



WORK WITH MYTHS

BOOKLET



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Sicilian mythology: Ancient Stories, Modern Inspiration. An informative booklet tailored for young people to introduce them to mythology of Sicily

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Table of content

Introduction	2
1. The role of myths in shaping our world	3
2. The myths of Sicily: a glimpse into the past	5
2.1 Origins of Sicilian myths	5
2.2 Some mythical places in Sicily	6
3. Sicilian mythological heritage: some of the most notorious stories	8
3.1 The tale of Persephone and the Seasons	8
3.2 The myth of the Cyclops	10
3.3 The myth of Scylla and Charybdis	12
3.4 The Paladins of Charlemagne and the Puppet Theater	14
3.5 Mythological roots in Christian traditions	15
3.6 Aeolus and the Aeolian islands: master of the winds in myth and landscape	17
3.7 Amphinomos and Anapias: the heroic twins of Catania	19
3.8 Aeneas, Anchises, and the birth of the Elymians	20
3.9 Liotru and Heliodorus: the genius loci of Catania	21
3.10 The Genius of Palermo: A timeless protector	23
3.11 Colapesce: the legend of the sea	25
3.12 Hephaestus and the forge of Mount Etna: the god of fire's fiery workshop	26
3.13 The nymph Arethusa and Alpheus: love and transformation in Syracuse	28
3.14 The donas de fuera and the Spanish Inquisition: Sicily's hidden witches	30
3.15 Archimedes and the burning mirrors: genius and defense in ancient Syracuse	31
3.16 Giufà: the trickster fool of Sicilian folklore	32
3.17 Cyane transformed into a spring: the power of sacrifice and nature	33
3.18 Adrano: the Sicanian god of fire and protection	35
3.19 Ibla: the Sicilian goddess of fertility	36
3.20 The Palici: twin deities of Justice, Earth, and Springs	37
3.21 Daedalus, Minos, and King Cocalus at Sant'Angelo Muxaro: a tale of ingenuity and defiance	39
3.22 The Dancers of Addaura: Paleolithic Art and the mysteries of Early Sicily	41
3.23 Ferdinandeia Island: an ephemeral land and a symbol of Sicilian freedom	44
3.24 The Sword of Damocles: power, peril, and the burden of leadership	46

4. Mythology and modern creativity	49
4.1 Domenico Pellegrino: illuminating sicilian icons	50
4.2 Igor Scalisi Palminteri: reimagining the sacred	51
4.3 Franco Accursio Gulino: mythology in motion	52
4.4 Elenoiret: weaving the Aeolian islands into contemporary creativity	53
5. Our references: books and podcasts on Sicilian mythology	54
5.1 Books	54
5.2 Podcasts	54
6. Embracing the power of myths: your journey begins	56
6.1 Stay connected with our cultural heritage	56
7. The EU funded project “WORK WITH MYTHS”	57

Introduction

This booklet is created as part of the "Work With Myths" project (co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme), a cultural initiative that explores the timeless influence of mythology on our modern world. Through the lens of Sicilian myths, we aim to connect Europe's rich cultural heritage with contemporary creativity and innovation. By engaging with these ancient stories, we invite readers to uncover powerful lessons and symbols that continue to shape our identities, inspire artistic expression and drive new ideas. Join us on this journey where the past meets the present, and where myths become a source of inspiration for the future.

1. The role of myths in shaping our world

Welcome to the rich and fascinating world of Sicilian mythology! The island of Sicily is a place with a history as deep as the Mediterranean Sea itself: a history shaped by countless civilizations, each leaving behind stories, myths and legends that continue to inspire and intrigue.

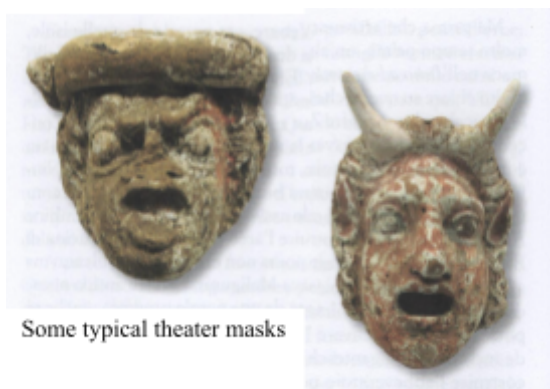
Why should you care about ancient myths? After all, they seem so distant from the fast-paced, digital world of today. The truth is, myths are far more than just old stories: they are windows into our past, our culture and our European identity. They offer timeless lessons and powerful symbols that still shape the way we see the world and ourselves.

By discovering Sicilian mythology, you're not only learning about ancient gods, heroes, and monsters; you're also uncovering parts of yourself and your heritage that you may not even have known existed. These myths are woven into the very fabric of Sicily: its landscapes, its people and its traditions. We invite you to join us on this journey of exploration, where the ancient and the modern meet, and where creativity and entrepreneurship can find new inspiration in the myths of an old world.

Myths are universal stories that explain the world around us and our place within it. Every culture has its own mythology: stories that explain how the world began, why natural events happen, and how people should live their lives. Sicilian mythology is particularly rich, influenced by the island's unique position between the Mediterranean and Europe. Here, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Arab, Byzantine, Norman and Spanish cultures all merged, creating a unique tapestry of stories and beliefs.

In Sicily, mythology is not just a relic of the past. These stories continue to be relevant today, influencing modern culture in surprising ways. From literature and cinema to art and even entrepreneurship, myths offer timeless themes such as heroism, adventure, love and conflict. Understanding these stories can provide new perspectives and inspire fresh ideas.

As you go through this booklet, you will discover how the ancient myths of Sicily can serve as a source of creativity and innovation, providing the foundation for new ideas and projects. Whether you want to be an artist, a writer, or even start your own business, you can draw on this powerful cultural heritage for inspiration.





From Scylla and Charybdis to god Aeolus: myths in north-eastern Sicily

2. The myths of Sicily: a glimpse into the past

2.1 Origins of Sicilian myths

Sicilian mythology is a rich blend of influences that span centuries of conquest and cultural exchange. The island of Sicily, strategically located in the heart of the Mediterranean sea, has been home to many different civilizations, each contributing to its unique mythological landscape. Some of the earliest – and most notorious – myths date back to the Greeks, who established colonies on the island around the 8th century BCE. The Greeks brought with them their pantheon of gods and heroes, developing new and original stories that would take root in Sicily and become a native component of its heritage.

However, the Greeks were not the only influence on Sicilian mythology. Later, Arab and Norman conquests added even more layers to the island's mythology, as elements of Islamic and Norse stories found their place in Sicilian folklore.

One of the key characteristics of Sicilian myths is their deep connection to the land itself. The island's rugged landscapes – its mountains, forests and especially its volcanoes – are often central to the stories. Myths about gods and goddesses, monsters and heroes, frequently revolve around the natural world, helping ancient peoples make sense of the sometimes terrifying forces of nature that surrounded them.



Ruins of the Temple of Apollo, Syracuse

2.2 Some mythical places in Sicily

Sicily's geography is inseparable from its myths. The island is dotted with locations that are central to ancient stories, making Sicily a living landscape of mythology.

Mount Etna: the highest active volcano in Europe, Mount Etna looms large in Sicilian mythology. It is said to be the home of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire, and the forge of the Cyclops. According to local legends, when the volcano erupts, it is the result of the gods' anger or the giants trapped beneath the mountain stirring in their sleep.

The Valley of the Temples: located near the town of Agrigento, the Valley of the Temples is one of Sicily's most famous archaeological sites. This collection of ancient Greek temples, built in the 5th century BCE, is not only a testament to the island's historical significance but also to its mythological past. The temples were dedicated to various gods and goddesses, including Zeus, Hera, and Heracles.

The Strait of Messina: According to myth, the Strait of Messina, which separates Sicily from mainland Italy, was once home to two sea monsters, Scylla and Charybdis. Sailors had to navigate between these two dangers: Scylla, a creature with multiple heads who would snatch men from ships, and Charybdis, a giant whirlpool that could swallow entire vessels. This treacherous passage is immortalized in Homer's *Odyssey*.

The Plains of Enna: where Persephone was said to have been abducted by Hades. According to Greek myth, Persephone was gathering flowers in these fields when Hades, the god of the underworld, emerged from the earth and carried her off to his dark realm. They are considered a sacred site where the divine and the natural world intersect.



Rock of Ceres in Enna



From Colapesce to Polyphemus: myths in eastern Sicily

3. Sicilian mythological heritage: some of the most notorious stories

3.1 The tale of Persephone and the Seasons

The story of Persephone and Demeter is one of the most famous and enduring myths of ancient Greece, and it holds a special place in Sicilian mythology. This tale of love, loss, and renewal not only explains the changing of the seasons but also reflects the deep connection between the natural world and the divine. In Sicily, where agriculture has always been central to life, the myth of Persephone and Demeter takes on particular significance, as it speaks to the rhythms of planting and harvest, the cycles of growth and decay, and the ever-present forces of life and death.

According to the myth, Persephone was the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility. She was a beautiful and innocent maiden who loved to wander the fields and meadows, gathering flowers. One day, as she was picking flowers in the Plains of Enna in the heart of Sicily, Hades – the god of the underworld – saw her and was immediately struck by her beauty. Without warning, he emerged from the earth in his chariot and seized Persephone, carrying her off to his dark and desolate realm.



Henry A. Payne (1868-1940), *In the garden of Proserpina*, 1983, oil on canvas



French painter, *Hades and Persephone on the throne in the Afterlife*, XV century

When Demeter realized that her daughter was missing, she was overcome with grief and began searching for her everywhere. She wandered the earth for days and nights, refusing to eat or rest, and as her sorrow deepened, the earth itself began to suffer. The crops withered, the fields lay barren, and famine spread across the land. Demeter's grief was so great that she withdrew from her duties as the goddess of agriculture, and the world plunged into darkness and desolation.

Finally, after many months of searching, Demeter learned from the god Helios that Hades had taken Persephone to the underworld. In her rage, Demeter refused to allow any crops to grow until her daughter was returned to her. The gods, fearing that the world would perish, intervened, and Zeus, the king of the gods, sent a message to Hades, commanding him to release Persephone. However, there was a condition: if Persephone had eaten anything while in the underworld, she would be bound to Hades and unable to return to the surface.

Unfortunately, Persephone had eaten one seed of a pomegranate, a fruit associated with the underworld, and she was therefore bound to Hades for part of the year. A compromise was then reached: Persephone would spend half of the year with Hades in the underworld and the other half with her mother on the surface. During the months when Persephone was with Hades, Demeter would grieve, and the earth would become barren, marking the fall and winter seasons. But when Persephone returned to the surface, Demeter's joy would cause the earth to bloom again, bringing forth the abundance of spring and summer.

