



## **Sicily: A Short History, from the Greeks to Cosa Nostra**

*John Julius Norwich*

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'Sicily is the key to everything' Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The author of the classic book on Venice turns his sights to Sicily in this beautiful book full of maps and colour photographs.

'I discovered Sicily almost by mistake . . . We drove as far as Naples, then put the car on the night ferry to Palermo. There was a degree of excitement in the early hours when we passed Stromboli, emitting a rich glow every half-minute or so like an ogre puffing on an immense cigar; and a few hours later, in the early morning sunshine, we sailed into the *Conca d'Oro*, the Golden Shell, in which the city lies. Apart from the beauty of the setting, I remember being instantly struck by a change in atmosphere. The Strait of Messina is only a couple of miles across and the island is politically part of Italy; yet somehow one feels that one has entered a different world . . . This book is, among other things, an attempt to analyse why this should be.'

The stepping stone between Europe and Africa, the gateway between the East and the West, at once a stronghold, clearing-house and observation post, Sicily has been invaded and fought over by Phoenicians and Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans, Goths and Byzantines, Arabs and Normans, Germans, Spaniards and the French for thousands of years. It has belonged to them all - and yet has properly been part of none.

John Julius Norwich was inspired to become a writer by his first visit in 1961 and this book is the result of a fascination that has lasted over half a century. In tracing its dark story, he attempts to explain the enigma that lies at the heart of the Mediterranean's largest island.

This vivid short history covers everything from erupting volcanoes to the assassination of Byzantine emperors, from Nelson's affair with Emma Hamilton to Garibaldi and the rise of the Mafia. Taking in the key buildings and towns, and packed with fascinating stories and unforgettable characters, *Sicily* is the book he was born to write.

## **Sicily: A Short History, from the Greeks to Cosa Nostra Details**

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## **From Reader Review Sicily: A Short History, from the Greeks to Cosa Nostra for online ebook**

### **Michael Cayley says**

A very readable history of Sicily from Greek and Carthaginian times to the present day. It is easy to follow and written in an engaging way. I have given it three stars, though, because it is unbalanced. There is a lot of attention on the period when Sicily flourished under the Normans - a period in which the author is an expert - and much less so on other eras. For instance there is much more that could be said about Sicily's other golden age, in ancient Greek times. John Julius Norwich also takes Cicero's speech against the undoubtedly rapacious Roman governor Verres too much at face value, not allowing for the exaggerations that were part of the blackening of an opponent's character in Roman trials. In places, explanations of the wider historical background turn into substantial digressions on events that have little direct connection with Sicily.

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### **Mr J J Todd says**

I took Norwich's book on holiday while in Sicily. There is much to commend this book and I learnt a lot. Not least how ignorant I am about broader European history whither ,Charles V, Wars of Spanish Succession, the amazing Hohenstaufen family and Treaty of Utrecht. I have taught for 19 years in British Schools and have never had cause to engage with these meaningfully, with Henry VIII dominating the historical landscape.

Norwich key thesis is the story of the Island is sad one; the plaything of various dynastic struggles leading to a range of violent struggles and/or neglect. The problem is that the telling of this story gets repetitive. Norwich marshals an impressive array of details and facts but the reader needs a little more storytelling, places where the essence of the story can be liberated from the relenting detail. He does this better in some sections, such as the Normans (where the Norman rule of Roger would make an interesting counterpoint to the rule Of William in England) and later with the role the island plays in the Second World War. I suspect because he is more comfortable with the history here. While the relationship with the Arabs and Sicily's connection with African largely underplayed.

Another critique is a tendency to be quite dismissive. For example describing the revolutionary events of 1848 in Sicily he argues that 'few had much idea of what they were fighting for'. It relates to a pervasive broader problem that while Norwich is sympathetic to the Sicilian people their story is largely told through the voices of their rulers.

