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A maritime city of the Reticular Mediterranean System

Gate of Sicily, gate towards the Levant, gate between East and West of the Mediterranean: the term “gate”, often used in defining Messina, certainly reflects a condition lasted for centuries. “Porta” and “porto”, gate and port: in Latin and the Romance languages the terms have the same root¹, and Messina has much to do with the relationship between “porta” and “porto”.

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 consider 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 it is an “access city”, entry threshold to a whole region and at the same time revolving door 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 doorstep of the 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 than land routes, because the greater difficulty of travelling in the latter.

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 was interested in valuable assets, 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.

These cities in the Mediterranean, following Hohenberg and Lees², formed a reticular system. The reticular system, with its different properties, completes the mechanism of central places: instead of a recursive hierarchy of similar centres, 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 centre, but a node.

¹ P. Matvejevic, *Mediterranean. A Cultural Landscape*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1999, pp.159-160.

² P.M. Hohenberg-L.H. Lees, *La città europea dal Medioevo a oggi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1992.

The real Sicilian cities of access were maritime ports associated with, rather than separated from the Mediterranean. And you could count them on the fingers of one hand: Syracuse, Catania, Messina, Palermo and Trapani.

These cities were part of a regional system, connected to the larger Mediterranean network. Considering the *long durée*, Sicilian port system assumes different orders, depending on economic cycles of the sea which it faces, and in turn it has an internal hierarchy in which the role of Messina stands out.

Although the city of the Straits, for most of the period, is competing with Palermo for the title of capital of the Kingdom of Sicily, in terms of opening to trades on a long distance has an undoubted prevalence.

When the regional political and economic primacy is divided, the conflict is not slow to appear: so it happens in Sicily, with “Palermo, the city of grain, and Messina, the capital of silk. The long-dominant Spanish authorities took great care not to choose between them: you must divide and rule”³. Sicilian space, although the market is doubly involved in both regional and international level, is divided between areas that have a tendency to live independently, and points inclined to be open to different external circuits. Among these points, which are the port-cities of access, Messina shines.

Confirmatory evidence of this predominance occurs in the conclusion of the competition between Palermo and Messina: after the Messina revolt against Spain (1674-1678), Palermo is definitely the capital, positioning itself as a central place in a hierarchy of cities, towns, settlements and territories, functionally complementary, and taking up its order, through the permanent presence of the viceroys.

But since the reticular cities easily establish a remote control, the influence of a city like this has little to do with the exercise of a formal rule in the territory. Messina, in some ways, can be defined as the “small” capital of the Straits, a narrow land area where to exercise its dominance.

The city is at the head of a mini-territorial hierarchy, which sees second place in Reggio Calabria and then, gradually, little towns, small maritime centres, from which many sea lanes sail to the sickle-shaped harbour of the Straits; and then, again and finally, the tiny villages scattered in the countryside of this small district.

³ F. Braudel, *Civiltà materiale, economia e capitalismo (secoli XV-XVIII)*, III, *I tempi del mondo*, Einaudi, Turin 1982, p.289.



In this district the Messinese ensure the supply of wheat, which the city is arranging in Sicilian grain ports. In Calabria they had, during the Byzantine and Arab periods, big business interests in raw silk, corn, minerals.

The real “domain” of the city of the Straits takes place in the Mediterranean.

The spatial characteristics of this area - commercial paths, nodes, access points, outposts - are largely invisible on a conventional map.

Since the Mediterranean cities of the system are interconnected nodes of a network, often without either first origin or final destination, they are somewhat interchangeable, as the routes themselves. Indeed, although the history is centuries old, it must be followed in its alternations of high and low cycles and economic trends.

Two imperial systems are struggling for the supremacy in the Mediterranean between 1453 and 1571; both wanted to direct the flow of economic goods within their two separate networks through the use of monopolies combined with the use of force. But the network system that covers the whole basin seems to resist, climbing over the specific political borders of the Spanish Empire and of the Ottoman Empire, although over these boundaries sharp-eyed bureaucracies watch and armed forces are always ready for action.

The boundaries of empires are passed over by the “raids” of the northern vessels driven by the modern world economy; the descent of the North-men in the Mediterranean, in particular the British, “est chose commence”, according to Braudel and Romano, already in 1547⁴.

In mid-sixteenth century the trade between the Western Mediterranean and the Levant regains its importance: the web is woven back and Messina will be interwoven. Two directions, according to Maurice Aymard, intersect the extraordinary port of the Straits: the route between the Adriatic and the Tyrrhenian Sea, in particular between Apulia the largest producer of wheat and oil and Naples which is great eater, and lines of communication between east and west of the Mediterranean⁵.



Very significant, to confirm the importance of these routes, is the table developed by Giulio Fenicia on the archival documents of Dubrovnik: it considers the insurance premiums paid in Ragusa about the routes with stopovers in ports of the Kingdom of Naples in the first half of the sixteenth century. Messina there appears in constant relationship with Amalfi, Barletta and as intermediate point between Naples and the Levant⁶.