This myth of Persephone and Demeter is deeply connected to the agricultural cycles of Sicily, where the changing of the seasons has always been a matter of life and death. The story reflects the ancient belief that the forces of nature are controlled by divine beings and that the fate of the world depends on their moods and actions. In Sicily, where the land is both fertile and volatile, the myth of Persephone and Demeter offers a way of understanding the unpredictable forces of nature and the delicate balance between life and death.

The story also speaks to the enduring bond between mothers and daughters, as well as the power of love and loss. Demeter's love for her daughter is so great that it affects the entire world, causing the earth to wither and die in her absence. But her love also brings renewal, as her joy at Persephone's return causes the earth to bloom again. This cycle of grief and renewal is at the heart of the myth, and it continues to resonate with audiences today, offering a powerful metaphor for the cycles of life and death that we all experience.



Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), *The Return of Persephone*, 1891, oil on canvas

3.2 The myth of the Cyclops

The Cyclops, the one-eyed giants of Greek mythology, have long been associated with Sicily, particularly with Mount Etna, the island's most famous volcano. These fearsome creatures are said to have lived on the slopes of the volcano, where they worked as blacksmiths, forging weapons and armor for the gods in the fiery depths of the mountain. The most famous of the Cyclops is **Polyphemus**, a monstrous giant who appears in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*.

According to the legend, Odysseus, the hero of *The Odyssey*, and his men landed on the island of the Cyclops during their journey home from the Trojan War. They soon discovered a cave filled with provisions and, thinking they had found a safe place to rest, they helped themselves to the food and drink inside. However, the cave belonged to Polyphemus, a massive Cyclops who trapped them inside and began devouring Odysseus's men one by one.



Giulio Romano's atelier, detail from a fresco in Palazzo Te's Sala dei Giganti (1536), Mantua, Italy

Odysseus, known for his cunning and resourcefulness, devised a plan to escape. He offered Polyphemus wine, getting the giant drunk, and then told him that his name was "Nobody." When Polyphemus passed out from the wine, Odysseus and his men drove a sharpened stake into the giant's single eye, blinding him. As Polyphemus screamed in pain, he called out to the other Cyclops for help, but when they asked who was attacking him, Polyphemus could only say, "Nobody is attacking me!" Deceived by Odysseus's clever trick, the other Cyclops left him alone, and Odysseus and his men were able to escape by clinging to the undersides of Polyphemus's sheep as they were let out of the cave.

The story of Polyphemus is one of the most famous episodes in *The Odyssey*, and it has become deeply associated with Sicily, where the island's volcanic landscape provides the perfect backdrop for the myth. Mount Etna, with its frequent eruptions and fiery depths, was seen by the ancient Greeks as the forge of Hephaestus (Vulcan to the Romans), the god of fire and metalworking. The Cyclops were believed to be his assistants, using the heat of the volcano to craft the weapons of the gods.

The legend of the Cyclops reflects the ancient Greeks' awe and fear of the natural forces that shaped their world. The towering mountains, active volcanoes, and powerful earthquakes of Sicily were seen as evidence of the divine presence, and the myths of the Cyclops and other giants were a way of explaining these terrifying phenomena. Today, Mount Etna remains a powerful symbol of Sicily's connection to the mythological world, and the stories of the Cyclops continue to capture the imagination of those who visit the island.



Engraving with Odysseus offering Polyphemus some wine, from John Flaxman's illustrated *Odyssey*, 1805

3.3 The myth of Scylla and Charybdis

The myth of **Scylla and Charybdis** is one of the most captivating and perilous tales in Greek mythology, set against the dramatic backdrop of the narrow **Strait of Messina**, which separates Sicily from the Italian mainland. This legendary strait was believed to be the lair of two terrifying sea monsters – **Scylla** and **Charybdis** – whose fearsome presence made the waters treacherous for sailors navigating between the island and the mainland. The myth encapsulates the ancient Greeks' fascination with the dangers of the sea and the unpredictable forces of nature that threatened their journeys.

Scylla and Charybdis were not ordinary sea creatures; they were powerful and malevolent forces that embodied the dangers of the open water, particularly the narrow passage where strong currents and whirlpools could easily sink ships. According to the myth, Scylla was once a beautiful nymph who, after rejecting the love of the sea god Glaucus, was transformed into a monstrous creature by the jealous sorceress Circe. Scylla's monstrous form had twelve legs, six long necks, and each neck bore a head with sharp teeth. She lived on a rocky cliff on the Italian side of the Strait of Messina, where she would lurk in her cave and snatch sailors from passing ships, devouring them whole.

On the Sicilian side of the strait, directly across from Scylla, lurked **Charybdis**, a monstrous whirlpool that would suck down water and spew it back out three times a day, creating powerful, swirling currents that could drag entire ships to the bottom of the sea. Charybdis was believed to be the daughter of Poseidon and Gaia, cursed by Zeus to become a whirlpool after she dared to steal his cattle. Unlike Scylla, who actively hunted sailors, Charybdis was a more passive, yet equally deadly, force of nature. Her massive whirlpool could create waves and turbulence strong enough to destroy ships that ventured too close to her domain.

Together, Scylla and Charybdis created an almost impossible dilemma for sailors, forcing them to choose between two equally deadly threats. The phrase “between Scylla and Charybdis” has become synonymous with being caught **between two dangers**, where avoiding one means risking the other. This phrase continues to be used in modern language, symbolizing situations where people must navigate between two equally perilous options.

The most famous account of a hero encountering Scylla and Charybdis comes from **Homer's *Odyssey***, in which the cunning Greek hero **Odysseus** must navigate his ship through the treacherous strait. In the *Odyssey*, the sorceress Circe warns Odysseus of the dangers posed by Scylla and Charybdis, advising him that it would be better to pass closer to Scylla, losing a few men to her grasp, than to risk the entire ship being swallowed by Charybdis. Following her advice, Odysseus chooses the lesser of two evils and steers his



The tale of Scylla: a frame from Andrew Lang's *Tales of the Greek Seas*, picture by Henry Justice Ford (1860-1941)

ship closer to Scylla. As he sails past, six of his men are snatched by Scylla's heads and devoured, but the ship survives and escapes Charybdis' deadly whirlpool.

This passage in the *Odyssey* captures the essence of the myth: the **inevitability of danger** and loss, even for the most skilled and resourceful of heroes. The tale of Scylla and Charybdis speaks to the broader human experience of navigating between opposing forces, where sometimes the best option is to accept a smaller sacrifice to avoid a greater disaster.



Johann Heinrich Fussli's (1741-1825) *Ulysses between Scylla and Charybdis* (1794)

Beyond its literary significance, the myth of Scylla and Charybdis also reflects the ancient Greeks' **deep respect for the sea** and its unpredictable power. The Strait of Messina, where these two monsters were believed to dwell, is a real and perilous stretch of water, with strong currents and dangerous whirlpools caused by the meeting of the Tyrrhenian and Ionian seas. Ancient sailors would have faced considerable challenges when navigating this narrow passage, and the myth of Scylla and Charybdis offered an explanation for these natural dangers, transforming them into something more comprehensible: a battle between humans and the forces of the divine.

In addition to its geographical and symbolic significance, the myth of Scylla and Charybdis also delves into themes of transformation, punishment, and the relationship between gods and mortals. Scylla's transformation from a beautiful nymph into a monstrous creature reflects the idea that the gods' wrath could

radically alter a person's fate. Similarly, Charybdis' punishment by Zeus illustrates the consequences of defying the gods. Both Scylla and Charybdis serve as reminders of the power of the divine and the vulnerability of humans in the face of nature's might.

Over the centuries, the myth of Scylla and Charybdis has continued to capture the imagination of writers, artists, and thinkers. From classical literature to Renaissance art, from operas to modern-day adaptations, the story of these sea monsters endures as a powerful metaphor for the challenges and dangers we face in life. In Sicily, the strait where they were said to dwell remains a place of wonder and mystery, drawing visitors who are captivated by the legend and the natural beauty of the region.

Today, the myth of Scylla and Charybdis still resonates with those who traverse the waters of the Strait of Messina. While the monsters themselves may no longer be feared, the currents and whirlpools that inspired the myth are very real, serving as a reminder of the enduring power of nature and the timeless relevance of the stories that the ancients told to explain the world around them.

3.4 The Paladins of Charlemagne and the Puppet Theater

While many of the myths associated with Sicily have their roots in ancient Greece and Rome, the island's medieval history also gave rise to a rich tradition of legends and heroic tales. One of the most famous of these is the legend of the **Paladins of Charlemagne**, a group of legendary knights who served the Christian king Charlemagne during the medieval period. The stories of the Paladins were brought to Sicily by the Normans, who conquered the island in the 11th century, and they became a central part of Sicilian folklore.

The Paladins were celebrated for their bravery, loyalty and chivalry, and their stories were often performed in Sicily's traditional puppet theater, known as the **Opera dei Pupi**, which is now part of **UNESCO's intangible heritage**. These puppet shows, which continue to be performed today, tell the stories of the Paladins' battles against the Saracens, their adventures in distant lands and their defense of Christian values. The most famous of the Paladins is **Orlando**, or Roland, who is the central figure in the medieval French epic *The Song of Roland*.



According to the legend, Orlando was a nephew of Charlemagne and one of his most trusted knights. He fought bravely in many battles, but his most famous feat was his defense of a narrow mountain pass against the Saracens during the Battle of Roncevaux. Although Orlando was eventually killed in the battle, his heroism and sacrifice became the stuff of legend, and he was immortalized in the *Chanson de Roland* and other medieval epics.

In Sicily, the stories of the Paladins were adapted to reflect the island's own history of conflict and conquest. The Normans, who brought the legends to Sicily, were themselves descended from Viking raiders who had settled in northern France, and their conquest of Sicily was part of a larger effort to expand Christian rule in the Mediterranean. The stories of the Paladins, with their emphasis on chivalry, honor, and religious devotion, resonated with the people of Sicily, who had experienced centuries of warfare and invasion.

The *Opera dei Pupi*, which became popular in Sicily during the 18th and 19th centuries, brought the stories of the Paladins to life through elaborate puppet performances. These shows were often performed in public squares and theaters, and they featured intricate wooden puppets, or *pupi*, dressed in armor and wielding swords. The puppeteers would manipulate the *pupi* with strings and rods, making them fight, ride horses, and perform heroic feats. The performances were accompanied by music and narration, creating a dramatic and immersive experience for the audience.

The *Opera dei Pupi* continues to be performed in Sicily today, particularly in the cities of Palermo and Catania, where traditional puppet theaters still draw crowds of locals and tourists. The stories of the Paladins, with their themes of heroism, loyalty, and sacrifice, continue to resonate with modern audiences, offering a connection to Sicily's medieval past and its enduring tradition of storytelling.

The legends of the Paladins are more than just entertaining tales; they are part of Sicily's cultural identity, reflecting the island's history of conquest, conflict, and resilience. The Paladins, like the ancient heroes of Greek and Roman mythology, embody the values of bravery, honor, and devotion, and their stories continue to inspire generations of Sicilians.

