Southern Russia and Turkey today are occupied by military installations and are out of bounds to archaeologists. Although completed many decades ago, the enormously important excavations of Pithecoussa on the Island of Ischia in the bay of Naples were published only recently. According to one rumour, the local Neapolitan Mafia had retarded the publication of the archaeological reports for thirty years by threatening the excavators with physical violence.

## The Motives and Process of Colonisation

The colonisation movement (ca 825-550) can be divided into four phases. The first (ca 825/775-700) was pioneered by the Euboean cities of Eretria and Chalcis pursuing trading opportunities in central Italy. The Euboeans were already a strong and active maritime power in the Aegean when they began purchasing raw

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

materials, iron, copper and luxury goods in Asia Minor and selling them to Etruscans in central Italy. In ca 775, the Euboeans founded their first permanent colony (*apoikia*) at Pithecoussa, which soon expanded onto the mainland colony of Cumae (ca 750). Excavations at Pithecoussa have revealed a metal working quarter where iron ore mined on the Island of Elba was processed and then resold to the Etruscans as tools, jewellery and weapons. By the end of the century, Euboeans had founded colonies at Corcyra (mod. Corfu in ca 740), Naxos (734), Zancle (mod. Messina, ca 725) and Rhegion (ca 700). Each was strategically placed to control shipping lanes. Corcyra was the springboard from Greece to Italy; Naxos was the first port of call, while Zancle and Rhegion controlled the straits of Messina. By 728, Naxos, bolstered by further colonists from Chalcis, had founded Leontini and Catane, thereby taking command of the huge, fertile and well-watered plain of Catania. Never an important town, Naxos was destroyed by Dionysius of Syracuse in 403. The surviving inhabitants formed the basis of a new community at Taormina a few kilometres to the north.

The Euboean colonies attracted an international market. Remains found at Pithecoussa stemmed from Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, and many mainland Greek states. Of particular interest is a pot inscribed with Aramaic, used for the inhumation of a Greek child and, perhaps the offspring of Greek and Syrian parents. In 700, however, the Euboean domination of the Aegean trade suddenly collapsed, leaving Corinth to fill the vacuum.

The colonists of the second phase (ca 750/35-650) also looked westward. During this phase, countless men from many Greek city-states migrated to southern Italy and Sicily in search of land and a better life.<sup>2</sup> Conditions in Greece were ideal for mass migration. Geographically, Greece is a small, mountainous and barren country with very few sizeable fertile plains to feed its people. Politically, ancient Greece comprised many independent city-states with limited territory and no room for expansion. A period of social stability during the ninth and eighth centuries had resulted in an increased population that was not easily sustained by the agriculturally poor country. Meanwhile, more and more land was falling into the hands of the large landowners, adding to the landless poor and politically disaffected. In contrast, Southern Italy and Sicily were attractive destinations. By now, the coastlines of Southern Italy and Eastern Sicily had become well known to sailors and traders. The regions are climatically and geographically similar to Greece, and they had plenty of land. Many independent city states participated: Chalcidians, Corinthians, Locrians, Megarans and others were drawn by the rich volcanic soil of eastern Sicily, and the broad coastal plains of Southern Italy.

The physical character of Sicily and its attraction to new settlers were captured by Homer, who in this extract was describing the home of the Cyclops:

This isle seagoing folk would have annexed it and built their homesteads on it: all good land, fertile for every crop in season: lush well-watered meads along the shore, vines in profusion, prairie, clear for the plough, where grain would grow chin high by harvest time, and rich sub-soil. The island cove is landlocked, so you need no hawsers out astern, bow-stones or mooring. (Odyssey 9.129-136)

## The Greeks in Sicily

---

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

The city that made the greatest impression on the new world was Corinth, one of great cities of ancient Greece. Situated on the isthmus between central Greece and the Peloponnese, it controlled shipping east into the Aegean Sea and west through the Corinthian gulf into the Ionian Sea. During the seventh century its readily recognisable pottery was found throughout the Mediterranean. Despite its maritime prowess and trading interests, Corinth's sole colony was Syracuse, founded in 733 on the Island of Ortygia,<sup>3</sup> about ninety kilometres south of Naxos. By ca 700, the colonists had occupied Helorus, a strong coastal position thirty kilometres south, and by the end of the next century controlled Southern Sicily.

