Pantalica
messages to us, writ into the limestone landscape

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Two hundred years before history was born, Pantalica dropped out of it. For 2700 years, this desiccated, rocky, windy, steep, lonely southeastern corner of Sicily has been pretty much nowhere. The few people who have stayed a while here, rather than passing quickly through, were driven here by whips and kept here in chains; or were hiding from invaders; or were on the run from the law; or were homeless. Only one people, the Sikels of prehistoric Sicily, saw any value in Pantalica; only for them was it someplace, not nowhere. And for them it was someplace sacred. Since the Sikels vanished nearly two-and-a-half millennia and about thirteen foreign occupations ago, Pantalica has remained in the care of lizards, bees, and the inconstant breezes.

I visit Pantalica once or twice a year, alone or with friends or clients. Tourists seldom bother to visit this dramatic ancient site, as it is difficult to reach, and 'nowhere' is not on most "I have three days to see Sicily" itineraries. Still, this wild and lonely place has much to tell us: Nature speaks, as she always does, to those who listen, and the passing humans left us messages in the limestone. The human story here has a quality of transience and a sense of absence. Put on your hiking boots and come with me, for the human voice speaks with a special vulnerability, a melancholy poignancy, where Nature rules. Pantalica is officially an Archaeological Park, but the feeling here is not of distance backwards in time, but continuous unchanging present; events seem to detach from chronology, everything that happened here was a moment ago, and is perhaps still going on around the next bend in the trail.

The main entrance to the archeological preserve at Pantalica (the "Fusco" entrance) is on the east side of the Park, on a small winding road leading inland from Siracusa. The smallish-hard-to-spot-brown-signs Italy uses for directions to historical sites are not likely to save most

tourists from getting lost. Rather, I have often thought, the way they are missing at key intersections and illegible at others, that subconsciously Italians want you to become lost, for they suspect you come from a place where life is insufficiently frustrating, where people have forgotten that denial is life's habitual response to our desires. So, without much confidence that we actually will arrive, I drive my tourists along one or another indistinguishable country road, bumping past rocky fields, floating on heat vapors down the valleys of dusty olive groves and luscious green citrus trees, resolved at least to enjoy the landscape. If, as we leave the coast, we ascend onto the Hyblean Plateau, and then begin tracing the length of a descending valley, my confidence grows that we might be going in the right direction. As the ravines become steeper and deeper, I know we are getting close. About one hour west of Siracusa, (or a half hour if a crow had flown it), our windy road twists down to meet the Anapo River. Above us, on the ridge a few kilometers ahead, sits the jumble of a yellow-white limestone town of Sortino.

At the bottom of the valley we turn left at a fork. As if to discourage us, the road's enthusiasm quickly wanes, narrowing to one lane through a grove of orange trees. Then it loses interest entirely, becoming a dirt track amid thickets of ten-foot tall Giant Spanish Cane. We arrive at a hard-pack widening in the road, a fence, a gate, and a sign announcing "Pantalica Archaeological Reserve." The only gesture towards a welcome is a forlorn little hut with a torn and faded park map pinned to the front porch, and sometimes there's an attendant who would rather not answer questions. Toilet facilities are generous (behind any tree you like) and I hope we remembered to bring water.

The archaeological park stretches about fifteen kilometers east to west and about five north to south, and it has at its heart the confluence of two narrow, cascading rivers, the Anapo and the Calcinara, which have cut converging canyons into the limestone of the stony uplands. This geography best can be seen from the spectacular overlook on the road from Sortino, and that is our first objective.

At the Fusco entrance, the valley floor path is wider than the road we drove in on, better surfaced and graded. Within a few minutes we enter a small tunnel, carefully chiseled, precisely rounded, the first of several that we will pass through on this walk. These miniature tunnels seemed charming and fairytale to me, until I learned that they date from Italy's uncharming Fascist era. They were cut for a narrow-gauge rail line that once followed the course of the Anapo River, running eighteen kilometers to Ferla, at the other end of what is now Pantalica Park. Mussolini's minions marched Ethiopian prisoners of war out here to carve these tunnels from solid rock by hand, then to lay the rails. The attraction of Pantalica was the Fascists' favorite aphrodisiac: gunpowder. Along the route, deep in this ravine, weathered station buildings still stand, where prisoners once loaded sulfur mined from the cliffs, carbon from wood-burning kilns, and potassium nitrate from guano found in several impressive bat caves.

For twenty minutes or so, we walk this road between the high cliffs to our left and the Anapo gurgling along down on our right. Then we take a hard right down to the river. We hop across on slippery stones, hanging on to low-bending willow branches, or, shoes in hand, wade across this creek they call a river, only deep enough to cool our ankles. Then we ascend the hill between blackberry thickets, following a stone wall. Red valerian like these walls, as do sweet broom, with their awkward stiffness and forever profusion of yellow flowers. Wild gladioli grow along the path, and also the tall, strong-stalked, feathery fennel. Soon we pass among gnarled olives like grey-green wispy low clouds over carpets of tiny white flowers. The air is thick with the scent of manure, the possibility of a horse, and the light and lazy sounds of the coming summer of bees. A steady climb brings us to the paved road from Sortino, a fence, a gate, and another sign announcing "Pantalica Archaeological Reserve." From here, leaning over the fence at the edge of the great chasm, we overlook the day's hike to come.

