

Protecting Antiquities in Danger: Sicily and World War 2 (1940-45)

World War 2 (WW2) can be defined as the most devastating international conflict of the twentieth century. The war caused millions of deaths – mostly in Europe – since military operations involved civilians and provoked much destruction in both major and minor urban centers. The history of WW2 is very well-known, since scholars have explored all phases of the conflict on a military, historical and political level. Therefore, we can benefit from a solid bibliography on the subject, since WW2 still generates much popular historical debate worldwide (Gilbert 2010; Kila and Zeidler 2013; Geyer and Tooze 2015). We also have general overviews on war and combat archaeology (Schofield 2005; Carman 2013; Kila and Zeidler 2013). However, past scholars have neglected some aspects of the conflict, namely the impact of war on antiquities in some targeted nations and areas of Europe.

Italy entered the war on 10 June 1940. At first, military operations occurred on the French frontline but then the Allies began bombing some Italian cities, as early as June 1940. As a consequence of early bombing, the Fascist Minister of Education (Giuseppe Bottai) promptly imposed strict laws in order to protect antiquities, archaeological sites and museums in Italy, which are, indeed, substantially important to the nation. Nevertheless, the war was incessant and bombing raids continued. The effects of war on cultural heritage, including the two-year military operation to liberate Italy from the Nazis, following the armistice on 8 September 1943, were devastating. General outlines of its effect on Italian cultural heritage (1940-45) have already been published (Coccoli 2011; De Stefani 2011), however, there are no specific case studies of Sicily.

The scope of this paper is to present my research project on the impact of war on Sicilian classical antiquities, when the island was involved in substantial Allied bombing and landing operations, which put cultural heritage at serious risk. Based on first-hand, archival

research in Italian, British and American archives, and funded by the European Research Council (ERC), my project aims to understand how WW2 impacted on the island's antiquities and its local communities, and also look at how local authorities dealt with their protection within a warzone context. Documentation includes dispatches, letters, military reports, maps, B/W pictures, aerial photographs, newspapers, etc. First, I offer a detailed introduction on Sicily and Italy in 1940-45, providing all historical data to contextualize my research (Moscati and Di Stefano 2006; D'Este 2008; Zaloga 2013). Then, I assess selected case studies: Agrigento, Cefalù and Palermo. They demonstrate how local Superintendents took care of protecting sites (inevitably clashing with military authorities), supervised the construction of urban anti-raid shelters for any potential archaeological discoveries and secured museums and their personnel, which benefitted from new equipment (e.g. fireproof suits and gas masks). Such a set of research data, which have now been disseminated by the USA for the first time, are essential to understanding how Sicily, which played a leading role in WW2, was also the scene of an effective plan to preserve the valuable and ancient cultural heritage that was at risk.

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