This is an ambitious book taking such a broad sweep, Norwich's passion for the island is always evident and he has stimulated my interest. He succeeds in telling a story of how central this island is to European history; in doing so Norwich helps exemplify Goethe quote ""Sicily, is the key to everything."

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### **John Laidler says**

#### **A Good History of Sicily**

This is a very readable and interesting history of Sicily. It misses out the last 60 years or so but that isn't a problem. Sicily's history is so long, 60 years is nothing.

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### **Dimitri says**

Norwich came to Sicily in 1961 in search of some sun; this brief history written at age 85 was his testament to the lifelong passion he found. Like all of his ilk, it runs past the years of ruin while pacing more praisingly through the golden years. Sicily's antiquity is well-integrated into greater Greco-Roman history.

It is only with the Norman kingdom of the 11th-13th centuries that the island becomes a power in its own right, displaying an unrivaled degree of what nowadays is termed 'multiculturalism'. Its universities could exploit a wealth of original Arab sources, rather than weak translations exported from Al-Andalus to the rest of scholastic Europe.

By the late Middle Ages, the island was again relegated to the Cash Cow of whatever country was the Power That Be : first France, then Spain, and so forth until the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, with its Palermo-Messina rivalries, was voided together with the Bourbon dynasty.

It's this continuous predicament that explains why lawlessness towards an indifferent government birthed the modern Mafia by the late 19th century, even if it claimed roots in the bloody anti-French riot of the Sicilian Vespers.

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### **Gavin says**

'Sicily: A short History from the Ancient Greeks to Cosa Nostra', by John Julius Norwich, is the sixth book I've read by this author and it does not disappoint.

As the work's title indicates, Norwich attempts to survey the history of Sicily from the arrival of the first Greek settlers on the island in the 8th century BC until the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime in the 1940's. In terms of its scale, this is undoubtedly ambitious, and I am not sure whether it is entirely achieved. For example, chapters pertaining to the Norman rule in Sicily, while undeniably interesting, dwarf the book's other chapters. However, this can likely be written off as being a product of author's area of interest and expertise.

Nonetheless, and as stated by the author in his preface, one gets the impression throughout that the book is a 'labour of love'. This is perhaps best evidenced by the lively, engrossing and informative narrative woven by Norwich.

Overall, a thoroughly enjoyable and well written overview of Sicily's history. Indeed, having read the book my appetite to learn more about the House of Bourbon, the House of Savoy, and Italian reunification in general has been wetted.

The book is definitely worthwhile picking up for anyone looking for a readable introduction to Sicily.

Happy reading,  
Gavin

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### **Margaret Tuomi says**

I spent a long time reading this book, much longer than it usually takes me, the reason being that I read other books along the way that supported this book, for example The Leopard by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. I am fascinated with Sicily and want to know as much as I can about it but I didn't have enough history "hooks" on Sicily to read it easily. In order to remedy this, I tried to read the book from the end to the beginning thinking that I was more familiar with Sicily's more recent history like the Second World War than the Carthaginians....that didn't work very well either so I started from the beginning again and plowed through. It was good for me to read this book. I truly learned a lot.

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### **Radiantflux says**

50th book for 2017.

A disappointing history of Sicily.

This book came across as rather lazy storytelling; mostly just covering the intrigues of the various kings and queens associated with Sicily over the last 3000 years. There is almost no discussion of culture (other than some glib comments about the Sicilians, including that proposition that they are overall a sad people!). The book ends very abruptly in the 1950s shortly after the World War Two.

While I found it sort of useful as a way of orientating myself in very broad brushstrokes about the influence of various groups (Greeks, Arabs, Normans, Spanish etc), but will need read other books to get any real sense of the island and its people.

Not recommended.

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### **Christine says**

I would have liked to have more about the people themselves but the book was mostly about the higher levels of society. I didn't get much of a picture of why as a society the mafia developed and not much at all on the fascist state in the 20s and 30s. However in saying that there were some interesting parts especially about Nelson and WW2.

