URBAN IDENTITIES IN "AFRICAN" SICILY.
THE CITY OF SCICLI IN THE MODERN AGE[1]

IDENTIDADES URBANAS NA SICÍLIA "AFRICANA".
A CIDADE DE SCICLI NA IDADE MODERNA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the formation process of the urban identity of Scicli, a city in the southeastern part of Sicily, between the 16th and 18th century. In the analysis of this process there is an attempt to reconstruct not only the conflictual relationship among the main characters of the town and among the cities, but also the role that the literary, graphic and cartographic descriptions had. Documentary and iconographic sources become, therefore, useful evidences to piece together the complex relationship between the city, its territory and the societies of the past.

Key words: Modern History, Urban Identities, Images, Cities, Mediterranean Sea, Sicily.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo reside na reconstrução do processo de formação da identidade urbana de Scicli, uma cidade situada na porção sudeste da Sicília (Itália), entre os séculos 16 e 18. Na análise deste processo há um esforço para a reconstrução não somente da relação conflituosa no âmbito dos principais aspectos da cidade e das cidades, mas também do papel desempenhado pelas descrições baseadas na literatura, figura e cartografia. Fontes documentais e iconográficas tornam-se, portanto, recursos evidentes à reconstituição complexa das relações entre a cidade, seus territórios e sociedades do passado.

Palavras-chave: História Moderna, Identidades Urbanas, Imagens, Cidades, Mar Mediterrâneo, Sicília.

The territory of south-eastern Sicily – that point of the island which faces Malta and Northern Africa – is characterized by a multifaceted landscape[3]. Corn fields enclosed by dry-stone walls follow the sandy coasts of Capo Pachino; vineyards and olive groves surrounding the densely-populated towns follow the pastures of the highlands of the Iblei Mountains. This territory is, today, somewhat different from that of the early centuries of the modern age. This was that part of the southern region of the island which the historians named "African" Sicily – an area of natural strategic, and thus geopolitical,

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[3] For the history of the Hyblean territory and of the territory of Scicli, s. Paolo Militello, *La contea di Modica tra storia e cartografia. Rappresentazioni e pratiche di uno spazio feudale (XVI-XIX secolo)*, Palermo, 2001.

importance; a frontier land which Christians wanted free of Jews and "Turks", but which smuggling made a "bridge" rather than a "frontier"[4].

The present article will attempt to retrace the historical identity of this territory and, in particular, of one of its cities, Scicli, in the early modern age. Moreover, it will try to reconstruct the often conflicting practices and the representations of its urban space made by the protagonists of the past.

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HISTORY OF A TERRITORY

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Sicily was part of Charles V's immense empire[5], and it was a strategically important area as for the policy of containment of Turkish power in the Mediterranean Sea. The south-eastern part of the island represented the nerve centre in the borderline of Christianity; this latter started from the "entrance" of the Adriatic Sea (Corfu, Naupactus, Preveza), touched Southern Italy and, after crossing the eastern coasts of Sicily, closed off the western Mediterranean Sea with Malta and Tunis. When Charles V abdicated, the island entered the polysynodal Spanish monarchy of Philip II and became a weakened bulwark against barbaric piracy. Sicily would follow the historical, political and economic events of Spain, thus living – although always through a lively dialectical relationship between the *élites* and the central power – the difficult path of modernity. In 1700, with the death of Charles II of Spain, Sicily regained its role as a remarkably important element in the Wars of succession. Thus, Spanish, Austrian and Savoy troops and dominations would follow on its territory, till when, with the conquest of the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily (1734) by Charles III, the island became a Bourbon possession until the unification of Italy[6].

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[4] G. Giarrizzo, *Prefazione* to Militello, *La contea di Modica tra storia e cartografia*, 13.

[5] For the history of Sicily, s. G. Giarrizzo, *La Sicilia moderna dal Vespro al nostro tempo*, Firenze, 2004.

[6] E. Iachello (ed.), *I Borbone in Sicilia (1734-1860)*, Catania, 1998.

