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Archaeological Landscape of the “Punic Epicracy” of Sicily

Abstract

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Since most ancient times, rarely a land had as many different populations and cultures as Sicily. The eastern part of the Island was inhabited by Sicels, who had moved native people, the Sicilians, westwards, where Elymians already settled in the cities of Erice, Segesta, Iato and Entella. Sicilian coasts were frequented by Phoenician merchants who, during Greek establishment in the East, firmly settled in three cities quoted by Thucydides: Motya, Panormus and Solunto.

The Greeks conquered the eastern coasts and then the northern and southern ones as well starting their hegemony on almost all Sicily.

This expansion pushed Carthage to strongly settle in the Island and slowly, though unavoidable, to build a kingdom, called Eparchy, which led to the foundation of Lilybaeum, a new defense city close to Motya.

The urban landscape of the Eparchy cities was characterized by a strong penetration with the territory, for the choice of the sites placed on flat peaks of isolated mountains or integrated with the sea. Phoenician cities were placed on islands, such as Motya, or on promontories, such as Panormus, and Solunto. Elymian cities, on the contrary, were placed on suggestive mountains, such as Iaitas, Segesta, Entella and Erice.

The capital of the Carthaginian Eparchy, Lilybaeum was characterized by the most complex defensive works in the ancient times.

The last actions of the possession of Punic Eparchy were the foundation dated 260 B.C. of Drepanon and the deportation of Erice inhabitants and the people exodus from Selinunte to Lilybaeum, where a new residential area was created. The Carthaginian domination in Sicily, was terminated by Romans' arrival, who conquered the Island after the Egades battle in 241 B.C.

Key words: Western Sicily, Carthaginians, urban settlements.

Genesis of the Punic Epicracy

With the destruction of Selinus in 409 BCE by the Carthaginians, who arrived in Sicily to bring aid to the Elymians in Segesta, and with the subsequent destruction of Motya in 397 BCE by Dionysius I of Syracuse, the decision to take a less neutral and more active stance to exert control over Sicily matured definitively in the city of Carthage. The first step taken was to abandon Phoenician Motya to its fate, as it had proven to be indefensible because of its insular position in the light of the new tactics of war, and to found a

Carthaginian stronghold on the western tip of the island, namely Lilybaeum. This city was strongly fortified and was able to play a leading role in the western part of Sicily for defensive and offensive purposes and, last but not least, for trade. The foundation of Lilybaeum can be dated around 396 BCE and, under full Carthaginian control and with a far-reaching plan, the city set out to take over the surrounding territory. This territorial control became increasingly clear when the peace treaty between Carthage and Dionysius I in 374 BCE acknowledged that Carthage’s supremacy over Western Sicily was a matter of fact and that the Punic Eparchy was a reality that would come to an end only with the Roman conquest of Sicily. With their victory of the Aegates Islands battle in 241 BCE, which marked the end of the hostilities in the First Punic War, the Romans conquered almost all of Sicily with the exception of the Hieron’s reign, tyrant of Syracuse: just thirty years later, with the end of the Second Punic War hostilities, in 211 BCE, the entire island of Sicily was completely under Roman rule, thus changing the course of its history.

The urban landscape in the Punic Eparchy in Sicily

The time from the eighth century BCE to the arrival of the Romans saw the consolidation of the system of Sicily’s most important cities, most of which still retain their preeminence today. Almost all the main cities of modern-day Sicily, indeed, the most populous cities, have ancient roots and date from this period. There are 40 main urban centers such as Palermo, Catania, Messina, Syracuse, Agrigento, Trapani, Marsala, Enna, etc. Most were founded along the coasts of the island during the long years of Greek colonisation of eastern Sicily. In southern and northern Sicily, however, the island’s westernmost Greek settlements were two outposts: Selinus and Himera. Both were destroyed in 409 BCE by Carthage. The other cities in the west are of Phoenician and Punic origin, such as Panormus (Palermo), Lilybaeum (Marsala) and Drepanon (Trapani). There are instead about 140 more towns, including Caltanissetta, the only provincial capital, founded mostly in the Middle Ages, on high ground, some of which date from the Islamic period.

Among the ancient cities, some were destroyed and never rebuilt after bloody battles that marked their end and abandonment, including Motya, in 397 BCE. Selinus, however, was evacuated in 250 BCE when the Carthaginians deported the inhabitants to Lilybaeum (but the discovery of the early Christian baptistery of the fifth century CE, of certain Byzantine origin, suggests a different occupation of the site even after its abandonment and at least until the Middle Ages).