Right in the Levant, the new relations between Messina and Alexandria are intense enough to worry Charles V and the Viceroy of Naples, Toledo, for the “extraction que se haze de moneda de oro y plata” used in the purchase of Oriental goods. In contrast, in 1546, the Sicilian Viceroy “condemns the ban on exports of cash, gold

⁴ F. Braudel-R. Romano, *Navires et marchandises à l'entrée du port de Livourne (1547-1611)*, Paris 1951, p.49.

⁵ M. Aymard, *Palermo e Messina*, in M. Ganci-R. Romano (eds.), *Governare il mondo. L'impero spagnolo dal XV al XIX secolo*, Società siciliana per la storia patria, Palermo 1991, p.147.

⁶ G. Fenicia, *Politica economica e realtà mercantile nel Regno di Napoli nella prima metà del XVI secolo (1503-1556)*, Cacucci, Bari 1996, p.196.

and silver”, because “it deprives the market of cash with harmful consequences for trade and, consequently, for the customs revenue of the Royal Court”⁷.

There is also a pecuniary network in the Mediterranean: gold and silver enter into this sea coming from afar and leave to go away. There are nodes of accumulation and ligatures of passage: Messina seems to belong to this second category. “The galleys of Genoa in August each year go to Messina, bringing boxes of ‘reals’” for the purchase of silk, valuable commodity flowing in the channels of merchant network on long distance and privilege of some port cities of the Mediterranean system.



Messina receives “cash the coins for silk”⁸, but nothing can stop their run to the ports of the Levant and from there to the Red Sea or caravan routes, at loss of sight.

We do not want to run after them, it is enough to recognize, with Braudel, that until “the beginning of the eighteenth century Genoese merchants and shopkeepers are still on the island”. Their head companies in Genoa agree to send in Sicily “considerable amounts of 'genovine', very fine silver coins much-prized in Italy”⁹.

The city port of the Straits had been from long time access gate of the Mediterranean reticular system and the presence of foreign merchants was a stabilized factor from a historical point of view. The municipal government of Messina does not adopt special policies towards foreign merchants, being a sort of a middle way between the Leghorn pattern and the Genoa one. A foreigner is “relatively foreigner” on the shore of the Straits: some groups – for example those from Pisa or Genoa – are present in Messina since the Norman period, others have more recent presences, but they integrate themselves quite easily. These economic agents promote also the entrance and the diffusion of heterogeneous materials in the urban context, increasing its variability and its richness. This phenomenon is particularly marked in artistic and architectonic fields: during the sixteenth century Messina is ready to welcome representatives of the Tuscan school, using their skills for the monuments and the fortifications.

⁷ G. Fenicia, *Politica economica...* cit., p.55.

⁸ A. Serra, *Breve trattato delle cause che possono far abbondare li regni d'oro e d'argento dove non sono miniere* (1613), in *Scrittori classici di economia politica*, Destefanis, Milan 1803, pp.115 e 117.

⁹ F. Braudel, *Civiltà materiale...* cit., p.146.

“Relatively foreigner” on the shore of the Straits, foreign merchants are also useful for attaching this port city to the Mediterranean and European network by the exportation of products: the best example is silk trade.

There isn't only trade in the sixteenth century Mediterranean network: during the first seventy years of the century there is also the great conflict between the two empires that share the Mediterranean and are contending for supremacy. In this context, the position of military frontier of the Straits is mostly exalted: under the martial and under the commercial networks are the spy plots, that in Messina have a point where gather information, true or false as they were, to diverge in each direction were interested in this intelligence action.

So the Turks knew from spies “muy buenas” what are the Christian port cities undefended, while Christians can record the movements of the Turkish fleet.

Then there is a special relationship with another centre of the Mediterranean network: Malta. Since the Spaniards had entrusted it to the St. John's Knights in 1530, Messina serves, with Syracuse, as supply base for the island located in the middle of the Straits of Sicily: from Messina supplies arrive in Malta and at Messina are regularly sold the prizes of corsairs warfare.

Valuable “goods” are also the slaves: in this particular case too, we may well speak of a Mediterranean network to which Messina is properly interwoven.

Indeed, following the footsteps of Giovanna Fiume, the network crosses, in this domain, the black African commerce, “by intercepting the flow of slaves who comes from one of the most important caravan routes through the Sahara, that leading from Bornou, near Lake Chad, to Barca in Libya and from there to markets of Scoglitti (Ragusa) and Augusta (Siracusa) or that from the Orient reaching the bathroom of Messina or from Tunis and Tripoli to the market in Palermo”¹⁰.

Routes and trades stretch on the Mediterranean, but it lacks a map of the currents of slavery, as well as amber and spices, silks and perfumes, wheat and salt. In that map slave markets should be identified better, and Messina may submit an application for a good position in the Modern Age.

Let's consider the year 1538¹¹. The defeat in the naval Battle of Preveza did not deter the ships of the Christian fleet from raids on the coasts of Epirus, channeling on Messina their loot with its human victims.