G. Delisle, *Carte de l'Isle et Royaume de Sicile,* Paris 1717

G. Delisle, *Carte de l'Isle et Royaume de Sicile,* Paris 1717. The County of Modica

In this period, the farthest south-eastern point of the island, which corresponded more or less to the County of Modica, played an important strategic role. An evidence of this is represented by a singular politico-diplomatic incident. In 1713, the year in which Sicily passed to Amadeus of Savoy with the Treaty of Utrecht, the king of Spain Philip V kept for himself full power over the County which thus became an authentic *enclave* within the Savoy rule[7].

Scicli was an integral part of this feudal institution. The County consisted of a territory characterised by a marked polycentrism and by the absence of a dominant city – such as Naples, Palermo, or Catania. In 1786 the economist Saverio Scrofani wrote: "In the County of Modica, six large cities [Modica, Scicli, Ragusa, Chiaramonte, Monterossom and

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[7] As for this event, cf. G. Poidomani, *Storia di una quérelle diplomatica. La contea di Modica nel periodo del governo sabaudo in Sicilia (1713-1720)*, in "Archivum Historicum Mothycense", no. 3, 1997, 33-44.

Vittoria] are at the centre of their territories"[8]. Each of these cities enjoyed some autonomy, had its own ruling class, and, as well as the other centres, belonged to the same higher local institution, that is, the County, and shared a common agricultural and commercial nature.

The urban configuration of this territory was mainly characterised by fortified medieval boroughs. It changed for the first time, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the growth of the inhabited centres beyond the old walls, and with the foundation, between 1606 and 1608, of the "new land" (purpose-built city) of Vittoria. Another change occurred after the 1693 earthquake[9]. The process of reconstruction which followed it caused further transformation in the urban structure. Some villages, such as Ragusa, "split" into two cities; others, such as Monterosso, were rebuilt in a new place.

This complex territorial organization was given, as has already been said, its political and administrative identity by being part of a feudal estate: the County of Modica, in fact. During the *ancien régime*, the situation of the county was, perhaps, unique compared with the other counties of the island. It enjoyed such autonomy of its own that it was considered *Regnum in Regno*.

This situation did not erase, of course, the local political divisions: the presence of cities with a strong identity and of significant élites is the other element which characterises our territory. It was precisely the feudal administrative system, however, which had determined roles and functions. From this point of view, the most substantial opposition within the County, in the modern age, was that between Modica and Scicli. During the *ancien régime*, a dual, highly conflictual polarity, from the political and military point of view, was long consolidated: on the one hand, Modica, the administrative "capital city" of the County, on the other hand, Scicli, the military "capital city" which controlled the territory and the coast.

From its very origins – during the Byzantine Empire, Scicli was, after all, a "military" city. This characteristic was confirmed during the sixteenth century, when the city became a "Sergenzia" (one of the military divisions of the island). During the eighteenth century, the city kept this military supremacy: all the cities of the County and of

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[8] S. Scrofani, *Memoria sulla libertà del commercio dei grani della Sicilia* [1795], in AA. VV., *Scrittori classici italiani di economia politica*, XL, Milano, 1805, 284. As for Scrofani, cf. G. Giarrizzo, *Saverio Scrofani*, in *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale*, LXV, 1969, III, 249-281. ("*Nel Contado di Modica sei grandi città [Modica, Scicli, Ragusa, Chiaramonte, Monterosso e Vittoria] stanno in mezzo ai loro territori*". All translations are by Aladio.)

[9] See G. Giarrizzo (ed.), *La Sicilia dei terremoti. Lunga durata e dinamiche sociali*, Catania, 1996.

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south-eastern Sicily depended on Scicli; it was also in charge of the health and sanitary control over sea trade within the 90 mile coast (and this area was characterised by a lively sea trade); finally, it was Scicli which released passports and *Patenti di Sanità* (licences of good health), thus extending its power to the areas (and business) of the other cities.

BUILDING IDENTITY: INVENTED SAINTS, ANCIENT REMAINS, CITIES' PORTRAITS AND A MADONNA DELLE MILIZIE

In such a context, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, Scicli would initiate a process of reinforcement of its own urban identity. This latter – in keeping with the historical and cultural processes of the island – would take shape in the building up of cults, myths, legends, and "places of memory".

