

Sicilian Dawn

Tom Verso (September 06, 2012)



When the Phoenicians came to Sicily circa 1000 B.C. they were not the first. Sicani, Sicels and Elymians anticipated by centuries the dozens coming after; all who could not resist the Mediterranean Siren's inexorable lure. Each brought a unique civilization, only to see it transformed and absorbed in the Sicilian Charybdis. Sicilian-Americans, the progeny of all those melded civilizations...do they still hear the siren's enticing melody coursing their veins? Increasingly I hear: "Are you Italian? No! I'm Sicilian!"

Classical Language Education (Latin & Greek) and South of Rome Historiography

If it should ever come to pass that Italian-American prominenti and literati should see fit to make available, to near seventeen million Americans of southern-Italian descent, a curriculum of their three thousand year history and culture, that curriculum should consist of something more than narrative stories of events and biographies. Such a curriculum should consist of training in the concepts, methods and techniques historians use to gain knowledge of the past. We don't need students who can regurgitate hiSTORIES that they read in hiSTORY books.

We need rigorously trained intellectuals who can think analytically and critically about history; not only able to discourse about the past but also how we come to know what we think we know about the past. The history of Italy south of Rome is so complex and profound that southern-Italian American students should be trained as philosopher-historians to fully appreciate the magnitude of their mighty ancestry, to instill a respect and passion that south of Rome history deserves, and able to pass that history and culture on to generations that follow.

Language - the raw material of historians

Historians seek knowledge of past societies based on the remnant documents of the past society; which differentiates them from archeologists who seek knowledge of the past based on remnant materials (shards, arrowheads, structures, etc.). Accordingly, the ability to read and **understand** the language written in the document is a necessary **prerequisite** for the historian.

Reading, in this sense, is not to be understood as simple comprehension and translation. Rather, the historian must have mastered fluency in the language of the society being studied, such that the nuances and connotation of the language allow him/her to grasp cultural implications.

Language then is the historian's raw material. With any craft, the more refined the raw material, the higher the quality of the final product. Similarly, the Historian's Craft; the better mastery of the language, the more refined the raw material and the higher the quality of the history produced.

Up to circa 1900 'classical education', modeled on the fifteenth-century Italian standards, was the principle form of upper-middle class education in Europe. It constituted very intense training in ancient Greek and Latin. The great classical scholar A. J. Toynbee, who was of the last generation trained in the Italian tradition, explained what very intense meant. Students were expected:

"...not merely to read and write Greek and Latin prose, and verse [but also] produce counterfeits of the original literature that an ancient Greek or Latin author, in each genre, might have mistaken for authentic pieces"

This is to say, students compose their own original texts and verses in the ancient language.

Given that such a classical education no longer prevails, it is reasonable for students of ancient Southern Italy and Sicily history to seek out nineteenth century classically trained scholars before contemporary scholars, who are given attenuated at best classical language training.

Any student of the Hellenic roots of Western Civilization who ignores nineteenth century scholars like Toynbee, E. A. Freeman, etc. seriously compromises the confidence they can have in their studies. For any contemporary historian who challenges those great scholars, the burden of proof is on the challenger.

One of the foremost scholars of ancient Sicilian history is Edward A. Freeman, whose 1891 classic *The History of Sicily from the earliest times* is still cited by twenty-first century historians. Accordingly, it will be the basis for this thumbnail overview of the first Sicilians.

The Dawn of Sicilian History - Sicani, Sicels and Elymians

The documents created by the ancient Greeks contain enormous amounts of references to the people in Sicily before the Greek and Phoenician colonists arrived- the Sicani, Sicels and Elymians.



While the Sicani, Sicels and Elymians did not leave any documents, historians can reconstruct many of the characteristics of their respective cultures based on Greek documents. Freeman:

“Every ancient writer who undertakes to give a view of Sicilian history begins by a list of the nations which were already dwelling in the island when Phoenician and Greek settlement began.