In the distance, the land rolls in great waves to the south and west, splotchy brown and green. Directly below, a magnificent forked ravine falls away at our feet: the confluence of the two rivers. The Calcinara River shows itself as a sparkle glinting down there among

the willows. The equally precipitous valley of the Anapo comes around a bend to our front and the rivers join their waters unseen below the treetops. Here I like to be silent, to listen for their stereophonic chorus, as if one river spoke in each ear. The Calcinara tells its own eternal story, but then, at the junction, surrenders its identity to the Anapo. The Anapo continues cheerfully through shaded chasms, falling down from the highland country to the sea, falling into history and legend, for all ancient Greeks knew of the river god Anapo.

The coming together of these rivers forms a v-shaped rounded ridge, a plateau. At the point of the ridge, directly across from where we are standing at the Sortino viewpoint, the road from Ferla screeches to a halt, afraid to leap the steep gorge. The top of that grassy plateau beyond is our midday objective. There Hybla once stood; capital city of the Sikels.

Why did the Sikels site their capital here? This land is distant from the sea and its high plateau makes it easily defensible, but I don't think that was the main reason the Sikels chose it. Until the arrival of the Greeks, Sikel villages and towns spread across the coastal lowlands of eastern Sicily; evidently they were not much threatened. So defense doesn't seem the primary reason they placed their capital in such a difficult and remote landscape.

What strikes me about this place is its unexpectedly rugged painful beauty. In these deeply cut ravines, vast views, delicate riparian glades, I feel a spirituality of place, a landscape that feels like the home and expression of the gods. The landscape and its aura reminds me most of the ancient religious site of Delphi in Greece. As Apollo favored Delphi, so the Sikel gods live in Pantalica, whomever the Sikel gods were (we don't know). Even for today's visitors, the aura of this place whispers of divinity. For the Sikels, the landscape in which they left their dead seems of decisive importance. Sikel rock-cut tombs occur all across eastern Sicily, tens of thousands of them: it is common for eastern Sicily highland farmers to have one or more on their property. But most often, they were cut on vertical cliffs in areas of dramatic scenery, the more inaccessible the better. The greatest concentration is here, in this most dramatic and lease accessible place of all. Pantalica contains over five thousand known tombs and perhaps an equal number yet undiscovered, making it

the largest concentration of rock tombs in Europe and perhaps the world. For this reason, Pantalica is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

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From the Sortino road, we scramble down a series of ancient chiseled steps, Sikel steps. Along the path, red valerian grows waist high, and handsome dark green acanthus spring out of shady crevices. I imagine the many hundreds of Sikels who passed on these steps each day to and from Hybla, to and from their herds on adjoining plateaus, or to pick wild asparagus, or to connect with the road to the coast. The generations for whom this trail was their daily road, their street, have vanished. These days, our passing only rustles some dry grass, frights a lizard, dislodges a pebble, none of them concerned with the passing millennia. We who pass this way seem no more substantial than the momentary wisp of a breeze.

Yet these steps are their footprints, their script in the rock telling us of their daily passing. We can't help but read as we walk, for the rocky path is uneven—the cut steps deepened by countless rainy seasons into a series of descending holes—and one has to look down, making sure that each of our footfalls match theirs, lest we fall and the hike end here. But in looking down, we see what we would miss. Flowers huddle in the crevices of the sun-baked stone like tiny pink stars. Wild spices grow abundantly at ankle height: silver-grey bushes of thyme, dusky sage, and wild fennel. Wild asparagus too. Sicilian cooking begins here: the harvest of a rocky, scruffy, yet abundant land brought to the table with Arab enthusiasm and Spanish flair. I remind my clients that they are not in Tuscany anymore, that there is no one thing called "Italian cuisine", but as many uncompeting standards of excellence as there are regions. Most interesting to many visitors to Sicily are the caper plants, bursting from the limestone rock faces like green fireworks. The caper we eat is the flower bud, picked immature in late spring, cooked, and pickled in brine. Left to bloom, the caper flower appears suddenly, purple and frilly like something from the South Seas, but it lasts only a

day, a metaphor in ever-pessimistic Sicily for the transience of good things. Along the way, some tough old carob trees appear, offering the rescue of shadow. In autumn and winter the dark pods lying around on the ground are chewy and sweet.

The trail follows a steep slope down into the gorge, and after a few minutes the hill to our right turns upstream and the Calcinara River sweeps around a bend in the gorge across our front. We are facing a sheer cliff, blackened with mildew and moss, tufted with capers, and streaked with lime. This sight can take the breath away, for the cliff is honeycombed across its broad, hundred-meter-high face with square-cut holes. Thousands of Sikel tombs, now looking like empty eye sockets, black and gouged of their dead. The black squares of their dark openings cluster even—or perhaps especially, deliberately—on the most inaccessible parts of the cliff. Looking at that cliff, I sometimes imagine stonecutters suspended by ropes and embalmed bodies hauled through open air. The wind pulses against the cliff as it rounds the bend, the felt breathing of the spirit of the place. It carries with it the faint chitter of cliff swallows, like an amplification of the scratch of lizards at our feet.

