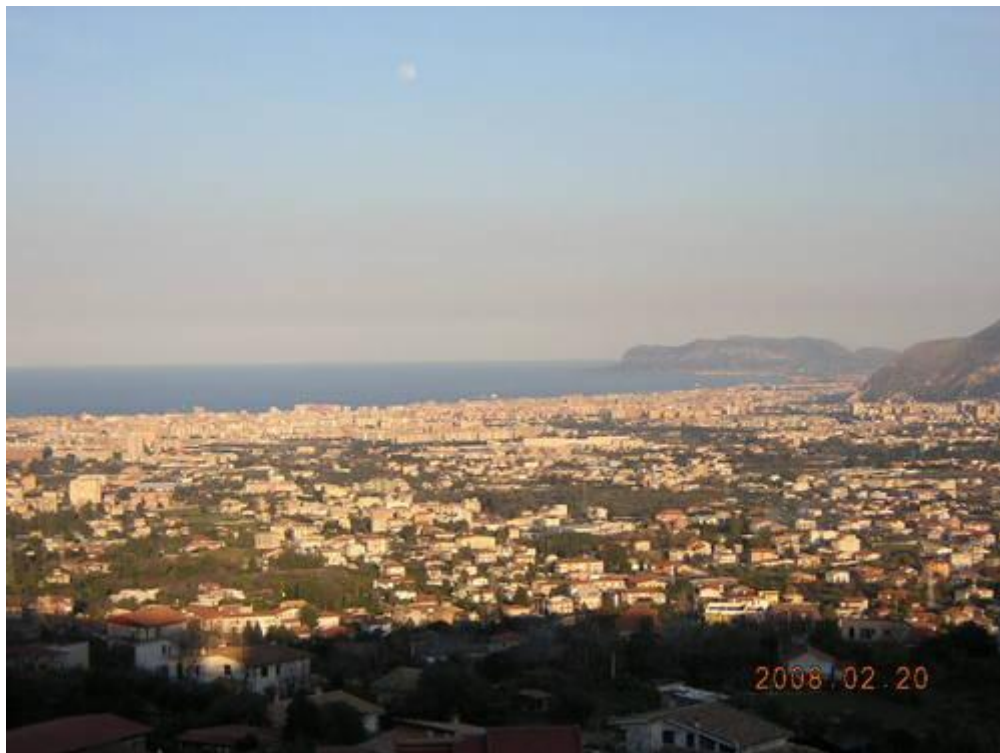




Place names in Sicily throughout the centuries

The history of Sicily can be traced back more than 3000 years ago, time during which it has been dominated by many different rulers. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Angevins, Aragonese and Bourbons shaped the culture and left their profound marks on the island. Traces of the enormous influence of all those different colonizers or conquerors can be identified everywhere. Apart from the different architectural styles, eating habits, myths, folklore elements and customs, language and place names give evidence of the diverse Sicilian inheritance. Studying place names, in particular, to find certain cultural influences is quite interesting but trying to find how those names have changed throughout the centuries can be much more interesting.

To start with, Greeks used to call the Sicily Thrinacia, a compound Greek word which comes from τρεις [tris] and άκρα [acra], meaning the three promontories probably because of the unmistakable tricuspid form of the island. Furthermore, the name of Palermo, the capital of the island, was Panormos during the Phoenician times. The Greek word Πάνορμος [Panormos] or otherwise all port is a proper name used, even nowadays in Greece, to refer to harbours which are protected from the wind. The city was later renamed Balarm by the Arabs, a name which within the time changed to Palermo.

