



**The archaeological and landscape park of the Valley of the temples of Agrigento**

The Valley of the Temples is the site of Akragas, an ancient city founded the year 581 BC by colonists from Gela and Rhodes. Its history lasted for more than a thousand years and ended between the VII and the IX century AD, when its inhabitants moved to the Girgenti hill, that is on the most western end of the area where the ancient Greek city used to be built. The ancient classical city which stretched between the Rupe Atenea hill and the Ridge of the Temples, shows the remains of its impressive buildings in what we call today the Valley of the Temples, a unique art heritage. Not so long ago, the so called Valley of the Temples covered only the area between the Ridge of the Temples and the Rupe Atenea hill. Today it includes also the surrounding area where you find the necropolis and the *extra-moenia* sanctuaries (that is outside the ancient city walls), and where the rivers Akragas

and Ipsas flow down to the sea by San Leone beach. The environmental and natural balances are strongly enhanced by the intervention of man. They fuse admirably together with the archaeological monuments, solemn like the temples, discrete and suggestive like the necropolis and the complex hypogees. However most of the ancient classical and roman city is still hidden under almond trees and hundred year old olive trees. Even today the remains come to the surface of this secret reserve to show more of its own past. In the middle of the 1900's an aerial view showed one of the most interesting sides of the town: the Hippodamian street plan in the area between the southern ridge and the foot of the Rupe Atenea hill. Six wide roads (*plateiai*) covered this area from the East to the West and were crossed by 30 narrow streets (*stenopoi*) according to a grid plan. All the buildings of the ancient city, including the temple of Zeus, the *gymnasium* and the *bouleuterion*, were inserted in this regular layout. Today clearly visible modern changes concern especially the San Nicola area. There you can see the remains of ancient public buildings next to the different terraces connected one to the other by ramps and steps and on which the city was built.



The most important period of Akragas corresponds to the first two centuries of its history at the time of the tyrants Phalaris and Theron (VI -V century BC). These two tyrants made the town wealthy in the V century BC by conquering new land and by winning against the Carthaginians in 480 BC the famous battle of Himera, when Theron fought allied with Syracuse. Thanks to the spoils of that war, that is mainly slaves, Theron was able to build great public buildings such as the temple of Zeus and less known but still visible water tunnels and reservoirs. Moreover he carried out a policy for the improvement of agriculture, which is

mentioned by Diodorus (*Diod. XI, 25, 5*), and which contributed to the development of the town in the V century BC. The temple of Hercules mentioned by Cicero in its *Verrine*, was the first *peripteron* temple to be built on the southern end of the ridge of the temples. About twenty years later the temple of Zeus was made next to it. During the VI century BC a large sacred site was to be found in the area on the western end of the ridge. It has been recognised as the sacred area of the goddesses of the Earth Demeter and Kore and it includes the temples, shrines, altars and precincts between the temple of Zeus, Gate V and the Colimbeta, that is the fishpond

where the water coming from the hills used to be collected through the underground tunnels. In the VI century BC, at the time of Phalaris, the 12 km. long city walls were made. During the V century BC all the temples of the ridge were built: from the temple of Zeus (480 BC) to the one of Concordia (430 BC). The public buildings excavated in the last few years in the San Nicola hillock area, right in the centre of the town, date back to the IV century BC. These are the rounded *cavea* of the *eklesiasterion*, that is the seat of the Assembly, where 3.000 people could meet and on the northern end of the hillock, the *bouleuterion*, that is the Council

hall, which lies on an area rich in more recent remains. The ruins of the ancient city still show marks of the destruction made by the Carthaginians in 406 BC and especially by the Romans during the Punic Wars, in the second half of the III century BC. The beginning of the Roman era, after the conquest's consequent destruction, was characterised by an intense activity and is represented by the Hellenistic and Roman Quarter, where different types of houses can be seen: Hellenistic houses with a wide peristyle, houses with an *atrium* and *compluvium* having also a portico like those found in Pompei, houses with courtyards, corridors and *atriums*.