Already, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the city had "created" its own patron saint (San Guglielmo). With the process of canonization of the hermit Guglielmo, who died at the beginning of the fifteenth century, at the end of the Middle Ages the city had created a "sanctus proprius", by taking San Corrado from nearby Noto as its model[10]. At the beginning of the modern age, in a city characterised by demographic growth and by a marked urban evolution (which more and more saw the city slip downhill from the ancient inhabited site), the invention of a local saint, "besides enhancing an already existing devotion, helped, above all, emphasize the continuity between the old site and the new site… a political as well as religious compromise solution"[11]. The first step is, thus, the building of a single identity within the urban phenomenon.

In addition, a cultural event would occur in the city during the first half of the seventeenth century: the identification of Scicli with the site of the ancient Casmene, a Syracusan colony which was founded in the VII century B.C. Here, a new element, besides the religious one, plays an important role in raising the city to a higher dignity: by resorting to the past which, in the second half of the seventeenth century, would begin to replace the religious element. The question of the identification of the site of Casmene –

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[10] As for the process of canonization of San Guglielmo, cf. G. Barone, *L'oro di Busacca. Potere ricchezza e povertà a Scicli (secoli XVI-XX)*, Palermo, 1998, 58-65. As for S. Corrado di Noto, cf. F. Balsamo – V. La Rosa (eds.), *Corrado Confalonieri. La figura storica, l'immagine, il culto. Atti delle giornate di studio, Noto 1990*, Noto, 1992; F. Balsamo, *S. Corrado di Noto. Biografia critica e storia del culto*, Noto, 1991.

[11] Barone, *L'oro di Busacca*, 59.

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which, moreover, has been solved only recently – had already roused the interest of sixteenth-century scholars. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the historian Cluver suggested that Casmene lay in the plain of Scicli[12] and transferred the toponym in his map of *Sicilia antiqua*. The Scicli historian Mariano Perello[13] accepted Cluver's idea and, in 1640, published *L'Antichità di Scicli anticamente chiamata Casmena, seconda colonia siracusana* – the first *laudatio urbis* of the city – in Messina. In this work, the scholar demonstrated the corresponding position of Casmene with that of Scicli. The event is very important for the use of the "past" in the process of dignifying the urban centre but also for the use the institutions and the local *élites* would make of it.

The two last elements of this process will be examined in more details. The first: like all of the other Sicilian cities, Scicli, too, made sure to build an up-to-date "portrait" of the city. In order to do this, it used not only local histories but also iconography. Between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, in fact, the city would trust in the use of images - the cartographic *laudatio* - to declare and spread its own identity. The image of the city would, in this way, be represented in a number of works: particularly, in the seventeenth century, in a landscape manuscript and in a *Patente di Sanità* (Licence of good health). The second: the creation of a specific Madonna protectress, the *Madonna delle Milizie*, a "Virgin warrior". For her, a legend – closely connected to the military function – was "created". It narrated how the Virgin Mary helped the Normans and the people of Scicli against the Arab infidels in 1091.

THE DEFENCE OF PRIVILEDGE: ANTONINO CARIOTI AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCICLI
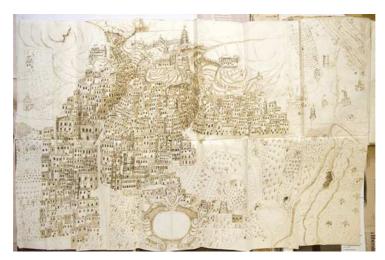
Antonino Carioti (1683-1780), a scholar and a careful researcher of the history of Scicli, spent all his life in Scicli exercising the office of archpriest in the mother-church of St. Matthew the Apostle, from 1721 to his death. As a well-educated man, historian, antiquarian and poet he left several manuscripts and printed works and, above all, a

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[12] *Philippi Cluveri Sicilia Antiqua cum minoribus insulis, ei adjacentibus, item Sardinia et Corsica, Opus post omnium curas elaboratissimum; tabulis geographicis, aere expressis illustratum*, Lugduni Batavorum, 1619, 359.

