

## HISTORY OF SICILY



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### **What is the origin of Sicilian people? Why are they different from Italians?**

*La mia Sicilia,  
bel fior fra tre mari sbocciato.* (Luigi Pirandello)

Your question suggests that Italians have a common origin and homogenous identity from which Sicilians in some way diverge. The history of Italy, from Roman times and through the middle ages, records the rise of city states each with its own culture, politics, dialect and cuisine (the latter being essential, rather than tangential). Until the Risorgimento, the separateness of Italian regions dominated its history; allegiance was to a city state rather than to a greater national entity.

Unification in 1861 brought about a union of many separate parts of which Sicily is but one. Italy was a territorial union long before it became a national state.

Separated by the Alps from the rest of Europe, Italy might have unified earlier were it not for the Appenine mountain chain that runs the length of the peninsula and extends into Sicily. It's irregular pattern created naturally separate regions of different historical and cultural development which were scarcely less insular than Sicily and Sardinia, separated from the mainland by water.

But your question is also about the origin of the Sicilian people and I'll answer as best I can. As to my authority to do so, I've been married for 58 years to a Sicilian born in Acquisanta, Palermo which explains my interest. And there alone is material for a blockbuster novel if only I had the courage and the energy to write it.

Archaeologists have found traces of men who lived on Sicily as long ago as 15,000 B.C. but it's probable that Sicily was inhabited during the Paleolithic period, a mere million years ago. Ancient myths record stories of monsters and giants. Historically, the Sicani are credited with being the first inhabitants of the island — an agricultural civilisation that called the island Sicania; the Sicani Mountains in the central west still bear their name. They were forced by the invasion of the Siculi to take refuge in the island's interior; the Siculi were a warlike people originating in Italy. The Elimi, who perhaps originated in modern Turkey, established themselves in the extreme west; Virgil identifies them as the companions of Aeneas who preferred to stay in Sicily rather than returning home. From the 11th to the 10th century B.C., notably in the west, Phoenicians established commercial centres at Solunto, Palermo and especially Mozia which is now the island of San Pantaleo in the Stagnone lagoon near Marsala.



(The ancient symbol of Sicily dating from the 7th century B.C. The gorgon's head surrounded by eels aimed to inspire terror in enemies; three legs represent the rays of the sun and the three extremities of the island. The ears of wheat were added in Roman times.)

Sicily's Greek period dates from the 8th to the 3rd century B.C. In 735 B.C. Greek colonists led by Theocles founded Naxos, on the beach beneath Taormina. This is erroneously regarded as the first Greek settlement but previous settlements were at Camarina (598 B.C.), Casmene (644 B.C.), Akral, today Palazzolo Acreide (694 B.C.), Suraka, i.e. Syracuse (734 B.C.). The westernmost of the Greek colonies was at Selinunte; the name derives from "selinon", the wild parsley that still grows in the area. Colonists from Rhodes and Crete founded Gela and Agrigentum in 689 and 581 B.C. Respectively.

The Roman period of Sicilian history is the longest, from the 3rd century B.C. to the 6th century A.D. It began in 264 B.C. with the first Punic war and ended in 535 A.D. with the arrival of the Byzantines. Sicily satisfied three Roman exigencies: politically it was well positioned for the battle for supremacy between Rome and Carthage in the Mediterranean; economically it provided sustenance for Rome's

troops engaged in warfare and for its ever-growing population; strategically it was the launching place for conquest of Africa. Sicily became the provider of Rome's grain. Roman authors, including Cicero, Lucretius and Virgil, sang the praises of Sicily. The latter had a villa there where he frequently sojourned and other historical greats to visit the island were emperors Augustus, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. Sicily remembers Rome fondly. A noble and generous gesture is, still today, a gesture "rumanu" for Sicilians.

