

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Agrigento (Italy)

No 831

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Archaeological Area of Agrigento
<i>Location</i>	Sicily
<i>State Party</i>	Italy
<i>Date</i>	19 July 1996

Justification by State Party

Art, history, and nature have made this place famous from antiquity to the present day, as testified by classical writers such as Pindar, Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, and others, by historiographers of the 16th and 17th centuries (Fazell, Cluverio), and artists and travellers of the 18th and 19th centuries who left behind them memorable texts and pictures. It is only necessary to think of Houel, Saint-Non, Denon, Swinburne, Brydone, and, above all, Goethe, in whose *Italiänische Reise* the most moving pages are devoted to the natural and artistic beauties of Agrigento.

[**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers the property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. However, in the tentative list for Italy, sent to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre on 28 June 1996, **criteria ii, iii, iv, v, and vi** are quoted.]

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the archaeological area of Agrigento is a *site*.

History and Description

History

According to tradition, the Greek town of *Akragas* was founded by colonists from Rhodes and Crete

coming from the founder colony in Sicily, Gela, around 580 BC. However, excavations have indicated that there was an earlier Greek settlement here in the 7th century BC. It is a classic Greek settlement site, on the flanks of a hill on the coast, and this allowed the city to begin to expand from the original acropolis (now occupied by the modern town) and to prosper within a very short time after the 6th century colonization. During the reign of the tyrant Phalaris (570-555 BC) a system of defensive walls was built, to reinforce the natural protection afforded by the difficult topography. It was at this time that the series of so-called Chthonic temples were built on the south-west flank of the Temple hill.

The political expansionism of Akragas begun under Phalaris reached its height during the rule of the tyrant Thero (488-473 BC). After defeating the Carthaginians decisively in 480 BC at Himera he extended his rule to the northern and eastern coasts of Sicily. The wealth that this brought to the city, and the cultural life that this wealth supported, are illustrated by the great temples that were built at this time on the southern extremity of the hill. One of its most notable sons at this time was the philosopher, doctor, and musician, Empedocles.

A democratic regime was established in the later 5th century BC, and the city enjoyed a short period of tranquillity, albeit one of rivalry with Syracuse. This came to a brutal end in 406 BC, when it was besieged and sacked by the Carthaginians. It struggled to regain its former glory, and succeeded briefly under Timoleon, who crushed the Carthaginians in 340 BC and brought in new colonists. However, the city became a prize fought over by Romans and Carthaginians. It first fell into Roman hands in 262 BC, and was definitively incorporated into the Roman Empire in 210 BC.

During the last years of the Republic and in the Early Empire, Agrigento, as it became known, benefited from being the only market town still active on the southern coast of Sicily. However, the decline of the Western Empire and the ascendancy of Christianity led to depopulation and impoverishment of the city.

From the 7th century AD onwards it shrank in size, the older quarters being abandoned and the remaining population clustering on the hill. The reduced settlement was which was successively occupied by the Arabs (who called it Kerkent or Girgent), in 829 and by the Normans (for whom it was Girgenti, the name that it retained until 1927) in 1086.

Description

The boundaries of the ancient city are defined by natural features. It is dominated to the north by the hill of Girgenti, where the modern town stands, and the Rock of Athena, which was the ancient acropolis. To east and west lie the rivers *Akragas* (modern San Biagio) and *Hypsas* (modern Drago). On the south is the bluff along which the famous series of temples are located; below is a broad plain stretching to the mouth of the river San Leone, the port of the ancient city.

The Valley of the Temples, as it is known today, covers most of the built-up part of the ancient city and its public monuments. It is closed by the ridge running parallel to the sea that was assigned the role of a sacred area in antiquity. The area between the acropolis and the temples was laid out in the early 5th century BC (as confirmed by archaeological excavations) on the traditional "Hippodamian" grid pattern. Six *decumani* (main streets) are crossed at right-angles by *cardines*, dividing it into *insulae* roughly 300m long.

