



A painting shows Roger I fighting Muslim forces at Cerami. Victory here would make the Normans the dominant force on the island of Sicily

1 The other Norman conquest

More than one island's history was transformed by a Norman invasion in the 1060s

The year 1066 is heavy with meaning for England: it marked the bloody moment a foreign leader overthrew the nation – and, in so doing, changed the course of its history. But William's was not the only Norman conquest at the time.

The Normans launched an assault on Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, in 1061 – five years before William set off across the English Channel. At the head of the invasion force were Roger de Hauteville and his brother Robert, called Guiscard, members of a group of Norman mercenary soldiers who had settled in southern Italy in the preceding decade. Supported by Pope Nicholas II (who had, rather prematurely, made Robert the “duke of Sicily yet to be conquered”), they sought to capture Sicily from its Arab rulers.

In May 1061, Robert and Roger crossed from mainland Italy to

Messina, at Sicily's far-eastern tip, with a small force of 150 knights and their mounts, plus 450 auxiliaries. Unlike William's lightning conquest five years later, it took the brothers 30 years to fully conquer Sicily – not least because Robert was often distracted by threats to his power in southern Italy.

The Norman conquest of the island would, though, prove to launch a golden age for Sicily – not simply because it augured a period of strong leadership, but because under the Normans the island was a beacon for tolerance and multiculturalism in an increasingly divided world. Roger, who ruled Sicily until his death in 1101, kept many of the local Arab rulers in place and maintained their bureaucratic system. He also established the island as an international market, encouraging trade with people from all points of the compass.

2 In thrall to Thomas Becket

Why an English saint was venerated in Palermo

Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in 1170 by a group of knights supposedly acting at the behest of Henry II of England. By 1173 Henry had offered penance for the death, and Becket had been canonised by Pope Alexander III. A year later, the Norman Sicilian king William II started work on a new cathedral at Monreale outside Palermo. In the centre of the apse of this magnificent new edifice was emblazoned a huge mosaic of Christ Pantocrator (“All Powerful”) above an array of saints – including none other than Thomas Becket, identified by a Latin inscription. This icon is the earliest known depiction of the archbishop anywhere in the world, and stands in one of the most prominent positions in the church at Monreale.

So why was Sicily – and, particularly, William II – such a fan of Thomas Becket? Sicily had long been connected to Becket and his family. A letter from Becket still exists, thanking William and his mother, Margaret, for the hospitality they had given his family. William's wife was Joan, daughter of Henry II of England and a firm fan of Becket.

Monreale was not the only place in Sicily to honour Saint Thomas. The cathedral in the town of Marsala at the island's western tip was also dedicated to him – his statue still adorns the front exterior.



Christ Pantocrator towers over an array of saints, including Thomas Becket, in the main apse of Palermo's Monreale Cathedral

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3 Sicily's go-to scholar

The Scot who became Frederick II's brain trust

In 1198 Frederick II was crowned king of Sicily. His court at Palermo was a cultural and philosophical hot-house of the Middle Ages, attracting some of the brightest minds in the world – including a near namesake of mine, Michael Scot.

Scot was born around 1175, possibly on the England–Scotland border. He became an ordained priest as well as a philosopher, mathematician and astrologer. Studying in Durham, Oxford, Paris and Bologna, Scot also learned Arabic. Attracted to the polyglot court, Scot – then aged around 50 – worked with others to translate Arabic versions of, and commentaries on, Aristotle's works into Latin. He was also Frederick's go-to scholar for questions on subjects ranging from geography to the locations of hell, purgatory and heaven, as well as studies of the soul.

Scot published on alchemy, astrology and physiognomy, and also gained a reputation as a man of magic – supposedly turning to stone a group of witches. This popular reputation earned him a place in Dante's *Inferno* in the eighth circle of hell (his patron, Frederick II, managed only the sixth).

