



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Foreign Places:
The Mediterranean: Sicily**

The Mediterranean

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The Mediterranean Report Seven: Sicily

Sicily was inhabited in ancient times by the Siculi people, who are believed to have come from southern Italy. Its recorded history begins in 734 BC, with the coming of the Greeks. Because of its strategic importance and crossroads location, it experienced centuries of warfare between, and occupations by Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Roman slaves, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Byzantians, Normans, Germans, French, Spanish, Austrians, Spanish again, French again (almost), Italians, Americans/Canadians/British, and Italians again. Presently, the Italians are in charge.

June 10, 2006



By now, you may have noticed I begin each report on the Mediterranean with a one paragraph synopsis of the adventurers---let's call them Nth generation adventurers --- who ventured onto an island to lay claim to turf heretofore claimed by previous adventurers, identified with the handle of Nth generation adventurers - 1. These adventurers dislodged an older set of adventurers, designated as Nth generation adventurers - 2. And so on, through many generations of adventurers.

The adventures of these adventurers, their wars with one another and their utilization of the local people, created a new class of citizen among the populace. I call them: The Adventured[®]. Their principle characteristic is that they were, to put it mildly, put upon by the adventurers in matters such as how they made their living, how they fed their families, how often they were solicited to haul stones to build the adventurers' forts to protect the adventurers from other adventurers.

They have been a part of these Mediterranean reports since Report One, but we have not given them a handle...which has been copyrighted by your writer. Hereafter, before you write, type, speak, or whisper Adventured[®], or Adventureds[®], write me for permission, including how many

times your intend to use the term. I'll send back a permissions slip with an invoice for each usage.

No offence intended, just following a trend. For example, the AppleTM computer company has been at loggerheads with the AppleTM record company about the issue of who owns the noun *apple*. Maybe an apple should continue to own the name. After all, an apple is an apple, a computer is a computer, and a piece of music is a piece of music. Our language, already under siege by politically correct wordsmiths, is being taken hostage by trademark zealots. If present trends continue, a grocery store will be required to advertise its sale of an apple with a notation of apple^{The Fruit}.

Catania, Sicily

Enough. Let's visit Sicily. Today, the *Minerva II*, with its adventuresome passengers, pulled into Catania, Sicily. This city was founded between 729 -734 BC and holds the distinction of being one of the first Sicilian towns to fall to the Romans in 263 BC. For some reason, a tour guide made this point as if it were a badge of honor.

The tour guide also informed us Sicily had been destroyed nine times by assorted combinations of volcanoes, earthquakes, and invaders. Because of their history of having to start over again so many times to reconstruct and refashion their lives, the Sicilians became strong and resourceful people. They learned to take care of themselves and their families, and to be wary of outsiders. She said the Sicilians were, "low profile people," who took care of their own.

She said street people or beggars did not exist in Sicily. A bag lady? Impossible. To have destitute women on the streets would be contradictory to the Sicilians' beliefs of taking care of their family.

She spoke of how domestic the Sicilians were. Lunch at home (usually macaroni), followed by a nap. She explained how the grandparents and great grandparents stayed with family until they died. The family. Take care of the family.

During our stay in Sicily, we tourists exchanged jokes about the Sicilians and their closeness to their family in the context of the *Godfather* movies. Sitting in America and watching the young Corleone's stay in Sicily seemed so remote, apart from reality. And so long ago, as the scenes took place in the early to mid 1900s.

I assumed the dominating influence of the mafia had ended. I was mistaken. I will return to this topic later in the report. For now, our short visit to this part of the island entailed a ride through the countryside, a visit to a WWII cemetery, a museum, and a walk around Catania.

Catania lies south of Mount Etna and sits on Mount Etna's lava flows.¹ Its center area (what we call downtown) is the Duomo Piazza, a fanciful arrangement of 18th century palaces. This part of Catania is new, at least in the context of the Islands of Antiquity. It was rebuilt after a 1693 earthquake, a time when America was just beginning to build. In comparison to Catania, our country is an infant.

¹ *Etruscans to the Crusaders* (Swan Hellenic Lines, passenger material), 2006, 34.

The Jolly Roger

In 1071, the city was taken over by the Normans, an army led by Count Roger. Because of the success of his adventuresome activities on this island, he became known as "Roger of Sicily." Roger? Sorry, if your name is Roger, but Roger does not engender visions of adventureness. America's Roger icon is *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, a children's show on PBS. If ever a pacifist icon could exist, Mr. Rogers is it. Mr. Rogers and Count Roger were different personality types.

The tour guide informed us Roger created the Jolly Roger pirate flag. He was having so many problems with the pirates that he took the attitude of, "If you can't beat'um, join'um." He formed a private fleet and used the skull and crossbones flag to incite fear among those whom his fleet attacked.

The tour guide did her job well. She was articulate, knowledgeable, and funny. Some of her points, along with a few sidebars:

- Just after WWII, many citizens declared they wanted to become part of the United States. Who says bombing alienates the bombed population?
- America made a deal with the Mafia to "smooth" landings on the island during WWII. A forerunner to JFK's deals with the Mafia to knock-off Castro.
- Sicilian people are guarded. Not hostile, but guarded. See *Godfather I, II, III*.
- Roundabouts (traffic circles) are fairly recent. Sicilians are still not sure who has the right of way, but everyone assumes the right of way belongs to them. Their roundabout technique, similar to dealing with a hostile dog, is not to make eye contact.
- Indicators (change direction lights), are now used but are used the wrong way.
- If you value your life, do not mention people's sisters. It's a huge insult. "Say, how's your sister doing?" Bang!

