



Sicily: from the Greeks to the Baroque

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

25 October–3 November 2024

(MK 526)

10 days • £4,880

Lecturer: John McNeill

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.

Option to combine this tour with the *Opera in Sicily* festival, 18–24 October 2024 (MK 525).

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



Segesta, watercolour by Alberto Pisa, publ. 1911

self-serving authorities, the 'Honoured Society' inserted itself as protector – though it has been even more exploitative and malign 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

If combining this tour with the *Opera in Sicily* festival, 18–24 October 2024:

First day of the festival, 18 October: fly from London City to Catania, via Milan, arriving c. 2.30pm. **First day of the tour, 25 October:** a coach transfer from Ortygia to Taormina is provided.

Day 1: Taormina. Fly at c. 8.30am from London City to Catania, via Milan (ITA 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: 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 3: 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

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encompassing Mount Etna, the Ionian sea and the Calabrian coast of mainland Italy.

Day 4: 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 5: Piazza Armerina, Palermo. Leave Taormina and drive through the hilly interior of Sicily. At Piazza Armerina are the remains 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: Palermo. Start with the cathedral, a building of many periods (though largely medieval), with grand royal and imperial tombs, then to San Giovanni degli Eremiti, a Norman church with tall cupolas and a

charming garden, and Il Gesù, grandest of Palermo's Baroque interiors. The afternoon is free.

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. Optional visit to three tiny stuccoed oratories in the afternoon, or free time.

Day 10: Palermo. En-route to the airport visit Castello della Zisa, an Arab-Norman Palace. Fly from Palermo, via Milan, arriving London City at c. 6.30pm.

Lecturer

John McNeill. Specialist in the Middle Ages and Renaissance – John lectures for Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education. He is Honorary Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, for whom he has edited and contributed to collections of essays on medieval cloisters, chantries, Anjou, and King's Lynn and the Fens. In 2010 he established a biennial series of international conferences on Romanesque visual culture. His most recent effort in this field – *Romanesque Saints, Shrines, and Pilgrimage* – was published in 2020. He is also author of the *Blue Guides* to both *Normandy* and the *Loire Valley*.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £4,880 or £4,580 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £5,780 or £5,480 without flights.

Included: flights (economy class) with ITA Airways; travel by private coach throughout; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 3 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** (piazza Borsa.it): centrally located 4-star hotel housed in an assortment of historical buildings.

How strenuous? This tour 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. There are also some long coach journeys. Average distance by coach per day: 58 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.