

Ancient Sicily was one of the most interesting countries in the Greek world. It had a turbulent history, including Greek colonisation, wars between Greeks and Carthaginians and wars between rival city states until they were all finally conquered by Rome. Sicily also made a valuable contribution to Greek literature, and it is amazing how many innovating writers and poets came from this island. I mention only a few of the most colourful personalities.

Stesichorus of Himera, who flourished in the first part of the sixth century, wrote lyrical poems on a grand scale in which he retold stories from the myths e.g. an *Oresteia*. A famous legend relates that he was blinded when he represented Helen as a faithless wife and did not recover until he wrote a second poem in which he denied that Helen ever went to Troy. Empedocles of Acragas (c.493-443 BC) was a philosopher who also wrote poetry; although Aristotle did not regard him as a real poet, the extant fragments from his poems have impressed many critics. A famous legend about his death relates that he threw himself in the crater of Mount Aetna in order that he might be believed to be a god. Epicharmus (c.530-440 BC) is regarded as one of the first writers of Greek comedy. The few fragments of his works point to a great variety in his dramatic production. Travesties of myths play an important part and Heracles was a favourite figure, but the poet was also a keen observer of everyday life.

Another famous Sicilian was Gorgias of Leontini (c.483-376 BC). He was a celebrated teacher of rhetoric who strove to write prose which should rival poetry in its effects. For this purpose he used many poetic words and metaphors and aimed at musical effects by means of assonance and rhyme. He caused a sensation in Athens in 427 BC when he was sent as ambassador to persuade the Athenians to assist his city against Syracuse. In his dialogue *Gorgias* Plato criticizes his ideas on eloquence but depicts him as a venerable old man.

Theocritus of Syracuse (c.310-250 BC), who belongs to a later period, also made an important contribution. He was probably not the first poet to write "pastoral" poetry but it was owing to him that this genre really became fashionable. Although he later settled in Alexandria, some of his poems have Sicilian themes, especially those in which the Sicilian shepherd Daphnis and the Cyclops Polyphemus play a prominent role.

Apart from the poets who came from Sicily, many poets from mainland Greece also visited Sicily, especially during the first half of the 5th century BC during the heyday of the tyrants. Aeschylus twice visited Sicily - the first time to produce a play, *Women of Aetna*, in honour of the founding of a new city by Hieron of Syracuse. During his second visit he died at Gela in 456 BC. A sensational story is told about his death, namely that an eagle let a tortoise fall on his bald head in order to break the shell! Another prominent visitor was Pindar who went to Sicily in 476 BC to produce the first Olympian ode in honour of Hieron's victory in the horserace. In another ode, the second Pythian, he praises Syracuse in the following words: "Mighty city of Syracuse ! holy ground of Ares that is ever plunged in war ! thou nursing-place divine of heroes and steeds that rejoice in steel!" (J.E. Sandys' translation).

In the next century a famous philosopher was not always treated so hospitably. Plato fell out with the elder Dionysius, ruler of Syracuse, and according to one account was even sold as a slave and had to be ransomed. He later returned to Syracuse at the request of his friend Dion and tried to persuade the younger Dionysius to rule according to his philosophical principles but this attempt also ended in failure; in the end he was only allowed to depart after the intercession of his friend Archytas. But even this tragic story shows the great importance that Syracuse and Sicily had for the Greeks.