

Agrigento's Valley of the Temples a Greek showcase in modern Italy

FRESH APPROACH TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL RUINS HIGHLIGHTS LIFE AND ART THROUGH TIME

Some 900 kilometers west of Athens, on the southern coast of Sicily, lies a fascinating place steeped in ancient Greek history and known today as the Valley of the Temples. Its dry, rocky landscape, now well watered and lushly green, is strewn with ruins whose Doric-style architecture is strikingly familiar to present-day visitors from Greece.

The remains of the once-magnificent buildings that belong to the ancient city of Akragas line the top of a long ridge overlooking the sea, while, from higher hills on the opposite side, the archaeological site itself is silently observed by the modern city of Agrigento, Sicily. The enormous, resource-rich island of Sicily, now delightfully Italian, was once part of Magna Graecia, Great(er) Greece, which also extended into the southern part of the Italian peninsula.

Greek traders were already sailing westward to explore these commercially attractive lands in the Early Iron Age, but by the 8th and 7th centuries BC, colonists from Chalcis (modern Halkida), Eretria, Corinth, Miletus and other Greek city-states had established powerful new cities, including Cumae, Tarentum, Croton and Syracuse. Akragas, with its splendid temples, was a secondary foundation site, circa 581 BC, settled by colonists from nearby Gela, itself founded about a hundred years earlier by Greek adventurers from Rhodes and Crete. Today, the antiquities of Akragas and other Italian sites stand as tributes to Sicily's rich, multicultural past, while the Italian authorities' progressive management of historic sites offers an inspiring reminder that archaeology encompasses all past eras and that ancient ruins need not always be presented as austere, untouchable monuments only to be experienced from the other side of a rope barrier or wire fence.

The archaeological park at Agrigento contains more than half a dozen Greek temples whose visible remains date from the late Archaic (late 6th century BC) or Classical (5th-4th centuries BC) periods. All of Akragas' major temples were Doric in style, constructed of local limestone – not marble – and, with the exception of the temples of Heracles (Hercules) and Olympian Zeus (Jove), the deities to whom they were originally dedicated remain subjects of debate. Six temples stand in a row along the high, east-west ridge that marks Akragas' southern,



The Temple of Concord in Agrigento on Sicily.

seaward edge. At the eastern end of this ridge towers the Temple of Hera (Juno), built circa 470-450 BC, which had six columns along its short ends and thirteen along its sides (termed "6x13"). Originally, this temple may have been dedicated to Poseidon, as evidenced by an Attic vase depicting sea nymphs that was found in its cella in 1928.

Moving westward, visitors encounter the remarkably intact Temple of Concord, reportedly a near architectural twin to the previously mentioned Hera/Poseidon temple.

The Temple of Concord, which derived its name from a Roman inscription discovered nearby, was also 6x13 and built circa 440-430 BC – making it a contemporary of the Parthenon in Athens. This temple, like the Temple of Hera at Paestum (south of Naples) and the Temple of Hephaestus in the Athenian Agora, is one of the best-preserved temples of the ancient Greek world. Its excellent condition is due – like that of the Hephaestus temple in Athens – to its later conversion into a Christian church, in AD 596.

Not as well preserved is the Temple of Heracles; of its original 44 columns, only nine are still standing or have been re-erected. The Roman orator Cicero identified the temple as belonging to Heracles but some modern specialists have noted a similarity between this building and the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.

The largest temple at Ancient Akra-

gas, indeed the largest Doric temple known from Classical Greek times, was the Temple of Olympian Zeus.

Constructed in circa 480 BC, it had an external column arrangement of 7x14 and overall dimensions of about 56x112 meters. This enormous structure was unique thanks to false half-columns incorporated into high screening walls that replaced the usual surrounding colonnade. In addition, the cella and porches within the building were defined by massive pillars (not columns), while around the outside were attached colossal Telamon (Atlas) figures that stood 7.65 meters high. Their exact positions on the exterior of the now-ruined building are unknown.

Further west along the ridge was the Temple of the Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux), a 6x13 temple also of the 5th century BC, which may have received later additions in the Hellenistic era.

Last in line was the Temple of Hephaestus (Vulcan), a 6x13 temple built

circa 430-400 BC. Temples outside the city included the Temple of Aesclepius (4th century BC) and the Temple of Demeter (circa 470 BC).

Visitors to the Valley of the Temples between mid-March and early October 2010 were treated to the opportunity to enter and walk through the magnificent Temple of Concord, where authorities had staged an open-air exhibition of modern art. Protective walkways were laid down, while the artwork was displayed throughout the temple as well as outside on the steps of its stylobate. Such progressive curatorship of archaeological sites, which gives historically important structures present-day relevance and allows visitors the memorable opportunity to experience fascinating ruins close up, can also be seen elsewhere in Sicily. In the eastern city of Catania, excavations at the 2nd-century AD Roman theater (erected on top of a 4th-century BC Greek theater) left intact several of the 17th-19th-century private homes that had once obscured the Greco-Roman theater's remains. After further excavation and restoration in 2004-08, these early modern houses overshadowing the ancient theater can now be viewed as part of the archaeological site. Experiential, diachronic exhibitions such as those in Agrigento and Catania highlight the true impact of the passage of time and make learning history even more of an enjoyable, attractive adventure.

BY JOHN LEONARD
ATHENSPLUS

Closer look

Visitors to the Valley of the Temples earlier this year were treated to the opportunity to enter and walk through the magnificent Temple of Concord