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## LATE BAROQUE TOWNS OF THE VAL DI NOTO (SOUTH- EASTERN SICILY)

*"[...] it takes a certain type of soul [...] to come to Ibla, a taste for silent and ardent tuffs, blind alleys, pointless U-turns [...] but also a passion for architectonic machinations are demanded, where the excitement of the forms in flight hides the twist of the plot until the very last minute. Ibla wears its Baroque with the discretion of a lady of ancient times... it resists intact as a resource after the 1693 earthquake (providential, we would like to say cynically) when every village in the Val di Noto, in the extreme heel of the island, wants the destroyed cathedrals bigger or even grandiose."*

*La luce e il lutto, Gesualdo Bufalino*

Caltagirone, Catania, Militello Val di Catania, Modica, Noto, Palazzolo Acreide, Ragusa (Ibla) and Scicli: the day after the terrible earthquake in 1693, one of the most disastrous in Sicilian history, these places collapsed like sandcastles blown away by the wind. Everything remained still for a long time, until the fever of rebuilding overwhelmed the whole of eastern Sicily. It was the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the taste for Baroque was dominant in the island and the best architects of the time reread the landscape in spectacular aesthetics: the inland slopes became the backdrop to grandiose staircases, the curves of the hills were reproduced in the facades of the churches and the aristocracy's townhouses, a profusion of statues repopulated the area that had lost so many human lives. Noto was born again ex novo in a different part, so that today it is a city of extraordinarily coherent town planning and architecture, while other centres, like Catania, incorporated some vestiges of antiquity in the Baroque layout.



**SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE**  
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1024  
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: BUDAPEST, HUNGARY  
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2002

**CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:** The eight protected sites create a sort of gigantic open-air museum which, with artistic and architectonic masterpieces, shows visitors the exuberance of the late Sicilian Baroque, at the height of its splendour. In addition, they are evidence of the resourcefulness of the communities involved, who reacted to a catastrophic event by innovatively redesigning whole centres, or part of them.





*“Going up the staircase, all marble, the the boy looked at walls hung with huge bas-reliefs [...], surrounded by swarms of angels, crowns, swags and palm branches all over the ceiling [...] he looked down into the cloister. This was surrounded by an arcade supporting a terrace full of statues, and had basins of tinkling water, seats set amid symmetrical flower-beds.”*

**As incredulous as Consalvo, we too will be overwhelmed by the Baroque exuberance of the Monastery of the Benedictines, described in the novel *The Viceroy*: we are in Catania, the starting point of this itinerary by car (which will take you at least three days).**

The white stone of the monastery contrasts with the darkness of the lava stone: dressed in black and white, the **1 centre of Catania** has a bond with Etna, which looms up on the horizon hooded with snow, in its DNA. We go down Via dei Crociferi, with its profusion of Baroque churches, we enjoy the lively atmosphere of Piazza del Duomo, the elegant drawing room of the city with the cathedral of St Agata, and after the due visits we get into the car heading to **2 Caltagirone**, to go up or down the most spectacular staircase in Sicily, with its 142 steps covered in hand-painted majolica tiles. When we have got our breath back, and after visiting some of the Baroque churches that fill up the city, (in the centre alone there are almost 30), we reach **3 Palazzolo Acreide**,

reconstructed in the shadow of the ancient Greek colony of Akrai. Today the archaeological site dominates the grandiose steps, the soft swirls and the spiral columns of the four Baroque treasures of the city. The masterpiece of the post-1693 earthquake is however **4 Noto**, the pearl of the Baroque and the birthplace of one of the architects who made the greatest contribution to redesigning the Val di Noto at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Rosario Gagliardi. Let's stroll down the elegant Corso Vittorio Emanuele at dusk, when the elaborate facades of the town-houses and of the churches glow with a unique splendour from the panoramic terrace of Palazzo Ducezio and still enchanted by the film-like appeal of its architecture, let's set off towards **5 Scicli**. Let's enjoy its