Megara was a nearby neighbour and constant enemy of Corinth, and their rivalry was carried to Sicily by their daughter colonies. Megara's colony, Megara Hyblaea, was founded in ca 728 on land provided by the Sicel king, Hyblon. Two hundred and forty-five years later, Gelon, the tyrant of Syracuse, destroyed the city, but not before Megara Hyblaea founded its own colony, Selinus in 651.

Ironically, having left a land which was crowded with city-states, the colonists copied the trend in Sicily and crowded the east coast of Sicily with a concentration of settlements. It was not until the Rhodian colony of Gela (ca 680) was established on the south-west coast that Greeks moved west. In ca 581, the Gelans founded their own colony further west at Acragas (mod. Agrigento).

The foundation of Gela ended the first wave of colonisation to Sicily and Southern Italy. Over the next century (ca 700-600),<sup>4</sup> interest turned east towards the northern Aegean and Thrace, the Hellespont and Propontis, and into the Black Sea. Euboea was very active and founded at least a dozen colonies in the northern Aegean and Thrace. Megara took control of the Propontis, founding among others the city of Byzantium (mod. Istanbul, in 668). Miletus, the powerful commercial and seafaring Ionian city on the River Maeander, is credited with founding some ninety colonies. The more important were on the Black Sea and included Olbia, Sinope, Amisus and Trapezus. While land was always a primary consideration in the founding of these eastern colonies, most also benefited from their proximity to trading routes and metal working regions. By the classical period, these regions had become essential to mainland Greece as providers of gold, iron, fish, timber, leather, wheat and corn.

The last phase of colonisation (ca 600-550) again moved Greeks westward. Phocaia, a Greek city on the Ionian coast, was the only community involved. According to one tradition, the Phocaians fled their homeland on the coast of Asia Minor to escape the encroaching Lydian empire. Sailing the full length of the Mediterranean they established a new home at Massilia (mod. Marseille) in ca 600. Immediately they sought to capture the tin trade emanating from Cornwall by founding trading stations along the French and Spanish coastline at the end of overland routes traversing the Alps, including Nicea (mod. Nice), Antipolis (mod. Antibes) and Emporion (mod. Empùries). The empire lasted only a brief period before the tin trade moved routes into Northern Italy, and the Phoenicians displaced the Phocaians' control of local trade.

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

### Founding a Colony

Ancient writers, with only fragments of memory to work with, have stereotyped the colonising process. Two accounts of the founding of Syracuse by Thucydides, writing in ca 420, and by the geographer Strabo, writing at the beginning of the first century AD, are examples. First Thucydides:

The first of the Hellenes to arrive were Chalcidians from Euboea with Thoucles as their founder. They founded Naxos and built the altar of Apollo Archegetes (the Founder), which now stands outside the city and is where visitors to the games first sacrifice when they are sailing from Sicily. Syracuse was founded in the following year by Archias, one of the Heraclids from Corinth. First he drove out the Sicels from the 'island' where the inner city is now - though it is no longer surrounded by water. Later the outer city also was taken inside the walls and the place became very populous (Peloponnesian War 6.3).

Strabo takes up the story after the decision to colonise has been made by the city elders and the leader or *oikist* was appointed:

Archias, sailing from Corinth, founded Syracuse about the same time that Naxos and Megara were established. They say that when Myscellus and Archias went to Delphi to consult the oracle, the god asked whether they preferred wealth or health. Archias chose wealth and Myscellus health, and the oracle assigned Syracuse to the former to found, and Croton to the latter (Geography 6.2.4).

Needless to say, Syracuse became the greatest city of *Magna Graecia*, while Croton became famous for its doctors and athletes.

Although brief, the extracts show some of the preparations preceding a colonising expedition. The decision to found a colony and the arrangements to mount a successful expedition were state decisions, and not the initiatives of private enterprise. Arrangements included selecting an *oikist*, who had full authority and full responsibility; recruiting, and when necessary conscripting, colonists; and drafting legal provisions determining the daughter-colony's status and relationship with the mother colony.

