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The Sicilian port towns in the eighteenth century: trade, social actors, infrastructure improvements and urban development

1. During the eighteenth century the interaction between economic and commercial activities and urban development in Sicily's major port towns (Messina, Palermo e Trapani) became quite complicated because of the peculiar commercial shipping of the island: indeed, in Sicilian ports, freight unloading usually exceeded goods loading. Therefore, ships had to look for other places of loading along the coast, close to raw material and food production sites. A more flexible movement of goods was under development and, at the same time, the number of storage locations was increasing. The growing short-sea shipping was multiplying trade routes. As for the city of Messina, the Greek *emporium* facing the sea, with the peculiar orography of its surroundings separating it from Sicilian inland, the infrastructure improvement of the port was still the main issue that had to be considered in its urban planning. After the revolt of Messina from 1674 to 1678, the shape of its harbour had changed. A pentagonal fortress called Cittadella had been built: it extended upward like a barrier between the city and San Raineri peninsula. The entire sickle-shaped area looked like a military post: the sixteenth-century Lanterna by Giovannangelo Montorsoli had been fortified; the storehouses located in the port had been used as a quartering for troops. All visual obstacles had been removed from the firing line between the ramparts of the new fortress and the city centre, because the Citadel had two functions: it was a defence against foreign danger and a menacing deterrent to popular uprisings. However, tensions eased in a few years and the revitalisation of trade became the main issue.

As a matter of fact, in 1695, Messina had been granted the status of free port which, in a short time, affected positively the revival of trade. When the war of the Spanish succession broke out, trade

relations with Holland and England – enemies of the Spain – were interrupted, thus provoking, for example, a steady reduction in silk exports. The status of free port also represented a main issue in public debate under the Savoyard administration. The reports sent to the king emphasized both the structural deficiencies of the Peloritana free port, and the difference between the economic conditions and trade in Messina and Livorno. According to those accounts, the success of the Tuscan port depended on the development of its local economies and on a wider exemption from custom duties. The new regulations, formulated by Victor Amadeus II in August 1714, for the free-port and the lazaretto (quarantine station) of Messina gave the requests of the businessmen of the city very little consideration. Meanwhile, foreign traders were increasing. In 1717 Victor Amadeus II empowered the British consul, Thomas Chamberlayne, to establish a Court having jurisdiction to preside not only over cases between his compatriots, but also between the English and the Sicilians. Thus, the British merchant community was giving itself judicial autonomy to defend its own interests. In addition, consul Chamberlayne, in charge of the *British Factory* in Messina, had the authority to appoint assessors and counselors who could have issued judgements in those cases. Only one appeal was allowed, and the king would have been called upon to give an opinion. The privileges of the English merchants working in Messina were substantially expanding. Moreover, their negotiating power with Sicilian institutions had already been granted by the treaty that had been signed by Spain in May 1667 and embodied in the Convention ratified by Victor Amadeus on March 8th, 1713. A few years later, when Sicily came under Habsburg rule, the *Court of Judicature* was suppressed (1726) because of the tensions within the British merchant community and, at the same time, of the mercantilist policy under Charles VI

2. Ships used to call at the port of Palermo to buy wheat. Not only did merchants negotiate wheat purchases, which was then collected from warehousing centers by the port (the so-called *caricatoï*) right next to their place of origin, but they also bought the necessary transportation permit, that is the *royalty* they had to pay to the monarchy.

In Sicily's capital, by the Molo Vecchio (the Old Pier), the expanding city limits and the growing trade needs required the construction of a new pier in the North, between 1566 and 1590. The ongoing interest for the waterfront during the eighteenth century did not imply any radical measures, but it focused on preventing the port from filling up because of storm surges or accumulation of fluvial silts, as well as on maintenance works or on changing of the functional requirements of the existing infrastructures.

