

July 2, 2006

As we planned to depart early Tuesday morning, June 5, for Sicily, we anchored for the night out in Arbatax Bay. We had expected to sail most of the way to Sicily with winds from the northeast, but the “god of the winds” decided differently. Instead we were granted northeast winds for only three hours. Then we lost our wind, and when it did return we were given light head winds oscillating between east and south, and so mostly motorsailed. During the night we saw, like we often do, phosphorescence from the plankton disturbed by our boat’s wake, but this night the size was larger than usual, almost the size of a small jellyfish. It was quite unusual.

We made landfall at San Vito Lo Capo in Sicily on Wednesday, June 7, having traveled 179 nautical miles in 35 hours. The Capo San Vito headland was impressive, a welcomed sight to our arrival in Sicily. We anchored for the night in the bay, but in the morning the anchorage became uncomfortable due to a change in wind direction, and so we moved on to Palermo, 36 nautical miles away.



During our visit to Palermo, we stayed at Club Mediterraneo, a small local sailing club. Palermo, the capital of Sicily, had a rich history, especially under the Norman rule from the 11th to the 14th centuries. For a long time it was the center for mafia activities. Now historic Palermo was trying to recover from years of neglect. Restoration projects were slowly taking place, but it still had a long way to go with many run-down and derelict buildings remaining and trash continuing to lay around everywhere. Even so, we felt the grandeur that was once Palermo.



Palermo, Renovated



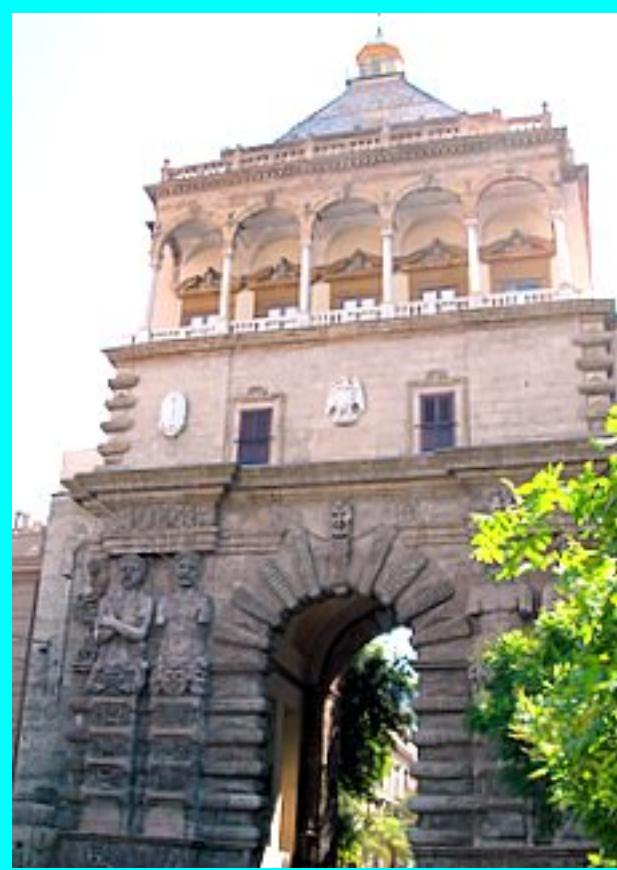
Palermo in need of Repair

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Friday we explored by foot and walked along some of the old streets. We visited the Quattro Canti (Four Corners) intersection which marked the center of the old town. This intersection was known for its four 17th century concave baroque facades. Nearby was the ornate 16th century Fontana Pretoria, also known by churchgoers of that era as the Fountain of Shame due to its many nude figures.



Saturday we traveled by bus to the Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel) and the Palazzo dei Normanni (Norman Palace), now the seat of the Sicilian parliament. Nearby, the main gate “Porta Nuova” displayed figures representing captive Moors, supposedly there to scare away intruders. Next we walked to Palermo’s majestic cathedral which over the centuries had uniquely blended several different styles of architecture. Afterwards we visited the 19th century Teatro Massimo where the closing scene of “The Godfather III” had been filmed.