Lines of rocks form terraces as our path descends to the river. After another hundred meters of punishing sun, we drop into shade at the bottom of the ravine. Here a divine microclimate flourishes; poplar, oak, and willow shelter the cool waters of the splashing Calcinara, just minutes above the point it joins the Anapo. In late summer, both rivers are barely streams, sometimes even reduced to unflowing pools. However, ancient writers report that once the Anapo was navigable from the bay of Syracuse all the way up to Pantalica. In fact, Phoenicians (Carthaginians) and others were able to trade with the inland plateau city of Hybla without stepping on land. And even after five hundred years of the Greeks cutting trees—for shipbuilding, light industry, and cooking fires—Sicily still enjoyed several large navigable rivers, still a bucolic green and forested island. Then Roman deforestation ended that forever.

But for us, a stream is as welcome as a river, and if I have timed the day right, we are ready for lunch. To the right, a path leads to a quiet pool, and, although the pool is barely

two feet deep, it is hard to resist flinging clothing across branches and lying in the brisk water. True, I rarely have clients who want to get naked, at least with me, but modestly or immodestly, we will pause here.

Pantalica seduces by her landscape, the big vista, her macro-Nature, so one might overlook the quietly abundant wildlife in the shadows. The animals lie low and rather hope you do not notice them. The geology and habitat of southeastern Sicily is known to biologists as "Cave Iblei" (Hyblean gorges), a topography of deep limestone gorges that links Sicily geologically with north Africa. The stark verticality and depth of these ravines offers many and varied habitats.

There are 700 species of plants found in Pantalica, a remarkable number for a dry and rocky few square miles. I have mentioned spices and food plants already, all thriving on the sunny hillsides. This is a botanical habitat named for the grey-green dome-shaped shrub *Euphorbia*, scattered among tamarisk, oleander, and myrtle. If we take an undignified position and stoop down to nose into the high grasses, we can discover many species of wild orchid, as well as wild ancestors of the gardener's snapdragon. Sicily is home to another garden favorite, cyclamen, down in the wetter ravine bottom, and with it in the soggy shadows lives a humble variety of nettle (*urtica rupestris*), a species unchanged since the last Ice Age. Pantalica's only sizeable trees are down here too, especially white and black poplar, willows, and the oriental plane, a species killed elsewhere by a pathogenic fungus. This uplands of the park now are free of cattle and sheep, so the native oaks—Holm oak and cork oak—are trying to reestablish themselves, but so far only as struggling individuals.

The many millennia of humans here have exterminated wolves and bear, the latter still found in tiny populations in mainland Italy. The Archaeological Museum in Siracusa displays skeletons of miniature elephants and hippos, which, like lions, might well have been here when the earliest known people, the Sicanians, arrived around 6000 BC. Would they still were here. Foxes live here abundantly, as do hares and hedgehogs. Pine martens are

less common. The largest remaining mammal is the North African Crested Porcupine, the world's largest porcupine. Although we occasionally come across their quills on the path, I know of no one who ever actually has seen the animal itself. This fellow sleeps away the daylight hours, possibly disguised as a prickly pear cactus. Equally hard to find, the Leopard Spotted Snake is an endangered species that, in Sicily, is mostly restricted to Pantalica. There are other snakes here and innumerable lizards; small trout live in the rivers; painted frogs breed along the banks; and toads inhabit the uplands. We have, the last time I checked, one mating pair of Peregrine Falcons (whose nest site is kept secret), as well as buzzards, Imperial Ravens, kites, partridges, kingfishers, and stone chats. Dippers slip in and out of the waterway. Occasionally, a Bonneli's Eagle or Griffon Vulture floats in from North Africa.

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After lunch, it is time to step across the river carefully on mossy rocks and ascend the opposite riverbank through scruffy tuffs of grass and occasional blackberry and scrub oak thickets. We begin to pass Sikel tombs on the slope to our right, recesses made raven black by the blaze of sun-blinding rock. Frequently ancient steps lead up to these tombs. They are chambers carved into the limestone cliff faces, ranging from the size of a large refrigerator for individual burials, to family-sized affairs, with a cavernous stone living room and numerous walk-in closets. The entrance to each tomb is indented to accept a flat, square-cut sealing stone. I have never found one of these stone doors. There are none lying about on the hillsides below, not even as broken slabs. The standard explanation is that they have all been stolen, since they were made from fine quality stone. But I cannot believe that this could explain the absence of the door slabs for every one of the five thousand plus known tombs. (Who carted them away? I hope none of my clients ask. If pressed, I incline toward theories involving space aliens.)

The rock-cut tombs gather in five necropoli groups on cliffs scattered about the park, and they represent four centuries of the Sikels burying their dead here. The tomb styles

divide into two basic phases. We have been climbing through the North Necropolis, and from marked vantage points on this side, we can see gaping tombs pocketing the vertical cliffs on both sides of the river. These were cut in the earliest centuries of Sikel habitation, from the thirteenth to the tenth century BC, the period of Mycenaean influence. This tomb style is of round chambers, hollowed-out like giant stone eggs. Around the bend ahead are the South and Cavetta necropoli dating from the second phase, the period leading up to the arrival of the Greeks, the tenth to the eighth century BCE. These tombs are square, box shaped. Further west lies the Filiporto necropolis of the final years of Pantalica, from the eighth to seventh century BCE.