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### **Ray says**

A gentle introduction to the history of Sicily, at the crossroads of the Mediterranean. Norwich outlines how Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Aragonese and Spaniards wash over the island - each adding a little something to the cultural, linguistic and racial mix.

I quite like Norwich's erudite and gossipy style, though a whole chapter on Nelson and Lady Hamilton was too much for me.

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### **Adrian says**

Acclaimed historian John Julius Norwich begins his study of Sicily with a quote by Goethe, "Sicily, is the key to everything."

While Norwich provides no immediate, concise answer, the entire book serves as a lengthy explanation of Goethe's statement. Sicily is a crossroads of civilizations, and how the very land has transferred from Greek, Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, Spanish, French and eventually, Italian, rule, provides a lengthy mosaic of a kaleidoscope of different histories and cultures, the sum of which gives us a unique island in itself, Sicily.

Inevitably, the book at times gives one a sense of *deja vu*, as though they are reading another historical study, as one encounters familiar Greek, Roman, Napoleonic or even WWII history, however, it would be impossible to give a history of Sicily without giving adequate attention to the wider dynamics of European history of the time. Sicily is firmly embedded in the European balance of power, and has long been of immense strategic significance, hence the appearance of characters such as Julius Caesar, Napoleon or Montgomery within this volume.

Despite including various other histories, Norwich fulfills his mission of providing a history of Sicily, in a concise, readable and informative manner.

While this is familiar territory for Norwich, Norwich has ably accomplished what he set out to do, to provide a short history of Sicily in one volume, and it is indeed a pleasure to read, and may be the definitive study on the Mediterranean's largest island for some time to come.

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### **Phil Livingstone says**

3.5 stars

Having been surprised and delighted reading John's book on the popes and the shorter four princes book I found this Sicilian history lacking a bit of spark.

That isn't a reason not to pick this up though. Oh no. Inside you'll get a great romp through civilisation after civilisation tearing through Sicilian history. All the while the Sicilian people face great hardship and strife whilst never mastering their own destiny due to struggles both internal and external.

The book suffers in its weighty middle section. There are several pan-European stories in here with barely a mention of the island other than a cursory nod. For example, I wanted to know more about the impact of the eruption so boldly drawn and described on the cover and far less about who was going to inherit the throne of the Holy Roman Empire.

Luckily the focus comes full circle and is Sicilian again by the end of the story. It is well told and leaves you wanting to know more.

I picked this up wanting to learn about a place I've never visited. I put it down wanting to go there and see it for myself.

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## Al Bità says

In the last few decades the island of Sicily has become a desired tourist destination for travellers in Europe, and deservedly so. The beauty and archaeological riches found on the island are wondrous to behold, and one is astonished at the extent and variety of its history. Of the very earliest inhabitants not much seems to be known; but the extensive traces of ancient Greece, as well as Roman, Byzantine, Arab and Norman influences can be found all over.

In this work Norwich attempts to convey some of the variety and complexities of the island. He gives himself the rather daunting task of covering some 2,500 years of history in a mere 340-odd pages. The necessary condensation can only serve to scratch the surface, and at best touches lightly on historical events and artefacts. As for the “people” themselves there is hardly any attempt at any consolidation, a task which is perhaps impossible. As Norwich himself points out in his introduction, Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Germans, Spaniards and the French have all left their marks. For most of the time the people have been “occupied” or colonised by these “others”. Despite this there is little to suggest that they were subjugated — indeed, as Norwich repeatedly says when referring to them, they were always more or less ungovernable, regardless of who was “in charge”.

Norwich seems to think this to be a sad state of affairs; that they were rarely “happy”. Yet I would suggest that this misses the point. I would proffer instead that all this cross-pollination resulted in a stoic, fiercely independent Sicilian identity, with its uniquely beautiful dialect, so specialised as to be almost a separate language in itself, and which might well serve as a beacon of individual self-determination, created almost in defiance of all Sicily’s invaders and occupiers, regardless of how well or badly they were treated by their overlords.

