HIMERA

ON ITS HIGH CLIFFS
(AESCHYLUS)

A journey into the necropolis uncovered by the railway track-doubling project

10 June - 10 November 2025

The doubling of the railway track between Fiumetorto and Ogliastrillo, as part of the upgrade to the Palermo-Messina line, represented an important opportunity for archaeological research, particularly into the ancient city of Himera.
Founded in 648 BC by Greek colonists, Himera was one of the strategic centres of ancient Sicily and the scene of major historical events, including the battles of 480 and 409 BC, the latter of which resulted in the destruction of the city itself by the Carthaginians. The Himera archaeological area affected by the new railway line has revealed a historical treasure trove, with the discovery of more than 12,700 tombs in the western and eastern necropolises. These "cities of the dead", with their variety of tombs and grave goods, provide a wealth of information for anybody studying the social, economic and demographic dynamics of the Greek colony.
The project balanced the need for railway track-doubling with the preservation of the relics present, by removing the old railway track, which interfered with the remains of the ancient city, and adopting design solutions aimed at minimising the impact on the necropolis. The work ensured that the areas involved could be fully explored, and the artefacts preserved. The result is a wonderful example of modern infrastructure coexisting with respect for historical heritage, granting the community the chance to learn more about ancient Himera.

HIMERA
On its high cliffs

9 May 2025
9 November 2025

Region of Sicily
Council of Cultural Heritage and Sicilian Identity

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THE FS GROUP

Archaeology in the FS Group

The FS Group treats the archaeological heritage uncovered during the course of its major infrastructure works with respect, as part of an ongoing dialogue with Italy's ancient history. Every construction site can provide a window onto the past, as our progress reveals our roots and forgotten stories are told once again.
Through its work, the FS Group restores long-lost cultural heritage to the nation, showing how infrastructural development and eastern-ecology can coexist in harmony.

From north to south, Rete Ferroviaria Italiana is hard at work building new railway infrastructure.
The excavations required as part of these major works pave the way for contemporary mobility needs to go hand-in-hand with the discovery of a shared archaeological heritage. This is exactly what happened on the Palermo-Messina line, during the work to double the Fiumetorto-Ogliastrillo (Cefalù) track:
extensive common burial grounds were unearthed, along with thousands of artefacts linked to two battles involving the Greek colony of Himera.

Italfer, the first engineering company in Italy to employ archaeologists on its staff, contributed to drawing up the regulations on rescue archaeology in the Procurement Code. In the context of planning railway works, the company's involvement includes carrying out specialised studies, designing and executing archaeological surveys and digs, and sharing the extent and methods of rescue archaeology operations with the Superintendencies which have local jurisdiction. The results of the surveys are thus built into railway projects from the very earliest stage, in order to anticipate potential conflicts.

This exhibition has been produced thanks to the help of Archeolog, a third-sector organisation with responsibility for the conservation, restoration and appreciation of the archaeological heritage unearthed during the construction and maintenance of Italy's road and rail infrastructures. Archeolog consists of Anas, Quadrilatero Marche Umbria, Rfi and Italfer.

THE HISTORY

The colony, from foundation to destruction: 648-409 BC

The first Greek colonists arrived by sea to found Himera in 648 BC. They settled in an excellent position on Sicily's northern coast, in the middle of ship routes across the southern Tyrrhenian Sea and close to both the high Madonie mountains and the hills around the valleys of the Imera Settentrionale and Fiume Torto rivers. Both these waterways offered privileged access to the rich inland areas of Sicily, then populated by the indigenous Sicanians.
The city's economy and population grew rapidly. After the first generations of settlers, once the city limits had been established and the sanctuary of Athena, protector of the colony, had been founded, the layout of the settlement was organised following a large and orderly urban plan.
The city's agora, or marketplace, a vital hub for trade and public life in the settlement, sprang up at the mouth of the Imera river, where ships made land.
The colony of Himera provided the backdrop for important cultural developments, demonstrated by the fact that Stesichorus, one of the greatest Greek lyric poets of archaic times, spent time and may even have been born there. Other illustrious Himeraeans include a number of athletes, named Ischyros, Python, Krison and Ergoteles, who triumphed at the Panhellenic Games held in Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and Isthmus. It was to Ergoteles, who won the cross-country race at Olympia no fewer than three times, that the poet Pindar dedicated his Olympian 12 ode:

... but now, having won a crown at Olympia,
and twice from Pytho and at the Isthmus, Ergoteles,
you exalt the hot baths of the Nymphs,
while keeping company with them beside your own fields.
(Pindar, Olympian 12)

Two key dates in the history of Himera are 480 and 409 BC, the years in which two great battles took place between the Greeks and the Carthaginians. The Greeks emerged triumphant from the first of these, marking the start of a decade in which the city was under the tyrannical control of Theron from Agrigento. The second, in 409 BC, proved to be the fatal blow for Himera: the city was conquered by the Carthaginians, destroyed, and finally abandoned.


Gorgon with fangs and snakes, late 5th - early 4th century BC


Two gold plates with drawing in repoussé, late 5th - early 4th century BC


Silver tetradrachm from Himera, with a nymph offering a sacrifice in front of an altar and Himera on a spring, 5th century BC

THE ARCHAEOLOGY

The excavations at Himera

The colony was identified in 1573, when the humanist Claudio Mario Arezzo recognised these ruins on the hills above the coastal plain of Buonfornello as the ancient colony of Himera.
However, it was not until 1927-1929 that archaeological surveys began, with excavations in the eastern necropolis and the Doric Temple of Victory. Excavations carried out since 1962 and continuing to the present day, thanks to the efforts of the Superintendency of Palermo and the Universities of Palermo and Bern, have established the city limits. Large portions of the built-up area, a vast port district outside the city, the great sanctuary of Athena and sections of the fortifications have all been brought to light; extensive areas of the necropoleis have also been explored. The results paint for us the first detailed picture of the topography of this large colony and its peri-urban landscape.





ENGLISH VERSION

Sicily in the 5th century BC, with the main Greek and Phoenician-Punic colonies



URBAN PLANNING

The settled environment

Around 575-550 BC, the Himeraeans embarked upon a systematic reorganisation of the settlement, implementing orderly planning of the environment. Two extensive urban designs were planned and gradually constructed in two different areas: the upper city, on the hilly land of the Imera Plain, the Lungo Plain and probably the Tamburino Plain; and the lower city, on the flatland below. The designs were based on regularly alternating main and secondary streets which dictated the perimeters of the blocks and the size of the houses, with public and sacred spaces organically inserted into the grid plan.
Himeraean urban design constitutes one of the earliest and most important examples of systematic town planning in the Archaic Greek world.


Territory of Himera, Acropolis A and B

It is futile and pointless
to weep for the dead.

(Stesichorus of Himera)

The necropoleis of Himera

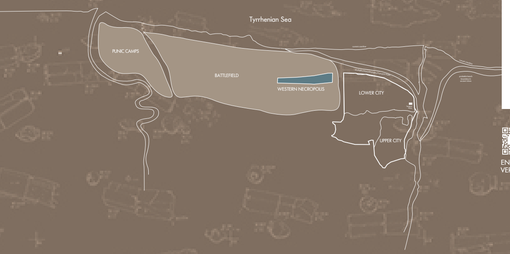
Three large necropoleis have been discovered in Himera. As was customary in Greek cities, they are located outside the settlement itself, along the main routes out of the city.
The western necropolis, located on the Buonfornello Plain, is the burial area which we currently know most about, thanks to the excavation carried out in collaboration with the FS Group.
The eastern necropolis sprawls across the Pestavecchia Plain, beyond the mouth of the Imera River. More than 3,000 tombs have been discovered, dating from the time of the colony's foundation in the mid-7th century BC, until its destruction in 409 BC.
The southern necropolis is located along the natural pathway connecting the city to its agricultural hinterland. Only about thirty tombs have been explored in this necropolis, dating back to the 5th century BC.