The cities present in the Punic Eparchy, founded in the archaic age, include the most ancient Phoenician colonies, such as Motya, Panormus and Soluntum (Thucydides, VI 2,6).

Alongside them, the Elymian cities of Eryx and Segesta lived and prospered, while Selinus was the westernmost of the Greek cities that later merged into the Carthaginian kingdom. Among the new cities founded by Carthage to ensure physical control of the territory, the most important was Lilybaeum but, over a century later the Carthaginians, in particular General Hamilcar Barca, in attempt to save the Eryx’s inhabitants and to protect them from the Romans conquest, founded the city of *Drepanon* among the many islands that bordered the slopes of Mount Erice at sea. Other cities, such as archaic Soluntum, were abandoned.

The Phoenician colony of Motya was built in the 8th century BCE in the Stagnone lagoon of Marsala (Fig. 1), a city whose archaic layout was based on blocks freely distributed within the walls perimeter that bordered the coast. The urban layout was very similar to that of the city of Kerkuane, another Phoenician city in Africa, built on Cape Bon. Many elements of the urban structure of Motya characterise several Phoenician cities, such as Cothon, traditionally intended as a port basin for small boats within the island, and now considered a lustral basin at service of Cothon's Temple, dedicated to Baal Hammon. The houses in Motya were typical of the residential structure of the Phoenician East, although some elements found within them show how its inhabitants were influenced by the prevailing Greek culture of the eastern part of Sicily. Equally ancient was the Phoenician colony of Panormus (Palermo). However, its layout responded to a more rational urbanisation, based on a *plateia* (wide road) running from east to west on which a series of narrow and elongated blocks, designed by *stenopoi* (narrow streets), running very close and parallel to each other, were organised at right angles. The map of the walled city of contemporary Palermo (Fig. 2) still bear clear signs of this original core as the heart of the city that expanded according to a medieval plan resulting from the transformations made under the Arabs and later by all the other conquerors who followed, thus making it an increasingly important urban settlement and becoming the capital of Sicily under Arab rule. The city retained this role under all the following rulers of Sicily after the year one thousand.

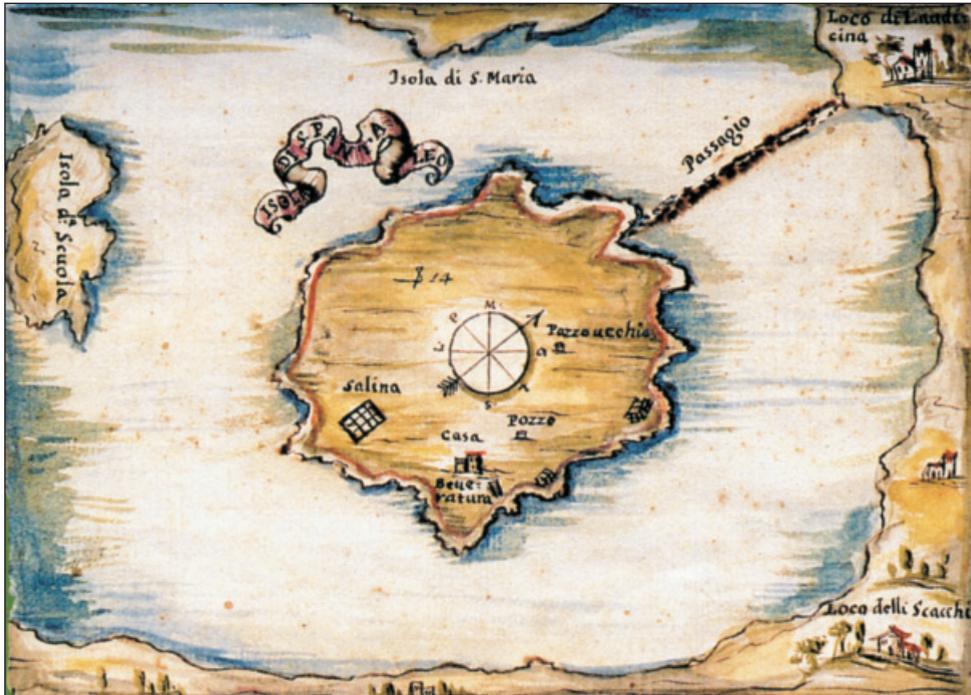


Fig. 1. Island of San Pantaleo (Mozia). From Rooms and lands of the Palermo's College properties, ms. 181, f.37, Fardelliana municipal Library of Trapani.

