

The Sicilian Expedition – James Heath – Appendix B

In October 2023, I was given the opportunity by work to accompany a group around Sicily on their trip, so I could see the sites and museums, and see how the various services are holding up, as it had been a while since anyone from work had been out there. The idea was for me to observe quietly in the background, but I ended up taking on a more active role.

Luckily, the BA flight out of Gatwick was in the afternoon, so I had plenty of time to make my way there from the Isle of Wight, without having to do an overnight stop on the way. Having arrived, got through security and grabbed a late lunch, I met the school group at the gate, introduced myself to the teachers and we boarded.

The flight itself was in good time and smooth, we landed in good time at Catania, and met the courier, Gloria, who was very nice and helpful, getting us over to the coach quickly then off to Letojanni.

The hotel itself was Palazzo Durante, near enough right on the beach in town (*Fig 1* for the view from my room), it was certainly pleasant enough for the two nights we needed it for, though I would in future perhaps look to only use for it groups who are travelling northwards around the island, or are making Taormina their first stop.



Figure 1: The view from my hotel room

Our first full day in Sicily was a trip to Syracuse Museum and Archaeological Park, and Ortigia.



Figure 3: The Krater Canicattini Bagni

The coach journey was a bit longer than ideal, due to traffic, and Letojanni's distance from Syracuse, but we got to have a good 30-45 mins at the Museum, and then a few hours at the Archaeological Park, without any major disruption to the day. Syracuse Archaeological Museum has a few highlights (*Figs.2-3*), but there was a lot of structural work going on, and much of it was closed. Heading to the Archaeological Park, we got to see the Roman Amphitheatre, the Greek



Figure 2: Terracotta Bust of the type belonging to the cult of Demeter and Kore

Theatre, the Ear of Dionysius and the Altar of Hiero II. The surviving remains are all pretty spectacular (see *Figs.4-6*),

but the Ear of Dionysius was everyone's favourite. I believe this is due to them having seen the latest Indiana Jones film where it features.



Figure 4: The Altar of Hiero II



Figure 6: The Roman Amphitheatre



Figure 5: The Ear of Dionysius

We ended up spending about 4 hours in Ortigia as free time that the group leader builds into his trip. Heading there after leaving the Archaeological Park, and it was a lovely end to the first day. Having first taken care of lunch with the teachers, I was off to explore! Helped by the lovely autumnal weather of high 20s, there was plenty to see and photograph (always my main concern; expanding the Flickr). Starting with the 6th Century BC Temple of Apollo (Fig.7), which still has plenty of columns standing. Just like several other notable temples it has had several roles since the end of polytheism in the ancient world. Next stop on my list was the Duomo for the remains of the temple of Athena, but on the approach, I discovered the Argentovivo exhibition on at a neighboring palazzo (Fig.8). The exhibition took place across two rooms. In one room was a projection on all 4 walls of scenes from Greek myth that are portrayed on Syracusan coins, in a creative art style (Fig.9). The second room had one large projection and



Figure 7: The Temple of Apollo



Figure 8: Argentovivo exhibition sign

a touch screen where you could view the coins and their myths individually, allowing you to spin and magnify the coin and the artwork for it.



Figure 9: One part of the Argentovivo projection



Figure 10: The surviving columns of the Temple of Athena

The surviving columns of the Temple of Athena are built right into the wall of the Duomo (Fig.10) and are immense. At rough measurement, they must be at least 3.5-4 times my height, it's a shame more doesn't survive of the Temple, but that can be said for nearly every ancient temple bar the Pantheon.

The other major site connected to the ancient world on Ortigia is the Fountain of Arethusa (Fig.11), the nymph who was chased to Sicily from Greece by the river god Alpheus as she was bathing in his stream and he fell in love with her (as male deities do in Greek myth). Arethusa rebuked Alpheus as she wanted to stay a chaste follower of Artemis, she was turned first into a cloud and then into a river, which flowed to Ortigia and became a spring, though she could not escape Alpheus who followed her and their waters mingled in the new spring. The fountain itself is below ground and the cafes nearby offered a good place to stop and get a drink and gelato in the heat. Strolling back through town to regroup, I did try to get into the Jewish Baths (Mikvah), with their Roman and Punic connections, but couldn't due to not having the exact change.



Figure 11: The Fountain of Arethusa

The streets of Ortigia were lovely to stroll through, and I'd definitely recommend having some free time there on any trip.