Disclaimer: I was born in North Queensland in Australia, where my parents met and married. Both of them had migrated to Australia at different times during the period between the two World Wars. I suppose one could say that I was raised tri-lingual: I spoke and wrote Australian English, but I was also adept at speaking and understanding the Sicilian dialect, and later also studied “proper” Italian. I grew up aware of the poverty and heartache of the Sicilians forced to migrate, but also gloried in the many stories of the beauty and excitement of the island itself, its culture and its fruitfulness. There was an unquestioned fierce pride in being Sicilian which I still carry with me. Even today, when asked what my background is, I will say Australian, of course, but if pressed I will say Sicilian first and foremost, and only secondly Italian. So I am biased!

Back to the book. The first part (up to chapter 7) and the last part (from chapter 14 on) are perhaps the most accessible and useful “histories” (barring my caveats above). The section covered by chapters 8–13 inclusive, however, (during which, in general “nothing happened” in Sicily) I found the most difficult and awkward to get through. In the middle of this section, when the European aristocracy were squabbling as usual over their European acquisitions, comes the story of Nelson and the Hamiltons, “which”, Norwich considers, “could on no account be omitted.” I beg to differ.

All in all I feel the book has both too much information and too little. Too much on histories which would probably be no more than footnotes on European aristocratic pursuits (and in which, in my opinion, the aristocrats lose out) — and too little on the people and culture of the island itself. More, perhaps, on the island’s ruling classes and aristocracy, and of the overweening power and influence of the Vatican on the island, would have been both educative and illuminating. I would also have preferred more maps showing

the extent of the foreign ownership of Sicily by the many occupying nations and cultures at various times in its history, and also more extensive notes (and even cross-references to the text) for the inserted illustrations and photos.

But beggars can't be choosers. Norwich's book does provide us with a loving view of Sicily, and it's worth reading if only to whet up an appetite and appreciation (albeit limited) of what is there.

Best of all, however, would be to actually visit Sicily itself for a unique and unforgettable experience.

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

Informative and entertaining, Norwich's Sicily covers the long, storied history of the Trinacria from Greco-Roman times up to the post-war period. Full of interesting anecdotes, it paints a picture of an oppressed peasantry pretty much bearing down (with occasional sparks of resistance) while the kaleidoscope of rulers changed: Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, Normans, Arabs, Spaniards, Bourbons, and the elusive Mafiosi. I have traveled extensively in Sicily and can vouch for the unique concentration of history and culture that Sicily contains and the breathtaking beauty of her patrimony: Monreale, Segeste, Selinunte, Agrigento, Ortygia, Ragusa Ibla, Noto, Modica. That being said, this is not a guidebook so it does miss a few other amazing places (the hanging village of Erice next to Trapani or the baroque masterpiece of Scicli).

Very readable, this book is a fantastic introduction to the island, but to truly understand it, you need to go there. Besides this book, I would recommend The Blue Guide for its unparalleled descriptions of the cultural sites, Peter Robb's *Midnight in Sicily* for a more contemporary view of Sicily, and of course, the greatest literary contribution that Sicily has bequeathed humanity, Lampedusa's magistral *The Leopard*.

On the negative side, it is clear that Mr. Norwich (House of Lords, etc) has a weakness for the royals and all their intrigues (bedroom, courtroom, etc) and I must admit I was a little disappointed that much of the narrative was about these inbred morons and not about Sicily itself.

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### **Marita says**

"The old name was Trinacria, referring to Sicily's vaguely triangular shape; this was also used for its ancient symbol, the triskelion, of three concentric legs."

In this concise story of Sicily, we are whisked through thousands of years of history. The Table of Contents gives us an idea of what to expect, and I'll mention some of the highlights.

