

## British Travellers in Messina, 1770 – 1815

Diletta D'Andrea\*

«*The landing in Messina is the most beautiful landing one can imagine: it is not as magnificent as Naples' landing, still its aspect is more charming. It is crescent shaped and it is surrounded by a series of four storey high buildings with a uniform aspect, stretching for one mile*». This is how, in 1770, Patrick Brydone described the port of Messina and the surrounding *Palazzata* or *Maritime Theatre*, that is to say the spectacular group of buildings which since 1622 composed a coherent vista of merchant houses and shops along the harbour. This symbol of the port-town was at that time the first element to impress every traveller arriving to Messina by sea. Brydone's *Tour through Sicily and Malta*, published in 1773 and immediately translated in French and German, represented a real and fundamental guide for all those travellers who reached Sicily from Northern Europe. The classic itinerary of the *Grand Tour* of Italy, the cultural tendency started in the XVII century, formerly found its southern limits in Rome and Naples. It was thanks to Brydone's enthusiastic survey that Sicily, and Messina in a very particular way, became part of that educational and enriching experience.

Since then, travellers arrived in Sicily in quite regular flows. Six years after Brydone's return to England, a second huge group of travellers arrived in Sicily, mainly from France (1776-1778). About seven years later a third important group came, composed chiefly of Germans (1785-1788). The fourth one, less numerous in its composition because of the beginning of the French Revolution, visited the Island between 1791 and 1794. If still in the XVII century British travellers in Sicily were a minority (Dryden, Brydone, Payne Knight, Swinburne), since the early years of the following century this situation completely changed because of an evident *raison d'être*. During the Napoleonic Wars and most of all during the British Decade (1806-1815), Messina in particular became the seat of the British military head-quarter in Sicily. This special historical juncture was the starting point for a new flow of British travellers, soldiers and politicians on one side, merchants and simple travellers on the other.

All over that period, the port of Messina was either the final destination or the starting point of all their travels, which produced from time to time several and striking descriptions of the Straits, the city and its beautiful and unique port, both during and after such dramatic events as the earthquake of 1783 and the Napoleonic Wars, and under several cultural, economic and social aspects (the beautiful appearance of the port itself and of the nearby buildings and surroundings, the commercial activities linked to its structure and site, its multi-ethnic character due to the presence of many nationalities attracted by the business opportunity offered by the free port). This paper, mainly through original bibliographical and archive sources, aims at analysing how these

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\* University of Messina, Italy.

descriptions helped build a new identity of Messina and introduce the city among the most favoured destinations of the *Grand Tour* of the European élites of the time.