



Harbors of the Phoenician Punic period in Western Sicily.



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In Western Sicily, in the same waters that saw a great part of Honor Frost's presence and preminence as pioneer of underwater archaeology, there are many traces and remains of underwater structures that testify the evolution of harbors in the ancient Mediterranean. Starting with the Phoenician colony of Motya, small island situated at the western farthest end of Sicily, on a stretch of sea known as the Stagnone Lagoon, one of the largest lagoons in Europe.

Its shallow water provided a safe haven for ships, in the best Phoenician tradition: everything in Motya's location seems to indicate that the entire lagoon served as a natural port system, with that unique element represented by the so-called "submerged causeway", that across the North Gate led carts and goods toward the settlement of Birgi on the opposite mainland.

The causeway was in the origin a massive structure meant to inhibit free navigation in the lagoon (Fig. 2).

After the Greek seige that destroyed the island in 4th century BC, Lilybeum-Marsala represents the continuity with Motya, and though the harbor system extension of the later town has yet to be fully determined, the location of the three harbors which gave fame and prosperity to the town is known through many evidences and ancient sources.

Photogrammetry and field research have allowed to locate a port near Punta Alga, close to the Stagnone entrance; another called Porto delle Tartane near the modern harbor and the last and most important one lies immediately north Capo Boeo, off the ancient city center. (Fig. 3)

Not too distant, the city of Selinus, had to process such a mass of maritime traffic that two ports were needed: one to the East and the other to the West of the Acropolis, near the Gorgo Cottone and the Modione river, the ancient Selinon, that gave the name to the city (Fig. 4).

The remain of these ports found so far are some a quay built of stone blocks and some stone blots attached to the jetty.

At the foot of the acropolis, along the beach and on the opposite sea floor, are visible architectural elements that belong to the port structures. (Fig. 5).

The site where the city of Mazara del Vallo I lies, was probably the seat of an ancient emporium of Phoenician origin, given its fairly important position on the coast, at the mouth of the Mazara river, on the border of the territory of Selinunte. Before the present day port, swarming with activities and making Mazara the first fishing port of Italy, the ancient Channel harbor made Mazara one of the most important centers of the ancient world.

One of the archaeological evidence of this is the discovery made on July 29, 1930 by the dredge Anzio, at a depth of 4 m, of a submerged wall structure, a quay or anthemural, 40 m long and emerging from the bottom for about 3 m in the direction N-S. Unfortunately it was dismantled to make room for current port activities. Heavy blocks of 150 kg were reused in town buildings. (Figg. 6 – 7).

At last, Eraclea Minoa was founded in the late 5th century BC by colonists from Selinunte. It was built on the left bank of the Halykos (Platani) river near Capo Bianco, in the area where it flows into the sea. The strategic importance of Eraclea Minoa's harbor is made clear from the sources and it must have had both military and commercial features. It was in fact the sea route and obligatory stop from the Aegean to the west. The Halykos river valley met at Eraclea Minoa its outlet, which penetrated the inner region inhabited by the Sicilian communities. And still: the Halykos represented "the salt way", beaten by the merchants who wanted to buy salgem and sulfur. (Fig. 8)

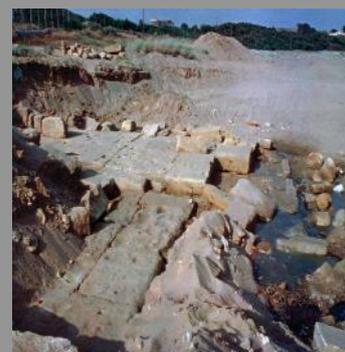


Fig. 5 -Selinunte: remains of the harbor structures on the eastern river



Fig. 6 -Mazara del Vallo and the entrance of the Cannel Harbor



Fig. 7 Phoenician inscription on stone found during dredge works



Fig. 8 -River Halykos mouth near Capo Bianco, Eraclea Minoa

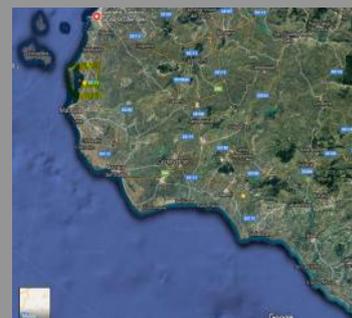


Fig. 1 -Map of Western Sicily



Fig. 2 - Motya : the submerged causeway from the Northern Gate to Birgi



Fig. 3 -Aerial view of Cape Boeo - Marsala



Fig. 4 -Selinunte: an aerial view of the Acropolis