Palermo had been strengthening its role of consumer market since the end of the seventeenth century. During a very difficult period for Sicilian trade, which persisted all the way into and through the beginning of the fourth decade of the eighteenth century, in the port of Palermo imports from several areas of Sicily increased, whereas exports volumes fell dramatically. Ships leaving from Palermo carried grain, oil, oranges, lemons, cheese, tuna in brine, cork, salt and sulphur; among the goods imported into the island there were wine, grain, coal, logs and plank of wood, iron, canvas and cloths, silk, cotton, sugar, sulphur, salt, sumac and codfish. Some of these products (oil, grain, salt, sumac, sulphur, etc.) were both imported and exported, confirming that Palermo – as well as Messina – served as a valuable centre for collecting and unloading goods for minor ports of the island. Foreign products reached Sicily via Messina (English leather goods, plank of wood, dates, rubber, English fabrics, etc.), sometimes via Trapani (finely-chopped tobacco leaves, Dutch stockfish and cheese) and via Malta (Brazilian tobacco, coffee). As for trade routes, it should be emphasized that Palermo was the departure point of one of the busiest trade routes to reach the grain ports of southern Sicily (Girgenti, Sciacca, Licata and Pozzallo), and then carry on to Livorno, Genoa or the Iberian ports (Barcelona, Gibraltar, Lisbon).

3. Trapani was the third most important port in Sicily, after Messina and Palermo, for two reasons: its peculiar sickle-shaped spur extending towards the sea, and its geographical proximity to African coasts. In the mid eighteenth century several structural works were carried out to improve the efficiency of the port (for example, the construction of the Molo della Sanità and the Colombaia Tower). Trapani was the main port of call of the island for the exportation of salt. During the first

three decades of the eighteenth century Trapani exported about 28.300 *salme* of salt a year. Salt represented 4/5 of export value to foreign countries. There were other exported goods from Trapani, such as corals, tuna fish salami and cheese. Part of the boats used by local marine were built in Trapani, characterized by lively shipping activities and a high level of expertise in shipbuilding. The owners of the boats played a key role in trade and enjoyed a high standing among the poor majority of the population, that used to work in the fishing sector, in tuna-fishing factories or chose to sign in as sailors. Some of them were half way between ship-owners and merchants. And there were boat owners who, far from being merchants themselves, had complex contractual relations in the form of trade with them.

4. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the growth of European population increased demands for Sicilian wheat, which started to, once again, become the most important export product. In two decades, from 1756-57 to 1775-76, average exports of grain were about one hundred and fifty thousand *salme*. Although Sicilian merchant fleet had been upgraded, most of foreign trade was usually carried out by Genoese ships, a situation which helped to keep the island dependent on large foreign fleets for Sicilian consignments on the high seas. Consular archives have provided for two valuable reports, not only for their exhaustive survey of Sicily's foreign trade, but also because they described the "backroom deals" made by all those social actors (merchants, consuls, governors, etc.) who pursued their own interests in a relational dimension where power hierarchy was being modified in their own social context.

The first report (14 may 1765), written by the English consul in Messina, George Tatem, gives a detailed description of trade exchange with Great Britain. As for silk trade, the consul remarked that, although it was Piedmont that met most of the strong foreign demand, England imported from Sicily about 200 bales of raw silk and *organzini* (organzine silk) a year. Among the other imported goods there were oil, *manna* (sugary substance), raisin from the island of Lipari, wines, cantharides and tartar. Tatem added that, owing to the treaty signed with Spain in 1667, English citizens were guaranteed privileges similar to those granted to most favoured countries: besides, they were

exempted from the payment of some import duty rates that were higher than those paid by the native Sicilian population. According to the consul, however, the compulsory quarantine for foreign ships damaged navigation and trade. Indeed, it was an expensive waste of time, more than any other charge. In Tatem's opinion, it was for these reasons that foreign ships used Sicilian ports of calls only when necessary. He thought that the only remedy was to guarantee a stable and fair income for doctors, notaries and for other subordinate officers of the Deputazione di Salute, so that they could have been dissuaded from making profit on their working activities. In addition, according to Tatem, foreign consuls should have always been informed if a quarantine order was issued and when it was lifted. And they would have been in turn expected to inform consuls living in other places. In that way, vessel captains would have learnt about the formalities required by the ports of Sicily they were going to, and carry out the procedures in time.

