

# TERRITORY AND MEMORY: THE LANDING OF THE ALLIES IN SICILY IN 1943<sup>§</sup>

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**Keywords:** Sicily, Second World War, museology, battlefield tourism, memory, local development

## ABSTRACT

The concept of memory (memorial site) has gained crucial importance in recent years for the identification of places (areas) and in the affirmation of local identities. The memorial sites are areas where usually tragic events have occurred and resulted in a cultural change. In these places there are still signs of these historical events and/or tangible and intangible indications created by the society such as: monuments, obelisks, marble inscriptions, others. Sicily represents an ideal area for studying memorial sites; not only because of the number of dominations in the past centuries, but also for the significance of all places where the mafia has taken its root. These elements have caused several changes in the culture and in the landscape.

Sicily is the land where “Operation Husky” began, in the summer of 1943. This agreement between the Americans and the British aimed at occupying Sicily, Italy after World War II. Seventy years after this operation the territory is still marked by testimonies of those tragic events. The bombing devastated buildings, which we can still acknowledge for their cultural significance. These memorial areas represent a strong testimony of the past. There are cemeteries, protecting bodies many of which are unknown; there are bunkers and other military garrisons well preserved throughout the territory. These signs must be rediscovered, to be replicated because of the contemporary geopolitical situation.

As a result, in this paper we propose to identify the area of eastern Sicily suitable for a tourist itinerary in the cultural memory of the war of 1943. The idea is to encourage tourism that gives rise to real emotions and thoughts.

## INTRODUCTION

*1. The battlefield tour: a resource for Sicilian tourism.* This paper deals with the analysis of the deep value embodied by collective memories linked to past historic events in the process of identification and representation of local identities, not to mention the growing tourist attractiveness showed off by memorial sites, where tangible and intangible signs of past events have moulded a highly specific anthropic and natural landscape.

In particular, the main aim is to evaluate the cultural implications as well as the tourist potentialities of such memorial sites in Sicily, especially those linked to the terrible events of the Second World War, during which the island played an indubitable first-rate geo-political role. In effect, seventy years after the so-called Husky operation, which marked the beginning of war operations in the island, Sicilian territory is still punctuated with eloquent signs linked to those events, such as cemeteries, bunkers and historic museums, which could be exploited as stops of a tourist route.

As a result, in this paper we propose to identify two areas of Sicily suitable for a tourist route which could go over the geographical and historic series of the Second world war events in Sicily again, with the aim of rediscover their deeply-rooted cultural significance not only to consolidate the collective shared identity, but also to promote an effective tourist exploitation according more innovative patterns of cultural tourism.

As a matter of fact, the itinerary should be inserted in the wider methodological and epistemological framework of the battlefield tourism, whose attractiveness in terms of tourist

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<sup>§</sup>Despite this paper is the outcome of a shared work, paragraph 1 of the Introduction and Conclusions were written by C.Cirelli; paragraph 2 of the Introduction was written by E.Nicosia. As far as the Results are concerned, paragraph 1 was written by T.Graziano; paragraph 2 by C.M.Porto; paragraph 3 by E.Di Blasi; paragraph 4 by L.Mercatanti.

interest has been already deeply exploited in many foreign countries, such as Great Britain, where travel agencies and tour operators have been proposing battlefield tours for many decades, with a great confirmation in terms of incoming flows.

Often associated with the so-called war, dark or grief tourism, the battlefield tourism focuses more on the historical value of areas marked by past tragic events, rather than on the voyeuristic and morbid pleasure deriving from the visit of areas marked by still-lasting signs of death and suffering, such as Ground Zero in New York City for instance (Richter, 2005).

On the contrary, the proposed Sicilian route should represent an innovative model of tourist promotion based on deep cultural and historic values, both for the local communities and the potential tourists. What is more, such a proposed Sicilian war tour could be easily inserted within the wider epistemological framework of the so-called emotional tourism, which is based more on the feelings and sensations rather than a mere visit of tourist sites. In this case, the heritage is not only a tangible series of monuments and locations, that is to say the real image, but also the (re)evocation of it, thanks to the fascination provoked by the anthropic and natural landscapes, where the signs of the past are deeply melt with those of the present.

