

Heritage and Communities in War Context: New Photographs on Sicilian archaeology (1940-45)

As one of the most devastating conflicts of the human history, World War 2 (WW2) involved several nations spanning from Europe to South East Asia. On a world wide scale, the conflict caused much destruction and death affecting millions of soldiers and civilians who desperately struggled for surviving and experienced starvation and the dread of aerial bombing. Furthermore, war put the protection of cultural heritage at serious risk due to the danger of military operations and bombing. Undoubtedly, Europe can be considered the most crucial macro region in which the conflict was carried out, especially between 1943 and 1945 when the Allied forces opened several frontlines in order to defeat the German army. Particularly, military operations conducted in Italy played an essential role in shaping the final outcomes of the war including the landing in Sicily (Operation Husky) (July 1943) and the harsh advance of the Allied forces from southern to northern Italy (September 1943-April 1945).

Following an official announcement of Benito Mussolini, Italy joined the war on 10 June 1940 and was subjected to enemy bombing right away. The safeguarding of its substantial cultural heritage was threatened. All over the Italian peninsula, Sicily represented one of the most intriguing regions to be explored and analyzed concerning the protection of antiquities in war context. Due to its undeniable proximity to the northern African frontline, Sicily was considered a potential military objective by the Italian army which carried out a series of strategic measurements for defending the island. Nevertheless, Sicilian cultural heritage, shaped by centuries of past foreign dominations and historical phases, was in real danger. Thus, state and regional authorities actualized a series of procedures to protect monuments and sites to minimize (if possible) any potential damage caused by military operations.

The main focus of my paper is to present the intriguing results of a recent research project on the protection of cultural heritage in Sicily during WW2 carried out through the systematic analysis of hundreds of archival records. In particular, the project has revealed how Italian safeguarding personnel acted in Sicily in a state of war to protect archaeological sites and museums triggering several frictions with the military authorities. The latter were mostly focused in defending the island occupying archaeological sites or even installing defensive artillery positions there.

Still preserved at Palermo's and Rome's archives, black and white pictures offer a significant record of evidence testifying how safeguarding personnel, communities and military authorities acted in a state of war and dealt with antiquities. My paper aims to disclose some peculiar sets of pictures which disclose a stunning set of vivid visual data on these topics. First, I outline the context of WW2 in Sicily providing a solid historical framework to my topic. Second, I assess some sets of pictures showing how authorities operated to install protective systems (scaffolding and sandbags) for protecting ancient temples (Agrigento's site) or valuable archaeological artefacts (Palermo's museum). Finally, I provide some conclusive remarks highlighting the significance of such visual documentation to better understand the social military and civilian networks widespread in Sicily in the early 1940s.

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