During Hellenistic time the urban layout shows functional characteristics. Importance was given to political, administration and social facilities which were arranged over different terraces and in different zones along the way which stretches from San Nicola hillock to the temple of Zeus. On the most southern end of the Ridge of the Temples the first terrace where the lower agorà used to lie was next to the *plateia-decumanus* which connected Gate II and Gate V next to the temple of the Dioscuri. This has been recently proved by excavations carried out in the area below the temple of Zeus. A second terrace was the one where the upper agorà and the *gymnasium* were located

and where excavations are still under way. The third terrace concerned political and administration public buildings like the *bouleuterion*, probably even the theatre, and the upper Forum where recently a square surrounded with porticoes and a big roman temple in the middle of it was found. At the beginning of the Roman Empire the town enjoyed certain wealth which is shown by the necropolis in San Gregorio plain, below the temple of Hercules and its monumental sepulchres like the one of Theron, still standing today. In the IV century AD early Christian time is represented by the small basilica by the stream that flows at the foot of the temple of Juno, and by the

basilica which is located on the North of the temple of Concord where a marble *pluteus* decorated with bas-reliefs comes from which can be seen in the local Archaeological Museum. At the end of the VI century AD the temple of Concord was converted into a Christian graveyard-church. Early Christian necropolis stretch inside the Greek city walls between the temple of Hercules and the temple of Juno. These include: the *sub-divo* cemetery (that is in the open air) and its graves made into the ground and sarcophagi carved into the bedrock which was in use since the III until the V century AD; the wide and winding catacomb, that is the so called *Grotta Fragapane*, made by

connecting some hypogees dating from the time of the classical city on the West of the temple of Concord and under the garden of Villa Aurea; several *arcosolia* carved into the rock of the former southern fortifications which even today cover the area between the temple of Concord and the temple of Juno. Events following the fall of the Western Roman Empire made the inhabitants leave the town. When the Arabs came in 827 they had moved their new small town already to the western hill in the same area where the Cathedral stands today and where the modern town grew. In a short span of time vegetation covered the area

once occupied by the ancient *civita*: of the ancient Akragas which had become the roman *Agrigentum* only the remains of its impressive temples and the almost intact temple of Concord can be seen today. However the souvenir of its great past was not forgotten and it was maintained thanks to the work of historians and topographers. In 1700 the study of classical Antiquities was boosted also thanks to archaeological research. At the same time the town of Girgenti, whose new name had Arab origins, became the destination of mainly foreign travellers who went to Sicily as they were attracted by its natural beauties and the fame of its monuments.



The crab represented on ancient coins of the city was the symbol of Akragas and of the river god who had the same name. Today it is the emblem of the Archaeological and Landscape Park of the Valley of the Temples.



The great fusion of monuments and nature had taken place already and it was underlined by the travellers' descriptions where they showed to be attracted both by that unique landscape and the stunning ruins which were then discovered and studied. Between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, monuments were not only studied but some of them like the temple of Zeus began to be restored and the *anastylosis* of the temples of Juno, of the Dioscuri and of Hercules was carried out. In the last fifty years the monumental heritage of the Valley has been enriched thanks to deeper research. Today besides the already well known different monumental zones such as the Ridge of the Temples, the area of the Temple of Zeus and the Hellenistic and Roman Quarter,

new sections such as the *Agorà* and the *Gymnasium*, the public building area next to the Museum, the eastern fortifications, the Punic Quarter and the Necropolis are not separate anymore but are part of large sections. International importance of the Valley was recognised in 1997 when it was inscribed in the list of the World Heritage protected by UNESCO. In November 2000 the Sicilian Region founded the Archaeological and Landscape Park of the Valley of the Temples in order to protect and to boost this natural, archaeological heritage and its landscape and to conserve it. Moreover it promotes events and interventions for the development of local economic sources in the field of tourism and in general for guaranteeing a pleasant social experience.

"The city of Akragas is different from the other towns for different reasons and also for its fortress, its beauty and its buildings. It stands 18 stadia away from the sea and everybody enjoys the wealth which comes from that. Its perimeter is defended in a great way both for natural and artificial reasons as its walls stand on a high and steep cliff in part natural and in part made by man. It is surrounded by rivers: on the southern end the river which has the same name of the

city, on the West and on the South-West where the *libeccio* wind blows from the river called *Hypsas*. The upper part of the city stands over the hillside which looks at the summer East: on the outside it is limited by a cliff and on the inside it is connected to the lower part of the city just by one road. On top of the hill there is a Sanctuary of Athena and one of Zeus *Atabyrios* just like in Rhodes".

(Polybius, "Historiae", book IX)

I have the pleasure of introducing the first English translation of the pamphlet about the Valley of the Temples of Agrigento included in the UNESCO World Heritage List

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