[13] As for Perello, s. A. Mongitore, *Bibliotheca sicula sive de scriptoribus siculis...*, Palermo, 1714, 44; Paolo Militello, *Gli storici, la città. L'Antico e l'identità urbana tra XVI e XX secolo*, in *Scicli: archeologia e territorio*, ed. by Pietro Militello, Officina di Studi Medievali, Palermo, 2008, 7-20.

voluminous manuscript, *Notizie storiche della città di Scicli*, written and revised over a long period of time (from the early decades of the eighteenth century up to 1780) [14], in which he reconstruct the history of Scicli, from mythic origins to his days, not only through archaeological finds and archival documents, but also through figments and loose interpretations.

In order to better understand the entire work of Carioti and the urban context in which it was written, it can be useful the analysis of an interesting cartographic document produced by the archpriest himself and depicting a map representation of the city of Scicli in the middle of the eighteenth century.

View of the city of Scicli, cm 57x91, XVIII century
(Biblioteche Riunite "Civica e Ursino Recupero" – Catania) (Photo: Luigi Nifosì)

It is a "bird's eye" view that represents the city from a central observation point (the hill facing the city), slightly above the built-up area.

During the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the urban planning of Scicli – as already mentioned- showed the city located downstream of the hill named "Colle San Matteo" for the name of the saint to whom the overlooking mother-church was dedicated. On the spur formed by two narrow gorges there were, in addition to the mother-church, the remains of a castle and a tower destroyed by the earthquake of 1693. Beneath the Saint Matthew's Mother-Church, downstream, in a central position and at the confluence

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[14] A. Carioti, *Notizie storiche della città di Scicli*, nineteenth-century copy of the ms. from the first half of the eighteenth century (published in M. Cataudella (ed.), *Notizie storiche della città di Scicli*, Scicli, 1994).

of the two gorges, there were the Church of Santa Maria la Piazza, contending with the Mother Church on the hill for the primacy.

Religious but also political conflicts were frequent among the members of the various parishes: not only between the supporters of the two churches (San Matteo over the hill and Santa Maria La Piazza under the hill), but also among supporters of other churches. For example, there were frequent contrasts between the church in the right canyon and the one on the left side of Colle San Matteo. Because of these contrasts, the urban space was deeply contended. Changing the procession route or moving the boundary of a parish was enough to cause tension and strife (and sometimes even murders) among the inhabitants.

View of the city of Scicli, cm 57x91, XVIII century.
(Biblioteche Riunite "Civica e Ursino Recupero" – Catania) (Photo: Luigi Nifosì)

Going back to our scene, the hill –Colle San Matteo- emerges along with the homonymous church (of which Carioti was the archpriest) and the two fortifications (pictured in a detailed manner). At the foot of the hill, the city appears dense and homogeneous, with a hint to a trisected disposition. Almost all the elements represented, finally, present numerical references to the legend, which, because of its excessive length, does not fit in the map and is reported on separate sheets of paper.

In the drawing, the acropolis is depicted surrounded by walls and gates, with the head offices of the religious power and, though almost destroyed, with those representing the military power: the castle and the tower, although they did no longer exist, being already ruined at the time, are conventionally depicted in details. Through this map it is

possible to identify the idea that the author had of the city: it is founded on a sort of "centralization" and "mythization" of the top of the hill.

The drawing has to be examined in the light of the rich legend (almost 80 references), added by Carioti. The legend and the map offer a dichotomic vision of the city, which is indeed represented as a unified organism (the «*Città di Scicli*»), divided by an ancient part, «*sù del colle*», and a new one, «nella *pianura a pié del colle*». To reinforce the central role of the hill, it is from the buildings on its top that the numbering of the houses begins.

The first references are dedicated to the two fortifications. Both of them are described as «*ruined by the earthquake*», although in the map it can be observed that they are intact, as to urge their reconstruction. Their presence is a justification for the prevalent military function of the town in the Modica County and, on the other side, according to Carioti, it represents an irrefutable proof to support the fact that the foundation of Scicli dates back to ancient times. It is only later that the «modern» town is pictured, as a periphery of the acropolis. In the map, it is depicted as a homogeneous body (more "dense" in the center) which surrounds the hill and converges towards the site of the ancient village. The buildings are, thus, arranged around the mother-church and the fortifications (by that time destroyed): the members of the *elites*, whose palaces constitute the larger part of the space represented in the map, are almost "summoned" around them.