Guided by the Delphic Oracle, the settlers left to make a new home. Besides proximity to fertile land and fresh water, an ideal site would offer security, such as an acropolis, and if possible a good harbour. The number of colonists, invariably all male, seldom exceeded a few hundred. Although not universally practised, it was a common feature of the colonising experience that every new colony became a separate political entity. The colonists were now citizens of a new city. If a colony failed, the colonists moved elsewhere and tried again, rather than return to their home-city where they were no longer welcome. An example of this is seen in Herodotus' description of the Theraeans who founded Cyrene on the Libyan coast under the leadership of Battus in ca 630. Having failed in their initial search for a new home, the colonists returned to Thera:

## The Greeks in Sicily

---

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

The islanders, however, refused to allow them to come ashore; they threw things at them as they were making up for the harbour, and shouted that they must put about and go back again; so as there was nothing else for it, they once more got under way for Libya (Histories 4.156).

Among the founder's principal tasks was the staking out of the colony's *chora* or territory of arable land; the allocation of plots of land to the colonists; and the establishment of civic and religious institutions. The essence of this is captured in an extract from the *Odyssey* describing the homemaking of the Phaiacians:

So the Phaiacians migrated thence under Nausithoos to settle a new world across the sea, Scheria island. That first captain walled their promontory, built their homes and shrines, and parcelled out the black land for the plough (6.8-13).

It is important to remember that during these early years of Greek history, the *polis* (Greek city-state) was just evolving as a civic and political institution; there were no great urban centres to serve as models for the new colonies. Still the leads came from home, and the constitutions colonists instituted usually resembled what they already knew. Once cities were established and flourishing, the city fathers moved to build an identity and sense of permanence for their city. It was during the second phase of the colony's life that major building programs were undertaken; that the colony ascribed itself a history by attributing its founding hero with semi-divine status and a mythological tradition.

## The Delphic Oracle and the Colonisation Movement

The above extract from Strabo reminds us that one of the *oikist's* responsibilities was to consult the Delphic Oracle for guidance and the blessings of the god Apollo. According to Herodotus, consulting the oracle ensured a colony's survival, whereas not doing so resulted in a failed expedition. While such traditions were probably propagated by the priesthood at Delphi to cement and continue the Oracle's importance, the practice resulted in many colonies claiming Apollo as their founder. Apollo's intricate association with the founding of Sicilian cities was confirmed by the popular altar to Apollo Archegetes at Naxos. In time, Delphi became the preferred arbiter of colonial disputes, as well as becoming a repository of useful geographical and political information.

However few of the extant foundation oracles are considered genuine. The oracle pronouncing on the foundation of Taras is one that is (mod. Taranto, in ca 706). Taras was the only colony founded by the Spartans. According to tradition, the colonists were the unwanted illegitimate sons of Spartan women and helots (a servile class):

Fair indeed is the space between Corinth and Sicyon; you will not live there, not even if you were all of bronze. Mark Satyrion and the gleaming waters of Taras and the harbour on the left

## The Greeks in Sicily

---

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

where the goat loves the briny surge dipping the tip of his hoary beard. There make Taras mounted on Satyrion (Bibliothèque 8.21.3).

Failing to understand its meaning, the Spartans again consulted the oracle. The second reply was recorded by Strabo:

I have given you Satyrion and Taras, a rich country to dwell in and to be a plague on the Iapygians. (Geography 6.3.2)

Not surprisingly, the oracle described the physical site of Taras correctly: it was sited on a peninsula with a harbour on either side. The reference to a goat's beard alludes to the abundant wild olive tree. The Iapygians were the native peoples whom the Greeks displaced.

### Native-Greek Relations

The literary sources do not tell us much about the indigenous populations of Sicily. According to Thucydides, the Sicels had occupied the island for 300 years before the Greeks arrived. The new arrivals displaced the native populations, pushing them into the surrounding mountains; or reducing them to serfdom or tributary status. Some, especially the women taken as wives by the colonists, assimilated. Because of the Greek tradition of political exclusivity, however, natives never received citizenship rights in the new Greek cities.

### Case-Study: Syracuse

According to Thucydides, Syracuse was founded in 733, although archaeological evidence would push the foundation date back another 25 years. The original site on the small island of Ortygia was outstanding: being an island it provided protection; the bay was a perfect double harbour; and the island had fresh water from a spring that still bubbles today.

Sited under the shadow of Mount Etna, Syracuse benefited from the vast tracts of available fertile land to grow wealthy and powerful. Her population grew quickly, and almost immediately the city expanded onto the mainland, with an artificial causeway connecting the two parts. She further established daughter-colonies at Helorus (ca 700), Acrae (ca 663), Camarina (ca 598) and Casmenae (mod. Monte Casale, in ca 643), thereby securing territorial control of Southern Sicily. By the fifth and fourth centuries, Syracuse's territory exceeded 9000 square kilometres.