3.5 Mythological roots in Christian traditions

Mythology is not just a relic of the past. In Sicily, it continues to thrive in the symbols, traditions, and practices that shape daily life on the island. To understand Sicilian culture fully, one must recognize the deep connection between its myths and the island's customs, rituals, and celebrations.

Across the island, there are countless examples of how ancient myths remain alive and vibrant. Consider the many festivals that punctuate the Sicilian calendar, some of which are distinctly linked to ancient myths but have evolved into Christian celebrations. For instance, the **Feast of Santa Lucia** in Syracuse, held every December, is a celebration that commemorates the Christian saint, but beneath the surface, it reflects a blend of older pagan traditions. Lucia, the patron saint of the blind, is honored with a parade, processions, and special food, such as the traditional dish of **cuccia**: a dish made of boiled wheat grains that harkens back to ancient rituals tied to fertility and the harvest, once offered to the goddess Demeter.

Similarly, the feast of **Saint Agatha** in Catania – a multi-day event that draws thousands of participants – is infused with elements of ancient fertility rites and volcanic worship. Agatha, a Christian martyr, is celebrated with parades that feature candles, elaborate processions, and prayers for protection against the power of Mount Etna, which locals once believed was controlled by the gods and mythical giants. These festivals showcase the blending of ancient and Christian traditions that characterize much of Sicilian culture, underscoring the island's deep-rooted connection to its mythological past.

But that's not all. The devotion to **Santa Rosalia** in Palermo reflects a fascinating blend of Christian and ancient pagan traditions, illustrating how elements of pre-Christian worship have persisted in modern religious practices. Santa Rosalia, the city's patron saint, is celebrated with rituals that echo older rites tied to nature, fertility, and the divine feminine. Her association with **Monte Pellegrino**, once a sacred site in ancient times, connects her veneration to the pagan worship of nature deities like the greek Demeter and Persephone, or the phoenician goddess Tanit. The annual **Festino di Santa Rosalia**, with its grand processions, floral offerings, and communal pilgrimage to her cave sanctuary, bears strong similarities to ancient fertility rites that honored the forces of life and renewal. This syncretism underscores how Sicily's cultural identity continues to weave together pagan and Christian elements, preserving the island's deep-rooted traditions through the figure of Santa Rosalia.



Painter Vincenzo La Barbera, *Saint Rosalia intercedes for Palermo*, 1624

3.6 Aeolus and the Aeolian islands: master of the winds in myth and landscape

Aeolus, the divine custodian of the winds, holds a unique place in Greek and Sicilian mythology, his legacy enduring in the archipelago that bears his name: the Aeolian Islands. This volcanic cluster off the northern coast of Sicily was considered Aeolus' domain, where he controlled the capricious Mediterranean winds that shaped both human life and the natural world. According to Greek mythology, Aeolus was appointed by Zeus as the master of the winds, a role that placed him in command of Boreas, Notus, Eurus, and Zephyrus: the north, south, east, and west winds, respectively. He is often depicted as a wise but temperamental figure, embodying the powerful forces that ancient sailors revered and feared.

In the myth recounted in Homer's *Odyssey*, Aeolus appears as a helpful ally to Odysseus. After welcoming Odysseus and his crew onto his island, Aeolus gifts the hero a leather bag containing all the winds except the west wind, which would guide them safely home. However, Odysseus' men, curious about the contents of the bag and suspecting hidden riches, open it while Odysseus sleeps, unleashing the winds and driving their ship back to Aeolus' island. Disappointed by their lack of discipline, Aeolus refuses further assistance, underscoring the importance of self-restraint and trust.



Painter Giovanni Stradano's (1523-1605) *The Wineskin of the Winds* (1560), located in Penelope's Hall, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

The Aeolian Islands, known for their volcanic activity, embody the unpredictable and often violent nature of Aeolus' winds. The island of Stromboli, referred to as the "Lighthouse of the Mediterranean," is one of the few continuously active volcanoes in Europe. Its eruptions, which light up the night sky, remind visitors of the ancient belief in divine forces controlling

natural elements. Aeolus' myth and the volatile landscape of the Aeolian Islands both serve as metaphors for human vulnerability in the face of nature's might. The legacy of Aeolus on these islands invites reflection on ancient Mediterranean seafaring practices, when understanding the winds was crucial for survival. Today, the Aeolian Islands continue to attract tourists and researchers drawn to their natural beauty and the timeless legends that animate their landscapes.



The island of Stromboli, with a trail of lava along the cliff

3.7 Amphinomos and Anapias: the heroic twins of Catania

The tale of Amphinomos and Anapias, twin brothers of Catanian lore, exemplifies the virtues of filial devotion and selflessness. Their story unfolds against the dramatic backdrop of Mount Etna, whose periodic eruptions have both threatened and nourished the fertile lands around Catania. According to legend, during a catastrophic eruption, the twins displayed extraordinary courage by carrying their elderly parents on their backs to escape the encroaching lava. As they ran through the blazing landscape, the lava miraculously parted, sparing their lives and preserving their family. This divine intervention, attributed to the gods' admiration for the twins' devotion, underscores the high regard for familial piety in ancient Sicilian culture.

The story of Amphinomos and Anapias reflects themes central to both Greek and Roman morality, particularly the concept of **pietas**, which encompasses duty and reverence toward family and the gods. This quality was considered foundational to the moral fabric of ancient society, and the twins' act of bravery became emblematic of this virtue. The tale was commemorated in Catania with a temple and later inspired local festivals celebrating family bonds and heroic sacrifice.

Beyond its moral implications, the legend serves as an allegory for resilience in the face of natural disaster. The region around Mount Etna has long been prone to volcanic eruptions, and its inhabitants have cultivated a sense of reverence for the mountain, viewing it as both a threat and a benefactor. The twins' story has thus taken on added significance as a symbol of the close relationship between Sicilians and the unpredictable forces of nature. Today, Amphinomos and Anapias are remembered as local heroes, and their story lives on as a reminder of the enduring values of loyalty and sacrifice within the community of Catania.



Painter Rosso Fiorentino's (1495-1540) *The Twins from Catania*

3.8 Aeneas, Anchises, and the birth of the Elymians

The myth of Aeneas and his father Anchises occupies a foundational place in the narrative of Sicily's ancient origins. Aeneas, a Trojan prince and son of Venus, is one of the most celebrated figures in classical mythology. After the fall of Troy, Aeneas escapes with a group of survivors, including his father Anchises, and his journey is immortalized in Virgil's *Aeneid*. As Aeneas journeys across the Mediterranean, seeking a new home for his people, he eventually lands in Sicily. Here, he establishes ties with local tribes, notably founding a community that would later evolve into the Elymians, one of Sicily's indigenous peoples.

The Elymians, who inhabited western Sicily, traced their ancestry back to the Trojans through Aeneas, claiming a prestigious lineage that linked them to the epic struggle of the Trojan War. This connection not only elevated their status among neighboring tribes but also reinforced Sicily's position as a cultural and historical bridge between Greece, Rome, and the wider Mediterranean. The story of Aeneas' journey to Sicily symbolizes themes of resilience, identity, and the search for belonging: a reflection of the challenges faced by communities throughout history as they seek to establish roots in new lands.

In addition to its historical significance, the myth underscores the idea of divine destiny. Aeneas is guided by prophecies and divine intervention, suggesting that his journey is preordained and sanctioned by the gods. This theme of fate reinforces the ancient belief in Sicily as a land blessed and chosen by the divine. Today, the Elymians are remembered as one of Sicily's earliest societies, their legacy intertwined with that of Aeneas, whose mythical journey continues to inspire reflections on migration, heritage, and the enduring bonds between homeland and identity.



Raffaello, *Aeneas takes father Anchises on his shoulders*, fresco, XVI century

3.9 Liotru and Heliodorus: the *genius loci* of Catania

The legend of Liotru, the iconic elephant statue in Catania, is deeply interwoven with the tale of Heliodorus, a nobleman with a penchant for the arcane arts. According to local legend, Heliodorus, disillusioned with the church and the local aristocracy, sought the aid of demonic forces to usurp power. His use of black magic, however, earned him both fame and infamy, leading to his banishment. The statue of Liotru, named after an alternative form of his name, became the symbol of Catania, embodying the spirit of defiance, resilience, and independence that characterizes the city.

The elephant, Liotru, is believed to protect Catania from Mount Etna's eruptions, serving as a talismanic guardian. The origins of the statue itself remain a mystery, with some suggesting it was created in the Byzantine or Islamic period, reflecting Sicily's long history of cultural fusion. The statue has become emblematic of Catania's identity, representing strength and resilience in the face of adversity. The association between Liotru and Heliodorus reflects the complex relationship between the city's people and the forces of both faith and magic, underscoring themes of power, rebellion, and survival in a land marked by both natural and human turmoil.

Catania's celebration of Liotru reflects the enduring allure of myth and the power of symbols in shaping local identity. The statue stands as a testament to the city's rich history, a blend of sacred and profane, where legends of magic and resilience continue to define the character of its people. The image of Liotru has been immortalized in literature, art, and folklore, maintaining its position as a beloved symbol of Catanian pride and the city's unique cultural legacy.



The *Liotru*: the elephant's fountain in Catania



Western Sicily: the island's tip

3.10 The Genius of Palermo: A timeless protector

In the heart of Palermo stands a lesser-known but deeply revered figure: the Genius of Palermo, an enigmatic symbol of the city's spirit and identity. Represented as a crowned man with a snake coiled around him, the Genius of Palermo is often depicted with a serene, protective gaze, embodying the wisdom and resilience of the city itself. This figure is a manifestation of the "genius loci," or protective spirit, a concept rooted in ancient Roman religion. However, in Palermo, the Genius took on a unique form, blending elements from Phoenician, Greek, and Roman iconography to represent the complex cultural heritage of the city.

The serpent, often a symbol of rebirth and transformation, underscores Palermo's history of renewal and survival, especially through periods of conquest and adversity. As a port city with a history of Greek, Roman, Arab, Norman, and Spanish rule, Palermo's identity has been shaped by diverse influences, each leaving an indelible mark on its architecture, language and customs. The Genius, therefore, serves as a reminder of Palermo's ability to absorb and integrate different cultures while preserving its unique character. In fact, a famous Latin sentence embodies the identity of the Genius and of the city itself: "**Panormus conca aurea suos devorat, alienos**



Roman god Saturn, 19th century engraving

nutrit". It means "Palermo, golden valley, devours its own and nurtures others".



Fountain of Genius by Ignazio Marabitti, Villa Giulia, Palermo

Historically, the Genius of Palermo was celebrated in local rituals and festivals, and its image has been preserved in artworks, statues, and public buildings. The figure of the Genius continues to serve as a symbol of Palermo's pride and autonomy, representing the city's deep-rooted resilience and the indomitable spirit of its people. In modern times, the Genius has become a symbol of civic pride, embodying

Palermo's enduring commitment to its heritage, while its image serves as a reminder of the city's role as a cultural and historical nexus in the Mediterranean.