For the specific aims of this paper, the historic value of such events should be exploited to enhance unprecedented patterns and practices of tourism, at the point that the two landing itineraries could be included in a wider war tour in Sicily, which converges on Catania, in order to drive along the Allies' two landing routes again thanks to the several signs impressed by such events within the rural and urban fabric.

The proposed route, finalised both to the preservation of collective memory and the tourist promotion of the involved sites, should be conceived as a tour which traces the historic itinerary, according to a systemic and integrated approach involving different territories, institutions and above all the involved communities. This itinerary could start from two Sicilian areas, which represent the geographic locations of the British and American landing.

*2. The historic background.* As far as the historic backdrop is concerned, within the frantic context of the events of November, 1942, the Allies' forces conceived a new Mediterranean strategy aiming at controlling the Central Western sea basin preliminary for the defeat of Fascism, after the defeat of Italian and German forces in North Africa and the Anglo-American landing in Algeria and Morocco.

On January, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1943, during the Casablanca conference the allied Chiefs of Staff began the so-called Husky operation. At the core of this operation there was the conquest of Sicily which represented the only Italian objective within the range of the fighter planes based in North Africa and Malta.

The Anglo-American forces, commanded by general Eisenhower, were composed by seven divisions, of which 115.000 British and 66.000 American soldiers. The strategy implied a multiple landing of the British forces and the American ones, which were to be unified in Catania.

In fact, the so-called Husky operation implied a contemporary multiple landing in two neighbouring Sicilian areas, as firmly supported by Montgomery, with the aim of permitting the 8<sup>th</sup> British Army to point towards Messina in order to preclude the Italian-German forces to withdraw towards Calabria.

As a result, the island was divided in two parts by an ideal dividing line passing amidst Pachino and Vizzini, which distinguished the western sector, entrusted to the American general Patton, aiming at the control of Palermo and Messina, and the eastern one, entrusted to general Montgomery, aiming at Syracuse, Catania and finally Messina.

In particular, the 8<sup>th</sup> British Army was organised in two army corps: the 13<sup>th</sup>, which included the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 50<sup>th</sup> infantry division, landed in the Gulf of Noto, between Cape Ognina and Calabernardo, along a front of 34 kilometres. The 30<sup>th</sup> army corps, which included the 51<sup>st</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian infantry division, landed between Marzamemi and Punta Castelluzzo, along a 20 km-front turning Cape Passero (Di Matteo, 2007).