The settlers were hill people from Corinth. The displaced Sicels either moved into the neighbouring hills or became serf labourers (*killyrioi*). The first settlers also evolved as the landed aristocracy (*gamoroi*) who formed the basis of the early government.

## The Greeks in Sicily

---

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

Excavations on the island confirm the rapid growth of the city and the expansion onto the mainland. Streets were laid out from the beginning of the colony's occupation. Utilising the geography of the island, two main thoroughfares were laid on a north-south axis, the present Via Dione and Via Roma. Narrow lanes running east-west climbed up to the main streets. Recent excavations carried out beneath Syracuse's Town Hall have revealed one-room dwellings, similar to those used in Greece. Built of mudbrick on stone foundations, they had a small courtyards and lined the streets as a continuous wall. The many wells found on the island suggest an abundant water table.

The city's wealth can be seen through its rich archaeological heritage. By the sixth century, the Syracusans had erected temples to Artemis, Apollo, Athena and Zeus. The temple to Apollo was the first (and the oldest in Sicily), reflecting the colony's Doric ancestry and its relationship with Apollo's sanctuary at Delphi. The temple stands at the north end of the island, and is on the main route leading to the mainland district of Achradina. Built in ca 575 in the Doric style, its monolithic sandstone columns stand 24.5 m tall. Massive, closely-set, monolithic, and squat in appearance, they ooze solidity and self-confidence.

The temple represented a major achievement in architectural engineering. It was built when the use of stone was still in its infancy, and architectural adjustments reveal concerns both with the weight, and the use of stone which was less able to withstand stress, especially along flaws which could develop into cracks. The roof span was reduced by making the temple long and narrow. The columns were made thicker and squatter, and were positioned closely together to bear better the weight of the superstructure. Reducing the width between the columns, however, disturbed the spacing and the alignment of the triglyph and metope sculptural decorations.<sup>5</sup> In compensation, triglyphs were moved off centre towards the edge. Moreover the temple established guidelines that fundamentally contradicted mainland practices and which became standard for Greek temples in Sicily. First the temple adopted a frontal perspective that ran along a central axis, which effectively drew the celebrants into an uncharacteristically spacious *naos*.<sup>6</sup> The double colonnade at the front was another colonial feature. An inscription engraved along the top step of the temple's platform reads, "Kleomenes, son of Kneideides made it for Apollo", suggesting the building was a private project by the said Kleomenes. The family is known to have had Ionian origins and connections, which might explain the introduction of the double row of columns at the front end of the temple, a feature that was still uncommon on mainland Greece.

Built by the tyrant Gelon in ca 480 after the defeat of the Carthaginians at Himera, the temple of Athena in the Doric order stands on an earlier building dating to the sixth century. Its reuse as a Christian church in the seventh century AD (dedicated to S. Maria del Piliero) preserved the building, thereby allowing us to appreciate the ancient temple's physical structure. The outer row of monolithic columns were bricked to form the church's outer walls, while the solid walls of the *naos* have been punctured to allow movement within the church. The reuse of an ancient temple as a Christian church is testimony to the continued veneration of sacred places, and the transmission of that sacredness through the ages by memory and custom. In Sicily, Artemis was transformed into S. Lucia, and the virgin goddess Athena and her holy place became the abode of Mary. In antiquity, the ancient temple of Athena dominated the main hill across the island, and was the

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

centre of the ancient city. Today, the area, known as the Piazza Duomo, is the civic and religious centre of modern Syracuse with the cathedral, archbishop's palace and town hall.

The monuments in the archaeological park and its environs all date to the classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods, and include the city walls built by Dionysus I, the theatre, the 200 m long rock altar of Hieron II (241-215), and a Roman amphitheatre built at the end of the first century BC. The theatre was originally cut into rock in ca 500, modified in ca 238, and again in the Roman period. Still in use today, it is one of the largest theatres in the Greek world. The original plan was based on a half circumference with a diameter of 138 metres. A quarry where much of the city's stone was mined is also within the park's boundaries. Now a beautiful garden of orange groves, in 411 the quarry floor was the prison of 7000 Athenian soldiers. Most of them suffered a horrible death from heat, cold, disease, hunger and thirst.

