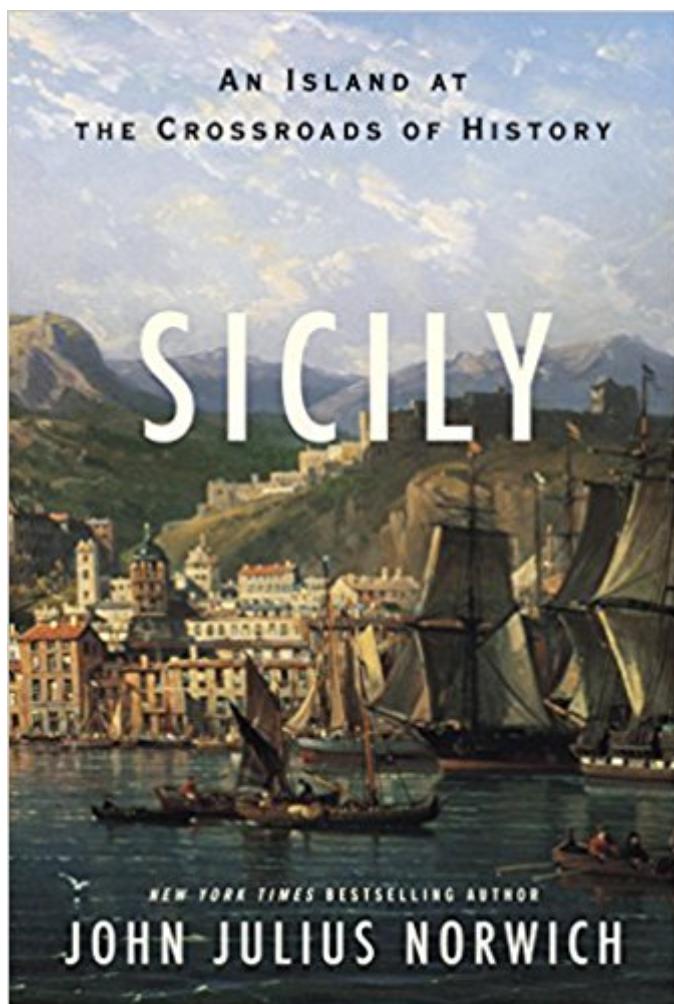


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# Sicily: An Island At The Crossroads Of History



## Synopsis

Critically acclaimed author John Julius Norwich weaves the turbulent story of Sicily into a spellbinding narrative that places the island at the crossroads of world history. "Sicily," said Goethe, "is the key to everything." It is the largest island in the Mediterranean, the stepping-stone between Europe and Africa, the link between the Latin West and the Greek East. Sicily's strategic location has tempted Roman emperors, French princes, and Spanish kings. The subsequent struggles to conquer and keep it have played crucial roles in the rise and fall of the world's most powerful dynasties. Yet Sicily has often been little more than a footnote in books about other empires. John Julius Norwich's engrossing narrative is the first to knit together all of the colorful strands of Sicilian history into a single comprehensive study. Here is a vivid, erudite, page-turning chronicle of an island and the remarkable kings, queens, and tyrants who fought to rule it. From its beginnings as a Greek city-state to its emergence as a multicultural trading hub during the Crusades, from the rebellion against Italian unification to the rise of the Mafia, the story of Sicily is rich with extraordinary moments and dramatic characters. Writing with his customary deftness and humor, Norwich outlines the surprising influence Sicily has had on world history "the Romans' fascination with Greek civilization dates back to their sack of Sicily" and tells the story of one of the world's most kaleidoscopic cultures in a galvanizing, contemporary way. This volume has been a long time coming "Norwich began to explore Sicily's colorful history during his first visit to the island in the early 1960s. The dean of popular historians leads his readers through the millennia with the steady narrative hand of a master teacher or the world's most learned tour guide. Like the island itself, Sicily is a book brimming with bold flavors that begs to be revisited again and again. Praise for Sicily "Suavely readable . . . The very model of a popular historian, [Norwich] writes to give pleasure to the common reader. And what pleasure it is." "The Wall Street Journal" "Entertaining on every page . . . There is something ancient and sorrowful in Sicily, "some dark, brooding quality," just as captivating as its spellbinding history or its beautiful and varied landscapes, from beaches to lemon groves, pine forests to volcanoes. . . . The most amiable and freewheeling of guides, Norwich will always find time for the amusing anecdote. "The Sunday Times" "Utterly engrossing . . . written with passion about the art and architecture of this magical island, filled with gossipy tidbits and sweeping historical theories. "The Daily Beast" "Dazzling . . . Norwich is an elegantly graceful and entertaining storyteller. "Richmond Times-Dispatch" "Charming . . . richly nuanced history relayed with enormous fondness. "Kirkus Reviews" "A brisk and always-lively tour. "Open Letters Monthly" "Norwich is deeply in love with Sicily. [His] boundless affection has inspired a determined