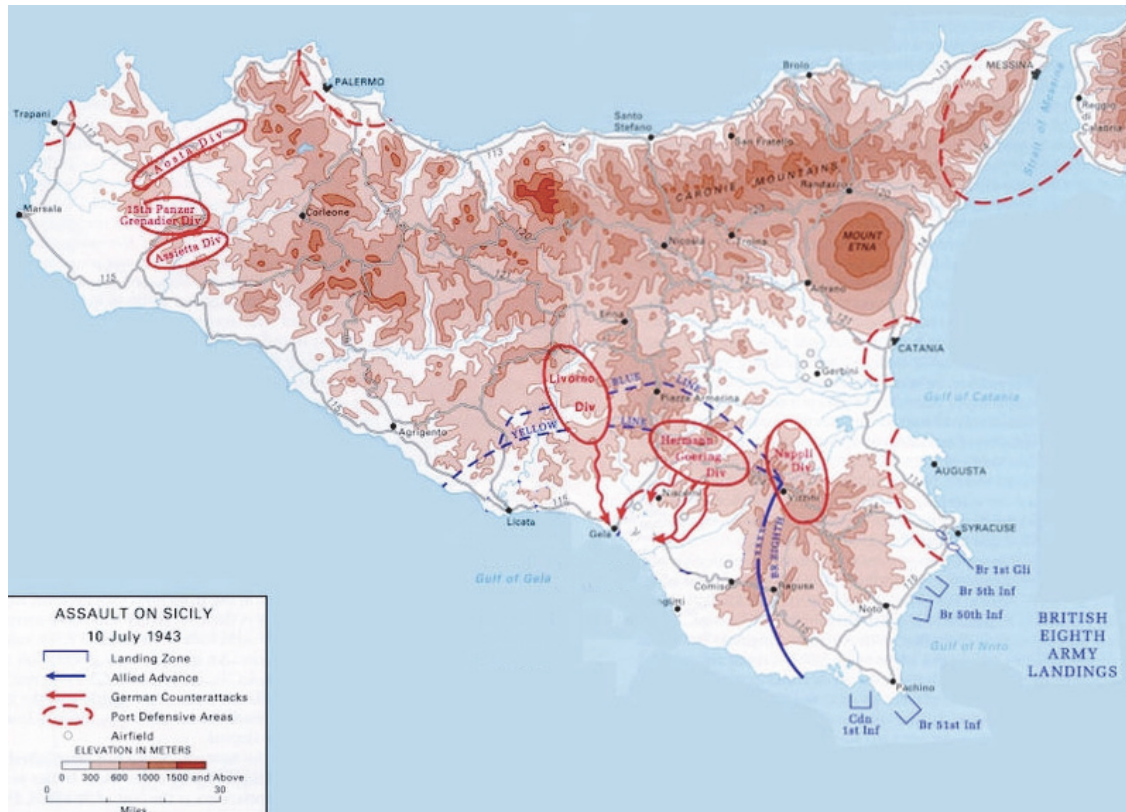
## RESULTS

*1. The British route.* The eastern battlefield route could start from what was called the “George beach” within the Husky operation, that is to say the beach of Fontane Bianche, from which the Scottish forces began to march towards Cassibile. The first stop of the battlefield tour should be the bridge on the Anapo River, near Syracuse, where one of the most strategic war operations was carried out by general Ladbroke on July, 9<sup>th</sup>, 1943. The *Ponte Grande*, which had been the main objective of such operation, was destroyed by the flood of 1951, despite a part of it survived in the middle of the rushes and papyrus. The harsh configuration of such territories as well as the dry-stone walls made the British landing really hard. It is not a chance that just 3 km northwards, along the Siracusa-Floridia road, the first British cemetery of Sicily rises, where more than a thousand of soldiers were buried. Along the route from Syracuse to Augusta, the wide caves near the cemetery of Melilli, where the war base of the fortress was situated, could be another stop, since they have remained undamaged. Actually, this route is punctuated with a series of blockhouses, undamaged or half-dismantled which, together with the harsh configuration of the road system, explains the caution which the 50<sup>th</sup> division was forced to drive on with. What is more, following the course of the San Leonardo river, the tourist comes upon the bridge of Malati, the only one survived to the time effects, as it is witnessed by the two plaques of Montgomery.

On July, 13, 1943 the Fustin operation managed to the control on the Bridge of Primosole, over the Simeto river. That was a very important conquest, owing to the geo-political value of the territory which was an obliged passage from Syracuse to Catania. Despite the old iron bridge is not longer existing, the tourist could rediscover an atmosphere drenched with past events, by following the two bends of the river: the first one, which extends towards the hinterland, was that one used by the Durham brigade to reach the Northern bank; the second one, towards the sea, was the location chosen by the Italian machine-gunners. Such a highly evocative natural area is a pleasant location for a tourist stop, since it has been created the oasis of Simeto in order to preserve the specific natural landscapes. Not far away from the Simeto River, near Bicocca, the British cemetery, which lodges more than 2 thousand fallen, together that of Agira, in the province of Enna, completes the picture of the British cemeteries in Sicily. The Axis resistance to conquest Syracuse again persuaded Montgomery to reach Catania with a more complex manoeuvre starting from west, rather than from south, which was entrusted to the 51<sup>st</sup> Scottish divisions of Highlanders, commanded by general Wimberley. Despite the harsh resistance of the Goering German division, it was a decisive victory for the Allies: on August, 5<sup>th</sup>, 1943 the British soldiers coming from south and west arrived in a completely destroyed and half-abandoned Catania (Condorelli, 2010).

*2. The American Route.* As far as this American landing is considered, the British itinerary should converge on Catania together with the American one, which concerns western Sicily. The American landing wide area is included between Licata, in the province of Agrigento, and Pozzallo, in the province of Ragusa, whose territories boast the sign of the war events, such as for instance several gun emplacements of medium-small size situated near the beaches.

Two itineraries can be elaborated with the aim of tracing the American penetration. The first one, which includes a wider area, follows the coastal route between Trapani and Palermo as far as Messina. The most important strategic road axis is that one linking Syracuse to Trapani, where it is still possible to admire several anti-aircraft emplacements and sighting bunkers. Even the other coastal routes are important from the strategic and historic point of view, such as for instance that one which connects Trapani to Palermo, where there are the ruins of the bombed quarters within the old harbour area and the fortifications of Monte Pellegrino, and the other one which follows the Tirrenic coast till Messina.