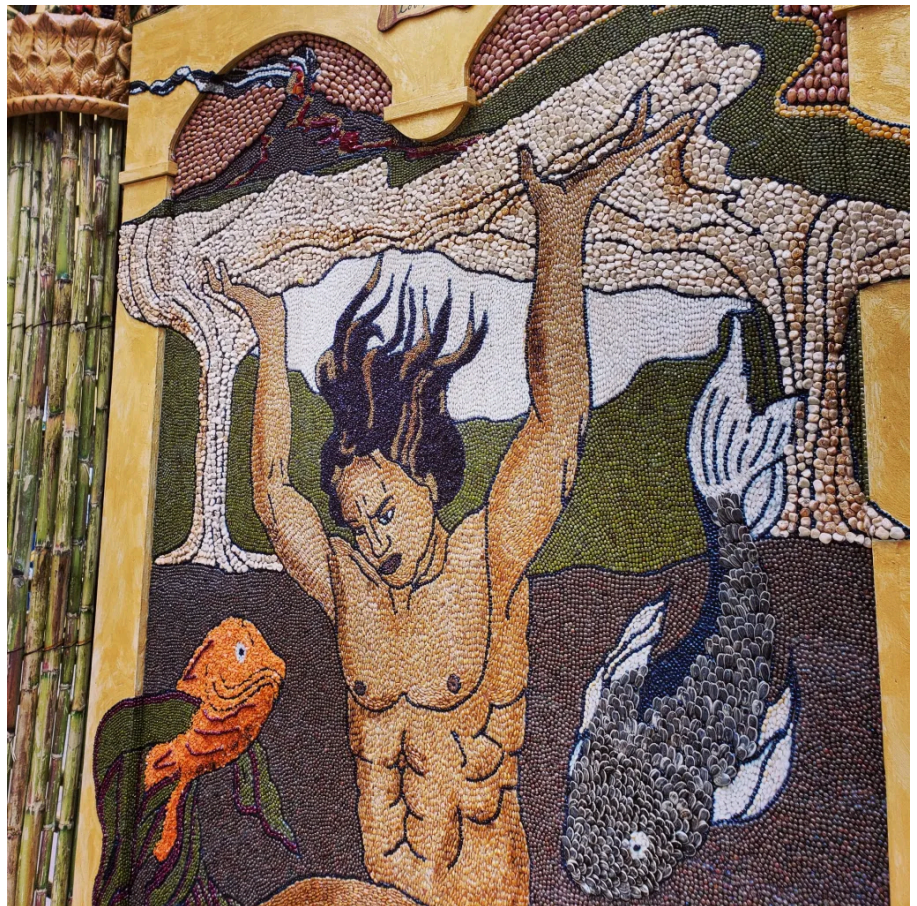


Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), Port of Palermo by moonlight, 1769, Hermitage museum, Saint Petersburg

3.11 Colapesce: the legend of the sea

The story of Colapesce is one of Sicily's most cherished legends, blending themes of sacrifice, duty, and humanity's relationship with the natural world. According to legend, Colapesce (from "Niccolò" and "pesce," meaning fish) was a young man from Messina with an extraordinary affinity for the sea. His ability to swim and dive for extended periods earned him a reputation as both a hero and an outcast. Fascinated by the mysteries of the underwater world, Colapesce would spend hours beneath the waves, exploring Sicily's hidden depths and uncovering secrets of the sea.

In the most famous version of the legend, Colapesce discovers that Sicily rests on three pillars, two of which are strong and stable, while the third is crumbling. When he reports this to the king, he is challenged to prove his claim. Without hesitation, Colapesce dives down to support the weakening pillar himself, vowing to hold the island in place forever. His sacrifice immortalizes him as a symbol of loyalty and resilience, reflecting the Sicilian values of courage and selflessness. The story suggests that Colapesce continues to hold Sicily aloft, his eternal presence beneath the waves serving as a testament to the inseparable bond between the Sicilian people and their island.



Colapesce's tale has inspired countless works of art, literature and music, embodying Sicily's connection to the sea and the sacrifices made by its people. His story is celebrated in various festivals and is recounted as a symbol of both Sicilian endurance and the enduring mysteries of the natural world. The figure of Colapesce resonates with those who live on the island, reflecting the delicate balance between life and the powerful forces of nature that have shaped Sicily for millennia.

3.12 Hephaestus and the forge of Mount Etna: the god of fire's fiery workshop

Mount Etna, Europe's highest and most active volcano, was believed to be the earthly forge of Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire, metalworking and craftsmanship. In Roman mythology, Hephaestus is known as Vulcan, a name that still resonates in the term "volcano". Ancient Greeks and Romans imagined that beneath Etna's fiery peaks lay Hephaestus' forge, where he worked alongside the Cyclopes: gigantic, one-eyed creatures of immense strength. Here, they crafted weapons, armor and intricate treasures for the gods, using the volcano's molten heart as fuel for their craft. The smoke and lava that erupt from Etna were seen as the byproducts of their labor, with each eruption symbolizing the wrath or industriousness of these divine beings.



Etna's eruption

Hephaestus' association with Etna reflects both the creative and destructive powers of fire: a duality that has fascinated humanity since the earliest days of civilization. Fire, like Etna's, can both create and annihilate, forging tools and art or wreaking havoc upon the land. For ancient Sicilians, Etna's eruptions were seen as signs of Hephaestus' favor or fury. The volcanic landscape around Etna, with its rugged rocks and fertile soil, embodies this dual nature: it offers both sustenance and danger, with volcanic ash enriching the soil and eruptions threatening to destroy settlements.

The myth of Hephaestus' forge under Etna also highlights the unique bond between Sicilian culture and the forces of nature. Etna's unpredictable eruptions have shaped local customs, prayers, and festivals, where people seek to appease the god's fiery presence. Today, Etna

remains a powerful symbol of Sicily's resilience, an ever-present reminder of the island's connection to divine and natural forces that are both awe-inspiring and perilous. The mountain's imposing figure continues to inspire legends, preserving Hephaestus' legacy as a divine craftsman and as a protector – and destroyer – of the island.



Wayne Anderson, Hundred-Headed Typhon, 1985

In addition to its association with the Cyclops, Mount Etna was also believed to be the prison of the giant **Typhon**, a monstrous creature who attempted to overthrow Zeus and was imprisoned beneath the mountain as punishment.

The eruptions of Etna were thought to be caused by Typhon's attempts to break free from his fiery prison, further linking the volcano to the world of mythology.



A sketch of Syracuse with its famous monuments

3.13 The nymph Arethusa and Alpheus: love and transformation in Syracuse

The tale of Arethusa and Alpheus, an enduring myth of love and pursuit, unfolds across the Mediterranean, ultimately finding its conclusion on the island of Ortygia in Syracuse. Arethusa was a nymph in the service of Artemis, known for her beauty and devotion to purity. While bathing in a secluded river, she caught the eye of Alpheus, a river god from Arcadia, who became captivated by her and pursued her relentlessly. Fearing his advances, Arethusa prayed to Artemis, who transformed her into a freshwater spring to protect her. Alpheus, undeterred, transformed himself into an underground river that traveled beneath the sea, merging with Arethusa's waters in Ortygia.



The necropolis of Pantalica, Anapo river valley, UNESCO World Heritage site

The fountain of Arethusa in Syracuse, said to be the place where the nymph reemerged, is one of Sicily's most treasured sites, celebrated for its mythological and historical significance. This myth represents the themes of transformation, persistence, and the interconnectedness of love and sacrifice. Arethusa's transformation into a spring is a testament to her devotion and purity, while Alpheus' relentless pursuit symbolizes the enduring power of desire and nature's forces.

The myth also reflects the ancient Greek view of water as a divine element with transformative powers. In Syracuse, the fountain remains a symbol of purity and resilience, drawing visitors who are captivated by its legend. The tale of Arethusa and Alpheus



The island of Ortygia, seen from above

highlights the timeless connection between Sicily's natural landscape and its mythological heritage, with water serving as a bridge between earthly and divine realms.



Carlo Maratta (1625-1713), *Alpheus and Arethusa*

3.14 The *donas de fuera* and the Spanish Inquisition: Sicily's hidden witches

The *donas de fuera*, or “ladies from outside”, are figures of Sicilian folklore often associated with witchcraft and healing. These women, believed to possess supernatural powers, were said to inhabit the rural areas of Sicily, practicing ancient rituals that blended natural medicine, divination and magic. During the Spanish Inquisition, however, such practices came under scrutiny as church authorities sought to suppress heretical beliefs. Many women accused of being *donas de fuera* were persecuted, interrogated, and sometimes executed, marking a dark period in Sicily's cultural history.

The mythology of the *donas de fuera* reflects a complex relationship between Sicily's spiritual traditions and external influences. These figures were not solely seen as malevolent witches but often as healers who used their knowledge of herbs, plants and natural remedies to help their communities. Their persecution reveals the tension between Sicily's indigenous beliefs and the restrictive doctrines imposed by foreign rule. Despite the Inquisition's attempts to eradicate these traditions, the legacy of the *donas de fuera* has endured, preserved in local stories, folk practices and cultural memory.

Today, the *donas de fuera* are remembered as symbols of resilience against oppression and as carriers of Sicily's ancient wisdom. Their stories highlight the island's enduring connection to its roots and the strength of its people in maintaining their identity in the face of external pressures. In modern Sicily, they represent the enduring spirit of Sicilian folk culture, where healing and mysticism continue to resonate as a form of resistance and cultural pride.



Paintings made by detainees in Spanish Inquisition's prisons

3.15 Archimedes and the burning mirrors: genius and defense in ancient Syracuse

Archimedes, one of the most brilliant minds of ancient Greece, left an indelible mark on the city of Syracuse with his innovations and inventions. Among the many legends surrounding him, the story of the “burning mirrors” is perhaps the most famous. According to this tale, Archimedes designed a system of mirrors that concentrated sunlight to set Roman ships on fire during the Siege of Syracuse, using the power of the sun as a defensive weapon. While historical accuracy of this invention remains debated, the myth has endured, symbolizing the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Sicilian people.



Ortygia's coast

The burning mirrors reflect the ancient Greeks' fascination with science and natural forces. Archimedes' application of mathematical principles to warfare showcases his ability to blend theoretical knowledge with practical innovation, embodying the Greek ideal of the *philosophos*, or lover of wisdom. His reputation as a mathematician and engineer extended

far beyond Sicily, influencing scientific thought across the Mediterranean and laying the groundwork for future discoveries in physics and engineering.