The sacred area was created in the second half of the 6th century BC, as shown by the early temples at the western end of the ridge. However, the most impressive remains are those of the temples built during the reign of Thero and after - to Herakles, Olympian Zeus, Hera Lacinia, Vulcan, and Concord. This area is linked with the residential part of the town by a wide road.

The Temple of Olympian Zeus, only the foundations and main altar of which survive, was one of the largest of all Greek temples, measuring 112m by 56m, and it has some unusual features. Instead of the more common open peristyle, it was surrounded by a wall varied by immense Doric half-columns on the outside and pilasters in the interior. The *cella* is defined by two rows of massive quadrangular pillars instead of internal walls, and was open to the sky.

The so-called Temple of Concord (a name for which there seems to be no authority) is the most impressive surviving Doric temple in the Greek world after the Parthenon in Athens. It has survived to a remarkable degree owing to its having been adapted for use as a church in the 6th century AD. It is built on a four-level stylobate and is surrounded by 34 columns.

Built at the same time as the Temple of Concord and in very similar style is the Temple of Hera Lacinia, built at the eastern end of the ridge, where remains of the Greek fortifications can still be seen. It was burned by the Carthaginians in 405 BC and traces of the fire are still visible. Its architrave and the columns on the north side are almost intact.

The Temple of Herakles is earlier than the other Doric temples on the ridge. It is hexastyle, with fifteen columns on the long sides. The eight columns standing on the south side were re-erected in 1923.

The two temples dedicated to the Chthonic (underworld) divinities, Demeter and Persephone, and that to the Dioscuri were begun in the 6th century BC but rebuilt in 480-460 BC. The site was in all probability sacred to indigenous peoples before the arrival of the Greek colonists. There is an interesting group of altars, some of them circular, with hollows in them for conveying offerings to the underworld gods.

In addition to these outstanding monuments, there are substantial excavated areas of the residential area of Hellenistic and Roman Agrigento. A number of the houses have well preserved mosaic pavements. There is also extensive ancient cemeteries on and south of the ridge with tombs and monuments from the pagan and Christian periods. The so-called Tomb of Theron

is actually of early Roman date, but its form, that of a small Ionic shrine set on a podium, is in Graeco-Asiatic form, originating from Asia Minor.

Other features of this site are the upper and lower agoras and the complex network of underground aqueducts.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The Valley of the Temples of Agrigento was statutorily declared a Zone of National Interest under the Law of 28 September 1966.

Decrees issued by the Ministries of Public Works (6 May 1968) and National Education (7 October 1971) defined the perimeter and constraints on use of the site. The perimeter was further confirmed legally by the President of the Sicilian Region in Decree No 91 of 13 June 1991. This group of statutory instruments imposes an absolute ban on any form of construction within the prescribed area

Management

The area is in the course of being set up as an Archaeological Park, under the management of the Assessorata Regionale per i Beni Culturali, Ambientali Pubblica Istruzione ed Educazione for the Sicilian Region and the Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali di Agrigento.

At the present time, 337ha are already in the ownership of the Region and a further 550ha are in process of being acquired; it is planned in due course to acquire another 100ha, making a total of around 1000ha. The final area is intended to cover 1400ha.

In the central area, which is that protected by law (see "Legal status" above), no building may take place. This is almost completely enclosed by an area where there is a height restriction of 4.50m and in a further area on the coast to the south-east of the main area the height limit is 7.50m. The latter are deemed to constitute a buffer zone.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Systematic research on the site began in the closing years of the 18th century, encouraged by the Bourbon rulers, who appointed the Prince of Torremuzza conservator for Sicily, assisted by Signor Lo Presti of Agrigento. They were responsible for the anastylosis of the Temple of Hera in 1786 and the restoration of the pediment of the Temple of Zeus the following year. Excavation and survey of the latter began in 1802.

During the first half of the 19th century excavations and restoration work took place at the Temples of Demeter, Vulcan, Herakles, and the Dioscuri. The four columns re-erected in the north-west corner of the last-named temple in 1836 became the symbol of the archaeological heritage of Agrigento. During the second half of the 19th and the early years of the 20th

century work continued on buildings within the ancient city and in the cemeteries.

