Messina and the Eastern Sicily: a Mediterranean port and its hinterland in the Early Modern Age (XVIth and XVIIth centuries)

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1. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Messina was an emporium of the Mediterranean where trade flourished. Wealth circulated and the main beneficiaries were those nobles (*nobiles*) and citizens (*cives*) who, after the struggles of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, came together to manage public affairs and had largely convergent economic aims.

This "bourgeoisie" was primarily interested in organizing the production of and trade in silk. For this reason, its members came to take on a social profile that was unusual on the island: they obtained fiefs and titles in Sicily and in Calabria, but continued to remain in business. Indeed the *nobiles* of Messina did not aspire to get hold of mountain feuds, but rather places where they could invest part of their business earnings; their aims were clearly speculative, rather than being exclusively orientated around achieving status.

In the case of the Messina hinterland, the *nobiles* pushed southwards to Taormina, close to the cattle-, horse- and pig- breeding centres of Linguaglossa, Randazzo, and Taormina itself. They moved towards the south west, in the direction of Agrigento, a territory rich in the wheat which was such a rare and precious crop in the Val Demone, and also westwards toward the lowland of Milazzo. Finally they acquired land in Calabria whence a large proportion of the raw silk that was put onto the market in Messina originated.

The result of this process was a form of social osmosis between the *nobiles* and the most important *cives* families. What is more, the urban nobility did not constitute a closed oligarchy that precluded any possibility of upward social mobility. It increased its ranks by admitting "bourgeois" citizens who were co-opted among the nobles by various means including marriage, a career in the highest public offices, the exercise of the profession of medicine, or wealth. In addition, the economic expansion of the 16th century, the growth in silk production, and generalized commercial prosperity had ironed out differences within the elite and favored a commonality of interests. Therefore the wealthiest sections of the bourgeoisie participated fully in the city's public life—although the far more numerous members of the lower tiers of the same order remained excluded.

2. Local silk manufactures became the city's economic mainstay. Abundant fresh mulberry leaves were fundamental for successful silkworm rearing, so plantations of black mulberries became a typical element in the rural scenery of the Valdemone(the north-eastern area of Sicily). The activities of the silk sector were regulated by an institution that played a leading role in Messina during the Early Modern Age, namely the "*Consolato dell'Arte della Seta*"

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- Consulate of the Silk Craft. In 1520 Messina's silk weavers, at their own request and by intercession of the city's Senate, obtained permission from Viceroy Pignatelli to establish a Consulate of the Silk Craft whose chapters were approved by Emperor Charles V ten years later.

In 1591 Messina's ruling class donated 583,333 scudos to the king of Spain, Philip II, who granted Messina the privilege of being exempted from the tax on crude silk. In addition, thanks to this privilege, Messina established a monopoly over the silk trade in the large area covering the Termini-Messina-Siracusa triangle and it also saw the confirmation of some privileges and the granting of other concessions.

The sum offered to the court of Madrid was borrowed from Genoese bankers at high interest rates, and for the repayment of it new taxes were imposed. Furthermore, the practice of contracting out the taxes (*arrendamento* - leasing) set in motion a vicious circle, which led to a rise especially in the taxes on consumer goods and products essential to the city's economy (e.g., silk) to pay those reaping revenues from the public debt. This state of affairs in the running of city finances led to a rise in the cost of living, which starting from consumer goods, was reflected in all production and commercial activities to the point that it became the cause of the structural weakness of Messina's economy, which was doomed to rely more and more heavily on a system of monopolies. Moreover, these could allow collectors (lease holders) to control the entire production and marketing cycle of any given commodity.

As I have already hinted, Messina's trade was powered not only by the silk produced locally but also by a supply basin that went beyond the Valdemone to include southern Calabria. In the 16th century, Messina had a Consulate in Monteleone, one of the most important towns in "*Calabria Ultra*" for sericulture, and Messina also became a place where business between foreigners and Calabrians was conducted. Calabrians also paid for Sicilian grain with raw silk. Messina's merchants served as brokers within this economic circuit: they bought silk and sold on wheat bought in Sicily with an additional charge. The Ruffo of Sinopoli are an illustrative case: they bought Scilla (1533) and other fiefs on the shores of the Straits of Messina and invested in the silk trade, showing not only that there was a strong economic interconnection between Messina and the area of Southern Calabria, but also that silk was a very important business for the nobility. In the 1570s and 1580s, Fabrizio Ruffo borrowed huge sums, at interest rate of 7.5%, to invest in silk, grain and iron that he then resold in different markets. Both mulberry plantations and sericulture continued to expand in Southern Calabria, and in particular in the Reggio area, during the second half of the sixteenth century.

In the first half of the 17th century silk had become Sicily's most important export, totalling more than 400,000 *libras* (pounds) a year. The sector's first signs of decline were noticed by Messina's ruling *élite* only towards the middle of the century.