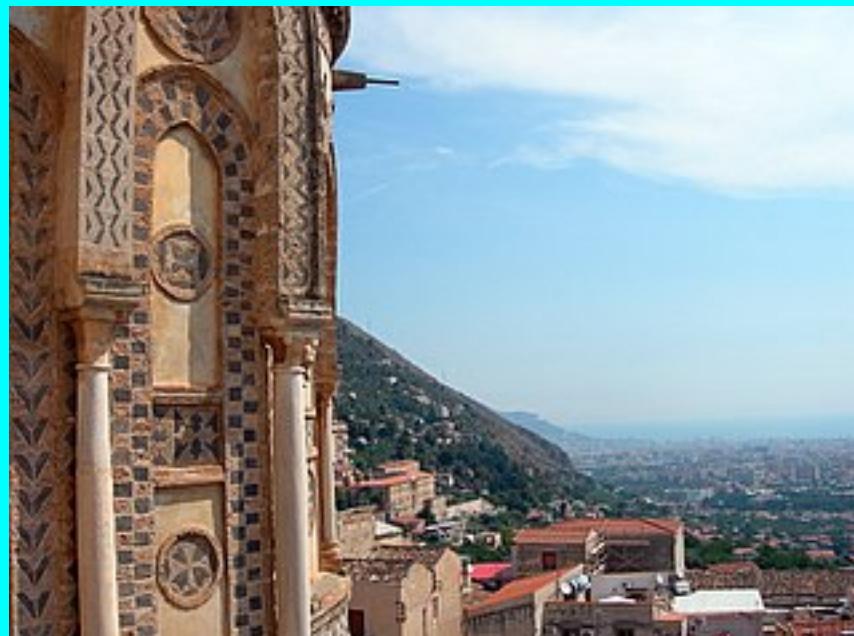
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Teatro Massimo

Sunday morning we took the bus to the town of Monreale located in the hills just outside Palermo. Here we visited one of the artistic treasures of Sicily, the beautiful Monreale Cathedral and its Benedictine cloister. This cathedral was one of the greatest artistic masterpieces of the Middle Ages, absolutely breathtaking with its 68,208 square feet of tiny golden mosaics incorporating Norman, Arab, and Byzantine art. In the center was the Christ Pantocrator (the Lord of the Universe) giving the benediction. Representing all the ethnic groups in Palermo at that time, the Christ was made up of the Norman hair, the Arab beard, and the Byzantine Greek nose. It was a most striking figure, and we could feel his arms reaching out and enveloping us. Only this cathedral, Palermo's Cappella Palatina, and Cefalu's cathedral displayed this unique Christ Pantocrator.



Before leaving, we climbed the steps to the cathedral's rooftop with views of the countryside and Benedictine cloister. Sunday mass had just begun when we returned, and the beautiful sounds from the choir and the 10,000 pipe organ combined with the image of the lit Christ Pantocrator moved us deeply. What an exhilarating feeling!

