



ARCHAEOLOGY, ARCHITECTURE, ART, THE SEA AND THE LANDSCAPE

LICATA: A MUSEUM EN PLEIN AIR

The territory of Licata, extending 24 km along the coast in the plain of the mouth of the River Salso, is mostly flat with a few gentle hills.

The town lies on the Western side of the Gulf of Gela, close to a hill called "La Montagna" (The Mountain).

The coast is among the most fascinating ones in Southern Sicily.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The name of Licata or Leocata had already appeared around the 11th and the 12th centuries, along with the name of Olimpiada of obvious Greek origin. The town of Licata developed between the River Salso and the coastal hill, the so-called "Montagna", on the southern side of Sicily, in the province of Agrigento, and today numbers 39,000 inhabitants. The River Imera (now called Salso), which was the easiest way to penetrate the hinterland, in ancient times was divided into two branches surrounding the "Montagna", almost making it become an island: a large cultivated area, well-sheltered and surrounded by a chain of hills. Its

location favored the human settlement since ancient time as documented by various archaeological sites from the prehistoric age. The town of Licata was founded by the tyrant of Agrigento Phintias in 281 BC, for the purpose of transferring the inhabitants of the destroyed Gela there, the Rhodian-Cretan colony founded in 688 BC. The human settlement strengthened under the domination of the Greeks in Sicily and even more under the Roman rule, when Licata became a very important town. Near Mount Eknomos, the Mountain of Licata, there were some of the most famous and decisive battles in ancient history: the battle on the River Imera in 310 BC when the Carthaginians led by Hamilcar defeated Agathocles, and the sea battle of Capo Ecnomo, in 256 BC during the Punic First War, when Attilius Regulus defeated the Carthaginian fleet giving the Romans predominance at sea.

Besides the archaeological finds, tangible evidences of the various dominations in Sicily, over time, have been found also in the religious and non-religious architecture as well as in the urban structures. Traces of the Byzantine occupation can be seen in the rock Churches and coenobia. In 1234 Licata was raised to the status of State City by Frederick II. During the Medieval Ages two castles were built: Castel San Giacomo and Castel Nuovo, fortresses no longer extant. The development of Licata, from the medieval village lying around Castel San Giacomo to the 16th-century walled town and up to the modern city, can still be seen in its streets. From the 16th century onwards, Licata underwent a flourishing period of trade and was enriched with remarkable Baroque buildings. In the early years of the 20th century the thriving development of the trading activity led to a considerable economical prosperity revealed in public and private elegant Art Nouveau buildings. The littoral, in a rapid alternation of cliffs, sandy stretches and small bays, even if marked by the growth of the buildings in the 70s and 80s, still preserves natural features in its various ravines that make it renowned among the best examples in Southern Sicily.

EVIDENCES FROM THE PAST AT LICATA AND SURROUNDINGS

The archaeological importance of the territory of Licata has been known since the past centuries. The archaeological research, mainly pursued in the last decades of the 20th century, has led to the identification of numerous sites that document various settlements in the area dating back to the most remote periods of antiquity. Among the most significant finds there are the hypogeum Stagnone Pontillo, the monumental necropolis with artificial caves of Monte Petrulla, the Grangela (a series of hydraulic works of the pre-Hellenistic era), the phourion of Phalaris (a fortress of Greek epoch) as well as the remains of the Greek town of Mount Sant'Angelo. Many relics are preserved and exhibited at the local Archaeological Museum that carefully document the long history of Licata.

Stagnone Pontillo

On the Mountain of Licata, the Stagnone Pontillo, highly fascinating, is a big hypogeum in a context of necropolises from the Bronze Age and the Greek-Hellenistic era. Probably created as a prehistoric monumental burial, it was converted into a hydraulic work perhaps in the Greek-Roman age. For centuries it was certainly used as a water reservoir: the walls still preserve big stretches of plaster on which the water levels can be seen.

The Grangela

Among the hydraulic works found in the area, there is a big and deep well dug out in the rock and placed at the foot of the Mountain, a short distance from the main square of Licata. A flight of steps leads to a rectangular chamber from which four short tunnels branch off for channelling in the water, which is collected into three trenches dug out at the bottom of the chamber. Inside one of these trenches, a few relics from the Hellenistic age have been recovered.