Standing inside a tomb, we find shade and coolness, mustiness, and occasional beer bottles. Looking out from the dark through the rectangle of the opening, the far hillside seems to blaze in its frame like a landscape painting of the surface of the sun.

The Sikel dead are gone, the unkind eviction of their bones having begun even in ancient times. Since then, who has used these caves? As best we can tell, Greeks hid in these tombs from the invading Romans; Romans hid in these tombs from the invading Vandals; Vandal families hid here from the Ostragoths; Ostragoths families from the Byzantines; Byzantines from the Arabs; Arabs from the Normans . . . well, you get the idea. Even between invasions, these tombs have given refuge to insurgents fighting against the current foreign occupying power (any one of thirteen to sixteen foreign occupying powers, depending on how you count them). They have also been used by escaped slaves, by shepherds as sheep pens and lodging for themselves; by tomb robbers (which in archaeologically wealthy Sicily is a career handed down the generations); by bandits (another well-established career here, though most now have traded musty tombs for air- conditioned offices); by Mafiosi and other shady groups to store contraband and weapons; and by poor folk with no other place to live. Even scofflaws like me have been known to come here and camp out in them.

At this point on the trail, we come to a lovely and poignant example of one of the more settled post-Sikel-corpse tomb dwellers. For three centuries after the fall of Rome (AD 6-8$^{\text{th}}$

Centuries), the Byzantines ruled Sicily. This was an especially downtrodden time for Sicily, an island that specializes in being downtrodden. Neglect by Constantinople sent Sicily on a downward spiral into ever-deeper poverty, so much so that the island's Christian residents actually welcomed the Arab conquest in the 9th Century, preferring infidels to poverty. Pantalica hosted a few Byzantine-era villages. Poor *contadini*, country folk, lived in wooden huts, a few Sikel tombs became chapels.

Along the trail, we come to a metal grating, usually open, and descend a few steps into the gloom of a cave-tomb no bigger than a VW bus. Glistening damp on the dark walls, polls of dank water, the dead smell of mildew. What lowered vision, what cramped sense of human potential would reduce people, when not in danger of an invader, to retire these damp rock holes to speak to their god? On the pitted and slippery crack-lined walls grow lines and splotches of vague colors of mildew, lichen, and spider webs. But then, as our eyes become accustomed to the dimness, and only because we know what to look for, the splotches and stains take shape as wall frescoes. We see suggestions of shoulders, the curve of a head, a faded gold halo, and around each image is a choppy picture border in cobalt blue and ochre red. We are standing in a place of worship, a Christian, early-Greek rite chapel, once decorated by a parade of haloed saints. The celebrated Michelin Green Guide three-star Byzantine frescoes of Constantinople and Ravenna are here reduced to a few suggestive colors amid the slime mold.

It is easy to underestimate the wretched poor. In spite of, or perhaps because of dark and hopeless poverty, they raised their vision towards a better life to come, a promise spoken in a language of visual beauty. This was fine fresco work, skilled, sophisticated, knowing. Perhaps it is a higher vision than the heaven of material entertainment we moderns have made for ourselves. Maybe we exchanged simplicity, clarity, and piety for the cornucopia shelves of Safeway. I fear, however, that most of them would happily have offered to exchange places with us, and few of us would have accepted.

Byzantine times were more brutal than ours and most brutal of all the passions aroused

by faith. Within those haloes on the tomb walls, we can make out heads, but rarely faces. Later Christians and Muslims—during fierce iconoclast controversies when representations were seen as blasphemous—hacked away the faces. Of the early Christian centuries in Pantalica, all that remains are these lonely, abused, faceless, voiceless echoes of faith's promise to the miserable.

Among the vanished and transient humanity of Pantalica, the Sikel ghosts still hold dominance over the land's memories. It was the great Sicilian anthropologist Paolo Orsi who excavated those tombs not already pillaged over the millennia by tomb robbers. We can thank him for saving what little was left of Sikel artifacts. In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, through several relentless, tireless decades, he excavated and catalogued and made sense out of the evidence of pre-Greek Sicily. The superb archaeological museum in Siracusa was named for him. Museums are the only place left for the Sikels to speak to us in material form, and they speak only in the fragmentary vocabulary of their graceful brick red terracotta pottery, bronze daggers and tools, razors, combs, and the hordes of large bronze safety pins (*fibulae*) they used hold up (what probably were) toga-like wool capes. They are a people about whom we know extremely little, almost nothing about their religion or social structure. But at least I can conjure up a picture of Sikels wrapped in wool capes on windy winter days, clean-shaven, with combed hair. One is tempted to speculate beyond the evidence. Even anthropologists can and do take a few excavated objects like cloak pins and shaving razors and run with them (though this can be unsafe, professionally speaking).