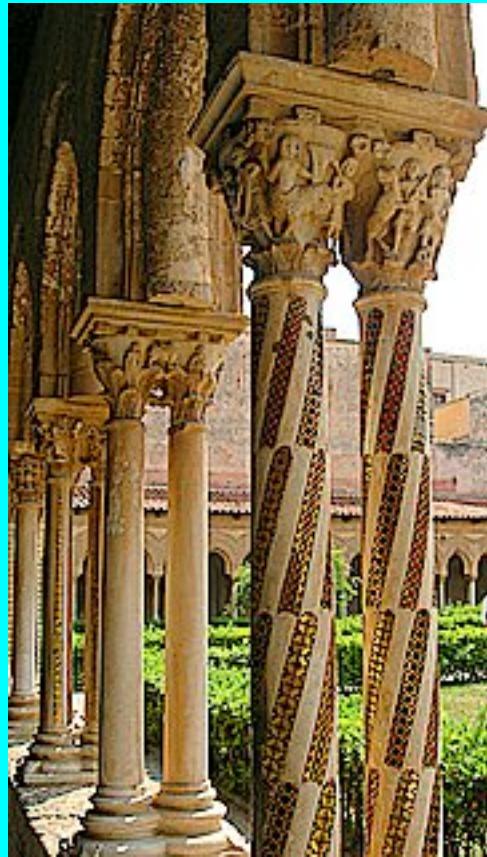


Looking out toward Palermo

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Afterwards we visited the Benedictine cloister with its many slender columns. Each alternating pair was exquisitely decorated with mosaics, and each capital portrayed a different theme.



Early Monday afternoon, June 12, we departed Palermo for Cefalu, 33 nautical miles away. A special memory will always be the departing waves from the staff of this small sailing club as they undid our lines. Six hours later we approached the headland at Cefalu. This headland, known as “La Rocca”, provided a dramatic backdrop to the town. Cefalu’s cathedral and twin towers dominated over the medieval town in front. We anchored just inside the harbor breakwater on the other side of “La Rocca.”



Cefalu with its narrow streets was quite charming and was now a popular tourist resort in Sicily. On Wednesday we went into town for a few hours to explore. Unfortunately at this time our walking was limited as Mary had acquired an acute case of bursitis in her left knee. Her knee had become irritated just after our haul out in Arbatax, and she had been using a walking stick ever since. The great amount of walking around Palermo, though, had caused more irritation and now her knee was quite swollen.



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Early Thursday morning we departed Cefalu for the Aeolian Islands (also known as the Lipari Islands) about 35 miles off the northeastern coast of Sicily. We planned our first anchorage in this archipelago to be at Vulcano Island, a distance of 49 nautical miles from Cefalu. During our stay we anchored in front of Gran Cratere, the only active crater on the island, and in the evening we often received whiffs from its sulfurous fumes. Gran Cratere on Vulcano Island was one of five active volcanoes in Italy. The others were Stromboli, also in the Aeolian Islands, and Mt. Vesuvius in southern Italy and Mt. Etna in Sicily. Vulcano Island was specially known for its therapeutic mud baths.



Saturday we took the hydrofoil from Vulcano Island to Lipari Island to visit the Aeolian Archeological Museum located inside the citadel above the town. This museum displayed an amazing collection of miniature Greek tragedy and comedy masks buried with the dead around the 3rd century BC.



Lipari Waterfront

We had originally planned to visit Stromboli Island before heading south toward the Strait of Messina. Instead, we headed immediately for the large city of Siracusa (Syracuse) on Sicily's southeastern coastline as we felt Mary's knee might need to be seen by an orthopedic doctor. We departed Vulcano Island early Sunday morning, June 18. With no wind, we motored south.

Approaching the Strait of Messina we saw for the first time the swordfish boats designed to catch the migrating swordfish in the strait. We were entertained as this boat moved around trying to find the fish. As swordfish tend to swim sluggishly near the surface during the day, the captain would steer the boat from top the mast looking for the swordfish. Then once found, the harpooner out on the long bowsprit would try to catch the fish.



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With our passage through the Strait of Messina we passed from the Tyrrhenian Sea into the Ionian Sea. At its northern end the strait was only about 1½ miles across. In Homer's Odyssey this was where Skylla and Kharybdis existed. We passed by the western side of the strait where Kharybdis was said to have lurked. In the earthquake of 1783 the strait's sea bottom was altered, supposedly "taming" both Skylla and Kharybdis. As we traveled at slack, we found Kharybdis sleeping.