No Imminent Domain Here

A traveler to this part of the world will notice the old buildings are not torn down. They are reused, over and over. Even damaged buildings, as we saw in Rhodes, are put to use. Sicily suffered severe damage from WWII. Allied bombing wiped out many sections of the cities. Nonetheless, instead of tearing down the remaining stones of a building, the resourceful citizens simply added some more stones to the place, reinstalled windows and doors, and moved in. During a walk, I snapped the photos in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The old and the new.

Times are changing in America. Many communities now declare buildings as "old" and forbid an owner to tear them down. I have seen a nearby community, Alexandria, Virginia, evolve from a shabby assemblage of 1800s row houses to a tony assemblage of 1800s row houses.

The Mafia

At a museum stop, I had an opportunity to talk with our tour guide for a while. I asked her if the Mafia was as prominent in Sicily as it was in the 1970s. She said, "Maybe not as much, but it is still embedded in our society. Take this museum for example. I doubt they would extort this place, because it doesn't bring in much money. But say, a large orange orchard. They come in and ask the owner for protection money. And he had better pay it."

"Adds a bit of overhead to growing an orange."

"Yes, it hurts our economy. And Sicily has had a rough go of it. Earthquakes. Volcanoes. Silkworm industry down. Grape blight. Our sulfur industry used to be big, but the U.S. found a better way to mine sulfur. Not to mention the Mafia. But have you read about Bernardo Provenzano?...No, well he is a big Mafia boss, and he was arrested not too long ago near Corleone. Been on the run for over forty years. Could be a big setback for the Mafia."

Later, I checked out Provenzano on the Web. The press stated, "Part of his legend was that he was at heart a Sicilian peasant who wanted to do good for his people. Reports suggest he stuck to the old fare of protection, land and cattle deals, and huge development rackets. But however expansive these were, they wouldn't account for an estimated fortune of around 10 billion euros."²

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Provenzano was a throw-back to those adventurers who came to Sicily centuries ago. In the legendary Sicilian way, he took care of his "family." ...And he took care of himself.

June 11, 2006

The cruise to Palermo, Sicily, was a short one. We dined, drank, and danced on the first part of the journey and slept on the last part. Our itinerary for today was a ride through the countryside,

² Key "Bernardo Provenzano" into your search engine.

a visit to an Albanian town, a vineyard for lunch, and back to the ship. I wrote Albanian correctly and will explain shortly.

This part of Sicily presents beautiful vistas. I had expected the country to be covered with houses, but many parts of it were meadows and mountains, as shown in Figure 2. Extraordinary terrain. I look at these pictures, and even having seen the sights, I sometimes cannot believe the photos are accurate portrayals.



Figure 2. The countryside around Palermo.

Lawyers Beware!

During our short jaunt from Catania to Palermo, and at various times during the cruise, Al and I lounged around the swimming pool. The idea was to give our mates the run of our cabins, and ourselves the run of the pool bar. On more than one occasion, we talked about America's tangled legal system and our frustration with our country's penchant for writing a law to cover just about everything we did in life. Reporter Junior confided in me, "I swear, someday, I'm going to kill a lawyer."

Fade to the evening meal, where the Juniors, Holly, and I were dining at a table with several other passengers. Al and I were sitting across from each other. To Al's left was an affable, gregarious gentleman (Jim), whom I asked, "Jim, what is your line of work?"

"I'm a lawyer."

Without a second's hesitation, Al and I looked at each other, both smiling. Jim must have read the book *Blink*, as he seemed to have read our foreheads, not to mention the remainder of our faces, "Yeah, I know, we're not too popular nowadays."

Reporter, "The reason for our reaction was that Al and I were talking about lawyers this afternoon. Al, now's your chance. I'd be a witness to the slaying, but I'd be a sympathetic one."

Jim, "Eh...."

Reporter, "Al mentioned to me this afternoon it was only a matter of time before he killed a lawyer. You're the first one he's come across since he made this decision."

Ha! Everyone had a good laugh, including Jim, who was a good sport about it all. We guests polished off our meals and headed for the evening's entertainment in one of *Minerva II's* lounges.

Visit to an Albanian, Italian, Sicilian Town

Back to the drive around Palermo: Before long, we arrived at a picturesque village, named Piana degli Albanesi, about 20 miles from Palermo. We learned most of the inhabitants were from Albania. The town was founded in 1488 by a group of refugees fleeing a Turkish invasion of Albania. But how could a large population immigrate into another country and create a city? Sicily needed laborers. Someone had to pick the olives.

It so happened that the land on which Piana degli Albanesi now sits was the property of the Roman Catholic Church. The pope, always looking for converts and a business opportunity, offered a deal to the Albanians: *Convert from Greek Orthodox to Roman Catholic, and I will give you land.*

Cool. I like the approach. Put a carrot in front of a horse, and watch that horse run. In contrast, think of the deal the pope gave the Native Americans: *Convert from animalism to Roman Catholic. Whatever your decision, I'm taking your land anyway.*

Piana degli Albanesi is still segregated. The native Sicilians and the imported Albanians have intermarried but not to any great extent. The street signs are in two languages, and the dress of the citizens appeared to me to be more Slavic than Italian. The population is integrating, but considering that the town is over five centuries old, the word *slowly* should be placed in front of the word *integrating*.

Figure 3 is a composite of three pictures I made while in Piana degli Albanesi. The left photo shows the interior of the local church, one whose services are a mix of Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic rituals. The middle photo shows another small meandering street, one of my favorite aspects of old Europe. I placed the right photo in this report as a quiz: Which person in the picture is a Sicilian? Which is an American?



Figure 3. Street scenes from an Albanian, Italian, Sicilian town.