Research, conservation, restoration, and protection programmes continue under the leadership of the Soprintendenza di Agrigento, financed by the Assessorato Regionale (see "Management" above). National and international organizations are consulted about and collaborate in many of these projects.

There are problems relating to the stability of a number of the monuments resulting from the nature both of the rock on which the ancient city was built and of the stone used in the buildings. Research is currently under way by commissions set up by the Sicilian Region.

The Soprintendenza has recently launched a programme for the systematic survey, study, and conservation of the temples. This meticulous and comprehensive project has already begun to produce exceptional results, visible in the striking appearance both close at hand and from a distance, of some of the major monuments, notably the Temple of Concord.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the Agrigento archaeological ensemble is high. It must be recognized, of course, that some restoration work carried out in the late 18th and 19th centuries in no way conforms with the principles of modern conservation, as set out in the 1964 Venice Charter. The restored pediment of the Temple of the Dioscuri is an example of inaccurate reconstruction that did not operate on the basis of rigorous anastylosis. However, the authenticity of the site is incontestable.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Agrigento in March 1997. ICOMOS also consulted a distinguished British expert on classical archaeology on the cultural significance of the site.

Dr Mounir Bouchenaki, Director of the UNESCO Division of Physical Heritage, kindly made available a copy of the report of his mission to Agrigento on 8-12 May 1996.

Qualities

Pindar described the Agrigento of his day as "the most beautiful of mortal cities." Many contemporary visitors would echo his views, because of the magnificence of the site and the quality of the excavated remains. The temples in particular are among the most impressive and best preserved from the Greek world.

In view of the fact that the modern town covers only a relatively small part of the area of the ancient city, the vast area proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List may be considered to have something of the nature of a cultural landscape. The row of great temples are the only significant upstanding monuments; the remainder of the site has preserved the rural setting of fields and orchards, with a handful

of vernacular buildings, that it acquired with the disappearance of the ancient city.

Comparative analysis

The great period of Greek colonization resulted in the construction of many cities, as far apart as Spain and the Crimea. Most were to be rebuilt in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, so that much of what remains today is not representative of Greek culture. Agrigento has a special place among the classical sites in the ancient world because of the way in which it has preserved on the original commanding site, so typical of Greek colonial settlements, very substantial remains of a group of buildings from an early period, not overlain by later structures or converted to suit later tastes and cults.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

There are three main sub-divisions within the area proposed for the Archaeological Park and nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List: a large central area already owned by the Sicilian Regional Government, an area surrounding it which is scheduled for expropriation in the near future, and a further area outside these. The first two of these areas are those protected under Law No 1089/1939.

It became clear on studying the air photograph submitted with the nomination dossier, and confirmed by the expert mission on the ground, that the third of these areas, and also the three outlying areas designated as protection zones (*aree di rispetto*), had been subject to unauthorized building activities which have to a considerable extent degraded their cultural value. The ICOMOS mission therefore proposed to the Provincial authorities that the area to be nominated should be confined to the State-owned *proprietà demaniale* (ie the first two areas identified above), with the remaining areas as a buffer zone. This proposal was accepted and a revised plan was prepared that incorporated the ICOMOS recommendations.

ICOMOS is concerned at the low level of funding currently available for conservation and restoration work. The Soprintendenza has a well researched programme for progressive conservation and restoration interventions, but these have received a check with a recent cut of 80%. ICOMOS therefore urges the relevant authorities to reconsider its policy in this respect, given the importance of tourism to the economy of an economically disadvantaged region.

At its meeting in June 1997, the Bureau referred this nomination back to the State Party to provide assurances of adequate funding for the management and maintenance of this property. No reply had been received to this request at the time that this evaluation was sent for printing (early September).

