

## Storms, War and Shipwrecks

### Treasures from the Sicilian Seas

21 June - 25 September 2016



Storms, War and Shipwrecks, Treasures from the Sicilian Seas, tells the story of Sicily at the crossroads of the Mediterranean through the discoveries made by underwater archaeologists.

For 2500 years, great civilisations met and fought on Sicily. Its rich and varied island culture has been marked by the Phoenicians, Greeks, Roman, Byzantines, Arabs and Normans.

The exhibition explores the roots of this multicultural heritage through objects rescued from the bottom of the sea- from chance finds to excavated shipwrecks. Objects range from bronze battering rams once mounted on the prows of Roman warships to marble pieces of a Byzantine flat-pack church, illuminating the movement of peoples, goods and ideas.

This is a charging exhibition but FREE for booked UK school groups and for under 12s.

To book a group visit please contact the Education Department:

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Storms, War and Shipwrecks has been developed in collaboration with the Soprintendenza del Mare under the Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana and the COBBRA consortium of museums led by the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.

Bronze pail with inscription in early Arabic from a chapter of the Qur'an, AD 1100-1200. © Museo archeologico regionale 'Lilibeo-Baglio Anselmi' di Marsala. Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana



Roman amphora with coral, terracotta, from the Levanzo I shipwreck, AD 275-300. © Soprintendenza del Mare, Palermo. Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana

## THE FIRST SETTLERS

Thousands of years ago, ancient explorers took to the seas in search of new lands and valuable resources like metals and timber. The Phoenicians, expert sailors and traders had arrived on Sicily by 800 BC. They came from the Near East, what is now Syria, Lebanon and northern Israel and spread the use of the alphabet.

When they arrived in western Sicily in around 1000 BC, during the Bronze Age (3000-800 BC) they encountered the local peoples, the Elymians and the Sicans and Sicels, who gave Sicily its modern name. Their colony of Carthage founded on the North African coast, a day's journey by boat from Sicily, would become one of the most powerful cities in the Mediterranean. The first newcomers to ancient Sicily, the Greeks called them the "Purple People" because they knew the secret of making purple dye for clothes.

## ANCIENT ANCHORS

Sea travel was dangerous. Anchors were decorated with good luck symbols such as the name of the sea god Poseidon or Aphrodite, the goddess of sailors. Early anchors were large, flat stones pierced with holes to tie a rope through. Wooden arms helped the anchor grip into the silt or rocks on the seabed. Later, anchors were made of lead stocks attached to a wooden shaft with curved wooden arms. A boat often lowered multiple anchors, depending on its size. There was always a risk that the anchor would stick too firmly into the sea floor and have to be cut loose.

## CROSSROADS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Sicily lies at the centre of the Mediterranean. For over 2000 years, foreign powers came by sea to settle and rule the island. Ships sank during storms, against the rocky shores or in battle. Beginning with the Phoenicians and the Greeks, followed by the Romans, Byzantines, Arabs and Normans, outsiders were attracted by Sicily's abundant natural resources. Sicily has been at the heart of the movement of peoples, goods and ideas between Europe, North Africa and the Near East from prehistory until today.



Corinthian Greek helmet, bronze, 600-500 BC, found off the coast of Camarina © Museo archeologico regionale di Camarina. Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana

## WEALTH AND POWER

Early Greek settlers found a land of plenty and opportunity. In 734 BC, the first ships carrying Greek colonists landed on Sicily's eastern coast. Sicily was a new world for the Greeks, who came in waves to colonise the island. Taking advantage of the perfect climate and fertile volcanic soil for growing grain and grapes, the Sicilian Greeks grew wealthy. Merchant ships sailed back and forth from Greece bringing luxury tableware, olive oil and wine for the dinner parties of wealthy Sicilian Greeks. Cities like Syracuse, Gela and Selinunte were adorned with huge temples and altars to the gods. Stone theatres hosted performances of the latest plays from Athens.

## CARTHAGE: RULER OF THE SEAS

The great city of Carthage lay on the coast of North Africa, less than a day's journey by boat from Sicily. For centuries, the Carthaginians fought the Sicilian Greeks for control of the island. However, by 300BC both had a new rival; the Romans. Phoenician traders founded Carthage as a stopping place on voyages from the Near East to Spain. Strategically located at the centre of the Mediterranean, Carthage became one of the most powerful cities in the ancient world.