Byzantine domination lasted from 535 to 827 A.D. and is not fondly remembered. Even last century, naughty children were still told, "Vidi ca venunu i Greci!", meaning "If you misbehave, the Byzantines will come to punish you". Muslim pressure on Constantinople saw Costante II transfer the capital of the Byzantine Empire from Constantinople to Syracuse in Sicily. When he was murdered there, the court passed to the the Armenian Mecezio. Costantino IV, however, defeated Mecezio in 669 A.D. and took his father's body back to Constantinople. The Byzantine domination is remembered for its fiscal restraints that plunged the island into poverty. The culture of this period was ecclesiastic and a noted sacred orator was S. Gregorio da Agrigento.

The Arabs dominated Sicily from 827 to 1060 A.D. Called to the island by rebel Byzantine Eufemio da Messina, they landed at Cape Granitola near Mazara in 827 and completed their occupation in 965 at Rometta nel Messinese. Their reign comprised a series of local "kaid" that at first persecuted Christians, requiring their conversion to Islam, but subsequently were content to receive payment of the "gezia" and consent to freedom of religious practice. In general, their treatment was humane and tolerant. Sicily was divided into three administrations: Val di Mazara; Val Demone; Val di Noto. The Arabian contribution to economic and civil development was considerable. They revolutionised agricultural production and introduced irrigation systems to better exploit the island's water resources. The memory of Arabian domination is recorded in the names of important cities and in commercial terms still in use, in many surnames and in words that have passed into the common language.



As explained, the Arab domination was not centrally organised. The "kaid" often fought among themselves. In 1060, when the Kaid of Catania was engaged in battle with the Kaid of Agrigento, the Normans were called in to intervene. They disembarked and occupied Messina in 1060 and extended their dominion, by 1092 occupying the island which they re-Christianised. Pope Urbano II conceded to Ruggero the title of Apostolica Legazia which entitled him to directly nominate all bishops of Sicily. The celebrated king Ruggero II reigned from 1130 to 1154. Some of the splendid buildings erected during his reign include the Cappella Palatina, the Church of the Martorana in Palermo and the cathedral at Cefalù. Ruggero II was succeeded by Guglielmo and Guglielmo II. The latter died childless making his aunt, Costanza d'Altavilla, the heir to the throne. Costanza married Henry VI of Swabia and the throne of Sicily passed from the Normans to the Swabian monarchy.



Mosaics in the Cappella Palatina:



The cathedral at Cefalù from my snapshots.

Henry VI was emperor of Germany and king of Sicily from 1194 to 1197. The reign continued with Federico II from 1198 to 1250 and terminated with king Manfredi from 1258 to 1266. Enrico VI reigned with cruelty and terror and blinded or killed his adversaries. In *Paradiso*, canto III, Dante describes him as "un vento impetuoso" (an impetuous wind). His son, Federico II, was called by his contemporaries "the wonder of the world". Dante (*De vulgari eloquentia*, I, 12) and Petrarch (*Trionfo d'amore*, IV, 35 and in the prologue to *Epistolae familiares*) testify that Italian literature was born at his court in Palermo with the school of Sicilian poets.

In 1266 Charles I of Anjou seized power in Sicily, having defeated and decapitated Conradin of Swabia whom Sicilians had called to be their king. His rule was overthrown when Sicilians massacred the French or drove them from the island. The revolt, signalled by the ringing of the vesper bell, is known as the Sicilian Vespers.



*Il vespro siciliano in un disegno di Pippo Madé.*

(I'm related by marriage to Pippo whose brother Franco is also a Sicilian artist of note.)  
As we approach more modern time, I should probably summarise. From the 14th to the 19th century, Sicily was chiefly under Spanish, Aragon, Savoy and Austrian rulers and government was generally oppressive. In 1860 Giuseppe Garibaldi led a revolt that freed Sicily from the Spanish Bourbon dynasty and it became part of the newly formed kingdom of Italy under King Vittorio Emanuele II.

From my potted history of Sicily, anyone who has read this far should be able to understand why Sicilians have placed their monument to King Vittorio Emanuele II outside the Palermo railway station in a place of continual leavetaking.

Santi Correnti, *Breve Storia della Sicilia*. Roma 1995.