The vision of the town that the author wanted to provide is basically that of a unified organism, which although being objectively divided, maintains its own unity and homogeneity, guaranteed by the centrality exercised by the ancient offices of religious and civic power from the top of the hill. This concept is well expressed by the impressive image described by the archpriest: «*[Scicli] sembra, a chi l'osserva, un'aquila*» («[Scicli] looks like an eagle to those who observe it»): the zoomorphic vision of the town effectively points out the static and consolidated conception expressed by the scholar from Scicli, a vision that stitches together the urban dimension with the antiquity and the tradition.

This vision was threatened to be replaced, during the XVIII century, by other concept of representation of the urban space, related to the affirming of a new way of thinking the town, coming from the necessity to understand and control the transformation processes and the urban competition that began to increase during this century.

[Patente sanitaria marittima di Scicli (Licence of good health)], seventeenth century

It was the *Patente sanitaria marittima* issued by the University of Scicli in the first half of the eighteenth century. The perspective of the view is almost identical to that of a previous drawing, but the representation criteria changes.

The division of the town is much clearer. The town is divided into four parts: "naturally" from right to left, by the two trenches and "artificially", between the hill and the plane, by one of the main roads. The alternation of filled spaces (houses) and empty ones (streets) offers a more "rational reading" of the urban space, functionally arranged along the main road axis and around the squares.

On the top of the hill, the Mother-Church of San Matteo continues to be represented, although this time with a less central role, without that "encompassing" aspect of the urban area, which does no more hinge on it. To underline the loss of influence of the top of the hill, there is the representation of the two fortifications, which are not only barely sketched, but they also had a prospective shift on the left with a consequent split and hence the weakening of the hill top.

At the top of the populated area in the map, a court of saints is represented, which is typical of the sanitary licenses. And it is here that, through the central position of the *Madonna delle Milizie*, riding a horse and armed with a sword, it is underlined the central role in the military control of the territory that belongs to the town. The most notable element is, however, constituted by the location of the shores in the top-left side of the map, close to the protecting saints. Regardless of the actual geographic position (from that perspective the sea is actually on the left of the city center), the coast line is presented

more like a "quotation", an element underlining the importance of Scicli: no need of a geographic "justification", as in the previous drawing that altered intentionally the perspective to make the coast look "closer" to the city. The most remarkable datum is the jurisdictional aspect: the shore is a space pertaining to Scicli. The small section crowded with ships underlines both the commercial wealth and the importance of its defense, and it is therefore part of the "glories" of the town. Rationality of the urban disposition, commercial wealth, prestige of the administration, all these are elements that represent the city in this *Patente* (License). From the "tradition", which is the backbone of Carioti representation, we move to the "function".

Two divergent visions emerge from the two maps, different not only by the technique used, but above all by the objectives and the "context" in which they are produced: Carioti is an archpriest that sees the primacy of his church being questioned, he insists on the tradition that legitimates this primacy, and to this purpose he makes use of a map that proposes a urban space not touched by the transformations of the '700s (in that time span there has been an earthquake and the expansion of the town); the city (University), its civic magistrate, engaged in a competition with the other towns of the county (like Vittoria), all underline the "function" of their center. It has to be reminded that there was pressure by the neighboring towns to reconsider the control of the coast line on the basis of geographic arguments (far/close): Scicli, having put aside all considerations related to its traditional privileges, out-of-date in the cultural scenario of that time, updates its defense, ignores the geographical aspect of the matter with a representation of the shores totally uncorrelated to the physical coordinates and focuses decidedly to the "function".

The instrumental function of the representations under examination (the one adopted by Carioti and the one of the sanitary license) instead of diminishing their value as a source, makes them particularly valuable for the insight in the relationship between space and society of the past: a space that is also a "resource", manipulated and redesigned by the tensions in it.

F. Pascucci, *The Madonna of "Milizie"*, 1780 (Scicli, Church of "Collegio") (Photo: Luigi Nifosì).

THE FEAR OF THE TURKS AND THE MADONNA WARRIOR

"Anno Domini" 1553, July. In the open sea, about twenty miles from Catania, the threatening sight of eighty-four Turkish and French galleys appears. The pirate Dragut leads them, he serves Suleiman the Magnificent. The island is in alarm. The ships slide towards Syracuse and, after rounding Capo Pachino, enter the African Sea. After a few miles, near the coast of Scicli, Dragut gives the order to land, but he finds a group of knights, headed by the Governor of Modica, waiting for him. The encounter is inevitable, and leaves, on the beach, besides many wounded, a Christian and twenty-four Turks. Dead[15].