“And there is no very great difference of statement as to the names of those nations, their movements and their ethnical relations.

“As the history of Sicily is a record of cycles, it is fitting that the **cycles** should begin from the beginning. (p 99 emp.+)

Accordingly, we can say our knowledge of Sicilian history begins with the Sicani, Sicels and Elymians.

“By common consent, Sikans, Sikels, and Elymians, are set down as the races which inhabited Sicily in times earlier than the beginning of Greek and Phoenicians settlement. It is with these races that we find our first approach to Sicilian history, even in the imperfect shape of tradition and legend.”(p102)

Sicani (aka Sikans)

“...those whom all tradition makes the oldest recorded inhabitants of the island...They are the first inhabitants of the island who have any share in the continuous history of Europe (p 107 emp.+)
Iberian origins:

It is certain that they emigrated to Sicily at some distant time that cannot be established; but clearly long before the Phoenicians arrived circa 1000 B.C. Nor can it be determined from whence they came; although there is some evidence that they came from Iberia. Freeman:

“The one fact of importance is the general belief that the most ancient known element both in Sicily and in Spain was a kindred element. Whether they passed from Spain into Sicily, or from Sicily into Spain, or into both lands from some third quarter is a point on which it is unsafe to make guesses.” (p 109)

Sicani Sites:

Note: It is not uncommon on internet sites dealing with the history of Sicily to find **maps** which divide the pre-Phoenician/Greek island into three unique sections corresponding to the three groups (Sicani, Sicel and Elymians). These maps may be misleading. Even if they are accurate they represent one point in time. Indeed, differnt sites show different maps. Freeman clearly documents the diverse overlapping areas of Sicily the Sicani and Sicel covered over time, and it is also not possible to identify precisely the Elymian boundaries.

Freeman:

“In historical times [begining with Phoenicians/Greeks] we find the Sikans only in the Western part of the island; they had once held the eastern coast; but fell back to the west, some said before the eruptions of Aetna, others before the invasion of the Sikels”

“At least its safe to say that the Sikans always remained a scattered and divided race...that had no considerable towns, that never came together as subjects of a single king or as members of a single league. (p111)

Some ancient documents identify the town of Kamikos as a Sicani town corresponding to modern Siculiana (p 113). Also, Hykkara near modern Carini (p.60) between Elymian Segesta and Phoenicians Panormos (i.e. Palermo)

Sicani Language

There are no surviving Sicani documents; hence no record of the language they spoke. However, Freeman makes an interesting comment. He writes;

“Sikans are not uncommonly mentioned among the early inhabitants of Latium. (p110)

It seems then reasonable to consider that they spoke some form of the Latin language. Indeed, classical scholar A. J. Toynbee felt that could very well be the case. However, as noted, there is no definitive evidence of their language in the form of written documents passed down from them.

Sicels (aka Siculi, Sikels) - “the people whom the island took the name Sicily”

Language - Latin

“No great amount of written language is handed down to us; we have no Sikel writings, no certain Sikel inscriptions; but we have Sikel words which are so plainly Latin that it is hardly needful to argue the point at any length.” (p 125)

Origins

Generally accepted that they came to Sicily from Italy.

“The general belief of the ancient writers, the belief of men who wrote when there were still Sikels



living by that name as a people...[they] came out of Italy, and were of kindred race with other Sikels who still remained in Italy...inhabitants of central Italy, as dweller on Latin soil." (p. 124)

"In short, they were a Latin people" (p 125 emp.+)

"The received belief among the Greeks, doubtless therefore among the Sikels themselves, was that they crossed the straits from the mainland to the island about three hundred years before the first settlements of the Greeks about the eleventh century before Christ" (p128)

"In the Sikel then we have an Italian settler in the great island, the near kinsman of the Latin of the Tiber and the Latin of the Alban Hills. (p 131 emp.+)

Sicel Sites

" From the coasts then the Sikels withdrew, or abode only as servants of Greek masters. In the inland parts of the island, where the Greeks cared not to settle, they kept their independence...Hemmed in between the Greeks on one side and the barbarians of Western Sicily on the other. (p 134)

Freeman lists dozens of Sicel sites. He writes:

"It is a wonderful long list we can put together of places which are recorded as Sikel sites. Not a few of them grew into considerable towns, which play a considerable part in history... (p 136)

Note: What a great student exercise it would be to assign each student respective Sicel locations and have them find the corresponding modern locations.