In Homer's Odyssey ... this was the "Tongue of the Land"

We broke the trip to Siracusa into two days. On Sunday we traveled from Vulcano Island to Taormina, a distance of 68 nautical miles. That night we anchored in Taormina Bay just beneath the medieval town of Taormina perched high up on the hillside. Monday, June 19, we continued on to Siracusa, 50 nautical miles away. Along the way we passed by majestic Mt. Etna, almost 11,000 feet high. A little snow could still be seen near its top.



Mt. Etna



Taormina

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We spent almost two weeks anchored in Siracusa Bay. During this time we visited some of Siracusa's major sights plus rented a car for two days to explore Sicily. Siracusa was a charming clean city, and we easily could have stayed longer if it had been earlier in the season. By the time we arrived it had become quite hot and exploring during the heat of the day was not much fun. It was hard to believe that just one week earlier in Palermo we were still sleeping with a blanket. Upon our arrival in Siracusa our intention was to have Mary visit an orthopedic doctor, but her knee slowly started getting better and so an appointment was never made. Mary did buy a walking cane which helped immensely.

Siracusa was founded in the 8th century BC on the island of Ortigia by Greek colonists from Corinth. For 200 years, beginning in the 5th century BC, this city enjoyed much prosperity as a major Mediterranean power, but by the end of the 3rd century BC Siracusa came under Roman jurisdiction. Of interest, the great Greek mathematician and physicist Archimedes had been a resident of this city. He was killed during the Roman conflict at the end of the 3rd century.

The island of Ortigia was small, only about two miles long and one mile wide. We'd park our dinghy by the bridge and walk across to Ortigia, now the main historic part of Siracusa. A couple of blocks away was an excellent outdoor market overflowing with fresh Sicilian produce and fish. Further on, Ortigia was filled with many narrow streets and alleys. Near the center of the island was Piazza Archimede and Piazza Duomo.



Ortigia



All Fish



Olives

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Piazza Archimede



Piazza Duomo

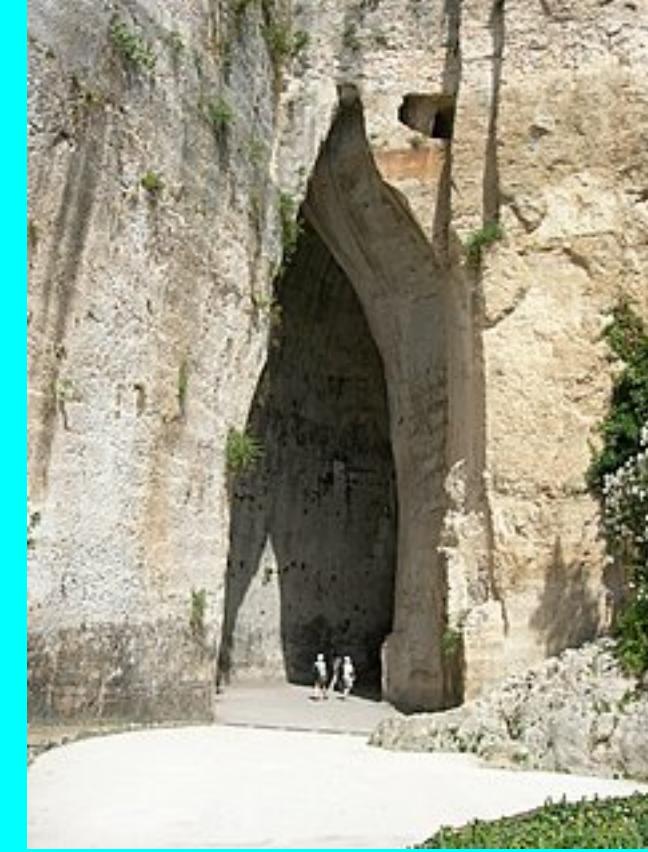
The cathedral “Il Duomo”, located in Piazza Duomo, was most unique. The central part of this church had been in existence for 2500 years. Originally it was the Temple of Athena. With the arrival of Christianity it was converted into a Christian church. Interestingly nothing was ever destroyed but only additions and alterations made to the original building. In a Greek temple the statue of the Greek god or goddess for whom the temple was dedicated was located inside a windowless rectangular building and that building was entirely surrounded by columns. When the temple became a church, what was closed in the Greek temple became open and what was open became closed. Archways were carved out of the solid temple building and then the spaces filled-in between the 5th century BC Doric columns. During the Baroque period, chapels were added along one side of the originally filled-in columns. The apostle Paul spoke here on his voyage to Rome, and this church was one of the first to be dedicated to Christ.



