

Origin of the Name Isola delle Femmine

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Isola delle Femmine is an Italian town in North-Western Sicily, approximately 10 km (6 miles) west of the City of Palermo. Administratively, it is part of the Metropolitan City of Palermo.

Despite its name, which can be translated in English as "Island of Women", the town is located on mainland Sicily. The name of the small town was chosen after the name of the small island that sits just off shore from it when it became an independent municipality from the neighboring city of Capaci in 1854. [1] The reason for this choice of name was a natural one based upon the combined history of the town and the island, a history that also explains the origin of the Island's name.

The etymology of the name of the island itself is based partly on legend and partly on documented facts. Unfortunately, there are many legends about the origin of this name, most of which have no factual basis and appear to be the fruit of creative imaginations over many centuries. One such legend concerns a letter that Pliny the Younger (born 61 or 62 AD), a Roman lawyer, author and magistrate, was to have written to Emperor Trajan describing a prison for women that he saw on this small island. [1] Pliny was a prolific letter writer and some 247 correspondences survive. An index of these letters can be found on the internet with 121 between him and Trajan without any mention of a prison for women. [2] An important issue with this legend is that there are no reports of artifacts of a prison found on the island in spite of the fact that cisterns dating to the Carthaginian or Punic period, 100-200 years before Pliny's letter writing era, have been found and still exist on the island along with supporting documentation. [1] The cisterns were used to ferment mixtures of fish scraps, spices and oils into a sauce called garum, a very valued food addition in the Roman era. Finding such a letter among the 247 surviving would give credence to the legend but not finding such a letter would not disprove it because the letter might be one that did not survive. That is one of the problems with legends. This legend of a prison appears to have given rise to many variations, possibly the most imaginative being a story that thirteen Turkish maidens, condemned for serious crimes, were set adrift at sea by relatives only to be shipwrecked on this small rocky island where they lived alone for seven years before they were found by their relatives, having had a change of heart. None of these similar legends are supported by any documentation or artifacts on the island. [3]

There is word of another legend that, possibly as late as the 19th century, the island was used as a refuge for women and children when a serious disease spread through the village so as to prevent them from being afflicted by the illness. The source of this legend is not known, but again there are no reports of artifacts of living quarters for such a refuge, and any such use of the island at that date should have been well documented.

A better documented legend relates to a figure named Euphemius. One version has him a 9th century general and Byzantine governor of the province of Palermo [1] while another claims he was an admiral who killed the governor and declared himself emperor of Sicily. [4] In the latter version, the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople sent troops to retake the island. Euphemius then invited Muslims from North Africa to help him battle the emperor's troops. Euphemius was killed in battle, but the Muslims remained to occupy Sicily for two centuries. [5,6] What this has to do with the little island in the gulf of Palermo is not explained, but if it was referred to as "island of Euphemius", this would have been in Latin "insula Euphemii" (genitive or possessive case). Then conjecture is that this gradually evolved to "insula Femi", then "insula Fimi", then "Isula di Fimmini" (Fimmini being the Sicilian word for women.) until finally "Isola delle Femmine" (Island of Women in Italian) as

Latin morphed into Sicilian and then into Italian; plausible, but still not a proven source of the name. [4,7,8,9] It does seem clear that the people of the area around Palermo, including this town, remember parts of this legend because there is a street in the town named Lungomare Eufemio (Seafront Blvd Eufemio) as well as a Hotel Eufemia. There was even a soccer team called Eufemia.

Another possible origin of the name starts with the fact that a structure was erected from the shore of what is now the city of Isola delle Femmine to the small island with a large net stretched across the narrow water passageway. The purpose of this structure was to catch Bluefin tuna that normally passed through that narrow passage, possibly as part of its migratory path. These large fish can exceed 10 feet in length weighing over 900 pounds. The structure was called a tonnara, a name derived from the Italian word “tonno” for tuna and commonly applied to facilities to process tuna as well as to catch them. [10] Some traces of these processing facilities remain on the mainland. The date of its construction is not known but it existed during the Norman rule of Sicily (1061 to 1189) and likely was built during the Moslem rule (902 to 1061). Legend has it that this tonnara was given the Arabic name for “mouth” or “entrance” which is pronounced as one would pronounce an English word written as “fim”. This word “fim” was Latinized into “Fimis” and then transformed into a word that sounded like Sicilian “Fimi”. [1,11]

