



## Sicily: from the Greeks to the Baroque

Temples, churches and *palazzi*: three thousand years of history

**18–27 September 2025 (ML 789)**

10 days • £5,160

Lecturer: Dr Mark Grahame

Based in Taormina, a charming seaside town, and Palermo, a bustling centre of culture.

Cross the Straits of Messina to Reggio di Calabria to see the Riace Bronzes.

Several special arrangements to visit places not normally open to the public.

A broad span of sites covering all periods of Sicilian history.

Sicily is the pre-eminent island in the Mediterranean – the largest as well as the most eventful historically. It is also more or less in the middle, a stepping stone between Europe and Africa and a refuge between the Levant and the Atlantic. Throughout history Sicily was viewed as a fortuitous landfall by migrating peoples and a prized possession by ambitious adventurers and expansionist princes. And as the Mediterranean has been the catalyst and disseminator of a greater variety of civilisations than any other of the world's seas, the island has accumulated an exceptionally rich and incomparably varied inventory of art, architecture and archaeological remains.

Here are to be found some of the finest surviving ancient Greek temples and theatres; Roman floor mosaics which have no peer in Europe; and wall and vault mosaics by Byzantine craftsmen which are unequalled anywhere. Medieval churches and Baroque palaces abound, and there are many memorable paintings, sculptures and other works of art.

As much part of the experience as these masterpieces are the picturesque hill towns, coastal settlements lapped by a gentle sea, haphazard alleys and vibrant city boulevards ornamented with wrought-iron balconies. In every town there are buildings of unexpected magnificence and a plenitude of modest structures of ineffable charm. Some are well preserved, some are crumbling – witness to a deeper malaise.

For much of its history, Sicily was regularly one of the most prosperous of European territories, but political mismanagement and social dislocation led to a long, deep slump. Into the space vacated by absentee landlords and self-serving authorities, the 'Honoured Society' inserted itself as protector – though it has been even more exploitative and malign



Segesta, watercolour by Alberto Pisa, publ. 1911

than the worst of earlier tyrants. And the region remains low in the tables of prosperity.

Matters are improving, however. Conservation and curatorship have made great strides in recent years, the Mafia has lost its dominance, poverty has lessened, and other indicators of wellbeing – the high quality of cuisine among them – are more evident as each year goes by. Sicily has been a part of a unified Italy since 1861 and ethnically and culturally it is unmistakably Italian. But it is also distinctly Sicilian, a world apart. Forming the backdrop to all this are some ineluctable landscapes, the formidable stark hills of the interior and the glittering greens of intensely farmed valleys. The smoking bulk of Mount Etna, Europe's largest active volcano, is visible from much of the eastern part of the island.

### Itinerary

**Day 1: Taormina.** Fly at c. 7.00am from London Gatwick to Catania (British Airways). Drive to Taormina, an extremely pretty hillside town, where four nights are spent. A smart resort since the 19th century, our hotel has shaded gardens which spill down a series of terraces.

**Day 2: Messina, Reggio di Calabria.** Drive along the coast to Messina. The city was one of Caravaggio's Sicilian refuges, and in the art gallery there are two paintings by him and the best-surviving work by the 15th-century painter Antonello da Messina. Cross the Straits of Messina by hydrofoil to Reggio di Calabria on mainland Italy to see the Riace Bronzes, over-life-size male nudes associated with Phidias and Polyclitus, among the finest Greek sculpture to survive.

**Day 3: Catania.** Sicily's second city, Catania was largely rebuilt after the earthquake of 1693 with long straight streets lined with Baroque palaces. Special arrangements to see a magnificent private *palazzo* and a Byzantine chapel, and visits to the Roman theatre and Normano-Baroque Cathedral.

**Day 4: Taormina.** A leisurely day to visit the town's buildings which span five centuries. The Teatro Greco (actually largely Roman) is incomparably sited with far-reaching views encompassing Mount Etna, the Ionian sea and the Calabrian coast of mainland Italy.

