

The Tuna-fishing Structures in Sicily: an Identarian Architectural Heritage

Maurice Aymard¹ has explained why 16th and 17th century royal authorities and viceroys financed the construction of an exceptional defensive apparatus along the Sicilian coast.² Given a scenario in which ties between the opposite shores of the Mediterranean were characterized by conflict, and at the same time, formal relations and commercial exchange, there was the need to protect the Sicilian population and the coastal cities from periodic incursions by pirates and Turks. But, above all, it was necessary to safeguard the preindustrial sugar cane refineries³ and tuna processing plants⁴ by fortifying the harbours and ports⁵ and constructing watch towers for armed defence.⁶

Though sugar refining in Sicily ended in the 17th century,⁷ the thousand year-old method of fishing tuna (the *tonnara*) was still being practiced well into the 20th century. Surprising architectonic vestiges, still visible despite the passage of time, human neglect, or worse, outright demolition, are suggestive of how much wealth the island once produced. During the productive cycle of the *tonnara* – from capture to commercialization – these fortified citadels housed owners, middlemen, accountants, an articulated hierarchy of tuna fishermen, plant workers, and even prisoners. On the outside, civil and religious authorities abounded, as did tax agents and local and foreign merchants.

¹ M. Aymard, “Uno sguardo sulla Sicilia: le coste e i territori”, in M. Scarlata, *L’opera di Camillo Camiliani*, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma, 1993, pp. 114-117.

² L. Dufour, *Atlante storico della Sicilia. Le città costiere nella cartografia manoscritta 1500-1823*, A. Lombardi, Palermo, 1992, p. 30; C. Polto, *La Sicilia di Tiburzio Spannocchi*, Istituto Geografico Militare, Firenze, 2001; F. Negro – C. M. Ventimiglia, *Atlante di città e fortezze del Regno di Sicilia 1640*, edited by Nicola Aricò, Sicania, Messina, 1992.

³ C. Trasselli, *Storia dello zucchero siciliano*, S. Sciascia, Caltanissetta-Roma, 1982, p. 265; A. Morreale, “Lo zuccherificio e l’impatto sull’ambiente in Sicilia tra XV e XVII secolo”, in *CEHA*, II, Madeira, 1999.

⁴ O. Cancila, *Aspetti di un mercato siciliano. Trapani nei secoli XVII-XIX*, S. Sciascia, Caltanissetta-Roma, 1972, pp. 133-160; Idem, *Storia dell’industria in Sicilia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1995, pp. 65-72; F. Benigno, *Il porto di Trapani nel Settecento. Rotte, traffici, esportazioni (1674-1800)*, Trapani, 1982, pp. 79-104; R. Lentini, “Economia e storia delle tonnare di Sicilia”, in V. Consolo, *La pesca del tonno in Sicilia*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1986, pp. 32-56.

⁵ G. Simoncini, “La Sicilia marittima fra XV e XIX secolo”, in G. Simoncini (edited by), *Sopra i porti di mare. III – Sicilia e Malta*, L. S. Olschki, Firenze, 1997, pp. 9-69; M. D’Angelo, “Porti e traffici marittimi in Sicilia fra Cinquecento e Seicento”, in G. Simoncini, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-110; G. Cardamone - M. Giuffrè, “La città e il mare: il sistema portuale di Palermo”, in G. Simoncini, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-192.

⁶ S. Mazzarella – R. Zanca, *Il libro delle torri*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1985; F. Russo, *La difesa costiera di Sicilia dal XVI al XIX secolo*, Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, Roma, 1994, tomi 2; A. Palazzolo, *Le torri di Deputazione nel Regno di Sicilia (1579-1813)*, ISSPE, Palermo, 2007.

⁷ A. Morreale, *Insula dulcis. L’industria della canna da zucchero in Sicilia (secc. XV-XVII)*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli, 2006, p. 225.

Up until the mid-20th century, this particular kind of fishing used a system of fixed nets and large underwater traps, completely different from usual deep sea methods, and entailed the construction of large buildings and functional work spaces appropriate to the productive cycle.

These included fenced and covered storerooms for the conservation of the nets, boats and tools, and areas for the preparation and conservation of tuna in salt or oil (initially using wooden barrels and then tin). Buildings were also needed to house all the workers who remained on site during the months of activity (April-June or July-September, depending on the passage of tuna along the coast)⁸ and to provide essential services to the tuna fishing community (taverns, bread ovens, chapels).⁹ The architecture of the different *tonnare* also varied according to the average volume of production recorded over the years and was, therefore, based on the importance of the site and on the strength of the site's profits in relation to its operational costs. Frequent abundant catches in a *tonnara* necessitated the expansion of its structures which had to be defended not only during the active months but throughout the year since the *tonnara* storehouses contained boats and tools as well as barrels of processed tuna that were to be sold locally and abroad.