Table 1: Silk exports from the port of Messina (1592-1678)			
Year	*Total (in lbs.)*	*Year*	*Total (in lbs.)*
1592-1595	376,320	1657	334,601
1596-1599	385,612	1658	355,096
1600-1603	404,041	1659	468,352
1604-1607	460,202	1660	500,905
1608-1611	497,088	1661	541,208
1612-1615	470,669	1662	559,198
1616	482,412	1663	593,888
1617-1619	479,610	1664	619,182
1620	503,600	1665	481,279
1621-1624	512,020	1666	482,170
1625-1626	610,063	1667	385,897
1627-1630	492,401	1668	423,366
1631-1634	497,443	1669	398,004
1635-1638	520,302	1670	522,640
1639-1642	550,736	1671	327,128
1643	----------	1672	410,140
1644-1647	483,031	1673	430,600
1648	407,251	1674	174,962
1649	570,448	1675	52,536
1650-1653	467,211	1676	66,069
1654	344,644	1677	100,110
1655	592,278	1678 (until August)	88,020
1656	368,948		
Source: Maurice Aymard, "Commerce et production de la soie sicilienne aux XVI-XVII siècles", *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire*, École française de Rome, LXXVII, 2 (1965).			

3. Up to the mid-17th century a major role was played by the cultivation of sugarcane in the plantations - *cannameleti* - located especially around Taormina, Milazzo and Patti. Cultivating sugarcane required abundant water for irrigation and wood for cooking. The processing was done in mills - *trappeti* - and the production cycle required the labour of dozens of workers. Another result of its cultivation was the development of related economic activities employing many other people. Blacksmiths, carpenters, woodcutters, boilermakers, potters and other labourers supported and created the conditions for the development of the sugar industry by carrying out various tasks (e.g., transporting firewood) or making the tools needed for the processing and sale of sugar (presses, canvas sacks, clay moulds for the sugarloaves, the vats to boil molasses, and so on). Sugar production started an unrelentingly decline during the second half of the 17th century; this was due particularly to high production costs, climate change and, above all, competition by sugar from Brazil, which joined the other traditional competitors on the sugar market, namely Madeira, Cuba, the Canary Islands and Asia.

Another of Messina's major economic activities was shipbuilding. Besides the old dockyard, a new one was built in 1565 in the San Raineri Peninsula, near Forte San Salvatore. In 1615, with the easing of Ottoman pressure in the Mediterranean, the new dockyard was dismantled, while the older and smaller dockyard near Palazzo Reale continued its activities, although these were limited to maintenance and repair works.

Messina was also home to Sicily's mint, which employed a large number of skilled technicians and workers. Other important activities included printing and publishing and the making of maps and nautical charts. Salt pans could be found in the San Raineri Peninsula and between Faro and Ganzirri. The salt was mainly used to preserve fish and tuna, which was principally exported. Swordfish was caught predominantly for local consumption. Coral fishing in the Strait was rather important at least until the end of the 17th century. The coral was exported or used by local craftsmen.

Messina provided a transit route for slaves, dyes, spices and Levantine luxury goods on their way to Western Europe. Slaves were often captured by government fleets or even private ships during their anti-privateer activities. Very often western ships, by express statement of their authorities, put slaves on the market in Messina where they could be sold easily. Moreover the merchants from Messina were involved in trading of Catalan, English, Flemish and Florentine cloth to supply the domestic demand.

In some cases commerce between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean was also managed by *messinesi*. In an example from the early decades of the 16th century researched by Valdo D'Arienzo and Biagio Di Salvia, a number of Messina merchants (Andrea and Nuccio De Gurriero, Pantaleone Giurba, Bernardo Murro, Giovanni Antonio De Marchisio, his son Nicolò, and Ippolito de Andrea) formed a company by means of a limited partnership agreement (*contratto di accomandita*), and traded tuna and salted sardines between the Algarve and Messina. Such cargoes of tuna and sardines often also included bulky iron balls (*ballocti*) for

trading in Messina. These were companies whose skill in adapting to new forms of contractual relationship, whose ability to undertake risk, and whose obstinacy in seeking out new commercial spaces make them seem surprisingly modern. Such cases are a compelling corrective to the paradigm according to which Sicily after the Vespers was static, its economy characterized by mere subsistence levels.

The other products exported from Messina included olive oil, wine, salted fish, hazelnuts and cheese. Of course, they did not all come from the Messina district, but they would reach its market, which was a major one in those days. A port of call for French, Dutch, Genoese, Tuscan and Neapolitan merchants, Messina was almost a compulsory stop along the route that English vessels covered between the Levant and Livorno and it consolidated this role further around the mid-17th century when the 'safe routes' system was adopted. It was also a hub to other Mediterranean ports where English merchant ships and man-o-wars were based.

