

AGRIGENTO

Introduction

Founded in 582 BC by Rhodian and Cretan colonists from nearby Gela, on a site already occupied by Greeks in the 7th century BC, Agrigento (Akragas) was mainly ruled by a succession of tyrants: after Phalaris, in the first half of the 6th century, whose cruelty remained proverbial, by Theron, under whom, allied to the Syracusans, the Agrigentines won the battle against the Carthaginians at Himera, in 480, and his son Thrasydeus who, breaking the alliance with Syracuse, led to the end of his dynasty in 471 BC. In 406 BC, a new conflict with Carthage ended, after a long siege, with the taking and partial destruction of the city, which regained its freedom only thanks to the Corinthian general Timoleon, in 340 BC. Contended between Carthaginians and Romans, Agrigento was definitively conquered by the Romans in 210 BC. Flourishing from this date, and until the fall of the Roman Empire, the town gradually became less populated until the 7th century: it was then reduced to a village on the hill of Girgenti (seat of the present town), which was conquered by the Arabs in 829, and later by the Normans in 1086.

History

The city walls, built in the 6th century BC, enclose an area, considerable for that time, of about 450 hectares, urbanized according to a rigorous orthogonal plan. Protected by the city walls, the sacred buildings of the "Valley of the Temples", all in Doric style, are for the most part arranged at a very regular distance one from the other, for a length of 2 kilometres. From west to east, we find first the "temple of Vulcan", the "sanctuary of the Chthonian gods", and above all the temple of Zeus, also known as Olympieion, of considerable size (56 x 112 m). Destroyed today at the level of its foundations, it consisted of a colossal open-air building entirely enclosed by a *peripteros*, whose construction was never completed. The Doric semi-columns of the *peripteros* alternate with extraordinary telamon statues of about 8 m in height, whose arms, bent behind the head, supported the entablature of the temple. Further on, the "temple of Heracles", the most ancient of all, dates back to the end of the VI century BC; the "temple of Concordia", built around 435 B.C., partially destroyed during the Carthaginian sack, but restored in Roman times, is today one of the best preserved Greek Doric temples in the West; finally, the "temple of Juno Lacinia" was built around the middle of the 5th century BC on a rocky spur. In the centre of the city, the area of the agora, systematically excavated since the 1950s, preserves, in its upper part, the remains of a *bouleuterion*, an *ekklesiasterion*, and the "oratory of Phalaris" - actually a small temple built in the late Republican period; in the lower part of the square, a *stoa*, a *gymnasium*, and a series of shops. In the area of Poggio san Nicola, the remains of an important residential quarter of Hellenistic and Roman times are also preserved, covering an area of about 15,000 m², with *domus* preserved in good condition, sometimes with their mosaic floor. A complex system of underground channels allowed the water supply and evacuation of waste water. To the south of the city, inside a large necropolis from the Hellenistic period, a monument known as the "Tomb of Theron" actually dates back to the end of the Roman Republican period.

Rediscovery and restoration

During the second half of the 18th century, with the beginning of excavations and studies on the site, promoted by the Bourbons, it quickly turned out to be necessary to carry out numerous restorations, which were completed, in a fairly unwise manner, throughout the 19th century and part of the 20th century. The remains of the temple of Zeus, which collapsed in 1401, were used as stone quarries in the 18th century for the construction of the pier of the nearby port and the buildings of town itself. Earthquakes and pillage of building materials led to the complete collapse of the "temple of Juno Lacinia", but it was then partially rebuilt between the 18th and 20th centuries, like the temple of Heracles, whose columns were raised in 1923. Inside the "sanctuary of the Chthonian deities", the "temple of the Dioscuri" is an anastylosis made in 1836 on the basis of purely aesthetic criteria. Unlike these examples, the "temple of Concordia" owes its exceptional preservation to its subsequent transformation into a church, consecrated to Saints Peter and Paul, at the end of the 6th century: the back wall of the *cella* was destroyed to open a new entrance, while the side walls were pierced so as to transform it into a basilica with three naves. In the same way, the "Oratory of Phalaris" has been preserved thanks to its reuse, during the Norman age, as a monastery chapel. Agrigento was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1997, covering an area of 934 hectares, due to the exceptional state of conservation of its Doric temples, which are among the most beautiful examples of Greek civilization and Greek colonial architecture, preserved in a natural landscape of great beauty, largely protected. The city also offers valuable evidence of the influence of Greek civilisation on the art and architecture of the Western Mediterranean.