In 1176, William II, the last Norman king of Sicily, granted large amounts of land to the Abbey at Monreale, which is located on a hill above this area. This grant was contained in a decree document that not only included statements listing the properties granted to the Abbey but also specified rights and privileges granted for use of the properties. It also included the statement: “... cum omnibus iusticiis et pertinentiis suis eidem onasterio concedimus et donamus Tunnarium quoque quae est in insula quae dicitur fimi prope portum gali ...”. [12,13] Translated into English this would read: “... with all the responsibilities and appurtenances, to the monastery is granted and donated the Tonnara which is on the island called fimi, near the port of galus ...”. With this decree the Norman king William II, called the Good, gave the first Abbot Teobaldo, bishop of Monreale (who had built a monastery there in 1174), this Tonnara and it referred to the small island by the name “fimi”. The parchment on which the edict was written can be found in the Tabularium of Santa Maria Nuova in Monreale. [12,13] All this was later reaffirmed by an ecclesiastical bulletin of the Archdiocese of Monreale in 1912 which repeated that the decree of 1176 included the Tonnara stating that it was located on the island named Fimi and went on to describe the location of the island with modern names of landmarks in its vicinity. [14,13] Therefore, by the 12th century, the name of the little island was acknowledged to be Fimi. In Sicilian, the word for women is “fimmuni”, as stated above. Then, it is quite possible for “Fimi” to evolve to “Fimmuni”, and “insula Fimi” to “insula Fimmuni”, then to Sicilian “Isola di Fimmuni” and then to “Isola delle Femmine” in Italian rather than Sicilian. [1,7,15,16,17] In the 12th century, Sicily was very multi-lingual. The court language was thought to be Norman-French but official documents, especially those dealing with the Church were written in Latin as demonstrated by the decree of 1176 discussed above. The Norman rulers relied mostly on the local Sicilian population, who initially spoke Arabic, Latin and Greek, for administrative and artisan work, but forms of Sicilian were already evolving. [18] It rose to the level of a literary language with the Sicilian School (1230–1266) [19] founded by Frederick II, the last heir to the Norman crown, and continued to be Sicily’s dominate language until well past the unification of Sicily with the nascent Kingdom of Italy in 1860.

The record then of the small island being called Fimi in the 12th century is well established. The exact origin of that name relies on legend. Either the path from Euphemius or the path from the Arabic word for mouth could have led to Fimi with the Arabic path more likely given the documented

existence of the Tonnara. How Fimi evolved into Femmine relies on likely language evolution as the several root languages evolved into Sicilian and then the accepted Italian language. Neither of the possible origins for “Fimi” nor the evolutionary language path to “Femmine” associates the origin of the name of the island and then the name of the town with women. Further, it was quite natural for the town, which had been referred to as Tonnara prior to it being an independent municipality, to adopt the name Isola delle Femmine given the historical ties of the ancient tonnara, the island and the town. [1]

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1. *STATUTO DEL COMUNE DI ISOLA DELLA FEMMINE (Provincia di Palermo)*, <http://www.comune.isoladellefemmine.pa.it/attachments/article/20/Statuto.pdf> (2005).
 2. “Pliny the Younger: Letters”, *Attalus*. <http://www.attalus.org/info/pliny.html>.
 3. Floriti, Maria, "L'Isola delle Femmine", *Parlermoviva.it (in Italian)*, <http://www.palermoviva.it/l-isola-delle-leggende/>.
 4. Prigent, Vivien, "La carrière du tourmarque Euphémios, basileus des Romains". In Jacob, André; Martin, Jean-Marie; Noyé, Ghislaine (eds.), *Histoire et culture dans l'Italie byzantine: acquis et nouvelles recherches* (in French) École française de Rome, pp. 279–317 (2006).
 5. Treadgold, Warren, *The Byzantine Revival*, pp.780–842. Stanford University Press, ISBN 978-0-8047-1462-4 (1988).
 6. Metcalfe, Alex, *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*, Edinburgh University Press, ISBN 978-0-7486-2008-1 (2009).
 7. “European Commission, DG MARE, Studies for carrying out the Common Fisheries Policy: Lot 3 Socio-economic dimensions in EU fisheries, Isola delle Femmine case study report”, http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/documentation/studies/socio_economic_dimension/files/cs-sicily-6-isola-delle-femmine_en.pdf (2013).
 8. Amari, Michele, *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia*, vol. I, (in Italian) ed. and rev. by C. Nallino, Catania (1933).
 9. Chisholm, Hugh, ed., *Encyclopedia Britannica (11th ed.)*. Cambridge University Press (1911).
 10. La Mantia, Vito, *Le Tonnare in Sicilia* (in Italian), Palermo (2012).
 11. There are English to Arabic translators on the Web. Some provide a pronunciation of the Arabic word. One such translation can be found at: <https://translate.yandex.com/?lang=en-ar&text=mouth>, which it pronounces and writes as: الفم for both "mouth" and "the mouth".
 12. Editto Reale Privilegio di Guglielmo II, Re di Sicilia, parchment n. 15, Carlo Alberto Garufi, ed. *Catalogo Illustrato del Tabulario di S. Maria Nuova in Monreale* (1902), located at the Biblioteca Regionale Siciliana in Palermo.
 13. The illustrated catalog containing the parchment of the Royal edict of reference 5 and the text of the Bollettino Ecclesiastico of reference 6 were located with much diligence by Orazio Sansonini; this work made the assertions of this article much more compelling.
 14. “Prospetto Storico dell’ Archidiocesi di Monreale – Isola delle Femmine”, *Bollettino Ecclesiastico della Archidiocesi di Monreale*, Monreale, Aprile (1912).
 15. Matthew, Donald, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*. Cambridge University Press (1992).
 16. “William II, King of Sicily”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/644121/William-II>.
 17. “Chronology of the Abbey at Monreale”, http://www.duomomonreale.it/indexdaae.html?option=com_content&task=view&id=250&Itemid=325&lang=en.
 18. Johns, Jeremy, *Arabic Administration in Norman Sicily: The Royal Diwan*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781139440196 (2002).
 19. Cipolla, Gaetano, "U sicilianu è na lingua o un dialettu? / Is Sicilian a Language?". *Arba Sicula* (in Sicilian and English). XXV (1&2) (2004).