Paolo Orsi's work gave us a place to stand to look from here over the historical landscape. Our most reliable ancient reporter is Thucydides. At the beginning of Chapter 6 of *The Peloponnesian War* (written between 424-410 BC) he gives us on one page a sketchy introduction to the inhabitants of this island the Greeks met when they arrived around 735 BCE. After opining that local monsters reported by Homer in the *Odyssey* (the Lastraegonians and Cyclopes) were more poetical than real, he says what he knows of the Sicanians

and Elymians (see the chapter on Erice), before turning to the Sikels:

> The Sikels crossed over to Sicily from their first home Italy, flying from the Opicans, as tradition says and as seems not unlikely, upon rafts, having watched till the wind set down the strait to effect the passage; although perhaps they may have sailed over in some other way. Even at the present day there are still Sikels in Italy; and the country got its name of Italy from Italus, a king of the Sikels, so called. These went with a great host to Sicily, defeated the Sicanians in battle and forced them to remove to the south and west of the island, which thus came to be called Sicily instead of Sicania, and after they crossed over continued to enjoy the richest parts of the country for near three hundred years before any Hellenes came to Sicily; indeed they still hold the centre and north of the island.[1]

Thucydides did not mention that when the Sikels arrived in southeast Sicily, not only the Sicanians were here. The coast east of Pantalica was already the home base of the commercial Thapsos culture, and I think this history is worth a short detour from our walk.

Thapsos is a remarkable spit of land poking out into the eastern sea near Augusta, between Catania and Siracusa. These days, it is surrounded by tankers, pipelines on long piers, and squat files of oil storage tanks entangled by the spaghetti-twisted refinery tubing of Europe's largest petroleum refinery complex. Thapsos sticks a kilometer out into the sea, at right angles to the coast, like a brown hatchet with a narrow handle. On this now flat grassy peninsula the intrepid amateur archaeologist can stumble into many rock-cut tombs, similar to those in Pantalica but below ground.

When the Sikels arrived, they found a city on this bit of land. The Thapsos culture, like the Sikel, spanned what we call Middle through Late Bronze Age (from about 1500 to 900 or 800 BC). Theirs was entirely an urban life, their streets walled in by multi-story wooden row homes and warehouses, inner courtyards, enclosed alleys and passages. Thapsos society seems to have been based almost entirely on commerce, like their contemporaries, the

[1] Richard Crawley translation

Phoenicians (a.k.a. Carthaginians–see the chapter on Motia). Both were people for whom trade and business came naturally, who found commercial competition more to their taste than military conquest. They established trade links around the central Mediterranean and thus brought foreign influences to Sicily. Most especially they brought Mycenaean arts and culture. The Mycenaeans were predecessors to the Greeks in the Peloponnesus and they are also the folks who brought us the Trojan War (ca. 1260 or 1180 BC). The houses in Thapsos resembled what is called the "Megaran" domestic architecture of Mycenae, characterized by a distinctive vestibule in the form of a grand entranceway and projecting sidewalls on the exterior of the building. In the later centuries of Thapsos, leading up to the arrival of Greek colonists, Phoenicians and Etruscan merchants jostled in the crowded streets with Africans and Sikels, making deals, translating contracts, loading and unloading goods. Through Thapsos, raw materials from the central and western Mediterranean heading east; and manufactured goods (especially pottery and metalworking) arrived in Sicily from the eastern Mediterranean (Mycenae, Cyprus, Malta, and perhaps Egypt).

The Thapsos culture thrived in numerous trading and fishing settlements along eastern Sicily. It is unlikely that the folks at Thapsos would have fought the arriving Sikels, as you don't want to chase off potential customers with a sword. Nor would the Sikels have had much interest in competing with coastal people; as they were not traders or fishermen, but farmers and pastoralists, and their source of outside goods was Thapsos.

We continue our Pantalica walk climbing steeply out of the Calcinara gorge, leaving behind the Byzantine tomb-church. We pass a metal railing leading down to the narrow opening of a cavernous bat cave. Since I forgot, again, to bring a flashlight (& considering that you have to crawl on your belly to enter), we will forgo the cave and continue up the main path. We are ascending that between-two-rivers prow of the Hyblean plateau. Here we meet the dead-end of the paved road from Ferla. Turn around and we can see across the steep ravine the Sortino overlook where we stood earlier. This gap was last bridged by

the Byzantines, so the road between Sortino and Ferla has been awaiting a new bridge for about fifteen hundred years. No one is in a hurry in Sicily, but there was a plan back in the 1980s. Normally, the Mafia has its slimy fingers in all construction projects, and they are usually the only folks on the island with the motivation to get things done quickly. Here, however, thanks to heroic efforts by the lovers of antiquity, lovers of nature, and heirs of Paolo Orsi, the project collapsed into lawsuits and the valley was saved. I am convinced that, most often, the worldis better off when attempts at improvements don't happen. For now, the Toyotas and Fiats must continue to find a way around Pantalica, leaving it a place where it is impossible to hurry.

You have stayed with me so far, so bear with this hottest, most exposed part of the walk. Along the paved Ferla road, we see more tombs: half-buried, evocative dark spaces, thistles crowding the opening to keep us away, but the road margins are cheerful with marigolds. We leave the road to ascend a path to the crest of the plateau, all waist-high dead grass and wind-shaken emptiness, where once stood the Sikel capital, Hybla. Of the great city, there seems to be nothing here at all. Yet, wading through the high grasses at the crest of the plateau, we (literally) stumble across foundation stones of a building that archaeologists call the "Anàktoron" (Greek for palace).

