

Messina and the Eastern Sicily: a Mediterranean port and its hinterland in the Early Modern Age

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Under Arab domination (IXth-XIth century) Sicily was divided into three different valleys: the Val di Mazara (the north-western section of Sicily), the Val di Noto (the southern part of the island) and the Val Demone (the north-eastern area). Messina, near the north-east corner of Sicily, was the most important town in the Val Demone. Since ancient times '*grande histoire*' and local history have been intertwined in the Straits of Messina. In fact, thanks to its geographical position, the city was the meeting point both for the ships sailing between East and West Mediterranean, and for coastal navigation between the Ionian and the Tyrrhenian Seas. Products and merchandise coming from and going to Sicily, Calabria and many ports in the Mediterranean Sea passed through the port of Messina, which was the main trading place in Sicily.

Because Messina was isolated from the food-producing interior areas of Sicily, its survival depended on trade along the coasts. Its hinterland yielded very few cereals, so it was driven to trade in order to pay for grain and other staple goods coming from the Val di Mazara and Val di Noto. Messina was hemmed against the sea by the Peloritani Mountains, making its real hinterland of Messina the sea: its port was a natural shelter for ships and vessels of all kinds and had been a commercial emporium for centuries. Messina, in sort, was pushed inexorably outwards, towards the other countries of the Mediterranean. The core of the economic and social life of Messina was the natural 'sickle-shaped' port in the Straits.

Messina extended its domain over the surrounding territory or 'districtus', but, between XVth and XVIIth century, it had a dominant role in the whole eastern Sicily. Besides the market integration across the Straits were a significant point for the economy of Messina and in the XVIth century the business relations with Calabria improved.

In ports, with goods and people, also come ideas. And from Messina, even in this sense 'door of Sicily', Lutheranism, before, and Calvinism, then, spread over Sicilian society, although the Sicilian Inquisition prevented them from striking root.

However the economic and cultural development of Messina can be usefully analysed only within the framework of the Sicilian, Mediterranean and international scenarios. So this paper will examine Messina and its hinterland as a case study in a wider context by focusing on some aspects of international trade flows and some religious and cultural implications regarding the tensions between ruling and subordinate groups.

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