Source: Our processing, based on <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/72-16/map1.JPG>

**Fig. 1 The British landing itinerary**

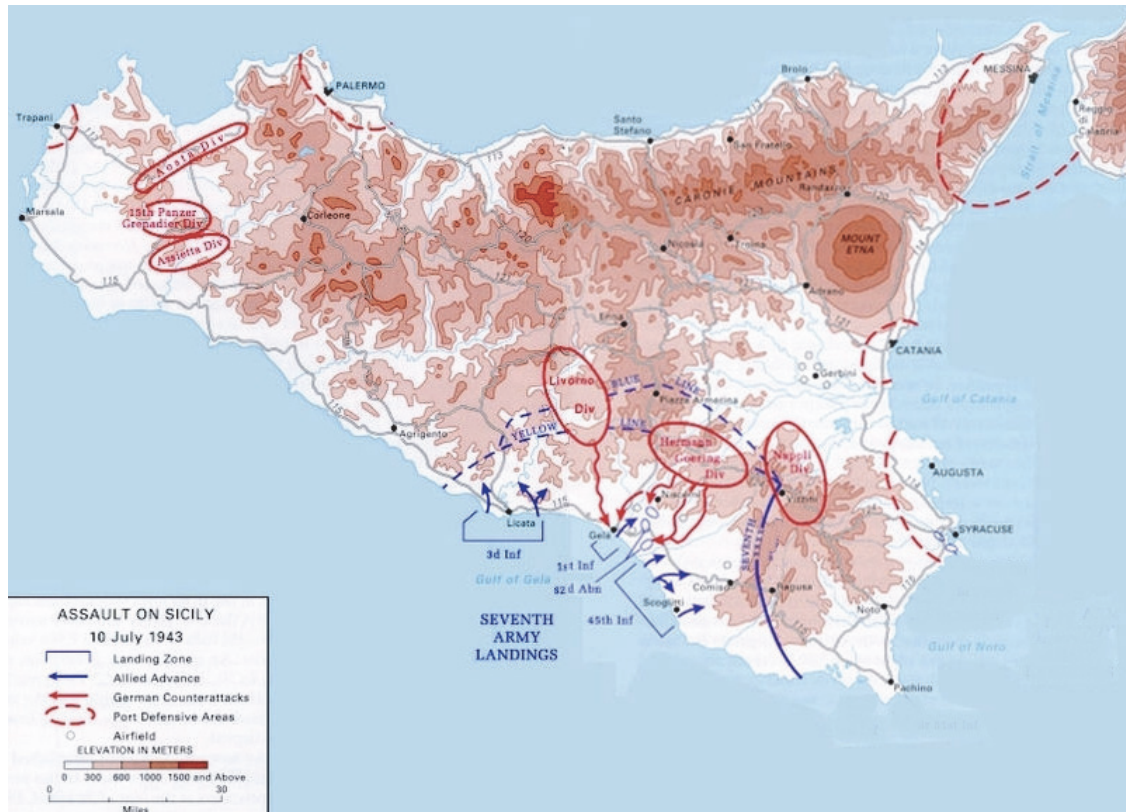
The second American route recalls the deeds of the troops along a route rich of historic importance as well as cultural and landscape significance. It is an internal route which recalls the Americans' victories in the Sicilian hinterland, starting from Piazza Armerina to Nicosia, strategically located in the very heart of the island, where the American troops organize the assault to another German stronghold, Troina. From this urban centre, the American troops headed towards the foot of Etna, where they rejoined the British ones in order to support a pincer movement against the withdrawing German troops.

The Sicilian campaign ended on August, 17<sup>th</sup>, 1943 when the Anglo-American troops arrived in an already exhausted Messina, by sealing the conquest of the whole island (Costanzo, 2007).

3. *The Bunker Lighthouse*. As a result, since the two itineraries converge on Catania, this city should embody the final stop of this Sicilian battlefield tour, where it is possible to exploit from a tourist standpoint some tangible marks linked to Second World War events.