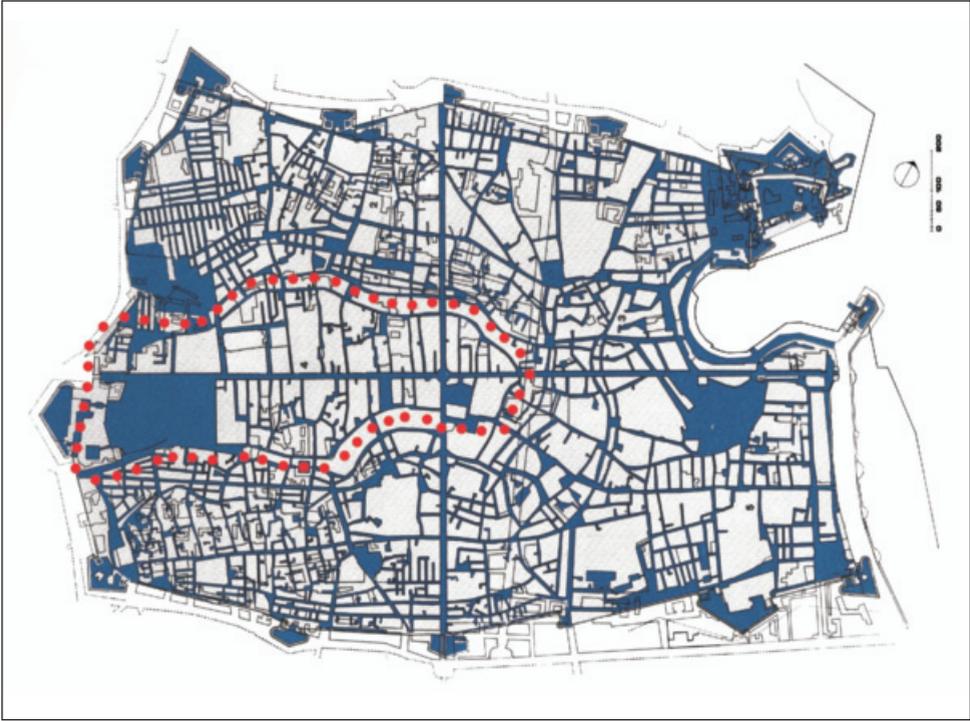


Fig. 2. Palermo (Panormo) - in red the Phoenician city (graphic elaboration of Giulio Caruso from: Casamento & al. (1984: tav. 13)

Selinus was, instead, a Greek city founded in western Sicily - inhabited by Elymians, Sicans and Phoenicians - by Megara Hyblaea, a colony in turn founded on the Ionian coast by Megara Nysea, located on the isthmus of Corinth. Megara, in fact, had sent its inhabitants to found *apoikie* (city-colonies) both in the east and west, like Byzantium on the Bosphorus and, in Sicily, Megara, which added Hyblaea to the name of the mother city, in honour of the Sikelian King Hyblo, who had given the Megarians the land on which to found the new city. After only three generations, around 650 or 628 BCE, its inhabitants, together with Megarian settlers who had arrived from Greece, decided to found Selinus on the other side of Sicily, in an area already inhabited and perhaps hostile. But the city was able to live in peace, engaging in profitable trade with these foreign civilisations that were already living in the western part of the island and with which relations made it possible to hellenize their customs to the point that the inhabitants went on to take on names, the art of writing and manners typical of the Greeks.

An offshoot of two Megaras, Selinus was an immense city, covering over 112 hectares with outer walls stretching over 4.5 km (Caruso [in press (b)]) (Fig. 3). From the beginning, it stood on a series of hills running from north to south with two watercourses on both sides, to the east and west, i.e., Gorgo Cottone and the river Modione, called Selinus in