The legend is likely to have originated from this event: the miraculous intervention of the "Madonna delle Milizie" in defence of the Christians against the infidels. To make the story more evocative and convincing, the battle is shrouded in the mists of time and transferred to another age, during the conquest of Arabian Sicily by the Normans.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the Scicli historian Antonino Carioti would narrate it in this manner: "The story is told of how, in the year 1091, the Emir Belcane landed on

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[15] *Cronaca siciliana del secolo XVI... dal codice della Biblioteca Comunale di Catania*, ed. by V. Epifanio and A. Gulli, Palermo, 1902, 192.

the shores of Donnalucata with a large army and the people of Scicli rushed there with their weapons, but, since they were outnumbered by the army of the infidels, they prostrated themselves with their faces on the ground, and invoked the help of Christ and of the Virgin Mary. Mary, then, appeared with a sword and surrounded by a mist shining like the sun, she cried to the people: "En adsum ecce me, Civitas dilecta, protegam te dextera mea (Here I am to help you, oh my beloved city: I will protect you with my right hand)". To that cry, the people rose up, and saw the Norman army which arrived in time to bring help; and all united, hurling themselves like a thunderbolt upon the army of the infidels, they completely vanquished it."

The Norman conquest of Sicily was a traumatic and particularly violent event which saw two great cultures facing each other: Western culture, that is, Christianity, on the one hand, Eastern culture, that is, Islam, on the other. In the sources, however, this battle is not mentioned. Only two documents, later on, deal with it: two *Memoirs*[16], which are almost certainly false, dating back to the sixteenth century (and, thus, we go back to the period in discussion). These are centuries – we must remember – during which the fear of a Turkish landing, along the Ionian or African coast above all, would arouse panic. In the Mediterranean Sea, badly shaken by the fall of Constantinople (1453) and by the Turkish advance in the Balkans, the island had seen its geopolitical role change. It had become "frontier of Christianity". This new role became stronger with the developments of the Venetian-Turkish war (1463-1479) and with the participation of Aragon in Pope Paul II's anti-Turkish "crusade". Such a situation caused, in the Sicilians, anxiety and fears which would often give vent to anger and cause *pogroms*. During the sixteenth century, Sicily would, thus, be at the centre of a Mediterranean which was more and more crowded with pirates and enemies. It would be Charles V, and the following sovereigns, who would make Sicily – through towers, walls, and ramparts – an authentic "besieged fortress" against the Turkish-French danger.

The preachers, who were sent to arouse a crusade spirit, would exploit this general mood – as the historian Giuseppe Giarrizzo reminds us: at the core of their repertoire there were the themes of Mariology, above all the exaltation of the virginity of Mary which was opposed as a symbol, and a restraint, to the sensuality and sexual violence of the Turks. This climate of fear over the assaults of the infidels, their killings, their plundering, their deportations, lasted throughout the first centuries of the modern age, when the

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[16] The Memoirs are recorded in M. Trigilia, *La Madonna dei Milici in Scicli*, Modica, 1990.

names of Frederick Barbarossa or Dragut echoed, in a terrifying atmosphere, among the people of the towns and of the countryside. Thus, the ancestral traditions of resistance against the "perfidious" Arabs were revived. In this atmosphere, the cult of the Virgin Mary (and, with her, of the saints) represented one of the central and more meaningful aspects of the general religious sentiment.

This tension, then, was very strong in south-eastern Sicily which – together with Malta – formed a sort of "frontier land", of "bulwark society" particularly exposed to the Turkish menace. Thus, the legend of the Madonna *bellatrix* – which is so unusual in the common Marian iconography – is to be placed in such a context, and this also explains the presence of the "warrior" element in a figure who usually displays "positive" values.

All of which, besides being part of the already rich thread of post-Tridentine Marian cults, offered the opportunity to emphasize its military function of defence against the dangers coming from the sea to the city.