Again, the architecture is decidedly Mycenaean, and it was possibly through Thapsos that the Sikels learned Mycenaean crafts and building skills. Heavy stones outline a pattern of rectangular rooms: only eight rooms, but for the Sikels a large structure. Its size, the fact that it was made of stone, and its placement at the highest forward point of the plateau, all suggest a royal palace and/or center of government. Except for a possible wall to the west and a few traces further down the slope suggesting supports for terraced houses, this is the only remaining evidence of the city. Excavations by Paolo Orsi under this structure yielded some pieces of Late Bronze Age fine, red-slipped, burnished pottery, and also much metallurgy in bronze: those fibulae (broach pins), combs, knives, razors; stone moulds for casting axe heads we find in the Orsi Museum. One room seems to have been reserved for

metalworking; another identified as a kitchen. The floor of the forecourt was cobbled, the rooms likely tiled. A trapezoidal tower seems a later addition, being clumsily placed, its corner jutting into the forecourt. On the south side, the palace was fortified with three concentric walls.

The strong Mycenaean influence in craft and architecture suggests an historical problem for the Sikels, a problem shared by most of the world's overwhelmed cultures. The Sikels had the material good fortune and historical bad fortune to be the contemporaries of the Mycenaeans. Their good fortune was to have traders from Mycenae and other advanced cultures bringing their technology and their art to Sicily, vastly improving Sikel life. Their bad fortune was to be an example of a pattern repeated again and again around the globe: when you see a representative of a more advanced culture step ashore, you should know your days are numbered. The superior culture was the Hellenic. In fact, the Mycenaeans themselves have been relegated to the role of precursors of the Greeks, supporting actors in the great self-congratulatory story of the Rise of the West, the Triumph of Greco-Roman Civilization. So, in effect, the arrival of Mycenaean influences was a precursor to the arrival of Hellenic Civilization, which meant that five centuries before Greeks colonists even showed up, centuries before even there was a Greek people, the 'Hellenization' of the Sikels, their absorption into Greek culture, their gradual cultural extinction, already had begun.

When it was intact, and the only stone building around, the Anàktoron would have been an imposing citadel, visible at a great distance, reassuring to the Sikels keeping watch over their flocks. From here, we can see most of the Pantalica Reserve and beyond: north to Sortino, eastward to the sea, and south and west to rolling ravine country. Today the limestone highlands of southeastern Sicily are called "Monte Iblei," named for this ancient city or for its Sikel ruler, King Hyblon. When the Greeks arrived in the eighth century (700s) BCE, Thapsos was in decline: perhaps in part out-competed commercially by the monopoly-seeking Phoenicians who were now based in Carthage, across the straits in north Africa; perhaps partly due to military and political pressure from the arriving Greeks.

Let us leave Pantalica for a moment and take a flight of imagination to the edge of the Hyblean Plateau twenty kilometers due east of here. I like to imagine King Hyblon standing on this overlook, squinting out to sea. Except for Thapsos, right in front of him on the coast, Hyblon ruled all that he could see. To his right, three small Sikel villages gathered around the rim of the great harbor, at what are now Syracuse, Ognina, and Plemmyrion. To his left, other Sikel villages dotted the coastal plain: small villages of herders and farmers living in wooden-post, thatched-roof huts. Sikel towns also spread inland behind him, across the limestone plateau country we call the "Iblei," as far as the land of the Sicani. These would likely appear as ridge-top clusters of stone walls, fortifications, and a few stone row buildings surrounded by thatched roof wooden dwellings on posts (one can visit, for examples, the archaeological sites of Monte Castellazzo, Bavucina and Mokarta).

I like to imagine the king squinting into the brilliant Sicilian sun—on a day in the second year of the Eleventh Olympiad on the Greek calendar (about 734 BCE on ours), let's call it a Tuesday—watching the future arrive. Normally, he might not have taken much note of the Greek ships he could see rowing down the coast. For half a millennium, the coast and coastal plain had been populous and active with foreign traffic. The year or so before, some Greeks had planted themselves on a coastal site off the northeast side of Etna, calling their colony Naxos, and although they stayed, unlike the previous traders, they seemed interested in peaceful co-existence. They were Ionian Greeks, from the Aegean.

Unfortunately for King Hyblon, the Greeks he was watching today, those now pulling into the great harbor south of Thapsos, were from Corinth and Corinthians were Doric Greeks, Greeks from the Peloponnesus, whose practice was to dominate and enslave. Upon coming ashore on the island/peninsula they called "Ortigia", they attacked and burned the local Sikel village. Thus was the great city of Syracuse born in aggression and conquest. Like invaders through the centuries, these Doric Greeks considered the land effectively empty of occupants, virgin land free for the taking.

King Hyblon quickly learned the difference between the two kinds of Greek settlers.