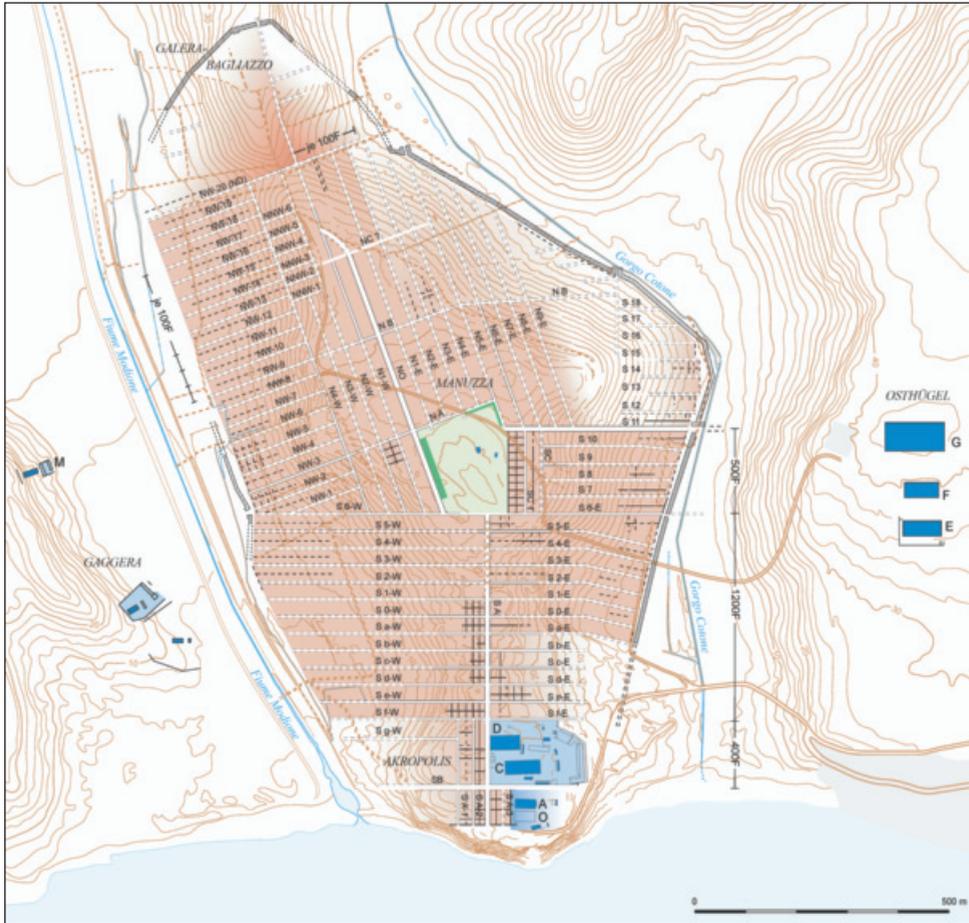


Fig. 3. Selinunte: urban plant. The worship places in blue (from Mertens 2006: fig. 303).

ancient times for the presence of wild *Apium* (celery/parsley) that the Greeks called *selinon*, and that gave the name to the city.

It was magnificent (Fig. 4), surrounded by walls along the two watercourses and with a system of very elongated east-west blocks, aligned along the *stenopoi* (secondary roads) running orthogonal to the main *plateiai* (wide roads) arranged according to the median axes of the north and south hills (Mertens 2010b: 95-99). These met ideally in the agora, the city's trapeze-shaped square - similar in design to Megara Hyblaea's main square. It was over thirty thousand square metres (Mertens 2010b: 99-106). The city's skyline was marked by the presence of enormous religious temple structures that rose to south, in the area dedicated to the city's cults, dominated by Apollo Temple, one of the first and largest archaic peripteral Doric temples erected in Sicily (Mertens 2010a: 70-73). It is surrounded by other proto-Doric temples and small sanctuaries. Another 3 temples, designated by let-



Fig. 4. Sélinonte. Face Sud. Restauration. From Hulot & Fougères (1910: tav. XIII).

ters of the alphabet E (Hera), F (Athena or Dionysus) and G (Zeus Olympius), had been erected outside the walls, on the eastern hill, among which emerged the Temple G, the second largest among the Greek temples built in antiquity. In the west, instead, there were numerous sanctuaries, more modest in size but among the most beloved by the Greek population who went there to pay homage to cults that were practiced there. These cults were also very popular with the indigenous peoples who adopted the Greek deities who were venerated there. These deities had intriguing names such as *Malophoros*, *Ecate*, *Zeus Meilichios*, *Hera Matronale*, each with a *temenos* (enclosure) where the rites were officiated. And in this part of the city, the evolution of the archaic *megaron* temple (Mertens 2010a: 64-67) was experimented with and followed through, as in the case of *Molophoros* (bearer of fruits, probably Demeter), whose archaic proto-Doric temple could be accessed through the *propylaea* (monumental entrance) (Mertens 2010a: 90-92) next to which was the pilgrims' portico, where the faithful were sheltered from the sun or rain, waiting for the temple to open.

This city that traded with neighboring peoples and produced wheat and ceramic items among the most popular in the ancient world, was rich and had such a vast territory (the *chora*) that also included three important towns such as *Mazaris* (now Mazara del Vallo), *Adranon* (Mount Adranone-Sambuca di Sicilia) and *Heraclea Minoa*, the latter founded east of Selinus already in the sixth century BCE beyond the river Platani, guarding the border with the mighty polis of *Akragas* (Agrigento). Despite the vastness of the territory under its control and the attacks of the city of *Akragas* that for a certain period even succeeded in conquering *Heraclea Minoa*, Selinus was constantly warring with the nearby Elymian city of *Segesta*, with the aim of winning the lands along the borders of the two cities. This effort was so dogged that the people of *Segesta* finally called for Carthage's aid, obtaining it.