Madonna of the "Milizie", XVIII century (Scicli, Church of St. Teresa)

The legend revisited

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the legend and iconography were renewed through a series of pictorial and plastic representations. Under the influence of the Christian heroines/Amazons of the Baroque religious literature, of the image of "mata moros" Saint James, of the Norman *topoi* about saints on horseback – such as the St. George described by the Sicilian Tommaso Fazello, the Virgin Mary would be portrayed

according to a "horseback" version: on horseback and with her right hand always holding a sword.

In 1736, the miracle was officially acknowledged by the Church, with a decree of Pope Clement VII, and the tradition of staging a "religious performance of the battle" every year continued (even up to the present day). In 1919, the Scicli historian Concetta Cataudella wrote a historical description of it: "Every year, fifteen days before Easter, the festival of the Madonna delle Milizie is celebrated. On Saturday afternoon, an old sailing boat placed on wheels, with, on board, *Belcane* and a handful of men disguised as Turks and armed with sabres and firearms, approaches the Cathedral. On the opposite side of the Cathedral there is Roger d'Hauteville, with his staff and some Christian soldiers armed with sabres and rifles, the national flag preceding them. Shots, smoke, screams! The artistic statue of the Madonna delle Milizie comes out of the Church... The bells chime; Turks and Christians shoot; Belcane and his men flee with the Turkish flag. The Madonna is paraded around the city; she stops at the Oliveto plain. On a wooden platform Belcane and his staff stand. The fight between Roger and Belcane follows. The Madonna arrives; the Turks run away and the Christians chase them... The music strikes up the royal march. A young lad dressed as an angel gets on the platform and, with the typical, slow, pathetic and sentimental voice, sings a hymn of thanks to the Madonna"[17].

In the period between the two world wars, the "religious" performance underwent a process of "modernization". In the new social and cultural atmosphere, a new character is introduced: the hermit, who tries to act as a peacemaker between the two opponents. In 1930, the Scicli scholar Mario Pluchinotta observed: "Such a character is, without any doubt, influenced by the times we live in, times in which the horrors of past wars arouse men's strong desire to avoid them, by calling for peaceful solutions to the contrasts between peoples". And, on the other hand, in the following decades, the festival became more and more a moment of socialization, up to the point that, recently, in his novel *Romanzo di un paese*, the judge/writer Severino Santiapichi has once again recalled how "tradition imposed that the armies – the "Turks" and the "Normans" – should eat mountains of peeled hard boiled eggs together, while passing each other the wine and the plate with the salt".

This feeling of reconciliation has characterized the latest performances over the last years, and there have also been frequent calls for the introduction of some moments of

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[17] C. Cataudella, *Scicli. Uomini e cose nel passato e nel presente*, Modica, 1919.

"idealistic pacification" as well as of "politically correct" attitudes in the play; so that the final song of the angel, with its Arabian-style melody, rather than being a thanks to the Madonna warrior, has come to represent an ever more evocative moment of meditation. This is the demonstration of the capacity of a legend to "modernize" itself and to take the shape of an open system, a system linked to the reality which has produced it, but which is also able to adapt to new contexts.

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As Bernard Lepetit and Carlo Olmo[18] already pointed out in 1995, every city in any given moment has to face with the inherited spaces (each one with its own temporal depth), spaces that the city itself has to provide with a social sense and, in some way, modernize, even when it neglects, abandons or erases them. This continuous and elaborate movement where the new absorbs and transforms the old, constitutes a privileged point of view, in which the historians have to test both the instruments and the grids of reading. Hence a further proof of the necessity – declared, but rarely practiced – to hold together actors and space in the reconstruction of the urban events.

The events related to the town of Scicli seem to confirm this consideration, as well as they seem to confirm the non-intuitive correspondence between space and society, both subjected to complex conflicts and processes of appropriation and identification. The urban space and the territory configure themselves as a "resource" that the actors contend at different levels, giving rise to continuous conflicts and elaborating ever-changing languages for identification and appropriation. Aside from the *heavy form*, what emerges from this contest, as observed by Roncayolo, is more and more a fluid space, intensively lived and at the same time intensively represented.

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[18] C. Olmo – B. Lepetit (eds.), *La città e le sue storie*, Torino 1995, p. 4.