Mount Sant'Angelo

The most wide-ranging archaeological site found up to now and only partially explored is Mount Sant'Angelo, on the eastern side of the Mountain. The monumental remains of a town from the Hellenistic epoch, still little known, are coming to light on the southern slopes of the hill. It is Phintias, the last Greek town founded in Sicily, in 282 BC, at the behest of the tyrant of Akragas Phintias, to be inhabited by the survivors of Gela, after its definitive destruction, as we are told by the historian Diodorus (XXII). The

archaeological area of Mount Sant'Angelo are giving remarkable scientific results of great interest: a complex of high places on which, starting from the 6th century BC, there were dwellings, little necropolises, sanctuaries and fortified castles.

LICATA: A MEDIEVAL AND MODERN TOWN

Today the town of Licata, located on the Eastern slopes of the Mountain overlapping the Hellenistic town of Mount Sant'Angelo, represents an art gallery, which is fascinating and interesting to visit, and whose works of art were realized in a period of time running from the Middle Ages up to 1900. We would mention Castel Sant'Angelo, a Spanish fortress dating back to the end of the 16th century, built on the top of the mount with the same name and defended by a large moat, now housing the Ethnographic Museum.

At Licata, among the monuments of religious heritage, we would mention: the Church of Sant'Angelo with the silver urn of the Saint; Santa Maria della Carità (17th century); the Cistercian Convent of Santa Maria del Soccorso, best known as Badia, that houses the Archaeological Museum. The Museum, that features the ancient history of the territory of Licata since its origins, is home to precious relics found in the various surrounding archaeological sites. The Duomo, dedicated to Santa Maria la Nuova, a 15th-century building with a few Baroque restorations, houses the splendid Chapel of the Most Holy Crucifix; the Chiesa del Carmine with the Convent, a 13th-century complex founded by the Carmelite Fathers; the Church of San Francesco with the Monastery of the Conventual Franciscans with various 18th-century paintings, among which we can see the Baptism of Christ and a canvas depicting the Virgin by Domenico Provenzali.

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ART NOUVEAU AT LICATA

At the beginning of the 20th century, when the sulphur trade and the harbor activities favoured the growth of a rich industrial and landowning middle class, a series of art nouveau villas were built; they gave Licata a new and modern appearance, which still now characterizes some of its most significant urban spaces. One of the greatest Italian architects of the time, the Sicilian Ernesto Basile, was asked to build them; he availed himself of the cooperation of some skilful local professionals, among which Re Grillo who brightly carried on the master's work. In the first decades of 1900, Basile designed the new Town Hall to be built in the square dedicated to "Progress"; this palace is now considered one of the most significant works by this master of the Sicilian Art Nouveau.

The City Palace

An example of the rigid and clear geometric design of the typical Sicilian Art Nouveau style, it houses some relics dating back to the Greek domination, as well as the 15th-century statue of the "Madonna col Bambino" and a 15th-century triptych with the "Madonna col Bambino e i Santi" from the Carmine Convent.

The Art Nouveau Villas

The Mountain of Licata is certainly the most striking feature of the landscape of Licata and the place in which there are concentrated and much appreciated the best landscape, and the architectural, archaeological, natural and cultural aspects of the territory to the west of the city.

Here we can see the art nouveau villas that, in the early years of the 20th century, were the residences of the noble and middle-class families, realized by the most skillful local professionals. These villas impose themselves with the force of their architecture and with the beauty of the views arousing the admiration of the visitor. We would like to mention Villa Sapio-Rumbolo, now a restaurant, by Filippo Re Grillo, one of the most capable local designers; at a short distance there is Villa Urso, the most imposing of the villas from this period, and then, immersed in a pine wood, Villa La Lumia. The series of buildings ends with

Villa Verderame, now called Villa Bosa, which is charming and pretty, also in the rustic appearance of an unfinished project; it overlooks the northern slope of the Mountain and dominates the plain below.