In 409 BCE a mighty army landed in Sicily, in the very place where only fifteen years later the city of Lilybaeum would rise, besieged Selinus and after just ten days conquered and destroyed it (Diodorus XIII 43). Immediately afterwards the army headed towards the other large Greek colony on the border with the Punic Phoenician world, *Himera*, and destroyed that city as well. It would not be rebuilt until 2-3 years later on a new site, under the name of *Thermai Himeraíai* (Diodorus XIII 79, 8). Selinus, on the other hand, was rebuilt only in the southern part of the ancient city (Fig. 5), where the city's temples stood. But it would be a town of modest size, having gone from the initial 112 to 12 hectares of land, with fortifications of only 2.5 km compared to the original 4.5 km. The city, now firmly in Punic hands while maintaining a strong Greek identity, was ultimately abandoned when, in 250 BCE, the

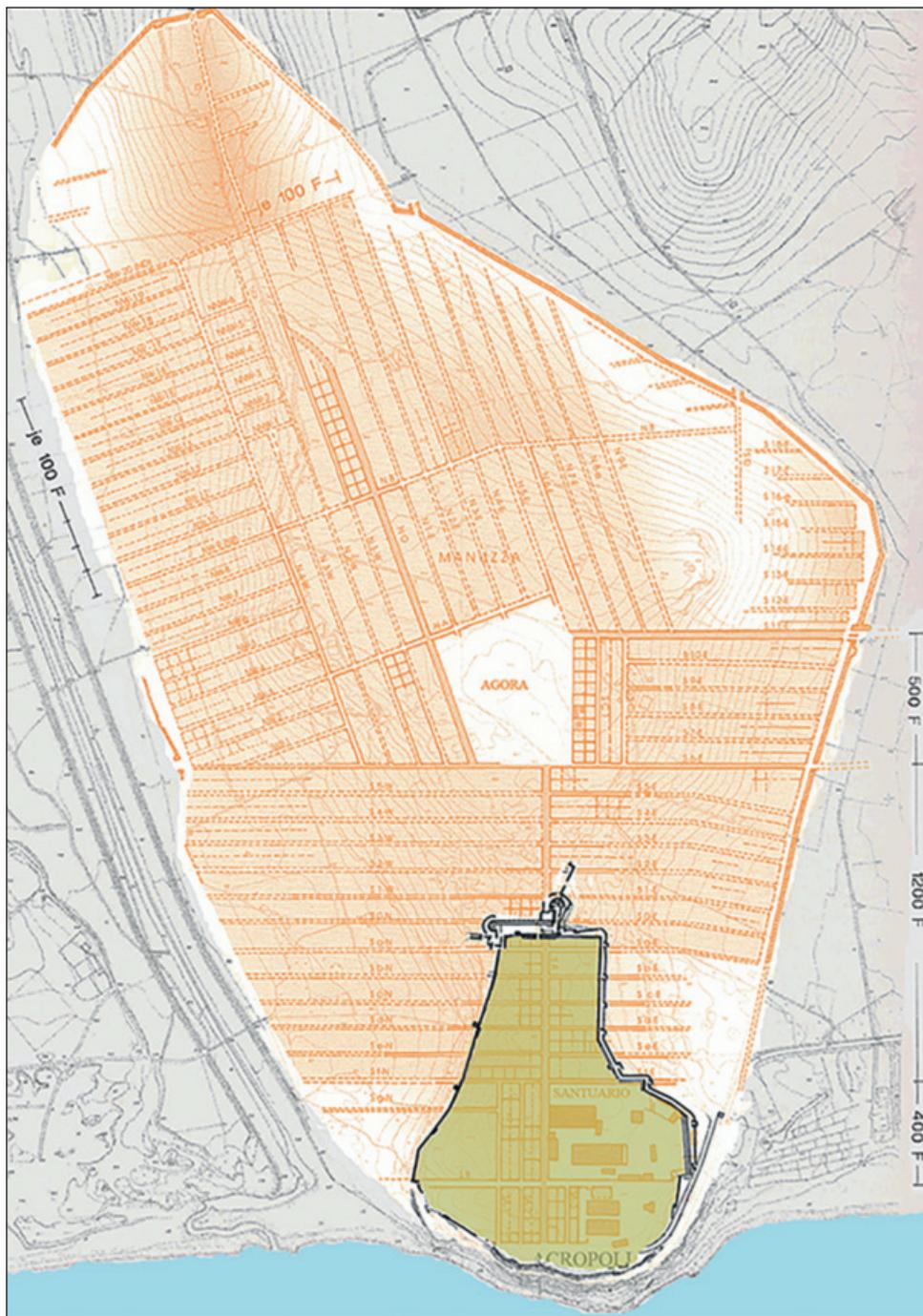


Fig. 5. Selinunte: the Hellenistic city related to the archaic city. From Caruso & Fourmont (2017: fig. 33).