Necropoli ovest
Necropoli est
Necropoli sud
Fiume Imera
Fiume Torto
Fiume Grande
Fiume Piccolo

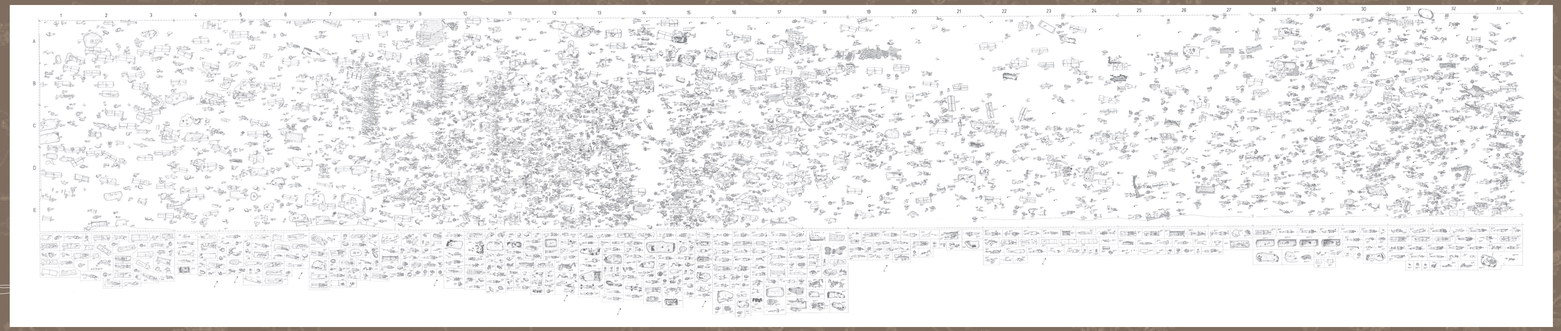
THE SITE

Organisation of the excavation and time frames

Between 2006 and 2011, more than 10,000 tombs were discovered in the area investigated by the Selinunte Project, in the Western Necropolis along the railway line. The archaeological work was carried out by Greek archaeologists from the Archaeological Service and the Archaeological Park of Selinunte, ordinarily divided up for the IS Group and under the scientific direction of the Superintendency of Cultural and Environmental Heritage of Palermo, involved a team of dozens of archaeologists, anthropologists, draughtsmen, restorers, topographical technicians and other workers, all of whom were in the field for over two consecutive years. While each was underway on the land, the site was opened up to exhibition, giving many visitors, researchers and schools the opportunity to visit the necropolis as it was being excavated.
The project was successful in fully documenting the archaeological artefacts, beginning restorations in the field, cataloguing all finds and creating an immense archive of digital photos and drawings. Today, these documents represent a wealth of data for the study of one of the most extensive necropolises in Archaic-Classical Greece.



EXCAVATION OF THE WESTERN NECROPOLIS ALONG THE RAILWAY LINE



ENGLISH VERSION

GRAVES STUDIED
9,650

ANTHROPOLOGICAL DATA SHEETS
5,200

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS
150,000

EXCAVATION SURVEYS
12,388

ARTEFACTS FOUND
8,000

THE LANDSCAPE

Funeral rites, types of tombs, external grave markers

The tombs, located at an average depth of 3 metres beneath the surface, were preserved in good condition. The type of tomb was determined by the soil: rock tombs were dug in the limestone bedrock, while earth tombs were dug into the sandy soil. Another significant factor was the presence of groundwater. These ranged from simple stones to pieces of terracotta, or a semi-circular monochrome stone or earth, all the way up to vaulted tombs made of stone blocks.
The rites of burial and cremation were both practised at Selinunte. In the latter case the body would be laid out on a wooden pyre with its grave goods and burnt; afterwards, the remains of the fleece and other were covered with earth. Only in a few cases were they placed in a ceramic urn.
Much more frequent, representing about 89% of cases, were various types of burial. Among the most common were: simple burial pits in the earth or in wooden coffins; "a cappuccina" (tegulae made the form of a roof); and sarcophagi, which were the most elaborate, being mainly terracotta anthropoid models with different features, and, for children, funnels in large pithoi.

THE TOMBS

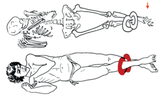
Child burials

A very high proportion (around 55-60%) of the tombs in the entire necropolis held child burials, mainly foetuses that died in the months leading up to or after birth, and up to the age of two or three years.
The burial of foetuses that died in the last months before birth shows that the Greeks viewed them as people, therefore deserving the dignity of a burial.
The object most frequently found among the grave goods of newborns is the guttus, a small vessel with a spout essentially comparable to our baby bottle, with its symbolism of very early childhood.



