

## SIRACUSA

### Introduction

According to Thucydides, the Greek colony of Syracuse, south-west of Sicily, was founded on the island of Ortigia in 734 BC by the Corinthian Archias. In the first half of the 5th century BC, the city, equipped with a large port, both commercial and military, owed its expansion to two tyrants of the Deinomenides family, Gelon, who defeated the Carthaginians at Imera in 480 BC, and his brother Hiero, victorious against the Etruscans at Cuma in 474 BC. Despite the return of democracy after the latter's death, the city was besieged in vain by Athens between 415 and 413 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War, and experienced a new phase of tyranny inaugurated in 405 BC by Dionysius I. At the beginning of the 3rd century BC, Hiero II chose to ally with the Romans, but after his death in 213 BC, Rome besieged the city, which had to surrender after two years, despite the ingenious war machines conceived by Archimedes who lost his life, like a large part of the city's population, during the sacking. In Roman times, Syracuse enjoyed a quiet and prosperous existence as the capital of Rome's granary which had now become Sicily. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the history of the city was marked by successive waves of invasions by the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the Swabians, the Aragonese, before its incorporation into the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, in 1816, and finally into the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

### History

The city of Syracuse has developed in two different sectors, the island of Ortigia and the mainland. Its five quarters were all fortified: the wall built by Dionysius I ran for more than 5 km and its access was closed, in a dominant position, by a powerful fortress, the "Euryalus Fortress", completed in 385 BC. On the island of Ortigia, where the residences of the tyrants and the government functions were concentrated, stood some of the most important temples of the city. The oldest was that of Apollo, in Doric style, built in the 6th century BC, while the temple of Athena, whose mighty remains are still incorporated in the city's cathedral, celebrates the victory of Gelon against the Carthaginians. Opposite Ortigia, the Acradina quarter, the true centre of the city, was the Greek agora, next to which stood the temple of Olympian Zeus and a sanctuary dedicated to Demeter and Kore. In the same district, a complex delimited by porticoes encloses a temple behind which there was a small theatre; the whole, currently identified as the "gymnasium" of the Roman city, was actually a sanctuary dedicated to oriental cults, that of Serapis or the goddess Syria, built at the end of the 2nd century BC. Part of the city is marked by large and deep quarries, which went down in history under the name of "Latomies", where about 7,000 Athenian prisoners died of hunger, thirst or illness after the defeat of their expedition in 413 BC. The largest one, known as "Latomia del Paradiso", divides the two main buildings for performances in the city. The Greek theatre, rebuilt under Hiero II, is one of the largest in the ancient world; each section of its *cavea* was dedicated with an inscription to a god, to the west, and to a member of Hiero's family, to the east: this ingenious device made it easy for spectators to find their place. The theatre stage was modified in the 5th century, probably to allow *naumachiae* to take place. To the south-east, the amphitheatre, built at the beginning of the Imperial period, is the largest of the three Roman amphitheatres built in Sicily: it could hold 14,000 spectators. In the same area, sacrifices were made on the altar of Hiero, of whose basement is almost 200 m long. Outside the walls, the great necropolis of Grotticelli hosted the tombs of famous citizens, among which possibly those of the tyrant Agathocles and of Archimedes.

### **Rediscovery and restoration**

The continuity of Syracuse's occupation caused the destruction of most of the city's ancient monuments, whose building materials have been systematically recovered, with some fortunate exceptions, today mostly included in the "Neapolis Archaeological Park". The temple of Athena owes its exceptional preservation to its transformation, in the 6th century, into a Christian church, transformed into a baroque style at the end of the 17th century, when the building became a cathedral. Still entirely preserved until the Renaissance, the Greek theatre lost, between 1520 and 1531, the top of its steps and its stage wall, which Emperor Carlo V destroyed to fortify Ortigia. Excavated since the end of the XVIII century, the theatre has been recently restored so that it can be used again for performances. In addition to this evidence, archaeological excavations carried out during the last decades have led to the discovery of numerous ancient structures, in particular in Piazza Vittoria (sanctuary of Demeter and Kore) and Piazza Duomo (temple of Apollo). The site was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2005 for an extension of 898 hectares which includes, in addition to the totality of the ancient city of Syracuse, the necropolis of Pantalica, 40 km south, with its more than 5000 tombs dug into the rock, most of them dating back to the 13th and 7th centuries BC. The site as a whole is considered to be an exceptional testimony to the successive Mediterranean cultures for three millennia, documented here by a set of monuments that bear witness to multiple cross-cultural influences - Greek, Roman and Baroque - inextricably linked to events, ideas and literary works of exceptional universal significance.