**Day 5: Piazza Armerina, Palermo.** Leave Taormina and drive through the hilly interior of Sicily. At Piazza Armerina are the remains

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of one of the finest villas of the late Roman Empire, whose floor mosaics comprise the most vital and colourful manifestation of Roman figurative art in Europe. Continue to Palermo, where the remaining five nights are spent.

**Day 6: Palermo.** The largest and by far the most interesting city on the island, Palermo has been capital of Sicily since the period of Saracenic occupation in the ninth century. It reached a peak under the Normans and again during the Age of Baroque. A morning walk through the old centre includes visits to the Palazzo Abatellis and outstanding Norman buildings including La Martorana with fine mosaics. Lunch is at a private palace, by special arrangement. In the afternoon see the remarkable Greek sculpture in the Archaeological Museum. In the evening there is an out-of-hours visit to the Palatine Chapel in the palace of the Norman kings. Entirely encrusted with Byzantine mosaics, this is perhaps the finest assembly of Byzantine art to survive anywhere.

**Day 7: Monreale, Cefalù.** The small town of Monreale dominates a verdant valley southwest of Palermo. Its cathedral is one of the finest Norman churches on the island and possesses the largest scheme of Byzantine mosaic decoration in existence. Cefalù, a charming coastal town, has another massive Norman cathedral.

**Day 8: Agrigento.** The remains of the Greek colony of Akragas at modern-day Agrigento constitute one of the greatest sites bequeathed by the ancient world. A relatively late foundation (580 BC), it rose rapidly to riches and constructed eight peripteral temples, the most numerous group in the Greek world. That dedicated to Olympian Zeus was the largest of all Doric temples before being felled by Carthaginians and earthquakes, while the Temple 'of Concord' is the best preserved.

**Day 9: Segesta, Palermo.** Set in an unspoilt hilly landscape, the almost complete but fascinatingly unfinished fifth-century temple at Segesta was built by indigenous, if thoroughly Hellenised, Sicilians. On an adjacent hill is a spectacularly sited theatre with views to the sea. Return to Palermo to visit the cathedral, a building of many periods (though largely medieval), with grand royal and imperial tombs, and Il Gesù, grandest of Palermo's Baroque interiors.

**Day 10: Palermo.** Fly from Palermo, arriving London Heathrow at c. 2.15pm (British Airways).

*Please note flights depart from London Gatwick and return to London Heathrow Airport.*

## Lecturer

**Dr Mark Grahame.** Archaeologist, lecturer and Member of the Chartered Institute of Archaeologists (MCIfA). He obtained his PhD from Southampton University and his thesis on the spatial layouts of the houses of Roman Pompeii was published as a British Archaeological Report and a series of journal articles. He has coordinated an adult education programme in archaeology at the University of Southampton (2002–2011) and has taught courses on the archaeology and history of the Roman Empire for Cambridge and Oxford Universities' Institutes of Continuing Education. He is currently the director of the heritage consultancy, M-Arc Heritage Ltd., a company which he founded in 2018.

## Practicalities

**Price, per person. Two sharing:** £5,160 or £4,810 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £6,120 or £5,770 without flights.

**Included:** flights (economy class) with British Airways; travel by private coach throughout; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 4 lunches and 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

**Accommodation. Hotel Villa Belvedere, Taormina** (villabelvedere.it): charming 4-star family-run hotel in the old town, with its own garden (rooms vary in size and outlook). The swimming pool is open until the end of October. **Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa, Palermo** (piazzaborsa.it): centrally located 4-star hotel housed in an assortment of historical buildings.

**Flights:** as flights are not yet available to book for 2025, we have listed the most likely flights based on equivalent dates this year, but we find changes are particularly likely on this route. Direct flights are not regular, a change to indirect flights is very possible. If you intend to book your own flights to coincide with our arrival and departure, we recommend you book flexible fares.

**How strenuous?** This is a particularly strenuous tour which involves a lot of walking, some of it over rough ground at archaeological sites and cobbled or uneven paving in town centres. Fitness and sure-footedness are essential. The itinerary is busy, with several long coach journeys: in Palermo, there are 3 consecutive mornings which start at c.8.00am in order to travel to the visit sites. Average distance by coach per day: 58 miles.

**Group size:** between 10 and 22 participants.