Trade was supported also by the insurance market despite the fact it witnessed a sharp decline in the early decades of the 17th century. Before a journey, merchants or shipowners would insure the goods or the entire vessel for a given amount by paying a premium. In turn, the insurer would cover the risk, in case of loss, up to a certain amount usually equal to just a part of the total insured. The policy signed by the insurers would be given to a notary who would make an authenticated copy to use if the original was lost. In case of a dispute between the parties the Consulate of the Sea of Messina would pass judgement.

Banks played an important and active role in the economic development of Messina although, according to the few indicators available, seem to witness a sharp decline in the 17th century.

Craftsmen making luxury goods (goldsmiths, silversmiths, silk makers, etc.), and specialized agriculture (grapes and olives) on Messina's farmsteads completed the city's and its district's range of production activities. The population grew three-fold over the course of a century: from the 25,000-30,000 inhabitants of the early 16th century, it rose to 100,000 inhabitants in the early years of the 17th century. This was the result of the sharp rise in birth compared to mortality and of the fact that the city drew migrants from its hinterland and especially from the Nebrodi area and from Calabria.

4. It is not just goods, but also ideas that circulate in a port city. In Messina the spread of Lutheranism began from the 1540s. Indeed, in December 1541, the first man to be convicted of Lutheran heresy was the friar Petruccio Campagna of the third order of St. Francis of Paola. Francesco Pagliarino, a native of Savoca and provincial of the order, was condemned by the Inquisition and burned alive in Palermo in July 1551. These are not isolated events. Lutheranism spread to various social strata in Sicily. Indeed in 1540, Bernardino Ochino, who was already suspected of heresy, arrived in Sicily and preached in Palermo and Messina. In the same year in

Catania, the heterodox *Trattato utilissimo del beneficio di Giesù Christo crocifisso verso i christiani* was drafted in the convent of St. Nicholas Arena before being published in Venice in 1543 and going on to create an international resonance.

Calonerò Eliseo Manzè and Giambattista Gotti who fled from Messina and were "relassati in statua" (i.e. they were burned in effigy—a sort of death sentence in absentia is not devoid of a baleful symbolism) were Benedictines from the monastery of San Placido. Books by Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon and other heresiarchs could be found in Messina. In fact, in 1559, the Inquisition issued a peremptory order to hand suspect books over to the College of Jesuits. Over about thirty years (1542-1573), the Court of the Holy Office condemned and arrested 72 Protestants in Messina. An exiled citizen of Messina, Giulio Cesare Pascali, translated John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* into Italian; it was published in 1557.

Although there were foreign contributions to the Protestant movement in Messina, it remained an indigenous phenomenon and developed not only in the city but also in the surrounding areas. Mandanici, a small centre in the Peloritani Mountains, was particularly significant in that its Protestant community had a popular character and included farmers, coal miners, masons, bakers, tailors and barbers, as well as two priests and a school teacher. Despite the blows inflicted by the Inquisition, religious dissidence in the city persisted and radicalized since it adopted some aspects of Calvinism, as demonstrated by the story of Giuseppe Stagno. A priest from an important noble family, Stagno underwent a first trial in 1558. Ten years later he was arrested, tortured, and forced to reveal the existence of a confraternity in Messina where he had been taught different points of reformed doctrine.

In addition, the Inquisition continued to strike at the "Moriscos" and their children who, though forced to undergo baptism, secretly kept the precepts of the Koran. Jesuit and Dominican preaching in Messina represented a different, non-repressive face of confessionalization work that aimed to establish the Counter-Reformation model of "salvation inside the Church", institutionalized the cult, controlled and reined in "breaches of the imaginary" allowing only the celebration of "miracles" as an alternative. Even natural events (volcanism, earthquakes, etc.), which before had produced an eschatological anxiety, were now interpreted by the official culture only as being a "divine warning to corrupt people and non-believers so that they may return to piety and penitence". Moreover the inquisitorial system, which was designed to remove any autonomous form of spirituality, also struck at well entrenched social practices such as magic and the occult.

5. In conclusion, Messina in the 16th and 17th century had an export-oriented economy and strong links with foreign markets. Its openness to people, cultures and ideas was checked but not entirely compromised by political and religious forces (for example, the Spanish Inquisition). Moreover the revolt against the Spanish Government (1674-1678) and the subsequent harsh repression by the Spaniards, which deprived Messina of a series of privileges that had been

important to maintaining its socio-economic life, did not have devastating consequences. It was the gradual shift of trade towards other areas of the globe that resized the commercial role of the Mediterranean and, therefore, of Messina. The political and economic situation over the following centuries opened up spaces and opportunities that Messina would only partially be able to grasp. But this problem affected not only Messina, but also the rest of Sicily and a large part of Southern Italy.

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