Giulio Parigi (1571-1635), *The endless screw that allowed Archimedes*, The Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Archimedes' legacy in Sicily is celebrated not only for his intellectual achievements but also for his role in defending Syracuse. The story of the burning mirrors has inspired countless works of art, literature and scientific inquiry, and Archimedes remains a symbol of Sicilian ingenuity. His story continues to inspire

those who view science as a force for protection and progress, reminding us of the enduring power of knowledge to shape and defend societies.

3.16 Giufà: the trickster fool of Sicilian folklore

Giufà, a beloved character in Sicilian folklore, is a figure of simplicity and often foolishness whose actions carry hidden wisdom. His tales involve humorous misadventures, misunderstandings and paradoxes that reveal deeper truths about human nature and society. Originating from Arab and Mediterranean folk traditions, Giufà's stories are shared across cultures and have become a fundamental part of Sicilian oral tradition. Through his blunders, Giufà challenges social norms and exposes the follies of those around him, often outwitting authority figures or revealing the absurdity of rigid customs.

Giufà's stories capture the Sicilian spirit of resilience, humor and ingenuity, celebrating the wisdom that comes from observing life with a lighthearted

perspective. His character embodies the picaro, or cunning trickster, who navigates a challenging world with wit and irony. Despite his apparent foolishness, Giufà often achieves unintended success, becoming an unlikely hero for the common people.

The enduring popularity of Giufà reflects Sicily's appreciation for humor and the ability to find strength in adversity. His tales, shared in homes and communities across the island, continue to resonate with Sicilians, offering both entertainment and a reminder of the power of laughter and simplicity in confronting life's complexities.



3.17 Cyane transformed into a spring: the power of sacrifice and nature

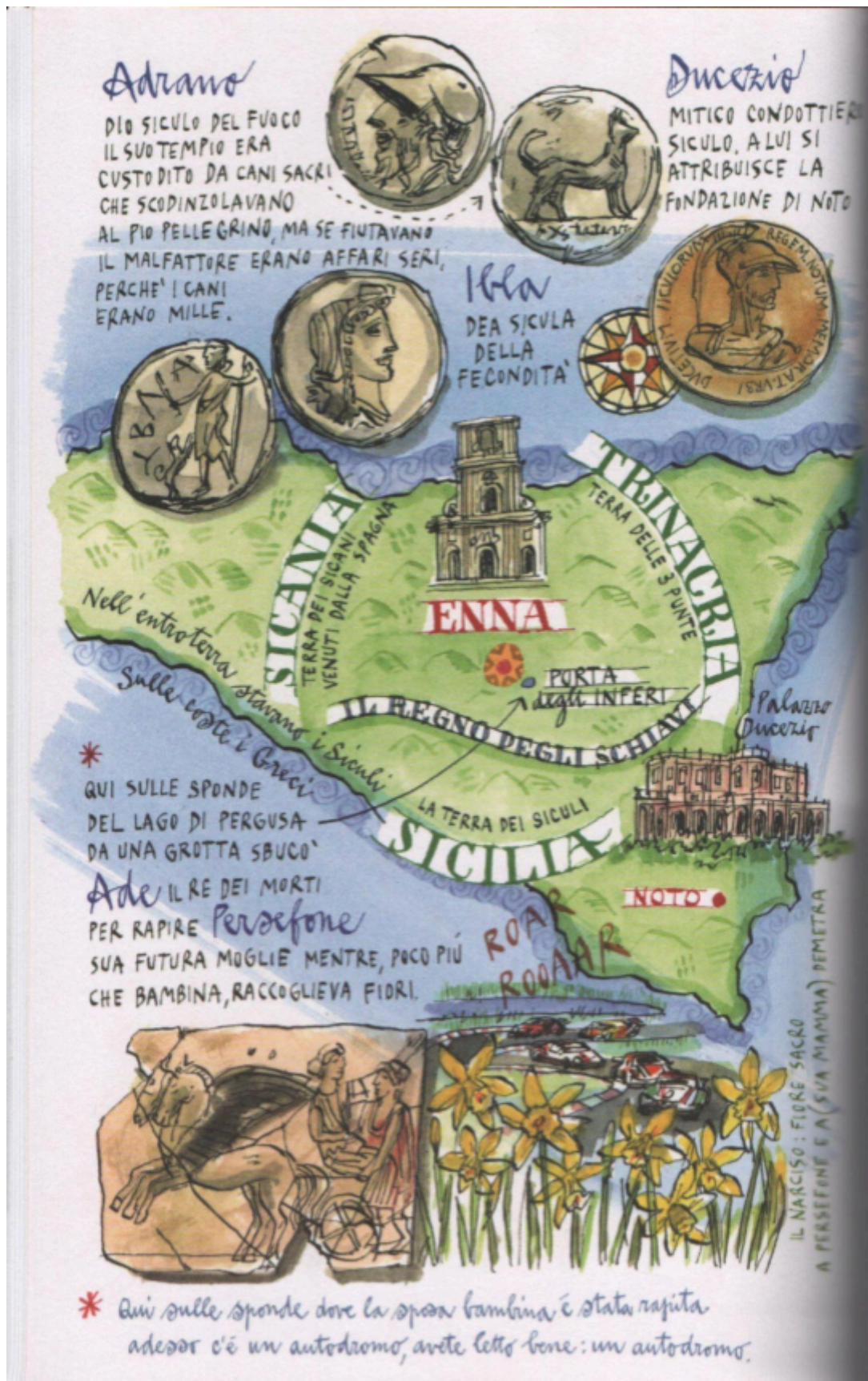
The transformation of Cyane, a nymph who tried to prevent Hades from abducting Persephone, is a poignant myth that connects Sicily's natural landscape with themes of love, loyalty and loss. When Hades captured Persephone, Cyane attempted to intervene, but her efforts were in vain. In her grief and powerlessness, she dissolved into tears, becoming the river Cyane, which flows near Syracuse. Her transformation symbolizes both the futility of resisting divine will and the endurance of love and loyalty, even in the face of overwhelming forces.

The story of Cyane and her transformation into a spring highlights the Sicilian reverence for water sources, seen as sacred sites that connect the human and divine realms. The river Cyane, where her spirit is believed to dwell, became a place of reflection and mourning, with visitors paying homage to her sacrifice. This myth reflects the importance of natural springs in Sicilian mythology, where water is viewed as a source of life, healing and continuity.

Cyane's tale serves as a metaphor for transformation and renewal, where loss gives way to beauty and permanence in nature. The spring that bears her name remains a cherished site, symbolizing the resilience of love and memory within the cycles of nature. The story endures as a testament to Sicily's natural beauty and its enduring connection to myth and spirituality.



Cyane's papyrus



From Adrano to Ibla: the myths of inner Sicily

3.18 Adrano: the Sicanian god of fire and protection

Adrano, the god of fire and war, was one of the most revered deities of the ancient Sicanians, Sicily's indigenous people. His worship centered around a temple near Mount Etna, where he was believed to command fierce, protective dogs that guarded the sanctuary. Adrano's association with fire and volcanic activity connects him to the island's primal forces, embodying both the destructive and purifying aspects of fire. His followers saw him as a guardian deity who protected them from external threats and ensured justice within their communities.

Adrano's legend underscores the ancient Sicilian respect for natural forces, particularly those linked to Etna's volcanic power. His worship reflects a belief in the divine's active presence in everyday life, where gods influenced the natural world and human fate. Adrano's role as a protector god further emphasizes the ancient Sicilians' need for security in a land marked by unpredictable natural events.

The legacy of Adrano continues to resonate in Sicily, where Mount Etna remains both a source of awe and a reminder of humanity's vulnerability. His figure embodies the island's resilience and reverence for the land's untamed power, standing as a symbol of protection, justice, and the enduring connection between people and nature.



Engraving with Typhon under Mount Etna, 18th century

3.19 Ibla: the Sicilian goddess of fertility

Ibla, a goddess revered by ancient Sicilians, was closely associated with fertility, agriculture, and the cycles of life. Her worship reflects the importance of the land in Sicilian society, where farming and harvest were central to survival. Ibla's blessings were sought to ensure abundant crops and healthy livestock, and her rituals often involved offerings of grains, fruits, and flowers, symbolizing life's continuity and prosperity.

The reverence for Ibla highlights Sicily's agricultural heritage, where the goddess represented the island's fertility and the vital bond between people and the earth. Her worship underscores the ancient belief in nature's sacred role in sustaining communities, and her figure reflects the cultural importance of growth, renewal, and community well-being.

Ibla's legacy lives on in modern Sicily through feasts and traditions that celebrate the harvest and honor the land. Her figure stands as a reminder of the enduring relationship between Sicilians and their environment, where the earth is seen as both provider and sacred presence. Her direct equivalent in the Greek pantheon is Demeter, whose tale is narrated within this booklet.



3.20 The Palici: twin deities of Justice, Earth, and Springs

The Palici, twin gods of Sicilian mythology, held a unique place in the ancient world as deities of justice, sacred springs, and volcanic phenomena. Worshipped near Palagonia in southeastern Sicily, the Palici were revered by the ancient Sicels, an indigenous Sicilian people, as protectors of the downtrodden and avengers of injustice. Their sacred site, known as the Lago dei Palici (Lake of the Palici), was believed to possess mystical powers, with bubbling **sulfur springs** that were thought to connect directly to the underworld. The mythological significance of the Palici is deeply entwined with Sicily's geothermal and volcanic landscape, as well as with the cultural values of justice, retribution and loyalty.

According to myth, the Palici were the twin sons of Zeus and the nymph Thalia, though other sources suggest that their father was Hephaestus, god of fire and volcanoes. To protect them from Hera's wrath, Thalia prayed to Gaia, the Earth, who opened a chasm to hide the twins until they were ready to emerge. When they finally surfaced, the Palici were embraced as divine mediators and symbols of resilience, representing both the nurturing and volatile aspects of the earth. This emergence from the ground symbolized rebirth and renewal, reflecting the ancient belief that the earth itself could bring forth divine forces to protect and sustain life.

The Palici's role as deities of justice was particularly significant in ancient Sicily, where they presided over oaths and vows, especially those concerning fairness and social integrity. People would gather at the sacred springs to swear oaths, with the understanding that breaking them would bring divine retribution. This practice underscored the Palici's reputation as defenders of truth and protectors of those who suffered injustice, especially enslaved people seeking freedom or sanctuary. Their mythology highlights the deep connection between justice, nature and the divine in ancient Sicilian culture, where natural forces were seen as allies in maintaining social harmony.



The Palici's lakes

il giardino della Kolymbethra, un vero e proprio paradiso terrestre



South-western Sicily: the land Dedalus, Cocalos and Minos

3.21 Daedalus, Minos, and King Cocalus at Sant'Angelo Muxaro: a tale of ingenuity and defiance

The story of Daedalus, the legendary craftsman and inventor, unfolds across the ancient Mediterranean but finds a notable chapter in Sicily, where he sought refuge from the vengeful King Minos of Crete. After helping Queen Pasiphae give birth to the Minotaur and constructing the Labyrinth to contain it, Daedalus fell out of favor with Minos. Seeking to escape Crete, Daedalus fashioned wings for himself and his son Icarus, allowing them to fly to freedom. Icarus, however, flew too close to the sun and perished, while Daedalus continued his journey, eventually arriving in Sicily and finding sanctuary with King Cocalus at Kamikos: present day's Sant'Angelo Muxaro.