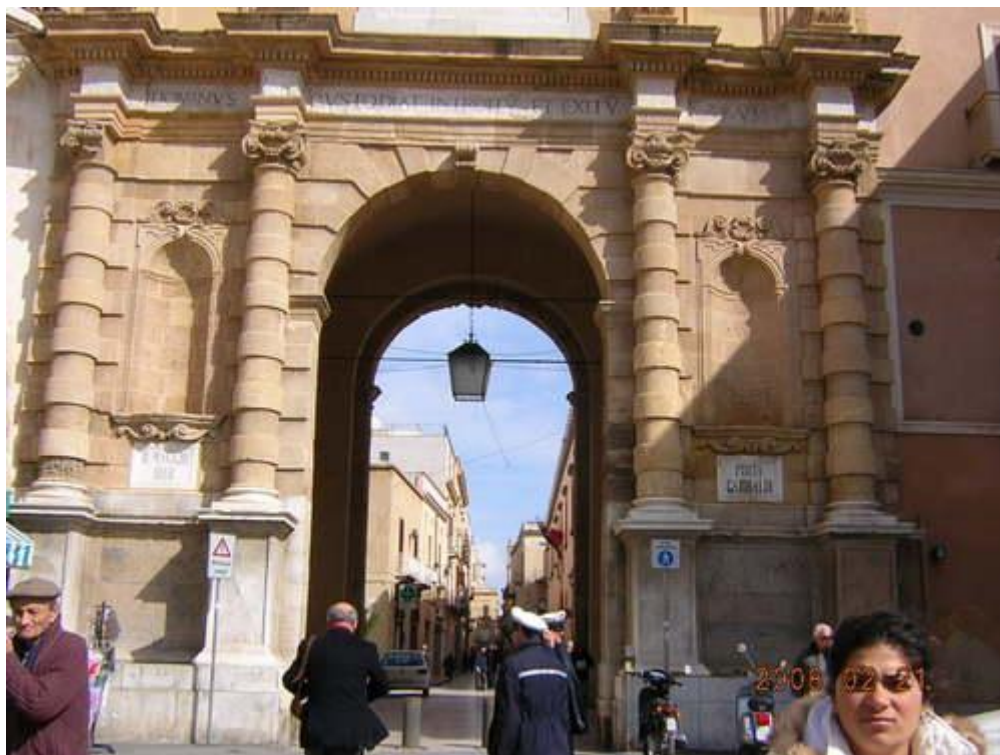




The Kalsa quarter in Palermo, built by the Arabs in the 10th century and situated in the North of the city, took its name from the Arabic words Al-Halisab which means the Chosen. Likewise, the Arab word Al-Qasar meaning the castle was used as the name of the quarter and the street led to the castle (in South Palermo), the present day Corso Vittorio Emanuele, known as Cassaro to the people of Palermo.



The city of Alcamo, southwest of Palermo, was also called Al Quama by the Arabs, whereas the port of Alcamo, the city of Castellammare del Golfo was named Al Maderig that is the staircase. The case of Alcamo and a number of cities situated in the west reveals that the Arabic influence was particularly strong in this part of the island. The names of the cities of Marsala coming from the arabic Mars Allah meaning the port of God or from Mars Ali the port of Ali and Mazara del Vallo a nice place to live, Vallo in Arab means district, are striking examples.



An earlier name of Marsala (probably a Latin one?) was Lilibaenum the place from where we can see Carthaginians, while its current name is sometimes said to derive from the Italian words mare and sale probably because of the salt pans in the area. Another common interpretation is Mars-Allah, the harbour of Allah). Regarding Mazara, it's worth mentioning that it was called Selinuntina in the Middle Ages.



Not far away from Alcamo, the ancient city of Segesta, which was called Αιγέστα [Egesta] by the Greeks, was known as the Calat el Barbar (the castle of

Barbarians) during the Arabic occupation.





The Greek influence is also apparent in the names of a number of cities such as Trapani, Selinunte, Agrigento and Taormina to mention some of them. Trapani is a town built on a narrow, curved promontory in the west that juts into the sea opposite the Egadi Islands and its name derives from the Greek word δρέπανον [drepanon] that means sickle.

The original settlement in Selinunte was founded by people from Megara Hyblaea near the river Selinos, the present Modione, which gave its name to the city. Respectively, Selinos took its name from Σέλινον [Selinon] celery, which used to be the symbol of the city, possibly because the ranunculus, a kind of wild celery, that grows in the area. In Arab times the city was known as Casale degli Idoli, the hamlet of the idols.



Further east Agrigento, the ancient Ακράγας [Akragas], was founded by farmers coming from Greece. So the origin of its name is Greek. When it became an Arab possession it changed its name to Girgenti, which it retained until 1927 when its

present name was introduced.

Last but not least, Taormina, in the north east of the island, which lies on the slopes of Mount Tauro, from the Greek word Ταύρος [Tavros] bull, was Greek in origin and it was called Ταυρομένιον [Tavromenion].

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