relaxing atmosphere trying not to be intimidated by the fantastic creatures which stretch out towards us from the corbels, arches and cornices of Palazzo Beneventano, the apotheosis of Sicilian Baroque. West of Scicli, **6 Modica**, with the medieval centre perched on the slope of a hill, awaits us. Its most famous attraction is the magnificent cathedral of St George, considered the masterpiece of Rosario Gagliardi, which stands in all its splendour at the top of a majestic 250 step staircase. We are now close to our last stopping place: **7 Ragusa Ibla**. With its labyrinth of alleys that wind through the grey stone townhouses and lead to sun-flooded squares, Ibla disorients the visitor who will find only one point of reference: Piazza Duomo, the magnificent sloping central square.



## SCICLI, A CITY OF HAPPY PEOPLE?

*«[...] the city of Scicli had opened up before him, with the crowns of the shrines on the summits of the three valleys, with the slopes of roofs and the steps along the sides of the uplands, and with a huge black swarming crowd in a dustcloud of sun[...] “It's the finest city we have ever seen. [...] Perhaps it is the most beautiful of all the cities in the world. And people are happy in cities that are beautiful.”»*

*The cities of the world, Elio Vittorini*

Sun-kissed and as radiant as its Baroque architecture, Scicli has yet to reconcile itself with a dark side of its past: the Chiafura question. Chiafura is the rocky part of the city, which today is

the object of attempts to be protected as an archaeological park. Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, its cave-houses of very ancient origin, probably dug out of the rock in Byzantine times, were still inhabited: they were damp spaces, light years away from the Baroque beauty of the nearby historic centre, where the *chiafurari* lived in abject poverty. After the war, the neighbourhood began to attract the attention of politicians and journalists, until it became the centre of an intense media campaign which culminated in May 1959, when a group of intellectuals, including Pier Paolo Pasolini, Carlo Levi, Antonietta Macciocchi and Renato Guttuso, visited the grottos to denounce the area's very poor conditions. Pasolini described what he saw: “A sort of mountain of Purgatory, with the circles one on top of the other, punctured by the holes of the doors of the Saracen caves, where people have put a bed, holy pictures or film posters on the stone walls, and live there” After years of activism, the neighbourhood was abandoned and the *chiafurari* found homes in the city's housing schemes.



'AT FIRST, SICILY WAS A LAND OF FAIRY TALES.- MY FATHER HAD LEFT IT WHEN HE WAS TWENTY AND HE WOULD TALK ABOUT SICILY AT HOME OR TO HIS FRIENDS LIKE FAIRY TALES.'

We can borrow the idea of Giuseppe Culicchia in his book *Sicilia, o care* and travel again in the Val di Noto, revealing its most fairy tale-like aspects to our young travelling companions. Let's leave from **1 Ragusa**, protected by the Four Giants, i.e. the enormous statues that guard the Cathedral of

St George. Older children can have fun recognising the places from the TV series *Inspector Montalbano*. In **2 Modica**, the city founded by Hercules to pay tribute to the woman that helped him find his oxen, we can look for the Sicilian version of Willy Wonka's factory to taste the "mythical" local chocolate which, according to tradition, is still made following an ancient Aztec recipe: the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, the oldest chocolate manufacturer in Sicily, opens the doors of its workshop for tours and tastings. After a stop to bathe and eat and **3 Punta Secca**, with its corners that will be familiar to Montalbano fans