Punics deported the inhabitants to Lilybaeum, settled in a new neighborhood, built for the occasion in the north-western part of the city (Caruso 2017: 109-111; 2019b: 14).

The fourth century BCE was marked by great ferment and saw the construction of new cities, as in the case of Soluntum, a coastal site of Phoenician origin, whose inhabitants sought refuge from the peninsula of Solanto where it was originally located high up on Mount Catalfano (Coarelli 1992: 33).

The city built there is placed on top of the hill according to a plan among the most modern of its times, with large 1×2 -metre blocks arranged on the slopes thus creating that particularly original type of Hellenistic city whose urban landscape follows the sloping terrain, with houses that are arranged on two floors, taking advantage of the steep slope and thus creating degrading terraces that afforded a magnificent landscape, suspended over the sea.

But the most important and challenging urban settlement founded in Sicily, as already mentioned, was the one built directly by Carthage to set up a military and political garrison aimed at controlling the vast territory of the nascent Eparchy, as it was in fact being shaped at the beginning of the fourth century BCE and that would become absolute and recognised by the peace treaty of 374 BCE, namely Lilybaeum. The first city founded by Carthage was almost certainly planned by General Himilco in 396 BCE, before his departure to eastern Sicily where he was set on taking the offensive against Syracuse, guilty of having destroyed Motya. Himilco went on to besiege it and almost conquered it if there had not been a plague that decimated his army, forcing him to come to terms with Dionysius I, losing in fact that advantage with which he wanted to return to Carthage appearing before his fellow citizens both as the winner of the Sikeliot Greeks and as founder of the city, events that would have allowed him to be named King (Caruso 2019: 457-458).

Lilybaeum (Fig. 6) is a city that has many similarities with Carthage, which certainly served as a model for its construction: the urban layout orientation and some elements such as the Tophet (Caruso 2000: 234-240) position, south of the city and not north of it as in Motya, where they worshipped Baal Hammon, as in Tyre, the city of origin of the Phoenicians, and not Tanit, the goddess worshipped in Carthage whose cult is clearly attested instead in the tophet of Lilybaeum. The city has a *strigas* plan, that is with regular blocks with a ratio of 1: 3 or $1: 3\frac{1}{3}$ set on no less than 6 *plateiai* and at least 23 *stenopoi*, running orthogonal to the former. The plan follows the contour and slopes, thus explaining their orientation even for the normal drainage of surface water. However, this regular plan had exceptions in the northern part of the city where the blocks were arranged parallel to the *plateiai* as opposed to most of the blocks arranged orthogonally to the main streets. A first hypothesis based on the observation of these plans variations (Caruso 2003: 154-157, 2008: 77-79) together with the study of some archaeological assays that dated the first settlement in this part of the city to the third century BCE, has led us to believe that this part was built at the time of the Selinuntines arrival in Lilybaeum, an event that occurred in 250 BCE. Recent research, carried out at the time of the Museum reorganisation to renew its exhibitions allowed the (re)discovery of three fragments of tiles found in 1972 and never studied and/or displayed, which bear the mark of the “*selinon*,” namely the symbol that identified the Selinuntines who had adopted it on their coins since the archaic age, impressed in the clay before firing. This shows that this was the Selinuntine district and that the city had a complex urban genesis, the study of which will provide further ideas to better define it.



Fig. 6. Lilibeo: the urban layout. From Caruso & Spanò Giammellaro (2008: fig. 4).



Fig. 7. Lilibeo: the Punic fortifications. From Caruso & Spanò Giammellaro (2008: fig. 5).

In the south of the city was the agora, built not far from the tophet and, perhaps, near the southern port if this was, as the current city of Marsala, located to the south, just like in Carthage (Caruso 2019: 457).