#### **Contents:**

- Greeks
- Carthaginians
- Romans, Barbarians, Byzantines, Arabs
- Normans
- The End of the Kingdom

- Stupor Mundi
- The Vespers
- The Domination of Spain
- Piracy and Revolution
- The Coming of the Bourbons
- Napoleon, Nelson and the Hamiltons
- Joseph and Joachim
- The End of the Murats
- The Carbonari and the Quarantotto
- Risorgimento
- The Mafia and Mussolini
- The Second World War
- Epilogue

The story of Sicily is picked up when the Greeks arrived around the middle of the 8th century BC, and **"...they introduced the olive and the vine, and rapidly built up a flourishing community. This soon became one of the major cultural centres of the civilized world, the home of poets such as Stesichorus of Himera – he whom the gods struck blind for composing invectives against Helen of Troy – and philosophers such as the great Empedocles of Acragas."**

Today the magnificent Greek sites of Selinunte, Segesta and Agrigento are all worth a visit.

In Ortigia, the little island attached to Syracuse, the magnificent cathedral has been a place of worship for centuries. In fact it dates to the 5th century BC, when it had originally been a temple dedicated to Athena. The Byzantines converted it to a Christian church, and subsequently the Arabs converted it to a Mosque. It once again became a Christian church, was damaged in a devastating earthquake and rebuilt in the Baroque style. This cathedral still stands, and has continuously been a place of worship from the time it was first constructed. Syracuse harbour is also where the entire Athenian fleet was destroyed during the Peloponnesian war. Syracuse was the birthplace of Archimedes, and he was killed there by a Roman soldier.

By the end of the First Punic War, Sicily was in Roman hands. Under Governor Gaius Licinius Verres the Sicilians suffered great depredations, and eventually he was recalled to Rome to be put on trial. To prosecute him, the Sicilians appointed the great Marcus Tullius Cicero. There was some prosperity during Roman times as evidenced by the Villa Casale in the town of Piazza Armerina. The mosaics at the Villa are magnificent and according to the author they were almost certainly the work of African craftsmen.

In the 5th century AD, the barbarians, that is the Goths, Huns and Vandals arrived. Next the Saracens made Sicily their home. They brought with them agricultural innovations and introduced cotton, papyrus, melon, pistachio, citrus and dates. Soon trade was flourishing.

The 11th century was the time of the Norman Conquest of Sicily. Robert Guiscard and Roger, two of the many de Hauteville sons, played a prominent part. During this period foundations were laid for a multicultural society. Roger de Hauteville's son became Roger II, King of Sicily. This ushered in a golden age for Sicily. There was religious and ethnic tolerance. Sicily became a prominent centre of Hellenic studies.

In 1131 Roger II began work on the beautiful cathedral in the lovely little beach resort of Cefalù. There was also the magnificent Palatine Chapel in Palermo which was consecrated in 1140. **"And so the chapel was further embellished with what is, quite literally, its crowning glory, surely the most unexpected covering to any Christian church on earth – a stalactite ceiling of wood in the classical Islamic style, as**

**fine as anything to be found in Cairo or Damascus, intricately decorated with the earliest datable group of Arabic paintings in existence – and figurative paintings at that.“**

As regards Roger: "**By the 1140s he had given a permanent home in Palermo to many of the foremost scholars and scientists, doctors and philosophers, geographers and mathematicians of Europe and the Arab world; and as the years went by he would spend more and more of his time in their company, well able to hold his own in their discussions, whether in French or Latin, Greek or Arabic.**" Roger II's tomb is in Palermo Cathedral.

Through marriage Sicily passed into the hands of Henry of Hohenstaufen, the Germanic Holy Roman Emperor. His son became known as Stupor Mundi due to his erudition. "**As he grew older, it became impossible to find a subject which did not interest him. He would spend hours, not only in study but in long disputation on law or religion, philosophy or mathematics. Often, too, he would withdraw to one of his parks or country palaces, there to study the birds and animals that were to be a lifelong passion. Many years later he was to write a book on falconry, *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus*, which became a classic, displaying a knowledge and understanding of wildlife rare indeed in the thirteenth century.**" He founded the University of Naples.