### Case-Study: Acragas (mod. Agrigento)

Approximately 250 kilometres west of Syracuse is modern Agrigento. Sitting imperiously on the top of Monte Camico, it commands enviable views across the broad coastal plain towards the Mediterranean Sea. Hundreds of empty and incomplete high-rise apartment blocks stand forlornly on the hill slopes, testimony to the power wielded by the Sicilian Mafia. Uncountable sums of government funding badly needed for a Sicily scarred by war and poverty have been siphoned into criminal pockets.

While historical, political and social circumstances over some centuries have retarded Agrigento and Sicily from prospering, the situation of ancient Acragas could not have been more different. Led by Aristonous and Pistilus, the Rhodian and Cretan settlers who left Gela in 581 occupied a perfect site. The high, steep mountain accommodated the town acropolis, while the ridge ringing the town to the south served as natural walls. At the town's feet was a vast fertile plain, watered by the tranquil rivers Hypsas (mod. Fiume de Sant'Anna) and Acragas (mod. Fiume di San Biagio), from which the ancient city took its name.

The colony's early history followed the common patterns of colonisation. The local Sicilian people were dispossessed of their land. Relations with Gela were cut and the city instituted its own constitution and government. During his reign, the tyrant Phalaris (ca 570-549) extended the town's territories east to the Licata promontory. In 480, Acragas joined its mother-city in defeating the Carthaginians at Himera, further extending its wealth, power and prestige. Its sacking by the Carthaginians in 406 instigated a period of decline that was not fully arrested until the Roman late Republic period.

Acragas' heyday was the fifth century, when the city reached its largest size, and a population of ca 200,000 inhabitants. It was also the period of greatest prosperity, based on olive groves, vineyards and horse breeding. The poet Pindar, admiring its magnificent and unique vista of temple architecture, described it as the most beautiful city of antiquity. Stretched out along the escarpment, the now golden-hued, limestone-stucco temples gleam in the Sicilian sunshine. Fleeting glimpses, as the modern highway winds through the valley, enthral the visitor; just as the first sight did ancient travellers coming by ship from the eastern cities.

## The Greeks in Sicily

---

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

Now covered by the modern city, archaeological investigations on the ancient acropolis have revealed temples dedicated to Zeus and Athena, today the cathedral of S. Gerlando and the church of S. Maria dei Greci respectively. Archaeologists believe the *agora* or marketplace was on the site of the archaeological park's current car park to the east of the temple of Olympian Zeus. Large-scale urbanisation did not begin until the fifth century. The street plan, largely anticipating the typical Hippodamian grid pattern, had six main avenues seven metres wide running east-west, and many minor streets traversing north-south. The residential quarters spreading down the side of the hill to the lower city belong largely to the Hellenistic-Roman period. The town's defensive walls, following the natural terrain, surrounded the lower town.

There are few classical sites that can compare with the archaeological splendour that confronts the tourist visiting Agrigento. An avenue of Doric temples, some in ruins, others erect, proudly boasting their architectural grandeur, overwhelms the senses. A building program of this proportion required enormous civic wealth and stability. It was undertaken during the fifth century, when the city was at its wealthiest, and ceased with the Carthaginian sacking of 406.

Today, only four of the ten temples can be visited with comfort. Heading eastward from the carpark along the Strada Panoramica, the first building we encounter is the ruins of a large temple dedicated to Heracles. Dated to ca 500, it is the oldest of the extant buildings. Built fifty years later, and also badly damaged, is the temple of Hera, perched last along the escarpment. The signs of fire suggest the damage occurred in 406 when the city fell to the Carthaginians. The remains of a sacrificial altar at the front of the temple (eastern face) reminds us that the Greek temples were the dwelling-places of the gods, and not places of worship. Worship was conducted outside.

Ironically, Temple F, the best preserved temple perhaps in the whole Greek world, and one which rivals the Athenian Hephaesteion, remains anonymous. Fifteenth century tradition renamed it the Temple of Concord, and newly-wed Agrigentians visit the temple for good fortune. Erected ca 430, the temple employed the earliest use in Sicily of columns with an inward slant and a curved platform, already used on the Parthenon in Athens.