Although it is very difficult to retrace tangible marks of these past tragic events within the fabric of the city, it should be highly meaningful to conceive a stop of the "Memory Route" even in Catania, in order to promote fundamental values such as democracy and freedom, which the allies fought for.

One of the most meaningful mark of past events, visible still today, is the Bunker Lighthouse which was built during the Second World War within the east pier of the Catania harbour. In general the lighthouses embody the historic memory of people, since they were built in order to support fundamental human activities, like the maritime and commercial ones, in addition to evoke the displacements of people towards unknown destinations.



Source: Our processing, based on <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/72-16/map1.JPG>

**Fig. 2 The American landing itinerary**

Particularly, the Bunker lighthouse stands out for its strong cultural value. Its main aim was certainly different from the traditional one, since it was specifically conceived to support war operations during the Second World War. Nonetheless, it represents today an unique example worldwide, which should be better exploited within a more complex and articulated battlefield tour.

As a consequence, the Bunker lighthouse, which has been recently restored, could be easily inserted in a still in progress project for the regeneration of the waterfront, elaborated by the Port Authority of Catania, implying a two kilometres “sea promenade” between the sea and the old baroque palaces.

In effect, the lighthouse represents an eloquent sign of past events, deeply impressed within the urban fabric, which could complete the already existing itinerary at the point to transform it into a very route of cultural memory, finalised to preserve the local cultural heritage and above all to promote a different pattern of tourism.

*4. The Historical Museum of the Allied Landings in Sicily 1943.* In particular, the Bunker lighthouse is thematically and even geographically connected with the near *Historical Museum of the Allied Landings in Sicily 1943*, located within the cultural centre “Le Ciminiere” (Chimneys) of Catania. It was built in 2002 and has an area of approximately 3000 square feet on three levels. It can undoubtedly be considered one of the most interesting museums about war, due to the quality and quantity of the items stored, the innovative techniques of representation, in addition to the great educational value and the scientific care.

The guide of the museum invites to stand a few minutes in a typical square of the period, in which there are few houses, a barn and the municipal building. On the walls are displayed typical posters of the period and in the background the visitor can hear popular songs of the fascist period. Suddenly an alarm announces an imminent air attack, and invites people to go to

the bomb shelter. The perfect reconstruction of the sites and sounds allow the tourist to experience strong emotions and imagine what fears and sense of powerlessness are due to the war. In the dark bomb shelter thanks to an old lantern you can barely see the faces of those who share this terrible experience. And there is a strong emotion when that narrow space, thanks to a suspension system, shakes really under attack. When the bombing ends, the visitor can exit but the vision is bleak: the square is destroyed, full of dust and ruins everywhere.

From this point begins the actual museum, full of artefacts such as uniforms, weapons, documents, cartography and including a 1:1 scale reconstructions of bunkers and wax statues such as Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt or Churchill. A path that seems infinite as infinite is the suffering caused by war. At the end of the tour there is a sentence of Pope John XXIII remembering that "Peace is the highest good. To forget it is folly" and a tomb in which are displayed thousands of names of American, British, Italian and German soldiers (Mercantanti, 2011).

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the proposed tourist tour clearly shows off an intrinsic socio-cultural value, in addition to evident economic implications deriving from the tourist impact.

In order to pursue this aim, it should be necessary that all the involved territories adopt a systemic approach, by overcoming the anachronistic parochialism, in order to build an integrated tourist itinerary where the sites with an already-existing tourist function, such as the Museum of the Allied Landing, could play as driving forces for the other areas punctuated with memorial sites. Obviously, such a tourist practice should be shrewdly exploited thanks to an effective system of site promotion, since the only commemorative plaque is not enough to enhance a battlefield tour. Thus, it should be necessary to develop specific actions of promotion, in terms of maps, brochure, posters and information points, in order to transform an already-existing route in a real tourist route.

Thus, the proposed battlefield tour could represent an innovative tourist pattern for the Sicilian territory, due to the fact that it would imply the promotion of a still widely unknown tangible and intangible cultural heritage, highly attractive both for local communities and for the international ones. In effect, the events recollected by the memorial sites are part not only of the Sicilian shared memories but rather of the worldwide collective past at the point that this proposed battlefield tour should be inserted within a wider European network involving all the countries marked by past war events, such as the Normandy landing area.

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