Day 2 was a bit chaotic, due to the distance between Letojanni and Morgantina, and that a lot



Figure 12: The ekklesiasterion of Morgantina

of it was narrow winding roads, we arrived over an hour later than we were supposed to. We had some brief time at Morgantina Archaeological Park, allowing the students to check out the Theatre, Ekklesiasterion (Fig.12), and Agora before we decided to skip Aidone museum to get to the town of Piazza Armerina for lunch and a quick stroll up to see the Duomo on top of the hill. Then we were off to what might have been the highlight of the entire trip for me. Villa Romana del Casale was incredible.

All the mosaics with such a high level of survival and completion, though I'm sure a large restoration has probably taken place for some of the pieces there. The colours, designs and intricacies were mind-blowing (Figs.13-15).



Figure 13: The central courtyard of the Villa



Figure 14: Mosaic of a hunting scene with banquet

The remains of the building itself were impressive too. I could

have done without the embarrassment of neither of my cards working when it came to buying the tickets for myself and the teachers, but as I'm sure all teachers are aware, trips never run smooth.



Figure 15: Mosaic of a chariot race with children and birds

Once we were all done it was back on the coach and over to Agrigento for the rest of our trip.

Hotel Tre Torre in Villaggio Mosé, just outside Agrigento was our hotel for the 2 nights, and aside from the other schools being noisy and wild, and some rooming complications, it was a good base. I will note now that we are still encouraging our local agents to push for improvements of food for school groups in hotels and restaurants, whose set menus veer between local foods and food they think will appeal to English students, often basic to avoid overcomplicating things for students and staff with dietary requirements. Teachers usually want the local food experience, though the students don't always agree, or want to try it, and hotels and restaurants are left trying to find some balance between the two.

Anyway, our first full day in Agrigento was supposed to be spent all day at the Valley of the Temples, but aside from longer stops at the Temple of Hera and the Temple of Concordia (*Fig.16*), the group had pretty much finished on site by lunchtime, so I made a few calls and got it organised that we would meet the driver at around 12:30 and then head to Agrigento town for lunch and free time. As for the site itself, it is huge, I wish I had had more time to explore it, especially the Hellenistic-Roman quarter. The temples are even more impressive in person than they are on screens on in pages of text books.



Figure 16: The Temple of Concordia

All that we needed to do was check out the museum and then meet the driver. I may have taken the group along the cross-site path that leads to the Hellenistic-Roman quarter than the main road up to the museum, only to find the gates at the end locked. This led to me climbing over a fence next to the locked gate, and getting some help from site staff to unlock the gate and let the group through. Rather than eat at the restaurant they wanted to go into Agrigento for a few hours of free time and lunch. Agrigento, like Piazza Armerina and Ortigia before it, was a very lovely little town for food and free time. I had a cracking honeyed octopus and aubergine burger, as well as a salmon and avocado bruschetta, in a seafood restaurant called Cusa Cucina di Mare.



Figure 17: My burger lunch.

Then it was back to the hotel, via a stop at a supermarket to load up on snacks for the next day.

We had a slight delay in leaving the hotel on that final morning, but still made it to Etna for bang on 11:00, which was when we supposed to arrive. Due to high winds, the cable car up to Etna had been cancelled, but the staff at Etna had agreed to run visitors up in 4x4 buses (*Fig.18*). Due to a ticket mix up, I didn't manage to go up higher with the rest of the group, but that turned out to be for the best considering the heavens well and truly opened while they were up there, as one of the teachers put it 'that was almost biblical'.



Figure 18: The 4x4 minibuses

So, we were then off to our final stop of Taormina, for a look at the Greco-Roman Theatre and



Figure 19: The Greco-Roman Theatre at Taormina

some free time. The Theatre was certainly amazing, with a lovely view over the coastline, though probably not a view one would have been able to see in antiquity, the small museum on site had a couple of pieces in, but just like in Syracuse, it was undergoing works. The town itself has several other sites in, such as the so-called Naumachia, thermal baths, the walls of the Temple of Isis built into a church, and an odeon. After a few hours in Taormina, it was back off to Catania airport for the flight home. Catania airport is rather small and basic, but the flight home was as smooth

as the outbound flight, and after a night at Premier Inn, due to landing at midnight, I was then off back home on the Sunday morning.