King Cocalus, who ruled a prosperous and fortified region in southwestern Sicily, welcomed Daedalus, valuing his skills and offering him protection. Daedalus repaid his host by constructing magnificent structures, fortifying Cocalus' palace and even creating a series of tunnels and traps to defend it. This alliance between Daedalus and Cocalus is emblematic of Sicily's reputation as a place of refuge, where those fleeing tyranny found sanctuary and respect. When Minos arrived in Sicily to retrieve Daedalus, Cocalus, unwilling to betray his guest, devised a clever plan. He invited Minos to a feast and, according to legend, arranged for his daughters to drown Minos in a boiling bath, freeing Daedalus from his pursuer.



Golden cup used for libations, from Sant'Angelo Muxaro, currently at British Museum, London



Entrance of the Prince's grave

This tale of hospitality, ingenuity and rebellion underscores Sicily's ancient tradition of defiance against oppressive powers. Daedalus, representing the archetype of the resourceful craftsman, embodies the Sicilian values of creativity, adaptability and resilience. The alliance with Cocalus highlights the island's complex relationship with authority, where loyalty and honor often outweighed allegiance to foreign rulers. The setting of Sant'Angelo Muxaro, believed by some to be the location of Cocalus' palace, reflects Sicily's unique position as a land both connected to and independent from the wider Mediterranean world.

Daedalus' story resonates in Sicily as a celebration of intellectual freedom and resistance to tyranny. His



Pelagio Pelagi (1775-1860), *Ariadne gives Theseus the thread to escape the Labyrinth*, 1814

legacy is preserved in the island's architecture and folklore, where the figure of the ingenious inventor endures as a symbol of Sicilian resilience. The tale of Daedalus and Cocalus at Sant'Angelo Muxaro illustrates Sicily's longstanding role as a sanctuary for those who challenge oppression, a theme that has shaped its history and continues to inspire its people.



Daedalus makes Icarus' wings, 19th century engraving

3.22 The Dancers of Addaura: Paleolithic Art and the mysteries of Early Sicily

The Dancers of Addaura, a series of prehistoric engravings located in the Addaura Cave near Palermo, offer a rare glimpse into the spiritual and artistic life of Sicily's Paleolithic inhabitants. These enigmatic figures, carved into the rock some 13,000 years ago, depict human forms engaged in what



Palermo and Addaura, seen from above

appears to be a ritualistic dance. With bent limbs and stylized movements, the figures are arranged in a semicircular formation, suggesting a scene of communal celebration or spiritual rite. This ancient artwork, one of the most significant examples of prehistoric art in Italy, has intrigued archaeologists, historians and visitors, inspiring interpretations that range from shamanic rituals to depictions of early societal ceremonies.

The Dancers of Addaura reflect a deep connection between early Sicilians and their environment, as well as a reverence for communal expression. The cave's location on Mount Pellegrino, overlooking the Mediterranean, suggests that it may have been a site of ritual significance, where people gathered to honor natural or ancestral spirits. The engravings reveal the aesthetic sensibilities of Paleolithic humans, who sought to capture movement,

emotion and the sacred within their art. The figures' positions, sometimes interpreted as depicting dancers, evoke a sense of rhythm and collective unity, indicating an understanding of the power of communal identity and shared experience.



A reconstruction of Palermo's landscape during prehistory

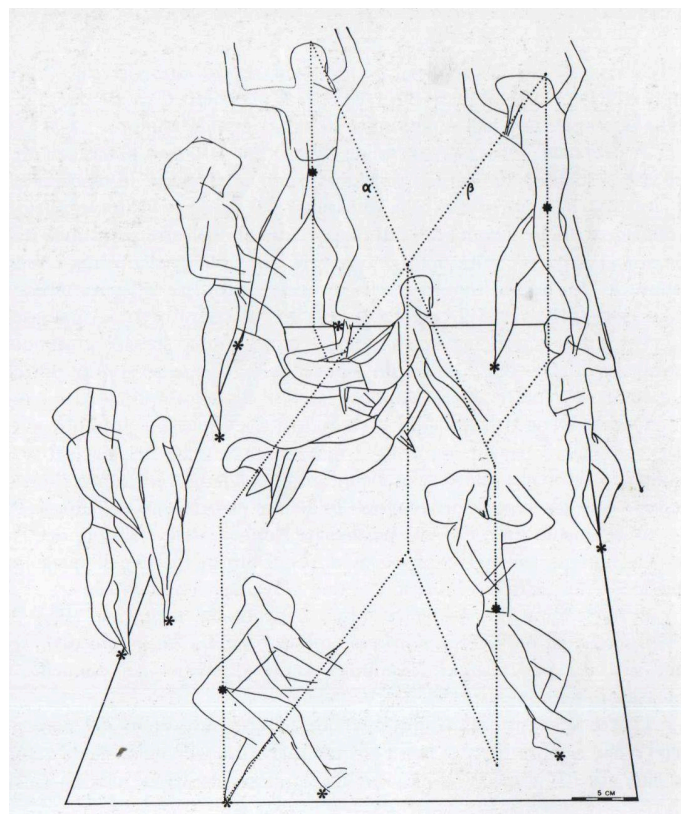
The exact purpose of the engravings remains a mystery, but they offer invaluable insights into the spiritual and social life of Sicily's ancient inhabitants. Some scholars propose that the Dancers of Addaura represent shamanistic practices, where members of the community may have performed dances or rituals to connect with the divine or ensure successful hunts. Others suggest that the engravings depict a rite of passage or a ritual of thanksgiving. Regardless of their precise meaning, the Dancers of Addaura reveal the symbolic richness of Paleolithic art and its enduring legacy in the Sicilian imagination.

Today, the Dancers of Addaura are celebrated as symbols of Sicily's ancient heritage, connecting the island's modern inhabitants with their prehistoric ancestors. The engravings serve as a testament to the enduring power of art to capture human experience, bridging millennia of history and preserving a vision of early Sicily that continues to captivate and inspire. The Dancers remind us that Sicily's cultural roots extend deep into prehistory, where art, ritual, and community life were inextricably linked.





The cave's entrance



3.23 Ferdinanda Island: an ephemeral land and a symbol of Sicilian freedom

Ferdinanda Island, a volcanic island that briefly emerged from the Mediterranean Sea in 1831, captured the attention of Europe's great powers before disappearing beneath the waves once again. Located in the Sicilian Channel, Ferdinanda was formed by a submarine volcanic eruption, rising above the waterline and creating a geopolitical sensation. Various nations, including the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Great Britain and France, quickly staked claims to the island, recognizing its strategic importance in the Mediterranean. The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies even planted a flag on its shores, renaming it Ferdinanda in honor of King Ferdinand II. However, within a few months, the island sank back into the sea, leaving behind only its story and a series of maps and sketches.



Location of Ferdinanda island



A painting portraying Ferdinanda

Ferdinanda's brief existence and rapid disappearance became symbolic of the fleeting nature of human ambition and the island's resistance to foreign domination. For Sicilians, Ferdinanda represents the spirit of independence, a natural phenomenon that defied colonial control. Its brief appearance and refusal to remain above water serve as metaphors for Sicily's resilience against external powers and the ephemeral quality of geopolitical claims on Sicilian soil. The island has since become a source of folklore and fascination, its story reimagined in the arts and celebrated as a testament to nature's defiance of human control.

In modern times, Ferdinanda's legacy has been preserved in art, notably by Sicilian painter Franco Accursio Gulino, who depicted the island as a symbol of freedom and untamed nature. Gulino's paintings present Ferdinanda as a mythical landscape, portraying it as an idyllic and liberated realm, forever free from the reach of empires and authorities. Through Gulino's works, Ferdinanda transcends its brief geological life, becoming a lasting emblem of Sicilian identity and autonomy.

Today, Ferdinanda is an underwater seamount, visible only to divers and marine explorers. Its submerged presence serves as a reminder of Sicily's dynamic geological history and the island's perpetual connection to the forces of nature. The story of Ferdinanda continues to resonate with Sicilians, who view it as a symbol of their enduring spirit and their island's indomitable character. It stands as a poetic reminder that, despite the ambitions of powerful nations, Sicily remains shaped by its own rhythms and natural laws, forever defying attempts to confine its essence.



Ferdinanda's commemorative plaque, at 8 meters below sea level

3.24 The Sword of Damocles: power, peril, and the burden of leadership

The story of the Sword of Damocles is one of the most enduring parables of power and its dangers, illustrating the precarious nature of authority and the hidden burdens of leadership. Originating in the court of Dionysius II, a tyrant who ruled Syracuse in the fourth century BCE, this story has transcended time, inspiring writers, philosophers and artists across centuries. According to the myth, Damocles was a member of the court of Dionysius, a ruler infamous for his oppressive tactics and volatile temperament. Envious of Dionysius' wealth and influence, Damocles expressed his admiration for the luxurious life enjoyed by the tyrant. He openly envied the abundance of riches, the lavish feasts and the supreme power that Dionysius seemed to enjoy with ease. Tired of Damocles' naivety and flattery, Dionysius decided to teach him a lesson about the true nature of power. In an act of cunning pedagogy, Dionysius offered Damocles the chance to experience a day in the ruler's seat, to taste the authority he so admired. Damocles eagerly accepted, anticipating a day of indulgence and prestige.

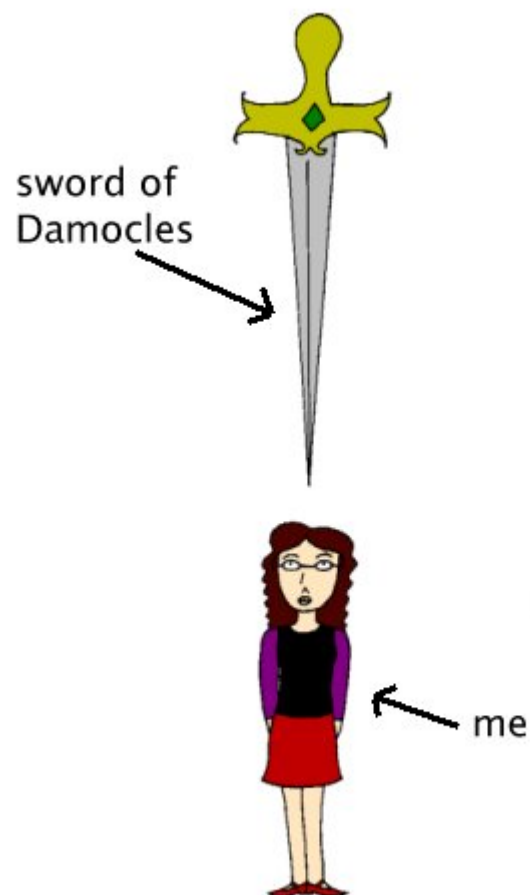


The Sword of Damocles, an engraving from History of the world, Ridpath, 1885

Dionysius commanded that a grand feast be prepared, and Damocles was seated on a throne, surrounded by opulence and served by the most attentive attendants. However, as Damocles settled into this newfound luxury, he became aware of an ominous detail above him: a large, sharpened sword, hanging directly over his head by a single horsehair. With each passing moment, the fragility of the thread became more apparent, and the sword seemed to loom ever closer, ready to fall at any slight disturbance. This image transformed Damocles' elation into dread, for he now realized that his life was at the mercy of this fragile bond: a precarious position that symbolized the constant risks faced by those in power. Consumed by fear, Damocles eventually pleaded with Dionysius to be released from his position, having learned the profound lesson his ruler intended: that power, while outwardly desirable, often entails a perpetual, unrelenting danger.