effort to understand its painful past. The result is impressionistic, as love often is. "The Times" Norwich sketches personalities vividly. . . . He does the island and the reader a generous service in providing such an amiable introduction. "The Sunday Telegraph" Norwich tells [Sicily's] long, sad but fascinating story with sympathy and brio. "Literary Review" From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Anyone who's roots are in Sicily or who wants to learn about this unique crossroad between east and west should rush out to buy this book. John Julius Norwich is a terrific authority on Sicily and a delightful writer. I laughed out loud any number of times as he described the utter madness of Sicily's crazy history. Yes, he covers 3000 years of it, and yes, it's damned confusing. Lots of utter chaos and lots of glory and plague and viciousness. The Greeks were there at the beginning of this story but were unorganized and let themselves be overrun. The Arabs, French, Spanish, English, and Germans were all after this wonderful island, murdering and raping their way across it over

centuries. Norwich talks about it being a sad place, too. Now it has some stability, but the Mafia is still there, and Norwich ends his history after WW II. He devotes only a few sentences to the present, but he waxes poetic about the architectural wonders, the beauty, and the historical riches to be found there. For sure, his love of Sicily comes shining through. If you can be patient and follow all the names and places Norwich casually throws at you, since he knows them so well, you will enjoy this book. It puts today's madness in perspective. Highly recommended.

Imagine touring Sicily with the most knowledgeable guide available - experienced in history, politics, art, literature. This is what Norwich's most recent book provides. His always friendly, accessible prose communicates his fascination with this place and its history. I enjoyed it as much as I have his other books that I've read. The period he is most interested in was the period of the Normans ruling Sicily, which he covered in depth in his two volume work on the Normans in Sicily. Those books completely held my interest over 800 pages. Another period which got my attention was the Napoleonic era with plenty of colorful characters. Highly recommended.

I did enjoy reading this book: not really an history book, with the usual endless and pedantic sequence of names and dates that will be forgotten as soon as read. The author provides rather the essential treads leading from one historical development to the next. I am a Sicilian myself, and what made me decide to buy the book was a comment in the introduction on which I totally agree: because of their history Sicilians have very little if any sense of humor and the prevailing mood is one of a sort of resigned sadness and a feeling of hopelessness, mixed with the illusion that somebody else will come and take care of our own problems. This is demonstrated throughout the book, but in a very sensitive, humorous and sympathetic way. I do recommend reading this book if you want to have a basic understanding of Sicilian uniqueness and complex, fascinating history and culture. The pages on the Normand Kingdom period (ca 1100) are truly illuminating and show the fascination of the author with this splendid and largely unknown period of Sicilian history.

I was disappointed by this book. I have read many of Norwich's histories. Usually my only complaint was that they were overly detailed. This work was somewhat superficial. It is a good overview of Sicilian history, and to paraphrase Churchill Sicily is "a mystery wrapped in an enigma". Norwich himself agrees that there are literally centuries of Sicilian History when nothing much happened of note. Norwich does give one of the best descriptions of the beginnings of the Mafia right after the unification of Sicily to Mainland Italy. Frankly since Sicily's history is so tied to Southern Italy, one

comprehensive history of the region should be done. Also if anyone knows of an essay or history of why Southern Italians and Sicilians emigrated in such great numbers beginning in 1870, I would love to have the suggestion as to where to read it. Norwich does touch on it, but I still was not satisfied.

Norwich provides the definitive history of the island that played a critical and largely unheralded role in Mediterranean civilization. He provides a concise and scholarly survey of Sicily's high civilization and cultural melting pot under the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans and Neapolitan rulers into modern times. This very insightful and at times personal account will provide the generalist or the scholar a marvelous insight into the strategic significance and rich cultural patrimony of this unique community, which has been at different epochs a frontier, cultural hub, bread basket, province and backwater. This is a welcome addition to the library of any lover of the history of the Mediterranean, which is incomplete without an understanding of the enormous contribution of Sicily.

Master historian's recent offering is a reverse peeling of an onion as he dissects Sicily, an island with many past masters. Norwich's style is engaging, and your brain swells from the knowledge he pours into it.

This is an easy to read insightful overview of Sicily's fascinating, often sad history. The style is anecdotal: you feel that you're sitting with Norwich, each with a glass ( Scotch or a red) while Norwich draws deftly on his deep knowledge and perspectives on variously Greek tyrants, the Norman flowering, the Mafia, etc. He conversationally but systematically shares his summaries of causes, effects and consequences...Loaded on a Kindle, Norwich's Short History...was a cornerstone for a very stimulating month on Sicily and surrounding islands.

I actually listened to the audio version during my commute. The ancient history, especially the many Greek and Carthaginian struggles early on were not as gripping unless that is where your interest lies, but it was really quite gripping once the Romans and Normans showed up on the scene. This narrative, although moving quickly through history and only pausing on the most relevant or dramatic bits, did a good job of tying in Italian and European history to lend relevance and a point of reference for those with an interest in history but no specific knowledge of the region.

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