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One morning we took the city bus to the Archaeological Park of Neapolis. Contained within this park was the 5th century BC Greek Theater, almost completely carved out of the rock, overlooking Siracusa Bay. It was considered one of the largest Greek theaters outside Greece, able to seat 16,000 people. A Greek Classical Drama Festival was presently taking place during the evenings. Next to the Greek Theater were the ancient limestone quarries. The "Ear of Dionysius" was a deep grotto carved out of the limestone, about 200 feet deep and 75 feet high, where it was said that Dionysius the Elder kept his prisoners. Afterwards we visited the Paolo Orsi Archeological Museum which contained one of the most extensive archaeological collections in Sicily.



Our first Saturday evening in Siracusa we attended a Sicilian puppet show. For generations the Sicilian puppet theater had become a daily event for Sicilians with new episodes in the lives of the heroes, the knights of Charlemagne, occurring almost nightly, much like our present day TV episodes. Now this art form was being kept alive due to its unique cultural contribution, and in 2001 the Sicilian puppet theater was added to the World Heritage list.



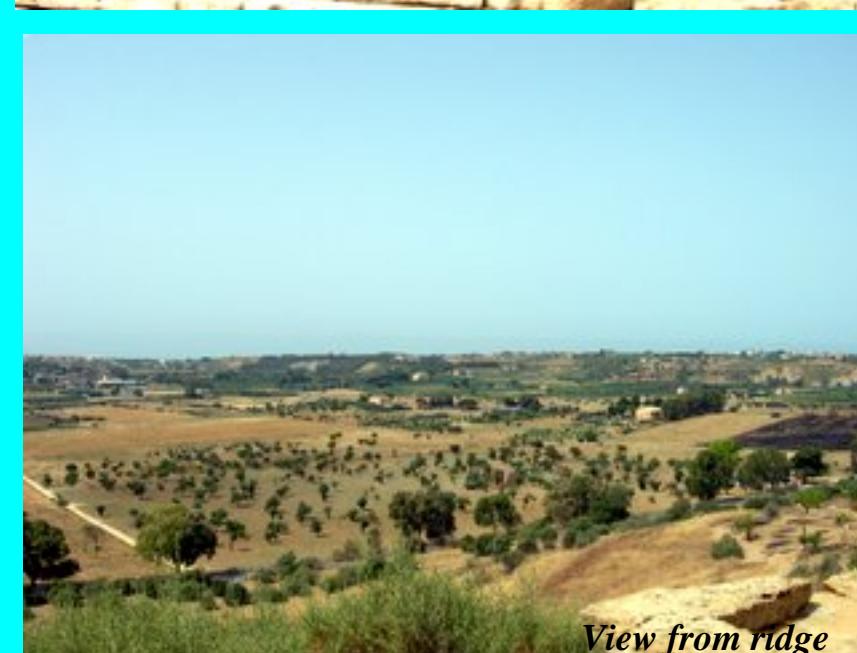
Charlemagne's heroic knight Orlando fighting Gradasso

