A Maritime City of the Reticular Mediterranean System

Gate of Sicily, gate towards the Levant, gate between East and West: the term “gate”, often used in defining Messina, certainly reflects a condition lasted for centuries. Let’s now go through a thousand years from Arab period to 2000, when we still can read about Messina as the “gate of Sicily”, to draw elements of a long-lasting history. This approach is permitted by being the studied historical object still alive: the maritime city of Messina. To play the card of the long durée history has its charm, a form of seduction of course; however, beyond persistence, it needs to place again the cyclical fluctuations, phenomena not to neglect. To do otherwise risks to displace us in front of some "newness" emerging "all at once” in some transition.

If Messina is a “gate” then is an “access city”, entry threshold to a whole region and at the same time revolving and transit toward wider urban structures established in Europe and in the Mediterranean from medieval age. “Access cities” mean those maritime ports of the great island, where traffic crosses the threshold of coasting trade to enter the long distance commercial circuit. Every day, for almost nine of the ten considered centuries, Sicilian ports can be seen in a busy comings and goings of small vessels, that with their continuous movements cover the island coastline, taking and carrying locally-produced merchandise from port to port. Goods, intended largely for domestic and daily consumption, prefer sea routes to land routes, because the greater difficulty of travelling in the latter, if not for their impracticability in some seasons of the year.

On the contrary, the movement of luxury goods originated in an “elsewhere” that was not Sicily with the closest areas. Trade with distant lands, which since antiquity had covered the valuables goods, even in the transition from Arab presence to the Norman Conquest, was confirmed by the competence of some port cities in the region. These cities, not so many in truth, acted as a gateway to commercial remote paths, but they were also nodes in a network with practically no direct constraints: the sea is open and on it you can trace the routes at will, affected only by the interest in the exchange and in the network of relationships that could stretch from one port to others, even distant, even of very different languages.

These cities are not unlike all those other centers of the Mediterranean, which formed, following Hohenberg and Lees, a grid system. The reticular system, with its different properties, completes the mechanism of central places: instead of a recursive hierarchy of similar centers, distinguished mainly by the number and rarity of its services, it has a sort of functionally complementary towns and urban settlements. The fundamental property of a city, from the standpoint of the system, is not to be a center, but a node.
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