

Michael Scott's **Global Connections**

“Sicily is an incredible melting pot of ideas, beliefs and peoples – which is why it is such a key focus for thought in 2016”

Sicily has been big in 2016. The British Museum in London, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and Amsterdam's Allard Pierson Museum all hosted special exhibitions of artefacts from Sicily. And I've recently completed the filming of a two-part series on the history of Sicily, to be broadcast on BBC Two early in 2017. So why is Sicily's history so popular right now?

In part, it's because Sicily is in the news as a destination for thousands of people rescued from unseaworthy craft attempting the crossing to Europe from north Africa. Sicily – like Greece – is on the front line of the biggest migration movement since the Second World War. When I spent a day this summer with the coastguard at Lampedusa, a small Italian island between Libya and Sicily, the sheer scale and highly emotional nature of this migration really hit home. The waters had been calm that week, and huge numbers of migrants were trying their luck on the seas: 7,000 had been saved on the Monday and 2,000 on Tuesday before I arrived on Wednesday.

To the coastguards, each migrant is a life to be saved without question; I could see in their eyes the pain of each life lost. Occasionally, they are called on to do more: a week earlier, a mother had given birth just after being pulled from a sinking inflatable, her baby delivered by one of the coastguard team, after whom the infant was subsequently named. That day cemented my belief that the most critical law of the sea – save everyone you can, whatever the financial cost – should never be broken, and that any solution to the migration crisis must be sought before or after the crossing.



Sicily's history has always been marked by new arrivals, being a stepping stone between Europe and Africa (the southern tip of Sicily is actually south of Tunis) and a gateway between the eastern and western Mediterranean. Over the past 2,800 years it has been claimed by Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, the French, the Spanish and, finally, Italians. Every one of those cultures left its mark on Sicily's traditions, infrastructure, architecture, art, politics and society, making the island an incredible melting pot of ideas, beliefs and peoples.

This is why Sicily is such a key focus for thought in 2016: it is a symbol of the difficulties, benefits and possibilities of the engagement between cultures that will no doubt define the 21st century. Of course, Sicily and the Sicilians have faced many challenges from the constant comings and goings over the centuries. But Sicilians are also incredibly proud of their international heritage.

One particular example stands out for me. In the 1060s, the same decade in

which England was conquered, Normans arrived to oust the Islamic rulers of Sicily. But they did not erase their predecessors' culture: in fact, they kept in place many of the Arabic administrative systems across the island, respected mosques (except those that had been built in former churches, which were converted back) and proceeded, over the next 70 years, to establish a cosmopolitan and international trading scene that embraced both Christian and Arab worlds.

One structure that encapsulates this is the Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel), built by the Norman king Roger II in his Palazzo Reale (Royal Palace) in Palermo in the early 12th century. It has a western Christian floor plan, Byzantine gold mosaics and a beautiful Arabic sculptured wood ceiling. At that time, the Christian church was still reeling from the great schism of the eastern and western churches, and the crusaders were waging war on Islam – so this building stood as a shining beacon of inclusivity, multiculturalism and internationalism in Europe.

While filming the BBC series, we learned that, curiously, the Sicilian dialect (really a language in its own right) has no future tense – Sicilians talk about everything in the present. But through its people think in the moment, there are many lessons from Sicily's past to learn for our increasingly globalised future. ☺

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Michael Scott's Sicily is due to air on BBC Two early in 2017 in the UK.