He showed remarkable generosity a few years later to some homeless Ionian Greeks, who had been chased out of the earlier Greek colonies of Naxos, then Leontinoi, and then were prevented by Syracuse against settling in its neighborhood. King Hyblon gave them a site north of Thapsos, and they called their city Megara Hyblaea in his honor. But even Ionian Greeks were bringing a more advanced civilization, and Hyblon might not have been so generous had he known that the extinction of his people had now become inevitable. The Sikels possessed a material technology nearly the equal of the invaders, but evidently that "nearly" was not nearly enough. The dagger hanging from King Hyblon's waist was iron, but he had acquired it by trade and a weapon such as this was too expensive for anyone but a king. Hyblon's warriors still were armed in bronze, no match for the iron-wielding Greeks.

From the eighth to the sixth century BCE, the Greeks settled the Mediterranean, as Plato said, "like frogs around a pond," which is to say that they anchored their cities along the coasts, widely spaced, eyeing each other suspiciously. Like frogs, they faced the water, for the sea was their road and main communication network; most were not much interested in what was inland, behind them. Syracuse was an exception, however; the Corinthian settlers brought with them a Doric territorial ambition. Thucydides tells us that Syracuse rapidly became "very populous," and rapidly became the regional bully. We know that fifty years after the city's founding, the Syracusans were strong enough and aggressive enough to establish sub-colonies as a strategic policy to control territory. In 664 BCE, they founded the sub-colony of Akrai (modern Palazzolo Acreide) thirty kilometers inland. In doing so, they leapfrogged Hybla, and the Sikel capital found itself between growling Syracuse and its cub. The archaeological record shows that Hyblon was abandoned suddenly around this time, and that is all we know. It would be two more centuries before Herodotus and Thucydides invented history (the discipline of recording events objectively and accurately for posterity), and so Pantalica dropped out of history before history was born. In no ancient source has it merited so much as a footnote.

After Akrai, the Greeks of Syracuse took over the Sikel town of Morgantina, now a

magnificent archeological site high on a spur above the plain of Catania. Other powerful Greek cities also put pressure on the Sikels, variously drove them inland, forced them into unfavorable treaties, and entangled them in the endless Greek wars as allies of one side or the other. In the middle of the 5^{th} Century BC, the classical age, a Sikel leader from Noto called Decetius led a revolt, uniting many Sikel cities against the Greeks. Syracuse defeated him in time, of course, and the last revolutionary Sikel lived out his life as an exile in Corinth.

In the long run, and in spite of the military might of the Greeks, the decisive factor was social, not technological. Though the Sikels were a settled society, they were tribal, lacking the organizational focus of more modern civilizations. Even at this early stage, the Greeks were developing a sense of civil society, a way of living together in which an individual had rights, legally recognized, and in turn accepted responsibilities, legally enforced. That is, they invented the concept of the individual, defined legally and officially, as the basic unit of society. From this point on, the Triumph of the West is the story of the overwhelming advantages inherent in a society of ambitious individuals, whose energies, though motivated by self-interest, are harmonized through loyalties to a network of political, social, and professional organizations. However much this explosion of human potential led to gross inequities and inhumanities more egregious than what is normal for tribal societies, nonetheless, individualism made for a society more powerful and more flexible.

Leaving the Anàktoron, our path descends the south side of the plateau in long switchbacks, swinging us past another of the Sikel necropolis become Byzantine village. Our next landmark is a particularly intriguing boulder-sized piece of the cliff that has fallen off and now lies on the slope amid brush and wild rosemary. I wander the hillside looking for it, circling various boulders, nervous because it is about time for me to get us lost again.

Eventually, on the downhill side of one boulder I see the hole right through the center, opening to the sky beyond. The hole is a perfect square, the cut square of a Sikel tomb entrance, the entire façade of the tomb having fallen off the cliff above. This marks for me

where the path begins, and we follow it down steeply, to the valley floor, where we find ourselves back on the wide hard-surface of the old rail line. We head homeward between the cliffs of the Anapo and through two rail tunnels cut by those Ethiopian prisoners of the Fascists we met earlier in the walk. One of these tunnels is long enough to become almost totally black inside. You can see the glow of the other end, but with no intermediate point for alignment, concentrating on that glow will not save you from colliding with the side wall. And so I have, ear first.

Today we'll forgo that excitement by exiting the path just before the tunnel, taking some stone steps to where the river forms a pool, deep and clear and cool. Nymphs might be glimpsed just slipping into shadows, and another swim is definitely an option.

Whether or not we take that dip, I urge us further downstream to see one more remnant of ancient Greece. On the steep cliff, about fifteen feet above the stream, a groove runs in a clean straight line in the rock, like a finger traced through icing. This is an ancient aqueduct incised in the rock face. This too is the work of war prisoners from Africa, but this time Carthaginian, this time the captives of Syracuse's defeat of Carthage in 480 BC. The Greeks forced their prisoners to build an aqueduct channeling Pantalica water to downtown Syracuse, thirty kilometers away. The water arrived at the fountain at the upper reaches of the Greek Theatre of Syracuse, flowing out of a square-cut channel in the rock. There playgoers offered ceremonial thanks to the river god, Anapo for his gift of cool water on a hot day. In this we find another example of that contrast between the Greeks and Romans that plays out in art, architecture, and attitude. The Greeks, for whom theater was prayer, drank the transported waters and thanked the river god. Four hundred years later, the Romans channeled the sacred waters of the Anapo from the same fountain, downhill to fill a nearby cistern, which is still intact. From there, they used the water to flood the nearby amphitheatre for mock naval battles between gladiators on little boats, and also to flush the amphitheatre clean of blood and severed body parts between entertainments.