Originally designed as a fortress, Lilybaeum (Fig. 7) was a city built to withstand any kind of siege, with walls almost 6 meters thick, no less than 30 metres from the inner edge of the moat, which was also originally no less than 20 metres wide and then probably expanded to 30 metres. The walls on the two sides of land that bent forming a right angle at the highest point - which is now about 25 metres above sea level - were no less than 2.2 km long, with a perimeter wall whose total length was probably no less than 3.5 km. They were about 12 metres tall; marked by circular battlements like those in Motya (Ciasca 1992: 80, 1993: 30) and Carthage (Rakob 1985: fig. 17), they had towers about 14 × 14 metres wide, placed at a regular distance of 38 metres from each other to form a rudimentary structure, creating an infallible system capable of launching very heavy stones with catapults at considerable distances, placed at right angles to the line of defence. From the towers, about 18 metres tall, the catapults could throw stones at the attackers even further away from the walls, from a higher position and in radial directions, varying by 180 degrees, creating a system of deadly crossfire with an offensive force and destructive power that were really difficult to sustain. In addition to this system, in itself complex and unique in Sicily, and not only, there was yet another particularly relevant weapon of defense consisting of underground tunnels typical of the Punic world, which, passing under the moat, allowed the besieged to attack enemies from the rear

or to try skirmishes to destroy their war machines, usually made of wood, that the besiegers devised to seize the walls and gates of the city with the help of rams and tortoises.

According to sources, Lilybaeum was sieged at least five times without ever being conquered: in 368 BCE by Dionysus I of Syracuse (Diodorus XV 73, 2; Caruso 2006: 291, [in press (a)]), in 340 BCE by Timoleon (Plutarch, *Life of Timoleon*, 25) and in 278 BC by Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, who during his expedition to Sicily left the island after the useless siege of Lilybaeum (Diodorus XXII 10, 5), the only city not to fall into his hands, and returned to Italy, and from there to Epirus, without obtaining any advantage for his kingdom. During the long years of the Roman conquest (Diodorus XXIV 1, 1), the city was surrounded by more than ten years of unsuccessful siege, finally being surrendered to Rome as a result of the peace treaty following the Battle of the Aegates Islands in 241 BCE. The Roman offensive in the Third Punic War started from Lilybaeum, with the ships anchored in the port before crossing the Sicilian Channel, which led to the destruction of Carthage. In the second Servile Wars (103-98 BC), the rebel Athenion dared to besiege the “impregnable Lilybaeum” in vain (Diodorus XXXVI 5, 1). This concluded the series of inconclusive attempts to conquer the fortified city, which only returned in vogue at the end of the first century BCE during the war between Octavian and Sextus Pompey. A plaque from 39-36 BCE, kept at the Lilibeo Museum in Baglio Anselmi, shows that its defences were clearly reinforced, after at least a century of neglect, with the restoration of the gate and the walls by Lucius Pliny Rufus, Pompey’s legate. But this concerns the last restoration of a fortified structure that soon became useless when the Roman Pax definitively led to the abandonment of its once mighty ramparts.

In the late Roman age, the city was enriched with Italic houses. The vast *domus* of Cape Boeo features large mosaic surfaces on floors and spas, these too embellished with beautiful mosaics depicting hunting animals, as in the case of the *frigidarium* of the spa where four different beasts attack four different quadrupeds.

But there is, finally, another piece of puzzle to understand the strength of Carthage’s intervention at the western tip of Sicily, the territory of the Punic Eparchy. At the Romans arrival, the Punics barricaded themselves in two particular points: Lilybaeum and Eryx. But General Hamilcar Barca, who was tasked with leading the defense of the Carthaginian territory, in addition to Lilybaeum and Palermo, decided that the defense of Eryx (Caruso [in press (a)]), at the top of the mountain was difficult to sustain because it took very little to starve the city, since it was enough to surround the mountain at the base to prevent the food and water needed to sustain a long siege from reaching the top. The Carthaginian General Hamilcar Barca decided to leave Eryx moving the inhabitants down from the mountain, to a site located near the sea where several islets barely emerging from the waters were distributed in a lagoon where the bends of the coast formed a continuous series of sickle-shaped roadsteads, called *drepane*. The new city founded by the forebear of the Barca dynasty took its name from this system: *Drepanon* (Caruso 2019: 459-466). Built on an island and therefore easily accessible by Carthaginian ships thanks to the numerous navigable canals between the islands, the newly founded city had a more modern layout than the late classical 1:3 ratio of Lilybaeum. In Drepanon, the ratios of rectangular blocks were 1: 2, typical of Hellenistic town planning. Only a small part of this plan can still be traced in the north-western part of the urban layout of the ancient Casalichio district, which corresponds to the original city. It has survived as a town with a long life spanning

the Punic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic and Norman ages. Then, in the Middle Ages, the city doubled its original size thanks to the intervention of King James I (Caruso 2019: 460, fig. 10).