West of the carpark lie the remains of the imposing temple of Olympian Zeus. Begun in 480, it was still incomplete when the Carthaginians ravaged the city in 406. The building was never completed, and subsequent damage by invaders, earthquakes and local quarrying, took its toll. It is undoubtedly the largest Doric temple known in antiquity - its floor-space of 113.5 x 56 metres exceeded the next largest temples at Samos and Ephesos - and one of the most original Greek temples of antiquity. Uniquely, the temple architect abandoned the traditional temple peristyle. Instead the exterior columns (seven on either end and fourteen along the sides) were set in as part of the temple wall. Furthermore, while they were carved as semi-columns on the outside, inside they were set as flat pilasters. The *cella* was divided into three aisles, with two rows of twelve square pilasters supporting the expansive roof-line. Another unique feature was the gigantic, male figures (*telamones*). Each over seven metres tall, they were positioned into the exterior wall on platforms between the columns. With their arms above their heads, they appear to be supporting the roof.

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

The temple complex served a number of purposes: it expressed the religiosity of the ancient city; it broadcast the city's sense of civic self importance; and, bearing in mind Acragas' location on the western half of the island, it represented a statement of Greekness in the native and Phoenician heartland. To this end, the sculptural program employed on the Olympieion's pediments was familiar to the Greek world: the east pediment showed the Olympian gods fighting the Giants; and the west, the capture of Troy. While alluding to the victory over the Carthaginian forces at Himera, both symbolically emphasised the victory of Greek civilisation over barbarism.

### Case-Study: Selinus (mod. Selinute)

Named after the wild parsley that grows profusely in the region, Selinus was founded by Megara Hyblaea in ca 651 with Pammilus as *oikist*. The first settlement occupied the low hill, lying between the rivers Selinos to the west and Cothon to the east, later occupied by the city acropolis. It looked over two good harbours at the mouths of the rivers, and an extensive, fertile coastal plain. Being the westernmost Greek city on Sicily, it quickly prospered as the primary point of trading with the local peoples and the Phoenician towns further west. It was during the latter half of the sixth century that the city commissioned its program of monumental architecture, and in 505, it founded a daughter colony at Heracleia Minoa, ca 25 kilometres west of Acragas. Selinus' location also influenced its political dealings, and during much of its history it followed a pro-Carthaginian policy. However, in 409 Carthaginian forces invaded and sacked the city. Although the city was resurrected by refugees, it had lost its trading monopoly and impetus, and was abandoned in 250.

Located in a fairly isolated region, the deserted site was forgotten until excavations which began in the early part of the nineteenth century uncovered the remains of an extensive ancient city. Unhampered by the constraints of later occupation, archaeologists have been able to study the ancient city's physical layout in ways unimaginable on the east coast. The archaeologists have determined three phases of town development, and believe that the city fathers had envisaged a grand plan for the city from an early stage. Following the initial settlement, the first phase of urban development dated to the seventh century. In this phase, the town was laid out in an early grid system across a broad stretch of land south and north of the acropolis. The housing was similar to that on the mainland, namely one-room houses with courtyards set on a rectangular block. During this phase, the city established two of its three 'rural' sanctuaries. To the west is that of Demeter Malophorus (Apple-carrier), where more than 12,000 terracotta votive figurines of the goddess, dating from the seventh to fifth centuries, were found; and on the east the precursor to the present Temple E.

The second phase effectively established a blueprint for the city which remained until the city's destruction. In this stage, the town planners laid an ambitious street plan that stretched north from the acropolis up to and beyond the next hill (Manuzza), and into the valleys on either side, encompassing in total some 100 ha. The natural north-south and east-west axes that traversed the

## The Greeks in Sicily

---

### Nicholas Vlahogiannis

settlement were laid out as broad avenues. The street blocks that were formed as large rectangles ran in grids off these axes. A sanctuary with four small temples and a sanctuary wall was built on a supported terrace at the main crossroad.

The years between 560 and 460 were probably the city's most prosperous and politically stable period, fostering the ambitious monumental building program of the third phase that is still visible today. Using stone from nearby Cusa, the building program began with Temple C in 560, and was followed by Temple D. The borders of the sanctuary confirmed the north-south artery of the town. Meanwhile more temples were being built on the eastern hill. Laid out side by side in an east-west orientation, Temples E, F and G served as a brilliant visual counterpoint to the focal temple complex in the town.