4 Britain fetes Garibaldi

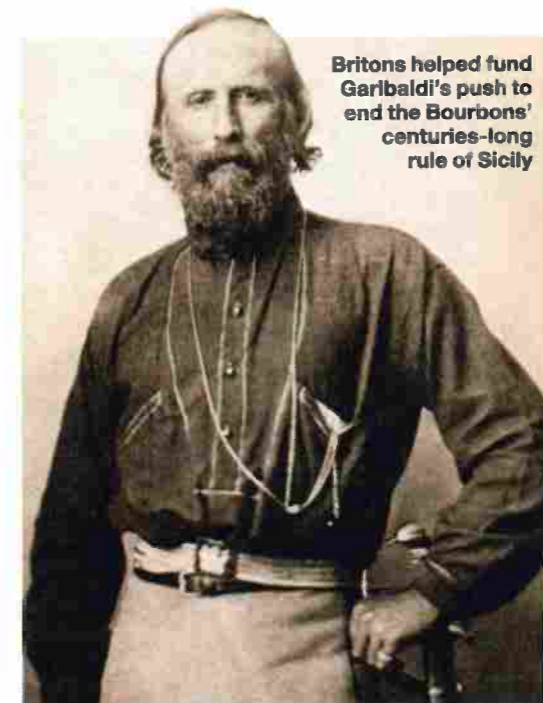
The Italian nationalist's conquest of Sicily made him the toast of polite society

On 11 May 1860, Giuseppe Garibaldi landed at the Sicilian port of Marsala with 1,000 troops. His aim was to liberate Sicily from its Spanish Bourbon rulers in the name of the Sardinian king Victor Emmanuel II,

and to kick-start the unification of Italy. Garibaldi was no stranger to guerrilla warfare: he had fought in Brazil and Uruguay, as well as in Italy, and was used to having huge odds stacked against him. Within a month he had taken Palermo and in little over a year he had driven the Bourbons out of Sicily. Not for nothing is he known as one of the fathers of Italy.

The story of Garibaldi's great crusade made headlines in the US, in Russia and, perhaps most notably, in Britain. The idea of freeing Sicily from the Spanish Bourbons inspired Britons not only to follow the news of Garibaldi's invasion, but to actively support it, raising money for his cause. We know that figures as illustrious as Charles Dickens and Florence Nightingale donated.

His conquest of Sicily complete, next Garibaldi launched an attack on the other great Bourbon kingdom of southern Italy, Naples, having hitched a lift across the straits of Messina with the support of the British Royal Navy. And as he entered the fray, Britain honoured him with perhaps the ultimate accolade: the invention of a biscuit. The creation of the ‘Garibaldi’ launched the ultimate teatime showdown: Bourbons v Garibaldi.



Britons helped fund Garibaldi's push to end the Bourbons' centuries-long rule of Sicily

5 The gangsters' paradise

When British and American forces liberated Sicily in 1943, it was the mafia that profited most

In July 1943, Allied forces secured their first key foothold in Europe – on Sicily. The Americans landed at Gela in the south-west, the British between Pachino and Pozzallo in the far south-east, with a combined force of 160,000 men. The decision to invade Europe via Sicily was one of the best-kept secrets of the Second World War. A significant element in its success was the triumph of misdirection codenamed Operation Mincemeat: the body of a ‘Royal Marine’ (actually a tramp), carrying false invasion plans (naming the targets as Sardinia and Greece) was dropped into the ocean for the German forces to pick up.

As Operation Husky began, American general George Patton and his British counterpart Bernard Montgomery led the charge for 40 days and 40 nights. British troops suffered 12,800 casualties, the Americans 8,800. But the cost to Sicily was even heavier: many of its cities suffered aerial bombardment, and Messina was the most heavily bombed of all Italian cities.

But there was also another, less-well-

known cost. In preparation for the invasion, Allied forces worked hard to ensure that the Sicilian mafia would support the Allied cause. The US even paroled mafia boss Charles ‘Lucky’ Luciano and returned him to Sicily. At the end of the war, many of these mafia men were confirmed in quasi-official positions of power across Sicily by the Anglo-American postwar administration, paving the way for decades of Mafia-led construction and drug rackets. In their efforts to win freedom for Europe, the Allies gave the mafia a vital shot of adrenaline and a new lease of life – and Sicily is still paying the price to this day. ■

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British troops are welcomed by Sicilian children after driving German and Italian forces from the island