The urban layout of Drepanon (Fig. 8) was based on a system of orthogonal streets with 6-metre-wide *plateiai*, arranged almost with an east-west alignment, and with orthogonal *stenopoi* between 3 and 4 metres wide creating blocks measuring 25 metres × 50-55 metres. The necropolis was outside in the north-western part of the ancient city, now occupied by the City Hall, the Post Office, the Provincial Offices and Prefecture and, finally, the Police Headquarters.

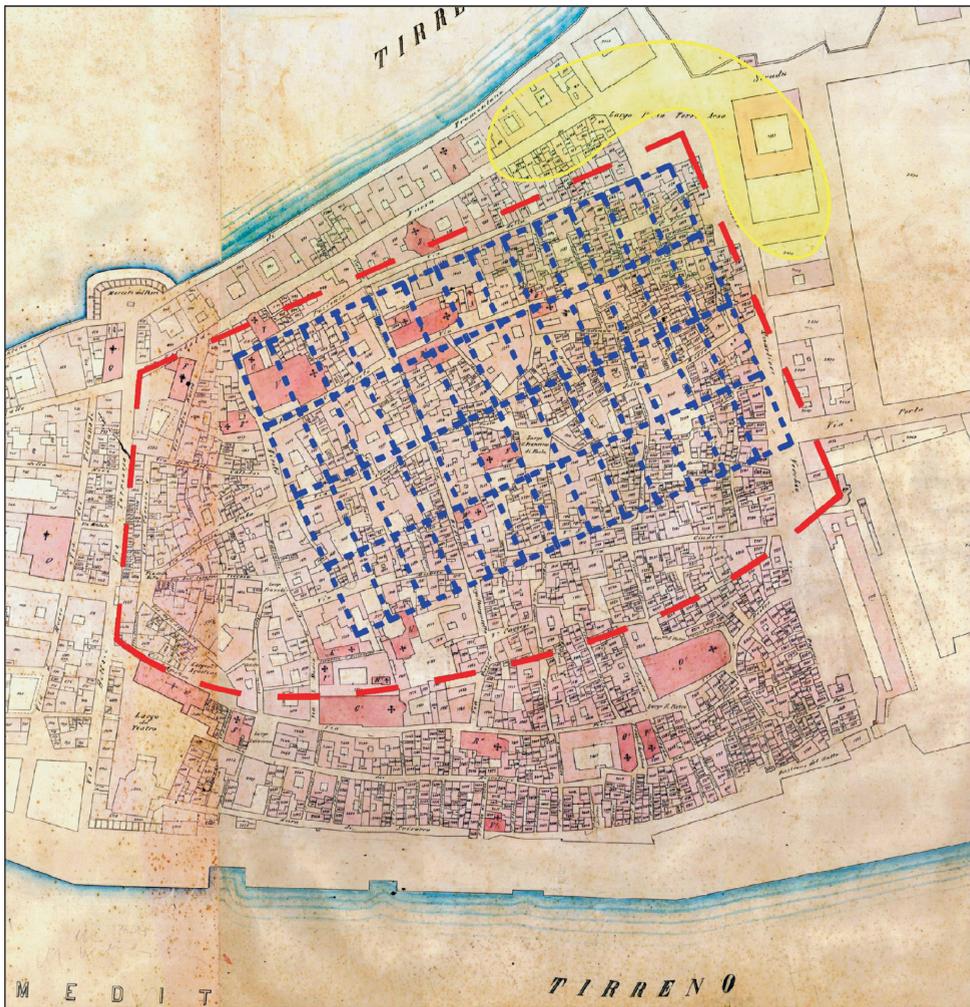


Fig. 8. Drepanon: hypothesis of the city planning (blue), the walls route (red) and the Punic necropolis (yellow). From Caruso (2019a: fig. 15).

With this revolutionary gesture, with the foundation of Drepanon and the relocation of the inhabitants from Eryx, as happened before to the Selinuntines deported to Lilybaeum, the Punic Eparchy tried in vain to resist the Roman offensive that now aimed at the total conquest of Sicily, which was achieved after 241 BCE, with the victory of the Aegates Islands Battle: the Roman fleet defeated the Punic fleet and, with the peace treaty that followed, Sicily became the first Roman province.

The resulting landscape was one of several towns that would become ever more famous and richer following the conquest of Africa by the Romans. They would go on to become part of a lively *koinè* based on trade with Africa, establishing a continuous flow of trade and permanent commercial relations as well as cultural and human exchanges between the shores of Sicily and Africa. These relations were bound to thrive over the centuries to the point of characterising the life of the Sicilian Channel as a place of uninterrupted passage from one shore to another of goods and, above all, of people up to this very day.

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