## BATTLE FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Carthaginians had the best fleet in the Mediterranean. The Romans were expert fighters on land but had little success at sea. The naval battle on March 10th, 241 BC changed history. Rome defeated Carthage and soon would conquer Sicily.



Roman warship ram from the Battle of the Egadi Islands, bronze, before 241 BC. © Soprintendenza del Mare, Palermo. Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana

## WINE, OLIVE OIL & FISH SAUCE

Shipwrecks often contain large numbers of amphorae (clay storage jars). These transported three basic commodities: olive oil - essential for lighting and cooking; wine from Greece and Italy; and *garum*, a Roman fermented fish sauce. Grain, timber, slaves, salt and textiles were also traded in bulk but leave little trace for maritime archaeologists. Although the business of shipping was considered vulgar by the Roman upper classes, it made vast profits and offered merchants and middle men the chance to become rich.



Marble torso of a warrior, 200-1 BC, found off the coast of Marsala. © Museo archeologico regionale 'Lilibeo-Baglio Anselmi' di Marsala. Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana

## MARE NOSTRUM: ROMAN TRADE & LUXURY LIFESTYLES

Rome's defeat of Carthage gave her control of the Mediterranean. Peace brought an explosion of trade. Fortunes were made or lost at sea because of storms and piracy.

The Romans called the Mediterranean *mare nostrum* or 'our sea'. They would rule the lands around its shores for over 400 years. Huge merchant ships criss-crossed the waters carrying foodstuffs, household furnishings, building materials and even live animals for the Roman circus. Sea-travel was much faster than by land, where goods had to be pulled in carts. Passengers could sail from Rome to Sicily in a day or two and from Sicily to Greece in less than a week. The Romans enjoyed a remarkable level of connectivity across their empire.

The Romans conquered first Sicily, then Greece and Egypt. Victorious generals looted temples, market places and homes for booty. Marble and bronze statues, paintings and tableware spread a fashion for foreign artworks in Italy.



Bronze perfume jar with enamel inlay, from the Camarina shipwreck, AD 175-200. © Museo archeologico regionale di Camarina. Regione Siciliana, Assessorato dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana

## A GOLDEN AGE

Arab rule introduced oranges, jasmine, sugar cane, date palm and silk to Sicily. It also brought great advancements in science and art. When the Normans invaded in 1061, they embraced the Arab community's expertise. For the following centuries, Christians and Muslims shared the island.

Norman kings Roger and his son Roger II maintained Arab advisors and conducted their courts in multiple languages: Latin, Greek and Arabic as well as Norman French. Their enlightened attitude and careful rule fostered a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural kingdom, with a remarkable degree of religious tolerance. Arab architects and craftsmen led the construction of magnificent churches adorned with dazzling mosaics blending the Byzantine and Islamic traditions. Muslim scholars made the capital at Palermo a centre for mathematics, geography and statecraft.

## LIFE AT SEA

Merchant ships had small crews of three or four to maximise profit. Conditions were cramped and sailors would pass the time telling stories, making music, playing dice and cooking food. For many ancient people, the sea was fundamental to daily life. It provided food through fishing and generated opportunity through trade and migration, but was also dangerous with the constant threat of storms and enemy attack. Merchant ships often hopped from harbour to harbour along the coast, rather than risk the open sea.

## A NEW FAITH SPREADS

Constant warfare divided the Roman Empire. The western half fell to invading tribes while the eastern half became the powerful Byzantine Empire. Christianity was the official religion and temples to pagan gods were replaced with churches. In AD 527, Justinian the Great ascended the Byzantine throne. He was determined to take back the western Mediterranean from the Goths and Vandals. Soon, Sicily was conquered by the Byzantine army as it swept to victory. To cement the Christian faith in all corners of his new empire, Justinian initiated an ambitious church building programme. Huge stone-carrying ships laden with prefabricated church interiors were sent out from his capital, Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), to building sites in Italy and North Africa.

## THE CHURCH SHIPWRECK

The flat pack church came from a ship carrying the inside of an entire church, which was probably bound for Italy. It seems the ship sank before reaching her destination. Since the 1960s, over 400 marble fragments have been brought to the surface. The cargo originally contained prefabricated sections of 28 columns with capitals and bases for the nave, a chancel screen and a complete ambo (early pulpit). Like modern 'flat-pack' furniture, these pieces would have been assembled by craftsmen on arrival. Thus, a church building made of brick or local stone in the western Byzantine Empire was decorated with opulent marbles imported from Constantinople in the east.