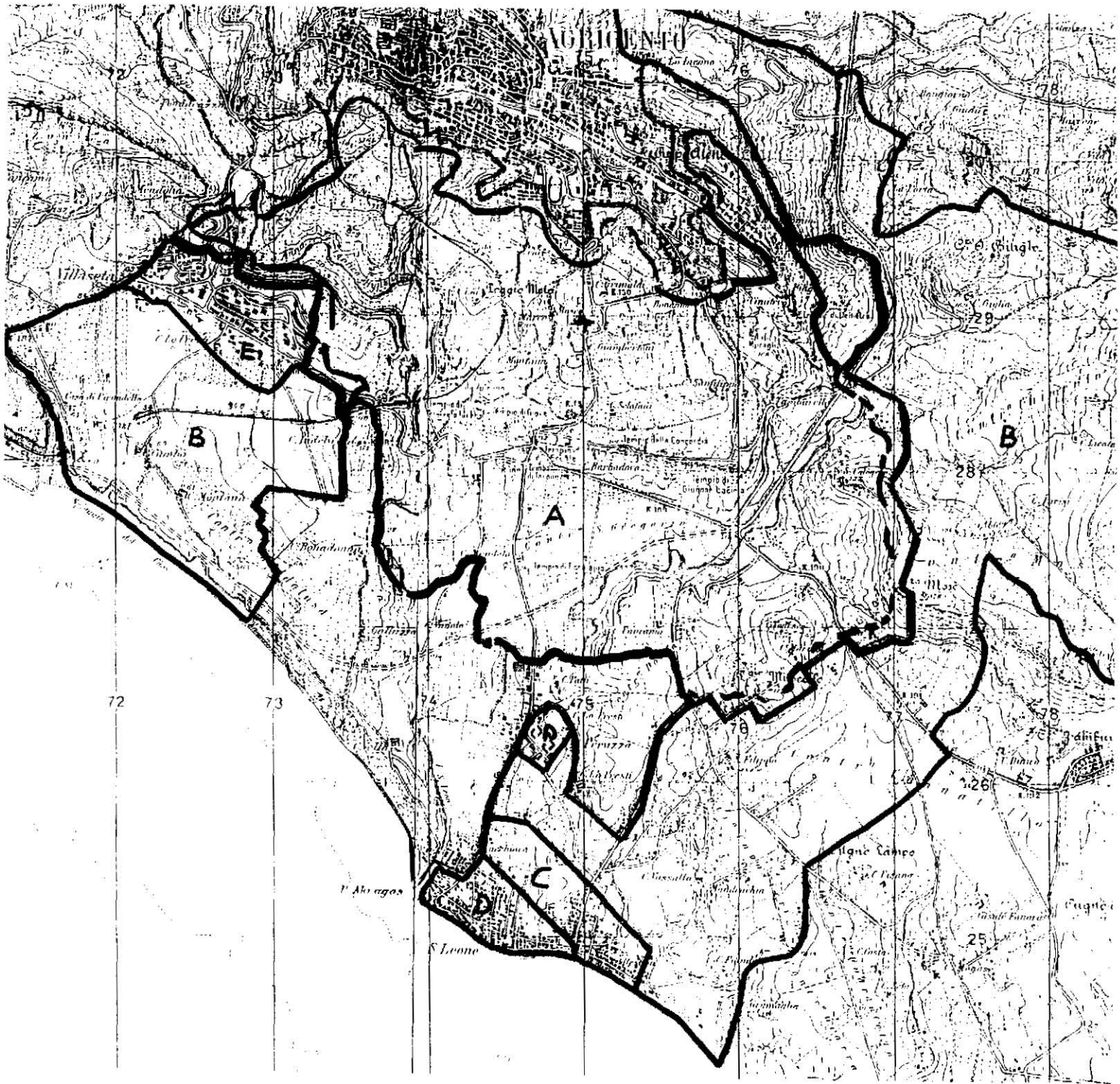
Recommendation

In the event of the assurance requested by the Bureau being received before its Extraordinary Meeting in November 1997, ICOMOS recommends that this

property, as revised, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, and iv*:

Agrigento was one of the greatest cities of the ancient Mediterranean world, and it has been preserved in an exceptionally intact condition. Its great row of Doric temples is one of the most outstanding monuments of Greek art and culture.

ICOMOS, September 1997



Agrigente / Agrigento :
Zone proposée pour inscription (A) et zones de protection /
Nomination area (A) and protection zones