In 1266 Charles of Anjou was crowned King of Sicily. By 1282 the Angevins were detested in Sicily, and when a drunken soldier pestered a Sicilian woman the event known to us as the Sicilian Vespers occurred in which the French were massacred. (Famous composer Giuseppe Verdi composed an opera by that title, and based on that story.) After that the Sicilians were not interested in accepting French rule.

Then the Spanish House of Aragon came into power, and with it came the Inquisition. The 3rd Duke of Osuna was happy to have theatre performances on Sundays and even to have women performing on stage, in disregard of the Inquisition.

Along came devastating earthquakes and the rebuilding in Baroque style of the towns Noto, Ragusa and Modica. Noto in particular is absolutely splendid.

The Piedmontese ruled, the Austrians ruled. By now Sicily was pretty much Spanish and they did not take to Austrian rule at all. Then the English were involved, and there is an account of the infamous affair between Captain Horatio Nelson and Lady Hamilton. The Bonapartes feature.

Finally we get to the Risorgimento and we meet Garibaldi and the Red Shirts. Garibaldi had quite an extraordinary effect not only on the Sicilians, but across the world. "**For by now Garibaldi's expedition had caught the imagination of the world. In England especially, the excitement mounted day by day. Appeals for funds were launched; Charles Dickens and Florence Nightingale were among the contributors. The Royal Small-Arms Factory in Enfield sent an artillery gun, duty free. In France, extracts from Garibaldi's memoirs were published in *Le Siècle* after careful editing by Alexandre Dumas himself. In America, the New York Times compared Garibaldi to Washington, while the New York Daily Tribune published a blistering attack on the Bourbons by the paper's London correspondent, Karl Marx.**" "**In London alone, nearly half a million prints of his portrait were sold, and as early as 1861 Messrs Peek Frean of Bermondsey launched their new firm with the Garibaldi biscuit –better known as the 'squashed fly' –which has remained popular ever since."**

Italy becomes unified under King Victor Emmanuel. The story of Sicily moves on to the Mafia, Mussolini and the Second World War.

Certainly a very complex history, but as the author states:

"And yet, for all its troubled history, Sicily remains a jewel. Nowhere else in the world will you find such a wealth of monuments from so wide a variety of civilizations –Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, German, French, Spanish, Neapolitan –gathered in so small a space and combined with so much that is Sicily's own: the dazzling baroque, for example, of Noto, Ragusa and Modica, the almost unbelievable stucco work of Giacomo Serpotta, even the traditional puppet theatre which, quite apart from its very considerable entertainment value, helps immeasurably in our understanding of the Sicilian people and their past."

I have but scratched the surface here; there is a wealth of detail even though masses of history had to be condensed into single chapters. I loved the way that people and events outside of Sicily were also mentioned. Various Plantagenets popped up, French Kings, Hannibal, etc. etc. The book was perfect for someone like myself who is not an historian, but who would like to know more about that island.

Note: Except for the Cathedral of Syracuse (Wikipedia), all the photos are my own.

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### **Ute Peterskovsky says**

A detailed yet well written and enjoyable history of Sicily from ancient times till recent. I bought the book as I was travelling to Sicily and wanted some background information beforehand and as I had read another book by the author and found it very enjoyable I settled on this one. I was not disappointed, it provided me a good deal of information and the author also mentions a lot of the towns and sights so I had some background information for my visit. At times it was a little too detailed and focused too much on the rulers rather than on the country. I had wished for more insights into the natural catastrophes such as the earthquake of 1908 or the eruptions of the Etna but I suppose as the author is a historian, he was naturally more interested in the kings and queens than in volcanos. In any case it was a little long in some parts and the author lost himself in too many details rather than stick to the larger picture, but overall it was a great book which everyone interested in Sicilian history should read!

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