The Sword of Damocles is a metaphor for the hidden anxieties that accompany positions of great authority. In ancient Sicily, as in many cultures, rulers were expected to navigate constant threats: be they from enemies, traitors, or even their own people. For Dionysius, whose tyranny inspired both fear and resentment, the sword was a visible reminder of his vulnerability. His rule over Syracuse, like the thread holding the sword, could be severed by a single misstep or a moment of bad fortune. The story thus encapsulates the insecurities and burdens that accompany absolute power, challenging the misconception that rulers enjoy untroubled lives. The Sword of Damocles highlights the notion that power itself can become a form of imprisonment, where the ruler is constantly vigilant, weighed down by the responsibilities and dangers that others rarely see.

The imagery of the sword has found echoes in literature, philosophy, and art throughout history. The Roman philosopher Cicero famously recounted the story in his *Tusculan Disputations*, using it to illustrate the theme of fear and the inescapable pressures that haunt those in power. For Cicero and later thinkers, the Sword of Damocles symbolized the ever-present shadow of death, a reminder that fortune and favor are often fleeting. This interpretation influenced Renaissance thinkers, who saw the tale as a moral lesson about the perils of unchecked ambition and the folly of desiring power without understanding its consequences. Renaissance artists even depicted Damocles in paintings, illustrating him seated beneath the sword with expressions of terror, a visual representation of the moral weight of the story.





The Cathedral of Syracuse, once a Doric temple

4. Mythology and modern creativity

While mythology has long been a part of Sicily's cultural identity, today's artists, writers, and entrepreneurs are finding new and innovative ways to bring these ancient stories into the modern world. Contemporary Sicilian filmmakers, for instance, often use mythology as a backdrop for their narratives. In the film *Stromboli* by Roberto Rossellini, for example, the volcanic landscape itself becomes a metaphor for the uncontrollable forces that shape human lives, much like the gods of old.

Visual artists on the island have also drawn from mythology to create powerful, modern interpretations of ancient stories. From **street art** in Palermo that reimagines mythological figures as modern-day heroes to **sculptures** and **paintings** that explore the complex relationship between human beings and the divine, today's artists are keeping these stories fresh and relevant for new audiences. Let's think about artists such as Domenico Pellegrino, Igor Scalisi Palminteri and Franco Accursio Gulino, or about designers like Elenoiret.



Francesco Lojacono, *View on Palermo*, 1875

4.1 Domenico Pellegrino: illuminating sicilian icons

Domenico Pellegrino is a Sicilian artist known for transforming traditional figures from Sicilian folklore and mythology into contemporary art. His work often features vibrant, light-filled sculptures and installations that reimagine mythical heroes, saints and folkloric characters as symbols of resilience and identity. Pellegrino's use of vivid colors and light in his sculptures reflects the Mediterranean landscape and climate, connecting viewers to Sicily's cultural roots while adding a modern twist. His pieces can be described as "pop art with a mythological soul", where he juxtaposes ancient figures with elements of urban aesthetics.

Through his art, Pellegrino revives myths such as that of the Genius of Palermo, presenting them in ways that speak to modern audiences about themes of renewal and transformation. By bringing mythology into contemporary spaces, Pellegrino's work provides a bridge between past and present, inviting viewers to consider how ancient stories resonate with current societal and environmental issues.



Artist Domenico Pellegrino with one of his works

4.2 Igor Scalisi Palminteri: reimagining the sacred

Igor Scalisi Palminteri is known for his reworkings of religious and mythological figures. Originally from Palermo, he has gained attention for his reinterpretations of Catholic saints and biblical icons, which he integrates with mythological elements. Palminteri's work challenges the viewer to reconsider the relationship between myth, religion and cultural identity. Through his paintings and street art, he often merges the faces of local Sicilians with those of saints and ancient heroes, suggesting that myth and faith are intertwined in the Sicilian psyche. This blending of myth and religion reflects Sicily's unique history, where pagan myths and Christian narratives have coexisted and influenced one another for centuries



Artist Igor Scalisi Palminteri with one of his works of art

4.3 Franco Accursio Gulino: mythology in motion

Franco Accursio Gulino, an acclaimed Sicilian artist celebrated for his abstract, multimedia style, has developed a profound artistic connection with Isola Ferdinanda: a mysterious volcanic island that briefly emerged from the Mediterranean Sea in 1831 before submerging again. For Gulino, Isola Ferdinanda symbolizes the ephemeral and transformative qualities of Sicilian mythology. Through his



Painter Franco Accursio Gulino with his paintings

Gulino's fascination with Isola Ferdinanda is reflected in a series of abstract works that explore the island as a mythic symbol of Sicilian resilience and transformation. His art uses flowing forms and layered textures to convey the volcanic energy that brought the island into existence, as well as the quiet mystery that shrouds its disappearance beneath the waves. By employing a color palette rich in oceanic blues, volcanic grays and fiery reds, Gulino creates a sense of dynamism that mirrors the sudden rise and fall of Ferdinanda, inviting viewers to ponder the unpredictable forces of nature and their impact on identity.



Ferdinanda island portrayed by Franco Accursio Gulino

Gulino's work on Isola Ferdinandea positions the island as a timeless legend, embodying Sicily's complex relationship with the sea and the island's ever-present volcanic energy. Through these evocative, layered compositions, Gulino reinterprets the island not only as a geological phenomenon but also as a symbol of Sicily's cultural endurance and the perpetual flux of myth within the Mediterranean landscape.

4.4 Elenoiret: weaving the Aeolian islands into contemporary creativity

Elenoiret, a visionary Sicilian designer, channels her admiration for the Aeolian Islands into graphic art, transforming the volcanic archipelago's rugged beauty and mythological resonance into a modern creative statement. Her work captures the allure of these islands, each with unique mythological and natural characteristics, and infuses them into her designs. Known for her intricate use of color and pattern, Elenoiret's collections celebrate the raw elements – fire, wind, and water – that define the Aeolian Islands, imbuing her pieces with the islands' timeless magic. Through these designs, Elenoiret captures the dual nature of the Aeolian Islands—both their untamed volcanic power and their serene coastal beauty.



Elenoiret's work on a t-shirt

Elenoiret's creations allow Sicilian mythology and natural wonders to take on new life in a contemporary context, enabling contemporary people to feel a connection to the Aeolian Islands' unique spirit. Her work exemplifies how graphic design can transform myth into a personal and cultural expression, bridging Sicily's ancient stories with modern aesthetics and preserving the essence of these legendary islands through art.

5. Our references: books and podcasts on Sicilian mythology

If you're eager to dive deeper into Sicilian mythology, here are some great resources to continue your exploration:

5.1 Books

[La Sicilia degli Dei. Una guida mitologica](#) by Giulio Guidorizzi: a mythological guide to Sicily, blending historical insights and a captivating narration thanks to the words of notorious Hellenist scholar Giulio Guidorizzi. The author explores how deities, heroes and mythical stories have shaped the identity of Sicily, enriching readers' understanding of the island's cultural and spiritual heritage.

[L'arte di annacarsi. Un viaggio in Sicilia](#) by Roberto Alajmo: this Palermitan journalist takes readers on a personal and reflective journey through Sicily, capturing the essence of the island's culture, humor and contradictions. His observations and anecdotes reveal the complexity of Sicilian identity, offering a blend of travel narrative and cultural commentary infused with wit and insight.

[Myths in Sicily](#) by Riccardo Francaviglia and Margherita Sgarlata: written for children, this book introduces young readers to the mythological heritage of Sicily, bringing to life the island's ancient legends and folklore. Through engaging stories and sketches, illustrators Riccardo and Margherita offer an accessible way for youngsters to learn about the heroes, gods, and creatures that have shaped the island's cultural history.

5.2 Podcasts

[FerdinanDea: L'isola che \(non\) c'è](#) by Fondazione Le Vie dei Tesori: Are you ready for an adventure made of freedom, peace, and dreams? This is the magical story of Ferdinanda: a volcanic island that emerged in July 1831 in the Sicilian Channel and returned to the depths of the sea just a few months later. During its brief existence, the island attracted the interest of European powers of the time, from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to France and the United Kingdom. In a few words, this is a myth come true. Each episode of the podcast features the most qualified voices in the field: you will be guided by historians, marine geologists, coral experts and divers.



Guidorizzi's book



"Ferdinanda" podcast's cover

[Le meraviglie inaspettate della Sicilia](#) by Birra Messina & Podcaststory: Levante, a renowned Sicilian singer-songwriter, lends her voice to take us on a journey of discovery through her homeland. She narrates nine stories, representing the island's nine provinces, each one infused with her personal touch. Levante shares unique anecdotes and experiences that deeply connect her to these beautiful places. This compelling journey allows listeners to truly feel the essence of Sicily through the perspective of one of the island's most beloved contemporary artists.

[Le meraviglie - Sicilia](#) by Rai Radio 3: From the Cyclops' bay to the volcanic islands homeland of Aeolus, and through the Puppets' Theater to the Strait of Messina, these are the Sicilian marvels: the wonderful places of Sicily narrated by writers, poets, scholars and artists on Rai Radio 3, the radio channel of Italy's State broadcaster. Among the renowned voices are writers Giorgio Vasta, Massimo Maugeri, Nadia Terranova and Cristina Cassar Scalia, critic Silvio Perrella, actress Patrizia Zappa Mulas, puppeteer Giacomo Cuticchio, semiologist Michele Cometa, landscape architect Pablo Georgieff, hellenist Luciano Canfora and musicologist Dario Oliveri.

6. Embracing the power of myths: your journey begins

As you finish reading this booklet, we hope you feel inspired to explore the power of myths further. These stories have shaped the identity of Sicily for millennia, and now they can become a part of your story too. Whether you decide to pursue a creative project, launch a business, or simply share these tales with your friends and family, you are contributing to the ongoing legacy of Sicilian mythology.

