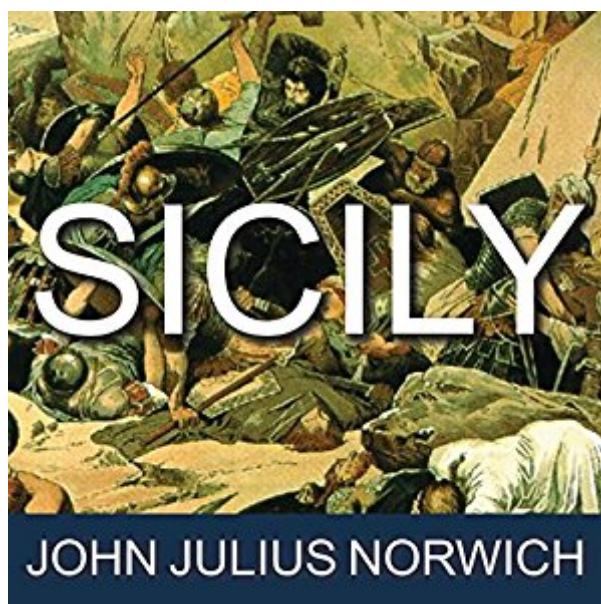


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# Sicily: An Island At The Crossroads Of History



## Synopsis

"Sicily," said Goethe, "is the key to everything." It is the largest island in the Mediterranean, the stepping-stone between Europe and Africa, the link between the Latin West and the Greek East. Sicily's strategic location has tempted Roman emperors, French princes, and Spanish kings. The subsequent struggles to conquer and keep it have played crucial roles in the rise and fall of the world's most powerful dynasties. Yet Sicily has often been little more than a footnote in books about other empires. Here is a vivid, erudite chronicle of an island and the remarkable kings, queens, and tyrants who fought to rule it. From its beginnings as a Greek city-state to its emergence as a multicultural trading hub during the Crusades, from the rebellion against Italian unification to the rise of the Mafia, the story of Sicily is rich with extraordinary moments and dramatic characters. Writing with his customary deftness and humor, John Julius Norwich outlines the surprising influence Sicily has had on world history and tells the story of one of the world's most kaleidoscopic cultures in a galvanizing, contemporary way.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Those of us who write about Sicily know how challenging it is to present thousands of years of history in one volume. Lord Norwich makes it look easy. He has been doing so for a long time. Here is a master; the others are merely apprentices. This book is an excellent introduction for anybody unfamiliar with the world's most conquered island. On finer points post-1800, one might beg to differ with a few of the author's observations about the unification movement and its aftermath. History is

not always pretty, and scholars like Denis Mack Smith and Lucy Riall, among others, have written cogently about the effects of unification on Sicily (it seems difficult to ignore things like Nino Bixio's massacre of civilians at Bronte or the kind of electoral fraud that results in a 99 percent majority). Aside from a (very) few details of that kind, this is a superlative volume. Norwich's Oxbridgian writing style is captivating, almost intoxicating, and his knowledge of the European and Mediterranean context of history is obvious. Having begun his writings about Sicily a half-century ago, he deserves kudos. Few of the academics who petulantly refuse to acknowledge him as a scholar write so eloquently or have sold so many books, and John Julius Norwich was bringing history to the public through television long before it was trendy to do so. He blazed the trails that today's historians and historical writers follow. He's the real deal. Back in the day, medieval Sicilian chronicles like those of Hugh Falcandus had yet to be translated into modern languages, so scholars had to slog through Latin texts. A true Siculophile, Lord Norwich wrote the first lengthy (2-volume) English treatment of the Normans in Sicily, consulting medieval texts directly instead of relying on Chalandon's French account. Here he followed in the footsteps of another giant, Steven Runciman, who wrote about the Sicilian Vespers without imitating Michele Amari's fanciful interpretation. A few, too few, general histories of Sicily have been published over the last twenty years. Most fall short because, frankly, their authors lack the background knowledge to write about Sicily. Why? Simply because Sicily's multicultural history requires its generalist historians to have a solid knowledge of a dozen ancient and medieval civilizations, and very few do. Norwich is the supreme exception. This book's publication was long overdue.

I was disappointed by this book. I have read many of Norwich's histories. Usually my only complaint was that they were overly detailed. This work was somewhat superficial. It is a good overview of Sicilian history, and to paraphrase Churchill Sicily is "a mystery wrapped in an enigma". Norwich himself agrees that there are literally centuries of Sicilian History when nothing much happened of note. Norwich does give one of the best descriptions of the beginnings of the Mafia right after the unification of Sicily to Mainland Italy. Frankly since Sicily's history is so tied to Southern Italy, one comprehensive history of the region should be done. Also if anyone knows of an essay or history of why Southern Italians and Sicilians emigrated in such great numbers beginning in 1870, I would love to have the suggestion as to where to read it. Norwich does touch on it, but I still was not satisfied.

