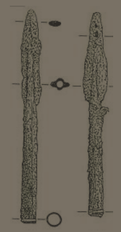
THE WEAPONS FOUND IN SKELETONS INFLICTED VIOLENT DEATHS IN BATTLE



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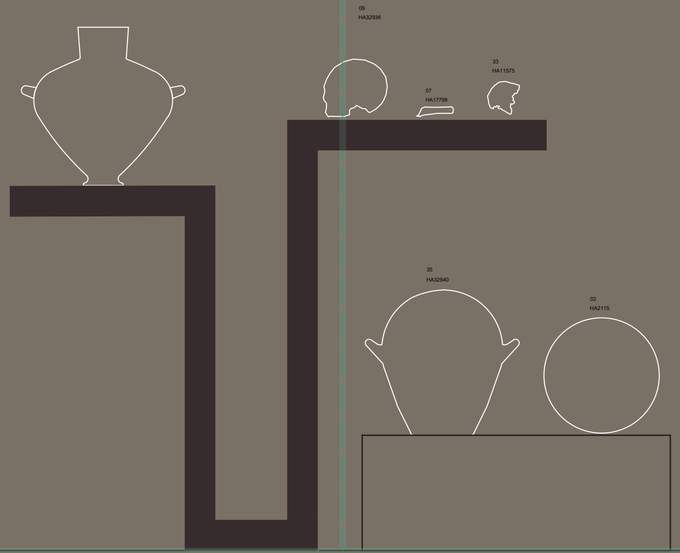
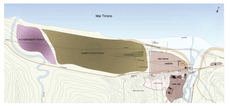


THE WARS OF 480 AND 409 BC



The battles of Himera 480-409 BC

In 480 and 409 BC, the Greek and Carthaginian armies faced each other outside Himera's city walls in two great military clashes that profoundly marked the history of ancient Sicily. The two battles had different outcomes. The Greeks were victorious in 480 BC, quashing Carthage's attempt to extend its rule beyond the three cities already under its control: Motya, Palermo and Solunto. In 409 BC, however, it was the Himeraeans who met their defeat.
The decades following the Greek victory in 480 BC marked the pinnacle of the city's history and of Hellenic culture in Sicily, which achieved its highest point in the cultural, artistic, economic and political spheres.
The battle of 409 BC, when victory went to the Carthaginians, ushered in the end of the colony.
The excavations at Himera have yielded exceptional documentation of these epic battles, with the discovery of tombs of the soldiers, horses and citizens who died in the massacre of 409 BC and the weapons used in the clashes.



The battle of 480 BC



The decade between 490 and 480 BC was an momentous period in the history of the Greeks in the Mediterranean. In 490 BC, at Marathon, the Athenians defeated the army of Persia's King Darius. Ten years later, in 480 BC, the Persian fleet was defeated by Themistocles in Athenian waters at Salamis; while King Xerxes renounced the conquest of Greece forever the following year, having also lost at Plataea.
This meant that in a single year, the Greeks of Sicily and the Greek mainland had triumphed over the Persians in the east and the Carthaginians in the west, both of whom they considered "barbarians". For this reason, many historians have emphasised that these should be considered some of the most important victories in the ancient history of the Mediterranean.

ENGLISH VERSION



THE KEY PLAYERS

Gelon, Theron and the mercenaries

The key players in the battle were Gelon, tyrant of Syracuse, and Theron, tyrant of Agrigento, both on the Greek side. On the Punic side was Hamilcar, King of Carthage, commanding a huge army made up mostly of mercenary troops from different parts of the western Mediterranean. Herodotus describes an army consisting of "Phoenicians, Libyans, Iberians, Ligurians, Elisycans, Sardinians and Corsicans". The discovery of two Iberian-style bronze schiener (greaves, pieces of armour which protect the front of the leg) in the necropolis is the oldest archaeological evidence found to date of soldiers of fortune coming from Spain to the Greek world.



Iberian mercenary with armour in the 5th century BC

THE FORTIFICATIONS

The battlefield and the fortifications



The final clash occurred in front of the western fortifications of the city.
The combat took place on the narrow coastal plain of Buonfornello, as attested to by the hundreds of arrowheads found on this land. The area was bordered to the south by the beach, to the north by the hills of the upper town, to the east by the city walls and to the west by the encampments of the Punic army.

3D suggested reconstruction of the battleground at the valley of Himera

THE SLAUGHTER WAS GREAT

The violence of the fighting, the deaths and the Greek victory

Thanks to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, we have an accurate account of all stages of the battle and the dramatic final clash. *"At the same time in both camps they sounded with the trumpets the signal for battle and a shout arose from the two armies one after the other, each eagerly striving to outdo their adversaries in the volume of their cheering.*
The slaughter was great, and the battle was wearing back and forth, when suddenly the flames from the ships began to rise on high and sundry persons reported that the general had been slain; then the Greeks were emboldened and with spirits elated at the rumours and by the hope of victory they pressed with greater boldness upon the barbarians, while the Carthaginians, dismayed and despairing of victory, turned in flight" (Diodorus XI, 22).
The skeletons of the fighters in this violent clash were identified in the western necropolis, where seven mass burials were unearthed, each holding between 2 and 23 skeletons of Greek soldiers who had fallen in battle, laid out side-by-side with care for burial.
The remains are of male individuals, mostly young. The bones of some skeletons bear the marks of traumatic injuries from bladed weapons like daggers and swords, even more significant is the evidence of weapons found embedded in the bones: spearheads, daggers and arrowheads.
Cavalry from both sides also participated in the battle: many animals were killed and their carcasses, left on the battlefield, were buried in deep pits in the area of the necropolis.