Generally speaking, the 16th and 17th centuries represented the golden age of tuna fishing in Sicily¹⁰ and consequently the heyday of *tonnara* architecture. However, even if there was a significant correspondence between the building of the towers and forts to defend the island and the development of facilities for the fishing industry, this did not mean that an increase in productivity was determined by copious investments. The use of relevant capital made it possible for ever greater numbers of owners and tradesmen to “lower” increasingly elaborate tuna nets and traps. But the reasons for the success of any fishing season are complex and primarily linked to the biological and reproductive cycles and the behaviour and migrations of the Mediterranean tuna.

At any rate, it should be pointed out that during these centuries this type of fishing was of particular interest to bankers, entrepreneurs, aristocrats and merchants because of its potential for generating great profits, despite the associated high risks. It is not a coincidence

⁸ R. Sarà, *Dal mito all'aliscafo. Storie di tonni e di tonnare*, Palermo, 1998; Idem, “Splendore decadenza e spegnimento delle tonnare siciliane. Una breve rivisitazione millenaria”, in G. Doneddu – A. Fiori (edited by), *La pesca in Italia tra età moderna e contemporanea. Produzione, mercato, consumo*, EDES, Sassari, 2003, pp. 500-506.

⁹ R. Lentini, “Favignana nell’800: architetture di un’economia”, in *Lo Stabilimento Florio di Favignana. Storia, iconografia, architettura*, Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA., Trapani, 2008, pp. 15-257.

¹⁰ O. Cancila, *Storia dell’industria* cit.; M. Gangemi, “La pesca del tonno e del pesce spada tra Calabria e Sicilia in età moderna e contemporanea”, in G. Doneddu – M. Gangemi (edited by), *La pesca nel Mediterraneo occidentale (secc. XVI-XVIII)*, Puglia Grafica Sud, Bari, 2000, pp. 161-177; N. Calleri, *Un’impresa mediterranea di pesca. I Pallavicini e le tonnare delle Egadi nei secoli XVII-XIX*, Unioncamere Liguria, Genova, 2006, pp. 71-78.

that the high costs of this type of fishing led to the creation of innovative companies of shareholders (*caratari*) that contributed capital in predetermined fixed shares (*carati*).¹¹

Referring to the archival material, including the most reliable authors and the rich historical cartography available regarding the *tonnara* sites built in Sicily from the Middle Ages until the end of the 19th century, one finds no less than 85 place-names corresponding to both large and small fishing complexes. For some, only the name remains, making them almost impossible to locate, while for others, it is possible to trace the decline in production and eventual abandonment of the structure. Between the 11th and 12th centuries 6 active *tonnare* can be documented. A century later, the notary sources reported another 15 *tonnare*, and by the 1400's there were at least 39 active.¹² At the end of the 18th century, the Marquis of Villabianca counted 71 sites of which only 9 – according to an optimistic estimate – were considered inactive or abandoned.¹³ In the end, a government commissioned report on the Italian *tonnare* by Pietro Pavesi – completed in May 1886 – found only 21 active fishing sites left in Sicily.¹⁴

Today, regardless of the uncertain future of tuna fishing in the Mediterranean – now mostly carried out by modern fishing fleets – there is a pressing need to involve local communities, researchers and specialists in the preservation of this productive preindustrial microcosm. Clearly, traditional tuna fishing has entered a final decline in Sicily, thus making the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Sicilian *tonnare* all the more urgent.

The so-called politics of “cultural heritage preservation” appear increasingly similar to simple declarations of intent unsupported by rigorous scientific programmes and effective strategies, and usually end up considering the issue exclusively in terms of financial feasibility. The problem, however, is to repair the damage due to the loss of collective memory, neglect, speculation and uncontrolled development along the coasts. Furthermore, a community lucky enough to have such historic sites in its territory must know how to

¹¹ R. Lentini, “Economia e storia delle tonnare di Sicilia” cit..

¹² H. Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen. Économie et société en Sicile 1300-1450*, Accademia delle Scienze, Lettere e Arti, Palermo 1986, tomo I, pp. 261-273; G.L. de Barberis, *Liber de Secretiis*, edited by E. Mazzaresse Fardella, Giuffrè, Milano, 1986; C. Camiliani, “Descrizione delle marine del Regno di Sicilia”, in M. Scarlata, *L'opera di Camillo Camiliani* cit., p. 640. A. I. Amico di Castellalfero, “Relazione istoriografica delle città, castelli, forti e torri esistenti ne' litorali del Regno di Sicilia”, in S. Di Matteo (edited by), *Sicilia 1713. Relazioni per Vittorio Amedeo di Savoia*, Fondazione Lauro Chiazzese, Palermo, 1994, p. 172.

¹³ F. M. Emmanuele e Gaetani, marchese di Villabianca, “Le tonnare della Sicilia”, in Villabianca, *Le tonnare della Sicilia*, edited by Giovanni Marrone, Giada, Palermo, 1986, pp. 35-101; G. B. Ghisio, *Nuova ed esatta carta corografica della Sicilia*, Roma, 31 agosto 1779, cm. 154 x 130; F. C. D'Amico, *Osservazioni pratiche intorno alla pesca, corso e camino dei tonni*, Messina, 1816.