All of the temples were in the Doric order. Their monumental proportions, especially those of Temple G, reinforced the not too subtle message that in many cases the colonies had surpassed homeland Greece. Now a garbled mess, Temple G rivalled the temple of Zeus at Acragas in size. Begun at the end of the sixth century, the eight-by-seventeen peristyle temple was abandoned incomplete in 480. Its overall height is estimated at thirty metres, while the broad *naos* required two rows of supporting columns. Four metopes from Temple E (ca 490-480) are housed in the Palermo Archaeological Museum. These are *Heracles Fighting an Amazon*, the *Wedding of Zeus and Hera*, the *Punishment of Acteon for Seeing Artemis Naked*, and *Athena Defeating a Titan*.

The Palermo Archaeological Museum also holds three metopes from Temple C: Perseus beheading Medusa, a *quadriga* (chariot with four horses abreast), and Heracles holding the mischievous Cecropes twins upside down. Perhaps dedicated to Apollo, Temple C was the principal building of the acropolis. Its massive columns were a mixture of monolithic and drum. The number of flutings vary among the columns, suggesting that the building took a long time to complete.

During the sixth century, the town was encircled by defensive walls. Archaeologists using aerial photography have identified some of these to the north-east of the acropolis. New fortifications were erected after 409. One of the impressive fortification gates can be seen at the northern end of the north-south axis.

## Conclusion: the Effects of Colonisation

The effects of colonisation were substantial. Economically, the transplanting of thousands of citizens alleviated population and land pressure in Greece. Commercially, traders found new sources of raw materials and opened new markets for their wares. Socially, a new class whose wealth was based on trade and industry emerged, which over the next century would challenge the political and social authority of the landed aristocracy. Politically, the sense of the independent *polis* was strengthened. Culturally, Greek communities were now strewn from Trapezus to the Straits of Gibraltar. They served as conduits of cultural diffusion and exchange. Mesopotamia and Egypt became sources and inspiration for Greek developments in art and architecture, the alphabet, medicine and mathematics, metalworking and mythology, while Greeks carried their cultural institutions and values, religion, art, philosophy, and alphabet to the peoples of the Black Sea, Italy and France. Their effect was encapsulated by Justinus, the fourth century AD Roman historian, in this case describing the Hellenisation of southern France:

## The Greeks in Sicily

---

Nicholas Vlahogiannis

... from the Greeks the Gauls learned a more civilised way of life and abandoned their towns. They set to tilling their fields and walling their towns. They even got used to living by law rather than force of arms, to cultivate the vine and the olive. Their progress in manners and wealth, was so brilliant that it seemed as though Gaul had become part of Greece, rather than that Greece had colonised Gaul. (Philippic Histories 43.41-2)

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all dates are BC.
- <sup>2</sup> The Greek presence was so great that the region became known as 'Greater Greece', *Megale Hellas* in Greek, and *Magna Graecia* to the Romans. It is believed that Pythagoras first applied the term. Strains of classical Greek persisted in remoter regional dialects until this century.
- <sup>3</sup> In ca 720/710 Corinth replaced the Euboean colony on Corcyra with its own colony.
- <sup>4</sup> The dating for many of these colonies is confused in ancient sources. For example, Eusebius dated the founding of Sinope to 631, yet dated Sinope's daughter-colony, Trapezus, to 756. Where archaeological evidence exists, it generally supports the later dating.
- <sup>5</sup> The Doric frieze consisted of triglyphs (meaning 'triple carving'), a decorative element, and metopes (meaning 'the space between'), which were square panels between the triglyphs.
- <sup>6</sup> *Cella* in Latin: the main room of a temple, where the cult statue was kept.

### Sources and Further Reading

- Boardman, J., *The Greeks Overseas: their Colonies and Trade*, London, 1980.
- Coarelli, F. and Torelli, M., *Sicilia*, Rome, 1984.
- Descoedres, J.-P., 'Greek Colonists and Native Populations', *Proceedings of the First Congress of Classical Archaeology held in Honour of A. D. Trendall*, Oxford, 1990.
- Dunbabin, T., *The Western Greeks*, Oxford, 1948.
- Graham, A. J., *Colony and Mother-City in Ancient Greece*, Manchester, 1968.
- Graham, A. J. in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 3, part 3, Cambridge, 1982.
- Macadam, A., *Blue Guide: Sicily*, London, 1988.
- Pugliese Carratelli, G., *The Western Greeks: Classical Civilization in the Western Mediterranean*, London, 1996.
- Ridgway, D., *The First Western Greeks*, Cambridge, 1992.

© Nicholas Vlahogiannis