The author, a journalist-historian, attempts the impossible: a book that engages the reader in the

three millennia long documented history of the island of Sicily. The island was fought over and occupied by every power who ever wanted dominion over the Mediterranean, because of the island's size and prime location. More than other books that cover such a vast swath of time, this author succeeds, with a sharp eye for anecdote and historical personalities. Three thousand years of history, amazingly, don't feel rushed! There are entertaining stories from the past that bring the times alive with the people, their actions, and their adventures and misfortunes. "The history of Sicily...is a sad one, because Sicily is a sad island...this book is, among other things, an attempt to analyze its causes." Sicily's earliest recorded history is Greek, with locations playing a large part in Greek's mythological gods and their battles, including Bacchus and the first grape vines on the slopes of Etna. But the history of Sicily stretches back much further, into the era of the great Carthage, her ancestors the Phoenicians, and the Neolithic cultures and the mysterious Mycenaeans, the Mediterranean's first great power. The prose is lovely. The facts are presented in a manner that is not overwhelming if you have a basic grounding of European history. If you don't have that grounding, you may find yourself overwhelmed at times. Sicily's history has been linked to the flows of power between the ruling European dynasties and countries for her whole history! My advice is to take the book slowly, and supplement it with reading the Wikipedia articles on the various peoples, battles, or events mentioned in the book. If you do that, by the end of the book, you'll have increased your knowledge tremendously. Within the history he presents, the author manages to mention highlights of Sicily's cultural heritage that tourists can visit, as well as literature and popular writing such as Camilleri's popular police procedural novels featuring Inspector Montalbano. Beware, however, that ancient history was institutionally sadistic, soaking the soil of Sicily (and all the soil surrounding the Mediterranean and throughout Asia) with human blood. The only oddity I found relating to this was that the author appeared to take the side of Rome against the slaves who periodically fought for their freedom. Sicily, more than many other land, also seemed to have a death-wish, both in personal character and in Mother Nature: the cities of the island were continually divided by internal strife and external rivalries; earthquakes, volcanoes, droughts, tsunamis, floods, malaria and plagues of various kinds have struck (and continue to strike) the island with regularity. "It is the sorrow of long, unhappy experience, of opportunity lost and promise unfulfilled--the sorrow, perhaps, of a beautiful woman who has been betrayed too often and is no longer fit for love or marriage." That quote from the book is quite apt for Sicily, an island who only since roughly the end of the Second World War has had an autonomous government. The centuries of foreign powers (16+) exploiting her position and soil and sun and harbors built up a mistrust in the locals that created a knee-jerk reaction of benign resistance and criminality when faced with any

type of governance, even when that governance was to the island's benefit. Many of those who wished to help Sicily ended up abandoning it for those reasons, deciding: "the place was impossible; the best thing to do was leave it alone" The land-based society coupled with widespread ignorance and illiteracy (only 1% could read and write in 1860) meant that only since the post World War II period, when educational reforms coupled with the building of local governance and social institutions including a strong judiciary and law enforcement capacity were begun, has Sicily made steady advancement into the modern age. The informatics age has contributed to a huge leap forward for the island, by allowing the inhabitants to see how the modern world functions, and how the world views Sicily's malfunction. The future looks much brighter for Sicily as the new generation strives to bring their beautiful island forward with industry and tourism. This book will have especial appeal for those about to visit Sicily, and for those who are of Sicilian descent. The pleasant writing style is modest, wise, humorous and nearly conversational, flowing seamlessly from subject to subject, and era to era. But nicest of all is the author's love of, passion even for, Sicily that shines through every word, as does his love of history and his erudition. Please visit my full and illustrated review at my Italophile Book Reviews site. I received a review-copy of the book for my honest review.

Norwich provides the definitive history of the island that played a critical and largely unheralded role in Mediterranean civilization. He provides a concise and scholarly survey of Sicily's high civilization and cultural melting pot under the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans and Neapolitan rulers into modern times. This very insightful and at times personal account will provide the generalist or the scholar a marvelous insight into the strategic significance and rich cultural patrimony of this unique community, which has been at different epochs a frontier, cultural hub, bread basket, province and backwater. This is a welcome addition to the library of any lover of the history of the Mediterranean, which is incomplete without an understanding of the enormous contribution of Sicily.

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