who will recognise the house with the veranda where the Inspector lives, we turn to the southernmost tip the island: **4 Portopalo**. Here we are further south than Tunis! At the **Beach of the Two Seas**, facing the delightful island of the Currents, the sea seems to take on different ripples at the points where the Ionian Sea meets the Mediterranean. In the fishing village of **5 Marzamemi** we can rent a boat for an excursion and then go in search of the secret treasure hidden in the **Grotto of Calafarina** enveloped by a legendary aura: it is alleged to be the result of a magic spell which transformed a castle of fairy tales into this damp cave. To find the treasure, you have to find the immortal fish in the sea among the waves that swallowed the ring with magic powers. See flamingos at the **6 Vendicari Reserve** where you can observe the birds and fauna between dips in the turquoise waters. Lastly, for some adrenaline, we can go further inland on the slopes of Mount Iblei, where there is the **7 Parcallario**, an adventure park in the heart of the wood nestled in the green with routes of various difficulty levels. From here we can return to Ragusa or take the direction of **8 Siracusa**, to visit Neapolis with its "ear of Dionysius" (a grotto 23 m high and 65 m deep, which gave its name to the legend according to which the tyrant Dionysius exploited the extraordinary acoustic properties of the cave to listen to what the prisoners were saying), run around the pedestrian square of Ortigia and bring the tour to a fitting end with a show at the Teatro dei Pupi.



KIDS



## THE LATE BAROQUE CITIES OF THE VAL DI NOTO in books

Reading suggestions to experience in full the churches, the townhouses and the Baroque cities.

- **The Story of a blackcap**, Giovanni Verga (1871). The "blackcap" is the young Maria, forced into the life of a nun for which she has no vocation. The novel is set in Catania and Monte Ilice, and in the film adaptation by Franco Zeffirelli some Baroque corners of the city close to Etna are clearly recognisable, in particular Via Crociferi with its arch.
- **The Viceroy**s, Federico De Roberto (1894). A historical novel and family saga, this classic set in the early days of the unification of Italy is a lucid but not very flattering picture of Sicilian society at the time, narrating the events of the noble Catania family of the Uzedas. The story on the origins of the Monastery of the Benedictines is especially entertaining.
- **Sunken Oboe**, Salvatore Quasimodo (1932). "But if I return to your shores / and a sweet voice singing / calls from the road in fear / I don't know whether it is childhood or love, / anxiety of other

skies envelops me / and I hide in lost things." The "lost things" Quasimodo refers to in his poem *Isola* also include Modica, the city of his origins. A museum has been dedicated to the poet and Nobel Prize-winner in the house where he was born.

• **Conversations in Sicily** (1941) and **The cities of the world** (1969), Elio Vittorini. In both books, the villages and the cities of Sicily are places that are as real as they are symbolic, the destinations of a physical and metaphorical journey in order to discover the human soul.

• **The Art of Joy**, Goliarda Sapienza (1965). The vitality of the heroine Modesta overwhelms readers, taking them to convents and noble townhouses, into the heart of Catania and Sicily in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

• **La luce e il lutto**, Gesualdo Bufalino (1990). A collection of essays published in newspapers and magazines which include the section *Visite brevi*, a sort of travel itinerary in Sicily. The island is told with that intimate knowledge that only a son of this land can have; thus, the narration of the places is imbued with maternal images and memories of childhood, while the late Sicilian Baroque takes on 'carnality'.

• **La mia casa di Montalbano** (2019) **Donnafugata** (2020), Costanza DiQuattro. In the first book, the author relates her memories of childhood in the holiday home which today is the TV set for the series inspired by the novels of Camilleri. The second is a historical novel in the form of letters, which takes readers into the heart of the Baroque manors close to Ragusa, discovering a tumultuous period: the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the unification of Italy which is being conceived in Sicily.

• **Lo splendore del niente e altre storie**, Maria Attanasio (2020). The stories, most of which are set in the imaginary Calacte, a literary transposition of Caltagirone, are of Sicilian women who have defied conventions and discriminations. In her prizewinning first work *Correva l'anno 1698*, Federica, a widow in the years following the catastrophic earthquake, pretends to be a man in order to find work.

### Children's books:

• **Leggende in Sicilia**, Riccardo Francaviglia (2023). Stories of love and secret treasures, fairy tale-like adventures and stories handed down from one generation to the next are gathered in this book for young readers.