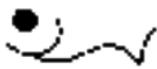


# The Ancient Theatre of Taormina



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## A LOOK BACK INTO HISTORY

BC

### 13th- 8th century BC

It was most probably the native Sicels (*Siculi* in Latin) who established the first settlement on Monte Tauro in the area of modern Taormina. Rock-carved tombs in the Necropolis of Cocolonazzo di Mola, located between Taormina and Castelmola have yielded indigenous, pre-Greek painted pottery fragments datable to the Iron Age, that is, between the tenths and seventh centuries BC.

### 8th century BC

As the result of a marked increase in population, during the second half of the eighth century BC, the Greeks sought new territories, and moved to Sicily and the southern coast of Italy. They conquered new areas by establishing colonies that were populated by the mother-country's own citizens and controlled directly by their cities of origin. The promontory below what is Taormina today, was their first destination: the Chalcidians of Euboea founded **Naxos**, the first Greek colony on the island.

The Sicels and Greek colonists coexisted peacefully during that period and, as revealed by native and Greek-inspired mid-eighth and seventh-century BC pottery finds, they influenced each other's material cultures.

### Late 5th – first half of the 4th century BC

In 403 BC Naxos was conquered and destroyed by the tyrant Dionysius I of Syracuse. In the war against Athens he was allied with Sparta that had little liking for the Chalcidians – allies of Athens – in the colony.

The Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus gives two accounts of Taormina's beginnings. The first (*Bibliotheca Historica*, book XIV, 59, 1-2) says that in 396 BC, with the support of the Carthaginian general, Himilco, the Sicels who lived on Monte Tauro accepted a small group of refugees from Naxos, and called the area where they lived **Tauromenion** (the name came from the Greek *Taurus* – the 'bull-shaped' Monte Tauro, and the verb *menein* that means, 'to stay').

Dionysius I besieged Tauromenion some time around 394 BC and the city definitively fell to Syracuse two years later (c. 392 BC), and a colony of mercenaries from Campania was also established in the area.

In his second account (*Bibliotheca Historica*, book XVI, 6-7) Diodorus says that, the 'real' and definitive establishment of

358

Tauromenion can be dated to 358 BC when Andromachus (father of the historian Timaeus) gathered the survivors from Naxos and their families and settled them on the site of what is now Taormina. The close ties between Naxos and Tauromenion are also documented by the earliest coins from Taormina, that were minted between 357 and 345 BC with Apollo Archegetas (*APXAGETAS*) god of the Chalcidian colony on the obverse and a bull with the Greek word *TAYPOMENITAN* on the reverse. However, the city remained under the influence of Syracuse during the ensuing years.

### Second half the 4th century BC

**Timoleon** arrived at Taormina from Corinth in 345 BC. Andromachus helped and supported him in Syracuse's war against Carthage.

In 312 BC, Taormina was annexed to Syracuse under the rule of the tyrant **Agathocles**; many of the inhabitants were killed, while others, including the historian Timeon – son of the city's founder Andromachus – were exiled.

345

312

### 3rd century BC

The **first theatre** was probably built during the reign of **Hieron II** of Syracuse. Under his government (between 270-269 and 215 BC) Taormina had good relations with Rome and came under Roman rule in 214-215 BC, that is before Rome's definitive conquest of Sicily in 212 BC. Along with Noto and Messina, Taormina was one of the few cities that enjoyed special privileges and was considered an independent ally, not subject to taxes, "*civitas libera et foederata*" (Cicero, *Verrine*, II, 4, 50).

270-215

### 2nd century BC

During the First Servile War, between 136 and 132 BC, Taormina was once again centre-stage as one of the main strongholds of the rebel slaves who resisted until the Roman senator Publius Rupilius suppressed the revolt and reconquered the city confirming its status as an ally of Rome.

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### 1st century BC

Under Caesar, Taormina received "Latin rights", like other Sicilian cities.

In 36 BC, during the war between Octavian and Sextus Pompeius, Taormina was besieged again.

36

403

396

394

4

## THE THEATRE

Starting from Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II and walking along the Via del Teatro Greco we will reach Taormina's most important and most popular monument. Beyond the ticket counter, we will go through the west foyer to the orchestra. Here we can see videos and panels, bits of floor mosaics as well as the stone steps (that were the seats) with Greek inscriptions.



The theatre was built on the natural inclination of the promontory that extends from the slopes of Monte Tauro towards the sea, so that it is in a unique position between the Ionian Sea and Mount Etna.

The view can only be described as breathtaking! (1)



Sitting on a step in the highest part of the theatre, as Goethe suggested and many other foreign travellers had done throughout Taormina's history, we can admire the beauty of the ancient ruins and of the natural panorama around it.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many scholars sketched the Taormina Theatre, using imagination to reconstruct the archaeological ruins they saw. For many years these unreliable, albeit beautiful, efforts distorted subsequent interpretations of the monument.

The original structure of the theatre would date from the Hellenistic Period (third – second century BC), when Syracuse controlled Taormina during the reign of Hieron II who held power from 270-269 to 215 BC.

However, the amphitheatre as we see it today (2) can be traced to a major remodelling done during the Imperial Roman era (first – second century AD) and modifications that were made until the third century. These changes over time led to the amphitheatre's being known as the 'Greco-Roman Theatre'.

This is the second biggest theatre in Sicily – after the Greek theatre in Syracuse: the diameter of the cavea is roughly 109 metres.

The acoustics were and still are outstanding because of the theatre's shape – and they were recently tested with modern methods.