The lessons embedded in these myths – about bravery, hybris, ingenuity and resilience – are just as relevant today as they were in ancient times. They remind us of the strength and creativity that lie within each of us, waiting to be unlocked.

6.1 Stay connected with our cultural heritage

Your journey into the world of Sicilian mythology doesn't end here: it's just beginning. As you continue to explore, we encourage you to stay connected with Sicily's vibrant cultural heritage. Attend cultural events, performances, festivals, visit historic sites and engage with the stories and traditions that have shaped this beautiful island. Attend talks and workshops hosted by cultural institutions, where you can learn more about the island's history and the stories that have shaped it. If you're interested in preserving and promoting these stories for future generations, you might even consider volunteering with cultural organizations or becoming involved in educational programs.

In Sicily, the most famous cultural project about intangible and mythological heritage is Le Vie dei Tesori: Le Vie dei Tesori Foundation enhances Sicily's heritage by transforming cities into open-air museums. Every year, the Foundation organizes a cultural festival: more than 500 venues are opened to the public and more than 300 cultural activities are carried out in 20 cities and 50 rural villages in Sicily. The Foundation leads an innovative and inclusive project born with a bottom-up approach, involving local communities in the knowledge and promotion of their territories, carrying out restoration and redevelopment interventions in abandoned areas, supporting sustainable development, contrasting unemployment and the youth "brain drain" from southern Europe, fostering hope and good practices.

And, finally, remember: mythology is not just about looking back; it's about creating something new from the past. Whether you choose to channel this inspiration into art, entrepreneurship, or simply living your life with a little more awareness, you are now part of Sicily's mythological legacy. Embrace it, and let it guide you toward your own heroic journey.

7. The EU funded project “WORK WITH MYTHS”

The Erasmus+ project titled “Exploring Entrepreneurship Through Myths and Culture, with the acronym “WORK WITH MYTHS”, aims to intertwine the richness of mythology and cultural heritage with entrepreneurship among young individuals. The project’s mission includes inspiring the youth to utilize the wisdom of mythology and implement it in their business practices. This approach not only serves as a means of protecting and promoting the unique cultural heritage of the different regions, but also encourages the entrepreneurial spirit.

Objectives: The primary objectives of the project are to equip young people with entrepreneurial skills through the use of cultural narratives, revive and promote local myths and legends, foster active community participation and pride in local heritage, and encourage eco-friendly business practices rooted in cultural traditions. More specifically, the project’s objectives include:

1. Promote Youth Entrepreneurship: Utilize mythology as a foundation to foster entrepreneurial thinking and initiatives among young people.
2. Elevate Youth Work Quality: Improve the quality of young participants through activities like best practices research, workshops, and mentoring programs.
3. Cultural Heritage Preservation: Revive and promote local myths and legends, ensuring their preservation and relevance in modern contexts.
4. Community Engagement: Enhance community involvement of young participants by connecting them to their cultural roots and enhancing their sense of belonging.
5. Sustainable Growth: Encourage eco-friendly and sustainable business practices rooted in cultural narratives.

Activities

The project also involves several key activities:

- Research and Documentation: Partners will research and document how myths influence modern businesses, resulting in comprehensive reports and educational booklets aimed at introducing regional mythology to youth.
- Workshops: Interactive entrepreneurship workshops will be held in each partner country, exploring the intersection of mythology and business.
- Mentoring Program: A mentoring program will guide young entrepreneurs in integrating cultural elements into their ventures.
- Dissemination: Findings will be shared through newsletters, social media, and community outreach.
- Evaluation: The project will be evaluated via a questionnaire survey and a final report to gather feedback from participants and stakeholders.

Partners

The project is a collaboration among three main partners:

- F. PARASTATIDIS – M. POUSPOURIKAS G.P. (Greece) specializes in European project management, development consulting and entrepreneurship mentoring.
- Miejska Strefa Kultury w Łodzi (Poland) is a cultural center focused on non- formal and informal education and community activities, like workshops, and educational programs.

- Le Vie dei Tesori (Italy) is a foundation dedicated to enhancing Sicily's cultural heritage through the organization of cultural festivals, workshops and community engagement activities.

The partnership between these organizations leverages their unique strengths and shared objectives. F. PARASTATIDIS – M. POUSPOURIKAS G.P. brings extensive experience in project management and youth entrepreneurship. MSK offers a robust framework for cultural and educational activities, while Le Vie dei Tesori provides deep insights into cultural heritage and community engagement. Together, the partners aim to create a sustainable model for youth entrepreneurship rooted in cultural heritage, fostering a sense of pride and active citizenship among young people.

Target Groups

The WORK WITH MYTHS project targets a diverse array of groups to achieve its objectives:

1. Young Aspiring Entrepreneurs: Individuals aged 16-30 interested in starting or enhancing their own ventures with innovative, culturally-rooted business ideas.
2. Local Youth Communities: Youth in the regions represented by the partner organizations, including those outside formal education, who will engage with cultural heritage through modern applications.
3. Local Communities: Residents in the project regions who will experience a renewed sense of pride and connection to their heritage, fostering community cohesion.
4. Stakeholders in Cultural and Heritage Sectors: Museums, heritage sites, and cultural festivals that will gain insights into leveraging mythology for entrepreneurial and educational purposes.
5. General Public: The broader public, both local and international, who will benefit from the project's dissemination activities. Understanding the project's goals and outcomes can foster support, encourage broader participation, and enhance cultural appreciation.
6. Digital Audience: Online followers, blog readers, and social media enthusiasts who will help spread the word, participate in online activities, and provide feedback.
7. Project partners: Each of the three participating partners will be both contributors to and beneficiaries of the project outcomes, learning from the experiences and insights of the other regions.

By engaging these groups, the WORK WITH MYTHS project aims to promote youth entrepreneurship, preserve cultural heritage, and enhance community engagement.

Impact and Follow-up

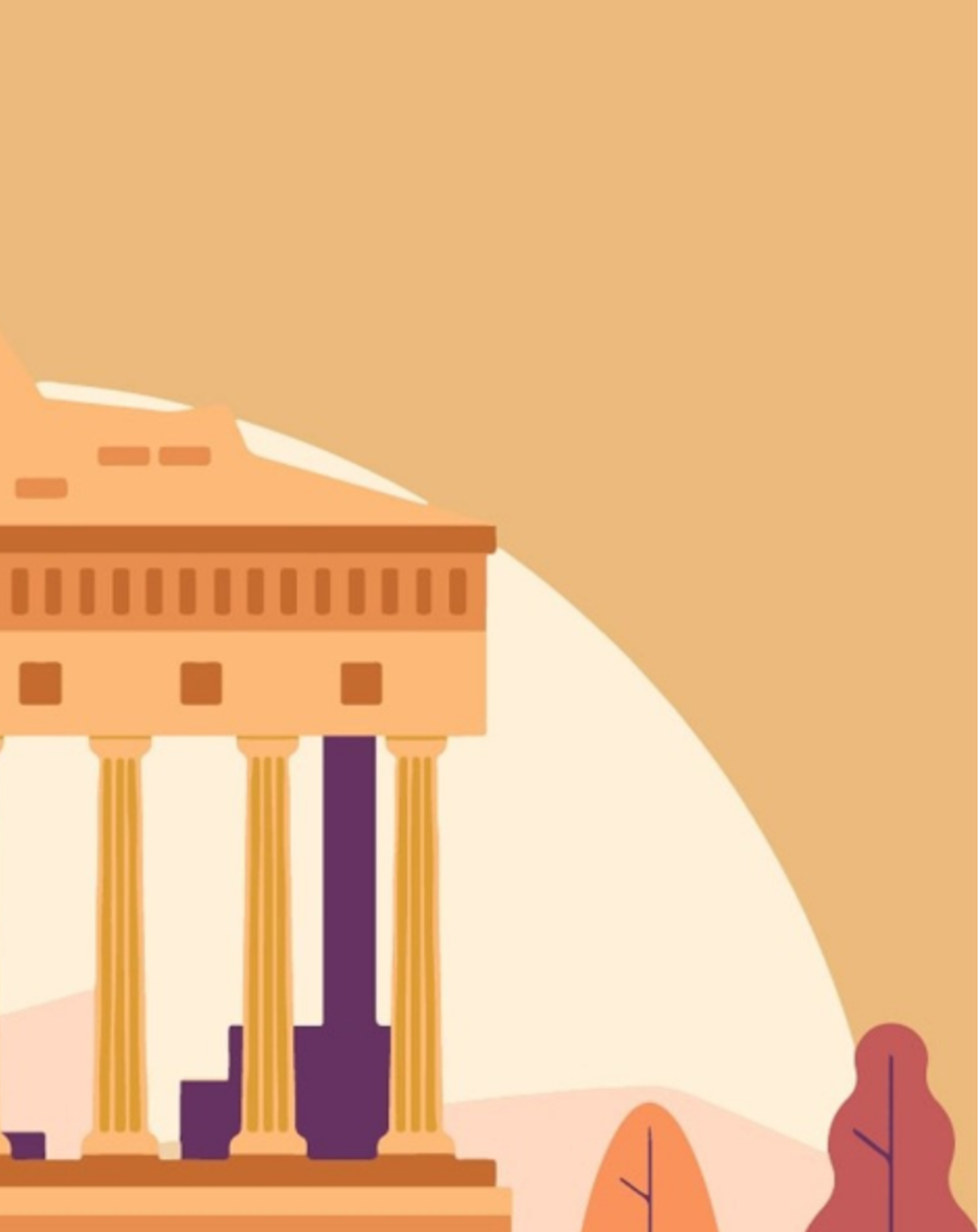
The project aims to leave a lasting legacy by fostering a new generation of entrepreneurs who value and promote their cultural heritage. It aims to significantly enhance cultural awareness and appreciation among young people by integrating regional myths into modern business practices. It will empower youth with entrepreneurial skills and knowledge, resulting in innovative ventures that celebrate cultural heritage. The project will produce valuable educational materials, facilitate successful workshops and mentoring programs, and increase community engagement in cultural preservation. By promoting sustainable practices and fostering cross-cultural collaboration, the project expects to boost local economies and create a sustainable model for youth entrepreneurship. Digital dissemination will ensure global reach, spreading the project's impact and results widely.

The "WORK WITH MYTHS" project leverages the strengths of its transnational partners to promote youth entrepreneurship, preserve cultural heritage, and foster community engagement. Through educational resources, workshops, and sustainable practices, the project will create a lasting legacy of cultural appreciation and economic growth. This booklet is part of the "Best Practices Research and Documentation Mythology" activity of the project and delves into the fascinating world of Greek mythology, offering insights into the timeless stories and legendary figures that have shaped Greek culture.

By exploring these myths, we aim to provide a source of inspiration for contemporary entrepreneurial ventures, demonstrating how ancient narratives can be seamlessly woven into modern business practices and drive innovation and success in today's world.



Work with myths banner



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