If on them the claim of the great Admiral of Sicily stirs up, “freedom of Messina trade sanctioned by royal and imperial privileges” is raised in opposition¹².

At Messina it is possible to have a supply of slaves, satisfying needs and desires from different parts of the Mediterranean. Thus, in 1595, one hundred “Turkish” slaves

¹⁰ G. Fiume, *Schiavitù mediterranea. Corsari, rinnegati e santi di età moderna*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2009, pp.23-24.

¹¹ C.D. Gallo, *Annali della Città di Messina*, second volume, Gaipa, Messina 1758, p.521.

¹² V. Saccà, *Mercato di schiavi turchi*, in “Archivio storico messinese”, VI, 1905, pp.151-153.

arrive in the city of the Straits to satisfy the “desire” of the Pope Clement VIII to have them for “reinforcement” of his fleet. The Order of Jerusalem in Malta provides for them¹³.

Two episodes, which have as protagonist the Knight of St. Stephen Stephen Inghirami, are indicative of the almost inextricable tangle webbing valuable goods and interchange nodes in the Mediterranean. In 1605 Inghirami made a quick stop in Paxos to compile an accurate inventory of the booty of his personal warfare: 300 slaves are conducted in the galleys. A part of these is left in Messina. Ten years after Inghirami leaves from Leghorn to Messina; aboard the “St. Stephen” is hosted Fakr-el-Din, the Emir of Saida. Landed the host and placed the clothes loaded on account of some Florentine merchants, Inghirami addresses the master of the Christian fleet ready to fight the Turks. His offer is refused; he returns to Livorno Leghorn with the galleys loaded with bales of silk valued at 50,000 crowns¹⁴.

When we speak of a network system in the Mediterranean is simplistic to think only of travels of valuable goods, of trade on the long run. The network is more complex, it moves, shakes, twists market and anti-market, war and peace, economic exchange and military confrontation.

Maurice Aymard tells what happens in Messina after the famous battle of Lepanto. In the great port of Messina at the end of summer 1571, Don John of Austria gathers all the forces of the Christian League fleet. At the same port, immediately after Lepanto, the fleet was welcomed with great pomp and fanfare: the winners split the spoils of battle, the galleys taken from the Turks and many prisoners. “Among the reasons why the winners decided to turn back, instead of moving towards the Aegean Sea and Constantinople, there are also, admittedly, some more exquisitely concerned with business: war and trade are indivisible. The galleys of Malta, Florence and Genoa in particular had carried to Messina large quantities of clothes and other luxury goods, for the great fair of mid-August, and four days after the battle, G.A. Doria and F. Spinola are already talking about leaving the army to return to load silks necessary to Genoese manufacture”¹⁵.

There is Lepanto in 1571, but there is also the plague coming from Alexandria, in 1575. After the “fight to the death” in the Ionian sea, the games of the exchange will reopen immediately. The strength of commercial intersections, such as destiny chosen by the men of maritime nodes, reasserts itself on the strength of arms: “In 1575 a ship coming from Alexandria infected with the plague Syracuse and then

¹³ G. Moroni, *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica da S. Pietro sino ai nostri giorni*, Tipografia Emiliana, Venice 1840-1841, p.143.

¹⁴ *Iacopo Inghirami di Volterra. Cavaliere di Santo Stefano. Marchese di Montegiovi*, in <http://www.corsaridelmediterraneo.it/corsari/i/inghirami-iacopo.html>.

¹⁵ M. Aymard, *Palermo e...* cit., p.148, who in turn quotes G. Arenaprimo, *Il ritorno e la dimora a cristiana dopo la battaglia di Lepanto. Nuovi documenti*, in “Archivio Storico Siciliano”, 1903, XXVIII, pp.78-79.

stretched out to Messina and Palermo”¹⁶. In this case we can see the superimposition of the microbic on Mediterranean commercial network.

By the seventeenth century the port of Messina could not escape the wider crisis: its economy was related to position. Even in 1612 it appears to the agent of Grand Duke of Tuscany as a “flourishing” stopover, where the “adventurers” ships from England, Flanders and France dock on their way to the Levant¹⁷.

But at the end of the first half of the seventeenth century, precisely at the end of the Thirty Years War, Messina is in crisis because it has lost trade with the Levant.

Actually the Mediterranean changed and “from Messina hands had slipped the traffic with the Levant because the big ships, no longer having need of stopovers of Trapani and Palermo and Messina, took the navigation on the high seas and from the Straits of Gibraltar were pointing directly to Malta”¹⁸.

¹⁶ A.F. Ferrara, *Storia generale della Sicilia*, tomo VI, Dato, Palermo 1833, p.322.

¹⁷ G. Iacovelli, *Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, medico alla Corte di Cristina di Svezia*, in *Cristina di Svezia. Scienza ed alchimia nella Roma barocca*, Dedalo, Bari 1990, p.187.

¹⁸ C. Trasselli, *Messina 1674*, in S. Di Bella (ed.), *La rivolta di Messina (1674-1678) e il mondo mediterraneo nella seconda metà del Seicento*, Pellegrini, Cosenza 2001, p.176.