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Monday evening, June 26, we picked up our rental car so that we could do some grocery shopping before leaving the next morning on our road trip. When we arrived at the huge shopping mall, the parking lot was almost deserted except for the employees inside. It is said that Italy is a "soccer mad" nation, and we believe it. At that time everyone was glued to their TV or radio either at home or in a bar listening to the game. Even the post office closed early. If Italy won this game it meant that they were headed to the World Cup quarter finals. Just as we finished our shopping Italy won and total pandemonium took place. We got caught in a huge traffic jam with motor scooters everywhere, all weaving in and out of the slow moving traffic, with huge Italian flags flying from the back of their scooters. Everyone was honking. It made for difficult driving, but what excitement! (Note: On July 9, just after we arrived in Greece, Italy won the World Cup. We can only imagine all the excitement at that time throughout all of Italy. We ourselves were excited for them.)

Tuesday morning, June 27, we left on our two day road trip. We first drove west to the Valley of the Temples (Valle dei Templi) in Agrigento. Originally five Doric temples had stood along the ridge of the hill, all built around the 5th century BC. Now only two were worth observing, but with a little imagination it was easy to visualize the impact that these five temples must have once made, visible to all around. The best preserved of the two was the Temple of Concordia as it had been converted into a Christian church in the 6th century AD. The Temple of Hera (Juno), the other temple, was located at the highest point along the ridge. Here it was easy to imagine people bringing sacrifices up the hill to this temple's sacrificial altar. Presently both these temples were undergoing restoration. At the other end of the archeological site where the Temple of Zeus (Jupiter) formerly stood was a copy of a gigantic "Telamon", one of many colossal statues that once stood between the columns of this massive temple. The temple itself was now in ruins.



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Afterwards we drove to Villa Romana del Casale just outside Piazza Armerina. This villa was considered one of the artistic treasures of Sicily for its magnificent floor mosaics. It had been buried under mud for almost 700 years until being uncovered in 1929. The villa's mosaics were discovered in the 1950's. This large, lavish Roman villa, built in the early 4th century AD, belonged to one of the Roman aristocratic families, most likely Maximianus Erculeus. Many corridors surrounded its central courtyard, and there were a total of forty rooms in the villa. Its entire floor space was covered in rich colored mosaics with each corridor and room in the villa displaying a different theme. Some told stories, some displayed African themes, and many involved different aspects of hunting. Most remarkable was the "Corridor of the Great Hunt."



Central Courtyard ... note site is covered to protect



From Piazza Armerina we traveled along country roads through rural Sicily back to Siracusa. Just before sunset we were able to get a glimpse of the prehistoric Pantalica Necropolis near Siracusa, the largest necropolis in the Mediterranean basin. In total, 5000 tombs had been carved out of these rocky ridges between the 13th to the 8th century BC.



Rural Sicily



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Tombs carved into lime stone

Wednesday morning, June 28, we headed north. We first drove up the southern side of Mt. Etna to the ski area at Rifugio Sapienza. At 6200 feet, this was as high as we could drive by car. The lava flow from the 2002 eruption just missed Sapienza but engulfed the area beside



Ski Run ... carved out of Lava



Lava Flows

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Next we traveled down Etna's eastern side to Taormina, today one of the most popular tourist resorts in Sicily. Perched high above the sea, this small, almost perfectly preserved, medieval town was enchanting. Now its main street was a pedestrian walkway, but up until the 18th century all travel from Messina to Catania passed along this road. From its Greek-Roman theater we had magnificent views of the surrounding area and the Ionian Sea. Originally this theater had been built by the Greeks in the 3rd century BC, but it was almost completely reconstructed by the Romans in the 2nd century AD. It could seat 5,400 people. After visiting this theater we drove back to Siracusa as we needed to return the car by closing time.



As we had more ports to explore before arriving in Turkey the latter part of October, we departed Siracusa, Sicily, for the Ionian Islands in Greece on July 2. As we have continued our travels east through the Mediterranean, the contributions and impact that different cultures have left on an area have been interesting to observe. This was especially true of Sicily with its numerous invaders due to its strategic position in the Mediterranean.

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