Among the reasons which adversely affected British trade, Tatem reported also that it was difficult to obtain redress and justice with regard to fraudsters, and that an ordinance had been issued about the obligation for merchants to declare the quantity and the price of the silk purchased. The truth or accuracy of the declared value, however, could have been easily determined carrying out a search of the houses and of the account books of foreign merchants. Tatem wrote that, when the ordinance was issued, he informed James Gray, the English ambassador to the Court of Naples. He thought that the expedient suggested by Tatem was highly worthy of consideration, so he advised his fellow citizens to get around the rules by purchasing silk using the names of Sicilian people. The considerations of the English consul might appear quite self-contradictory: in the same document he had accused the Bourbon government of being weak against smuggling, but, in fact, he had used an *escamotage*, a ruse clearly associated with smuggling, to get around a rule harming the interests of the British citizens. Indeed, the aim of foreign consuls was to protect their homeland interests and, ultimately, their own interests: actually, consuls were almost always merchants themselves. However, it was well-known, in Naples as well as in Palermo, that English and French were involved in illegal trade.

5. Another report about trade between Sicily and Great Britain was written by the English consul in Messina, Hermann Katenkamp, on February 8th, 1774. He gave a detailed account of Sicilian import products: different types of woollen cloths and cotton fabrics, silk drapes from Lyon interwoven with gold and silver, alum, brass, iron, lead, tin, coal tar, pitch, colophony, fish dried or in brine, cheese and various kind of spices. Katenkamp remarked that most of woollen and cotton fabrics, and all the lead and tin, came from Great Britain, whereas the other products were partly from Great Britain and partly from France and Italy. The list of the British ships in the busiest ports of Sicily in 1773, annexed to the consul's report, is of great interest because it was based on a full review of the account books of the "secrezie" of Messina, Trapani and Palermo, and not on estimates. Forty British vessels arrived at the port of Messina, thirty-eight at the port of Trapani and fifty-seven at the port of Palermo. A total amount of one hundred and thirty-five vessels shows the importance English merchant ships in Sicily's foreign trade. As for ships reaching the main Sicilian ports from other foreign countries, three hundred and seventeen were French, two hundred and forty-one were Genoese, ninety-six were Spanish, forty were Swedish, thirty-five were Dutch, twenty-five were Danish and seventeen were the Imperial ones. The main role was obviously played by the Neapolitan navy and its six hundred and ten vessels, and by the Sicilian navy, with one hundred and forty ships. Further remarks on traffic flow of foreign vessels show that Messina was the favourite port of call for French, whereas Spanish and Genoese preferred Palermo, and, finally, Swedish ships used to dock above all in the port of Trapani, where they could load all the salt they needed to preserve fish. Going back to British merchant vessels, it seems quite clear, from the ports of origin and the goods they used to carry, that there was a direct export of the English products to Messina. Ships in ballast arrived at the port of Trapani to load the salt to be delivered to England, Terranova, North America and also to Russia and Sweden. British merchant vessels offering trade commission service called at the port of Palermo. They usually carried on sailing until they reached the warehousing centers (*caricato*) of the island to load grain. Only a few English ships unloaded goods in Palermo; anyway, they were mostly products from countries importing Sicilian wheat (Spain, Portugal, Genoa, etc.).

6. Moreover, in late eighteenth century, the city of Palermo was changing its physiomy. The city expanded itself beyond the city walls towards the countryside, not only to create a closer relationship with its own *hinterland*, which could have in fact represented the most economically beneficial solution for trade, but above all for the widespread trend for spending the summer holidays in mansion houses with green spaces. In Messina, where the earthquake of 1783 had destroyed great part of the architectural heritage of the city, a new arterial road was built to honour the king, via Ferdinanda, located between via dei Banchi and via dei Ferrari e dei Campanellari: actually, it was the redevelopment of the area called “*quartiere degli artigiani*”, aiming at reducing population density by the port and, at the same time, creating a healthier built-up environment. In addition, the first plans for the construction of the new Palazzata were coming forward – it was the defensive wall running along the western side of the port, a symbol the city was proud of – because the old one had been severely damaged. It was finished in 1840. The increased number of the city gates (from fourteen to twenty-three) was probably the clearest and most visible sign of the enduring connection between the city and its port.

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