THE BEACHES

The long summer season, lasting from May to October, offers everybody many opportunities of choosing the most suitable way and time for spending holidays at Licata. 20 kilometers of coast can let you enjoy long sandy stretches to the East of the town, or charming cliffs to the West, as well as small and big bays, gulfs and inlets. There are various well equipped lidos along the main beaches, such as Torre di Gaffe, Pisciotto, Mollarella, Marianello, Playa and Gallo D'Oro, Rocca di San Nicola, Balatazze, Cavadduzzu, Nicolizia. Marianello is the urban beach of Licata that, even if not very big, can welcome people who don't like to leave the town to go swimming. Close to the seafront, in the evening it is enlivened by pubs, restaurants, pizzerias and various other places for meeting people. For those who look for quietness, clean water and sandy beaches, there is Torre di Gaffe, equipped with all the facilities, that is located 10 km from Licata and connected by bus services. Completely sandy and wide, the beach of Pisciotto is one of the most loved beaches by the inhabitants of Licata, since it lies in an airy spot and is protected from the summer sultriness. There are various lidos and refreshment facilities. For people and families that would like to spend holidays by renting flats or chalets, and who also need a bus service, we would suggest La Playa. It boasts the widest beach, close to the Fondachello-Playa area, in the Oltremonte district, that consists of almost 4 kilometers of sandy beach, well equipped for summer entertainment both in the daytime and in the evening. Those who don't like sandy beaches but prefer exploring the clear seabed, rich in fauna and flora, can enjoy La Rocca, an uninhabited islet, covered with the Mediterranean scrub and separated from the coast by a narrow and shallow channel. Another splendid place to go swimming and explore the seabed is Nicolizia Balatazze, that can be reached going down steep paths along the slopes of the Montagna, also covered with the Mediterranean scrub. This is probably the best choice to be made: crystal-clear water, few people, the Posidonia Oceanica grassland. Essentially only cliffs, apart from a little beach in a bay. Very characteristic are the flat cliffs that emerge a few meters from the coast, usually called "balatazze".

BIRDWATCHING STATION AT THE MOUTH OF THE RIVER SALSO

The birdwatching station, located on the right side of the river's mouth, close to the bank, has been founded to satisfy the need of studying and exploiting an area of remarkable naturalistic interest such as the mouth of the River Salso (Imera Meridionale), and with the aim of promoting educational activities able to encourage people to become more respectful to the natural environment. The scientific work is addressed to the naturalistic research about the habitat through the census of the bird population, the observation of the migratory flows, but also the monitoring of waters and the study of the coastal fauna and flora. The emblem of the Observatory is a spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*), a bird characterized by a long flat bill. The WWF Italia ONG-Onlus (Licata section) has been entrusted to run the Observatory and its activities by the Commune of Licata.

Cuisine **Typical Dishes**

Many traces of the dominations that followed one another in Sicily over time, can be found even in the local cuisine: the Greek olives, ricotta, honey, almonds and wine; the Roman "macco"; the Byzantine spices, spicy cheese, flavoured cakes; the Arabian "sorbetti", "granite", rice, "cassata" and royal pasta made with almond flour; the Norman and Swabian roasts and the dried and salt fish; the Spanish sweet-and-sour sauce, aubergines, tomatoes and the potatoes coming from America. But the most appreciated gift was surely the olive tree: spread out on the island by the Siceliotis, the Greek population living in Sicily, that used to banish those who uprooted the olive trees, its cultivation reached a peak at the time of the Arabian rule. All the products brought to the island by the foreign populations have been mixed with the original products and have created the Sicilian cuisine, which is among the most savoured and richest food in Italy,

as regards both the aristocratic cuisine of the "Gattopardo" and the simplest food that we can taste in the trattorie of Licata. We must say that the Sicilian food, that pleases everybody, derives most of all from natural products, aromas and seasoning that make a harmonious complex of delicate fragrances. Among the typical dishes we would recommend the "Pasta con le sarde", "Spaghetti ccu' l'ova di rizzi "(spaghetti with sea urchin's eggs), "Cacocciuli cini" (stuffed artichokes), "U Maccu" (vegetable soup with broad beans) and "Pasta a furnu ccu' mezzu zitu".

Getting to Licata

By car: A19 Motorway Palermo - Catania

From Palermo State highway SS189 towards Agrigento-Licata

By bus: Bus services from both Palermo and Catania

By train: From Catania to Gela. From Palermo to Canicattì then to Licata

By plane: Catania Airport (the nearest airport with shuttle connection to Licata) and Palermo Airport