Further along the forested river trail, the cliffs on the far side ease into a slope; the trail

turns a corner; and we are back in the sun, immersed in the perfumes of flowers and the hum of bees, where blackberries and wildflowers crowd happily against a stone wall. Bees and wildflowers bring us to the happy subject of honey.

The honey of Hybla represented in ancient times the finest nectar a person can find this side of the gods' own *ambrosia*. This inland country of rocky meadows (*Hyblaea* to the Greeks, *Iblei* now) is wild with wildflowers and this part of its history is a sweet one. We know the Sikels made honey, but it was the Greeks who turned bee-keeping into a major industry, marketing the wax and honey across the Mediterranean.

The Greek beehives were constructed with slats made of cane—the Giant Spanish Reed that dominates shallow and sunny waterways all over Sicily. And the early design was good enough to last. One afternoon, walking along the old rail line in the western part of Pantalica, a friend and I came across a row of these cane hives, alive with bees, as if the Sikel or Greek bee-keeper had just disappeared around the bend heading home for lunch. Each hive was about the size of an orange crate and constructed of slats of river reeds. I have been back to this place several times since, but have never again seen any trace of those hives. This is Sicily, where the past is present, if occasionally elusive, and so I indulge the pleasing thought that we chanced upon the Brigadoon of beehives.

To the ancients, honey had more culinary importance than simply providing an alternative to jam to spread on toast. It was 1400 years before the Arabs gave the Mediterranean sugar cane. So, until the early Middle Ages, honey and fruit juice was all Europe and the Mediterranean had to sweeten food and drink.

For the Greeks and Romans the "honey of Hyblaea" was the best there was, and it was a major commercial product. The city of Megara Hyblaea put the image of a bee on its coins. So much were the Greeks enamored of Hyblean honey, that when the power of Carthage waned and Greek traders swarmed on the wharves of Malta, their ships laden with the nectar and wax of Hybla bees, they changed the name of the island from the Phoenician

Maleth ("Sheltered Harbor") to *Melita* ("honey").

Roman writers also celebrated honey of Hybla, Strabo and Pliny favoring thyme flower honey. In his first *Eclogue*, Virgil says old age should be a time for lullabies murmuring of Hybla bees. Ovid compared rapidly changing women's hairstyles to the numberless bees of Hyblea. Shakespeare was an attentive student in his grammar school lessons on Latin authors: in *Julius Caesar*, he has Cassius accuse Marc Antony of a sour attitude: "your words . . . rob the Hybla bees, / And leave them honeyless." Among the English Romantics; Keats wrote of "Hybla's honied roses" as a perfect poetic narcotic of sweet taste and rapturous scent; Leigh Hunt sought to make a shilling or two by slapping together a book of Sicilian trifles called *A Jar of honey from Mount Hybla*; and Fanny Trollop wrote disgustedly of the Americans she met in Cincinnati being as desperate in pursuit of money as bees in pursuit of Hybla honey. Monte Iblei, the Hyblean Plateau, the fabled land of Hybla, has been the byword for the world's best honey for twenty-five hundred years.

Today, the Hyblean Highlands still produces great honey–thyme, rosemary, carob, and two new flavors that certainly were not around three millennia ago: orange-blossom and eucalyptus. The Pantalica gateway town of Sortino, of course, has an annual honey festival.

The Sikels themselves certainly were outlived by their wonderful honey. By the time the Romans conquered Sicily in the 3rd Century BC, after 500 years of Greek dominance, the people who gave their name to the island had so merged into the stronger Greek river that the Romans could not tell the difference between a Sikel town and a Greek town, or even between a Sikel and a Greek.

We have not seen the other half of the park, the less-visited part toward Ferla, but we have done a neat circuit of spectacular views, lovely glades, and the most important of the area's history. And if all of these things have eased you into a mood of reflective tranquility, then you will have entered into the spirit of Pantalica. (Alternatively, a spacey reflective mood out here could be an early sign of heat stroke.)

This is how we read history in these parts, taking time to hear the land tell its stories. On the tranquil ridges of Pantalica, all that remains of the various residents are one forlorn outline of foundation stones, a sketchy line gouged along a cliff, a few faded mildewy frescoes, some cute rail tunnels speaking of misery, and thousands of stone holes. The empty sockets of Sikel tombs have watched humanity's comings and goings, which seem here like ghostly imaginings. These eyes have watched the Greeks and Romans pass by headed for somewhere else; watched the Vandals, Ostragoths, Byzantines, and Arabs, each in their turn, hunt down refugees and then become refugees themselves; watched African prisoners, on two occasions 2400 years apart, hack away at rock faces in melting heat; and have just watched us hiking by. Even on a day when summer breathes like the mouth of a furnace, I am happy to come here, to this prophetic, philosophical place, to relearn that all life is as enduring as it is fragile—lizards, humans, carob trees, bees. To me, few places speak as clearly as Pantalica of the lightness with which the earth can bear witness to the weight of time and ever-renewed suffering.