Drawing of mass grave 13 with the skeletons of cavalry riders in the centre of the pit

Gelon's victory, outcomes, construction of the Temple of Victory



"Gelon, who had won a victory in a most remarkable battle and had gained his success primarily by reason of his own skill as a general, acquired a fame that was noised abroad, not only among the Sicilians, but among all other men as well; for memory recalls no man before him who had used a stratagem like his, nor one who had slain more barbarians in one engagement or had taken as great a multitude of prisoners. Because of this achievement many historians compare this battle with the one which the Greeks fought at Plataea and the strategem of Gelon with the ingenious schemes of Themistocles, and the first place they assign, since such exceptional merit was shown by both men, some to the one and some to the other. And the reason is that, when the people of Greece on the one hand and those of Sicily on the other were struck with dismay before the conflict at the multitude of the barbarian armies, it was the joint victory of the Sicilian Greeks which gave courage to the people of Greece when they learned of Gelon's victory" (Diodorus Siculus XI, 26).
Gelon, in addition to the enormous booty gained from the victory, many of the prisoners were enslaved and put to work in the tyrants' colonies, constructing major works. A large temple was built in Himera to celebrate their triumph, probably the so-called "Temple of Victory", a Doric construction built in the area close to the city agora and decorated with important sculptures.



"The intact, frozen muzzle of a lion bared its gaping jaws to the sky: it was painted in a barbaric and ferocious manner, the colours of which remained intact by some unknown miracle; the mane as blue as the deepest and most magical sky of Sicily; red were the jaws, the ears, the lolling tongue, as red as the fiery wild flowers of Sicily; golden-yellow the muzzle, as is the stone of the temples of Sicily, when struck and transfigured by the midday sun with a surrounding haze. A bold and violent mix of the simplest colours, primitive in its idealism and abstraction, utterly alien to our sensibility; but it struck us with such violent forcefulness, as perhaps no masterpiece of more refined art had ever done; it awakened in our souls distant, dormant echoes of wild and splendid ages. It was the miracle of a fleeting moment: we were all still gathered around, mute, astonished; we saw the colour die, fade, almost vanishing, so that we seemed to have dreamt it".

(Malcolm 1931)

THE TEMPLE OF VICTORY

ENGLISH VERSION

THE CONQUEST OF THE CITY

The battle of 409 BC

71 years later, Carthage organised a new expedition to Sicily. Having conquered Selinunte, the army of Hannibal Magо besieged Himera to avenge the defeat of 480 BC, for he was *"especially bent upon razing this city to the ground. For it was this city which had caused his father to be exiled and before its walls his grandfather Hamilcar had been out-generalled by Gelon and then met his end, and with him one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers had perished and no fewer than these had been taken captive. These were the reasons why Hannibal was eager to exact punishment."* (Diodorus XIII, 59).
The attack lasted for several days. Abandoned by its Syracusan allies, Himera fell despite strenuous and passionate defence by its entire population. Diodorus describes how *"the Himeraeans, having as spectators on the walls parents and children as well as all their relatives, spent their own lives unsparingly for the salvation of them all"*.
But soon the Punic mercenary troops broke into the settlement and *"the city had been taken by storm, for a long time the barbarians continued, with no sign of compassion, to slaughter everyone they seized"*.
Clear archaeological evidence exists of the battle: the breaches opened in the fortifications as described by historians have been identified, as well as attempts to restore them, layers of destroyed houses with collapsed roofs, and the subsequent abandonment.
The most moving reminder of the violent battle is mass burial 9, which holds the skeletons of no fewer than 71 individuals, probably soldiers who fell in the early stages of the war when it was still possible for the Himeraeans to give them a dignified burial, lined up side-by-side in a single grave.
Other finds connected to the dramatic taking of Himera, followed by the slaughter of its citizens, are the hundreds of skeletons discovered in the surface levels of the necropolis. These are probably those who died within the settlement: men, women, the young and the elderly, all victims of the massacre, who were taken outside the walls by the survivors for a hasty, uncremonious burial, as the tragic circumstances and urgency dictated.



Mass grave 9, with the soldiers fallen in the battle, of 409 BC

The abandonment of the site

Unlike all the other Greek colonies destroyed by the Carthaginians at the end of the 5th century BC — Selinunte, Agrigento, Camarina and Gela — in which the sites of the ancient cities would go on to be reoccupied, even much later, Himera was abandoned forever and the memory of its places soon lost. We have only scarce evidence that some houses in the ruined city were occupied again, probably by families engaged in agro-pastoral activities in the surrounding area.
Perhaps the absence of a safe harbour suitable for ships, which were becoming ever larger, or other political considerations, contributed to the abandonment of Himera. In 407 BC, the Carthaginians founded Termini Imerese just a short distance away, the true political and cultural heir to the first Greek colony, which has been inhabited continuously to this day.

After 250 years, the glorious colony of Himera disappeared, its ruins soon swallowed by the earth and forgotten.





ENGLISH VERSION



AFTER 250 YEARS, THE GLORIOUS COLONY OF HIMERA DISAPPEARED



CHILD BURIALS

THE GREEKS ENSLAVED MOST OF THE PUNIC SOLDIERS CAPTURED, PUTTING THEM IN CHAINS



