

One of the many fascinating aspects of ancient Greek civilization is that it was by no means confined to ancient Greece! Greek civilization existed wherever the Greek-speaking peoples went, and to a Greek of the Classical Age the Greek world included Asia Minor, the Black Sea area, parts of North Africa, Southern Italy, and Sicily, in addition to the Greek peninsula itself. The reason for such physical expansion is not difficult to determine: in the 9th and 8th centuries B.C. Greece proper was suffering from a growing population and an insufficient production of food. One obvious solution was to "export" the surplus population to more fertile areas of the Mediterranean; these colonies, once established, would not only siphon off the excess population, but would also export needed food back to the Greek peninsula.

The island of Sicily consequently became a magnet for Greeks seeking a better life. Her fertility and pleasant climate, in addition to a relatively subdued native population, turned Sicily into the "America" of the Classical world--the golden land of plenty and of opportunity. Greek colonies, soon to become completely independent city-states, sprang up all along the fertile coasts; one of these new cities was Syracuse, destined to become Queen City of the Greek West, and, indeed, a rival in wealth and power to Athens herself.

Syracuse was founded by a group of Corinthian emigrants around 733 B.C. Attracted by the presence of two natural harbours, these Corinthians first settled on the low islet of Ortygia which juts into the Bay of Syracuse, separated from the mainland by a very narrow strait. The settlement quickly prospered, and soon an artificial causeway was built to connect Ortygia to the mainland, where the "suburb" of Achradina was founded. As expansion relentlessly continued, other "suburbs" were established; Syracuse was fast becoming a megalopolis, with a population estimated at about 500,000.

The fifth century B.C. saw Syracuse transformed into a formidable naval power under the leadership of a series of tyrants. Beginning with Gelon (who ruled from 485 to 478 B.C.), Syracuse became an imperialist power, capable of dominating not only other Greek cities in Sicily, but also the major non-Greek power of the western Mediterranean, Carthage. In fact, Gelon engineered a victory over the Carthaginians at Himera in 480 B.C., a victory which initiated an extended period of prosperity for many cities on the island, but especially for Syracuse herself; there arose new ship-yards and docks, magnificent temples, and even a new agora.

Hieron I, the brother of Gelon, came to power in 478. His twelve-year rule saw Syracuse become a cultural centre of the entire Greek world: among the many philosophers and poets who flocked to his court were Pindar, Simonides, Bacchylides, and Aeschylus. Meanwhile, Syracuse's naval power continued to grow, and towards the end of the century Athens began to worry about a possible threat to her own security from the Greek West. The Athenians rashly decided to intervene in Sicilian affairs, to try to "neutralize" Sicilian powers (especially Syracuse) so that their war against Sparta could continue without a new front opening up. In 415 B.C. a fleet of 134 Athenian triremes set sail to besiege Syracuse. The Syracusans managed eventually to blockade the Athenian fleet within the Great Harbour, and the Athenians suffered one of the worst defeats of their entire history. It was a blow Athens never recovered from, and it led ultimately to her defeat by Sparta in 404 B.C.

Syracuse, however, was not to suffer such a fate for many years. Under some tyrants she would experience internal strife, but with the coming to power of Timoleon in 343 B.C. Syracuse reached a peak of well-being. It was only in the third century B.C. that a new power arose to put an end to her age of glory. There was now to be a new "Queen City" of the West, and it was located on the banks of the Tiber River.