The tombs of slaves

Slavery was a very common practice in ancient Greece. Most slaves were under the control of a master who could choose to sell or otherwise transfer their ownership, but there were also forms of slavery linked to the land and to the most menial labour. We know that slaves were present in Himera because of three skeletons found with heavy iron shackles around their ankles, a clear indication of their enslaved condition. Shackles were probably removed before burial as a rule, so these three individuals buried in chains are an extraordinary discovery, one which is very rare in Greek necropolises.
The slave population was routinely swelled by the prisoners of defeated armies. This probably also happened in Himera; in fact, the historian Diodorus Siculus recorded that the Greeks enslaved most of the Punic soldiers captured after the battle in 480 BC, putting them in chains. Therefore, it is not unlikely that our three shackled skeletons were part of this contingent, entrusted to citizens or assigned to major public works.



Surgical trepanation



Several skulls bear a circular hole, testifying to the practice of trepanation followed by sophisticated surgical interventions in an attempt to save an individual suffering from serious head problems. These interventions probably did not always have a successful outcome for the patient.
This discovery attests to the advanced state of medicine in Himera between the 6th and 5th centuries BC, and the existence of a "surgical school".

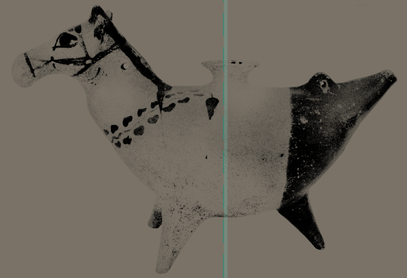
Charon's obol

"And lol toward us in a bark,
comes on an old man hoary white
with eld, [...] Charon, demoniac form,
with eyes of burning coal"

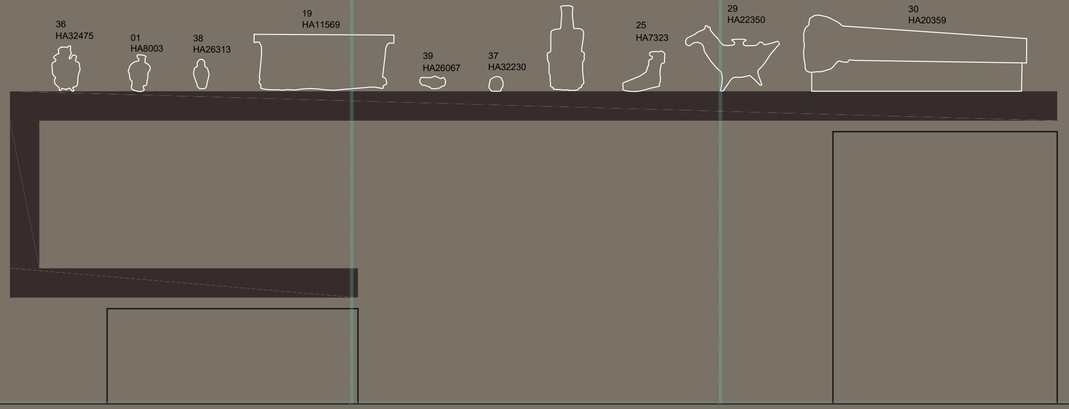


Silver Tetradrachm coin with bull

These are the words with which Dante, in Canto III of Inferno, describes Charon: the mythological figure who ferried the souls of the dead in Hades from one bank of the River Acheron to the other, assuring them eternal peace, on the condition that he was offered a coin or half a coin.
This funerary custom, in which a coin was placed in the mouth or in the hands of the deceased upon their burial, is attested to in the Greek world from the 5th century BC. It has been widely documented at Himera.
In three exceptional cases, the obol was not a single coin, but rich hoards of silver coins from different Sicilian and Magna Graecia mints.



VASES IN VARIOUS SHAPES WERE ALSO USED FOR OINTMENTS



MEDICINE

ENGLISH VERSION

EVERYDAY LIFE

Achondroplasia in Himera



One highly interesting find was that of an individual with achondroplasia (commonly known as "dwarfism").
While the frequency of this condition in ancient Greece is well documented in vase paintings, the skeleton found at Himera is currently the oldest archaeological evidence known to medical science of this particular form of skeletal development.

Everyday objects



The grave goods found in tombs commonly consisted of objects related to domestic activities, work or trade. So, excavating the "city of the dead" can even shed light on certain social, economic and cultural aspects of life in the "city of the living".
In this respect, valuable finds include the roof tiles and shingles of houses, various types of terracotta bowls used for processing agricultural products or for crafts, the vessels commonly used in everyday life, and many artefacts with artistic value.