Sicel Culture

The Sicels seem to embody the **essence of Sicilian culture**. Freeman writes:

"He tills the fruitful ground, he grows rich in flocks and herds and honey; but, like his successors to this day, the center of Sicel life was the fortified town, however small, perched on its hill-top. (p137 emp.+)

"The history of the Sikels is no small part of the history of the island which was specially theirs. It was not without fitness that the island bore their name and not that of any other of its inhabitants.

"The Greek-speaking people of Cicero's time must have been made up of many elements strangely unlike each other; but, if heads could have been counted, the Sikel element must have outnumbered every other. (p194 emp.+)

Note: "to this day" i.e. 1891 the date of publication, and the time of the great Sicilian migration to America. This is to say: there was a continuous Sicilian cultural tradition from the second millennium B.C. down to twentieth century "Little Italy". That's heavy! No?

Elymians (aka Elymi, Elymoi)

Origins: unknown

"The little that we know of Sikans and Sikels is strictly traditional; that is it comes from a source trustworthy in its own nature, though not a little likely to be corrupted.

"The origin of the Elymians comes within the range of legend and that kind of legend which always savours of deliberate invention" (p195)

One thing can be said for sure:

"The Elymians were, in the Greek sense, barbarians. But, they are barbarians who stand alone; they are not Sikan; they are not Sikel; they are not Phoenician. (p 198)

Sites - Northwest Sicily

"The Elymians were strangers from some other land, who found a corner which the Sikans had failed to occupy or from which they could be driven out. " (p198)

"The chief of Elymian cities was ever Segesta, but the crown of the Elymian territory was the sacred mount of Eryx (near modern Trapani).

Language: unknown

"Of the language of the Elymians we have no certain remains beyond a strange, perhaps barbarian, case-ending which has made its way into coins." (p 198)

Note: Both A. J. Toynbee (A Study of History vol. 8 pp. 704-708) and Ettore Pais (Ancient Italy... p113) point out the common place-names in Elymian Sicily and Liguria (near present day Genoa). Also, the prevailing language in the Genoa area was Latin. Accordingly, it seems a reasonable speculation that the Elymians were a Latin speaking people. Again, Toynbee felt there was a strong possibility that Latin was the language of all three groups of Sicilian people before the Phoenicians and Greeks.



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Introduction to the History of Sicily 101- a course in Patria Meridionale curriculum

The above is a minuscule outline of Freeman's near six hundred-page mind-boggling scholarly opus. A very challenging read meant for advanced students and professional historians, it is not a book that could generally be assigned to undergraduate students, especially in community colleges where so many southern-Italian Americans attend after high school.

More appropriate popular histories such as Sicily An Informal History by Sammartino and Roberts would serve as general readers for them.

However, there is no telling how many classroom lectures, homework and term-paper assignments a creative inspired teacher could develop from the Freeman book in social history, geography, historiography, etc.

#### Pedagogical Imaginings

Imagine - A southern-Italian American community college student reading the list of history courses offered.

History of: England, France, Germany, Russia, China, African American, Women, Hispanics, ... (OMG! could it be?) SOUTH OF ROME!

Imagine - Italian Studies programs not dispatching southern-Italian American students to Florence to stand in lines viewing Renaissance art devoid of southern Italian culture.

Rather sending them south of Rome to walk the land, breath the air of their ancestry; to scourer source document archives in Naples; to climbing the limestone gorges near Ragusa in search of the sacred site of the Sicel deity Hybla.

Imagine - The professor/teachers at an Italian American History Association conference discussing such imaginings.

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