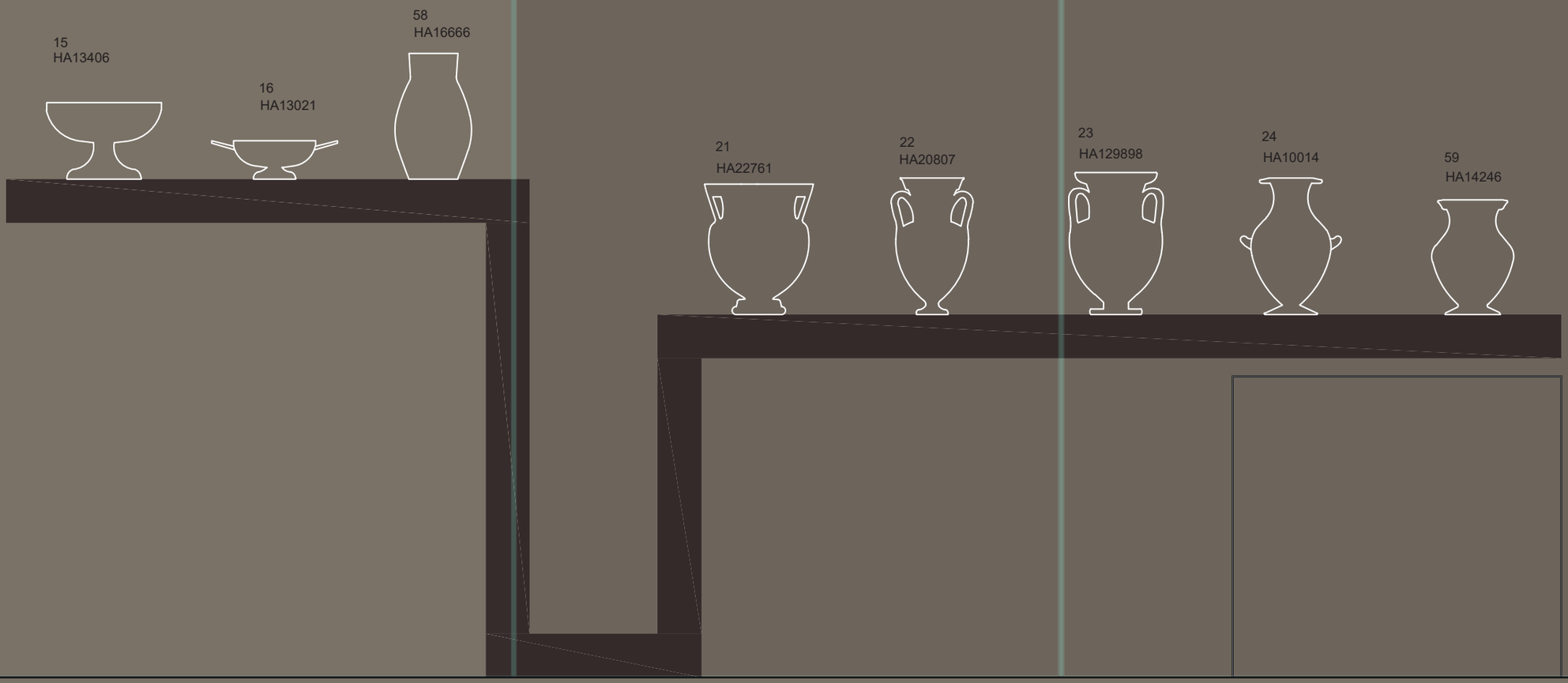
Transport amphorae

More than 3,100 transport amphorae have been found in the necropolis, used as "coffins" for child burials. However, the primary function for which they were created was as vessels for transporting foodstuffs, especially wine, oil and fish sauce, into holds of ships.
The great variety of amphorae from Himera is an extraordinary indicator of the vitality of sea trade in the Archaic and Classical periods. There are Punic amphorae (produced in Africa, Spain, Sardinia and Sicily); western Greek amphorae (from Marseilles to the main city-states of southern Italy and Sicily); mainland Greek amphorae (from Athens, Corinth and Sparta); and eastern Greek amphorae (from Samos, Miletus, Lesbos and the North Aegean).



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