¹⁴ P. Pavesi, “Relazione alla Commissione Reale per le Tonnare”, in *Atti della Commissione per le Tonnare*, Roma, 1889, pp. 34-35 e 47-54. R. Sarà, “Una ricostruzione ragionata delle attività di pesca nella Sicilia dei secoli XIX e XX”, in M. Gangemi (edited by), *Pesca e patrimonio industriale. Tecniche, strutture e organizzazione (Sicilia, Puglia, Malta e Dalmazia tra XIX e XX secolo)*, Cacucci, Bari, 2007, pp. 62-68.

manage its cultural heritage. Likewise, proposals for the creation of specific thematic museums should not become alibis for not preserving other heritage sites that risk being consigned to obscurity. Sea museums,¹⁵ for example, are important because they serve to educate people and can stimulate interest in local history, but they cannot be expected to substitute for an actual historic site. Moreover, though the exhibitions, despite the best intentions, can run the risk of simplification,¹⁶ they are much more effective when the original *tonnara* buildings are used for thematic museum exhibitions.

Furthermore, such a natural expository context permits a more authentic representation of the actual work of the *tonnara* as well as a deeper analysis of the relations of production that determined and regulated human life and activity. Of course, not all the surviving *tonnare* can become museums because ownership is often divided, making agreement about the terms of restoration impossible. It would be desirable, therefore, that the communities in which these structures are located create conditions favourable to the reconciliation of the needs and legitimate interests of the property owners and the proposals by the local authorities to protect and utilize the structures.

The restoration of the grand *Stabilimento Florio* merits special attention. This tuna processing plant on the island of Favignana was built in the 1880's on the shore near the buildings and storehouses of the ancient *tonnara*. Acquired by the *Regione Siciliana* in the 1990's, it has been restored with significant EU funding (about 15 million Euro) and opened to the public in 2009. In the meantime, the search for a qualified manager at a national or international level has also commenced. This enormous area (about 32,000 sq. meters) is suitable for a variety of uses, including an already scheduled exhibition space.

From this perspective, next to the profit-making activities that are due to start soon – sports facilities, hotels, etc... – cultural objectives should also be pursued in what is one of the most evocative locations in western Sicily. In particular, I believe that the *Stabilimento* in question must become not only the site of a museum for the two ancient *tonnare* of Formica and Favignana, but also the preferred site of a “Historical Museum of the *Tonnare* of Sicily” an expository space that would bring together material from the other ancient Sicilian fishing structures. Such a hypothesis is supported and strengthened by environmental factors and circumstances difficult to find or replicate elsewhere. In the first place, it should be noted that since 1991 the area in which the *Stabilimento* is located has been enhanced by the creation of the “Natural Marine Reserve of the Egadi Islands.” This is the concrete result

¹⁵ P. Frascani, *Il mare*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008 and the review of G. Imbruglia, “Il mare, la sua storia, i musei”, in *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche*, n. 16, agosto 2009, pp. 401-407.

¹⁶ A. Buttitta, “Introduzione”, in *Esperto nella gestione cit.*, p. 17.

of the need to protect a vast area of about 54,000 marine hectares, considered of particular importance for the marine ecosystem. Secondly, the two *tonnare* of the Egadi Islands were historically the most productive not only in Sicily but, as government data show¹⁷ from the second half of the 1800's, in all of Italy. Further still, the Favignana *tonnara* was the largest *tonnara* in Italy and represented, up until the 1960's, the most advanced canning industry for the conservation of tuna as well. Finally, the natural beauty of the islands exalts and amplifies the potential value of the museum project for the local economy since a restored and renovated *Stabilimento Florio*, serving as both a congress centre and museum, would attract a great deal of scientific and conference tourism activity. The *Stabilimento*, therefore, has all the characteristics and prerequisites to become the historic memory of a fundamental piece of Sicily's preindustrial material culture and of its centuries-old tuna fishing economy.

This identarian value which I've hinted at obviously does not belong exclusively to the *tonnara* and does not derive only from its functional specificity and construction typologies. Other examples of Sicily's rich identarian legacy include the network of the agropastoral homesteads in what were once the huge Roman *latifondi*¹⁸ and the feudal estates of Sicily, the ancient windmills of the saltworks that typify the south-western coast of the Island (from Trapani to Marsala),¹⁹ and the sulphur mines in the province of Agrigento, Caltanissetta and Palermo.²⁰ There are many different ways of interpreting the innumerable identarian elements present in the Sicilian landscape, but any interpretive coherency will be tied to the possibility of collecting ample data and information destined for an archival, bibliographic, iconographic and audio repertory able to confer depth to the reconstruction and make the recuperation of memory possible.

From this point of view, the history and the economy of tuna fishing, more than any other activity, have perhaps the greatest amount of available documentary evidence. The sources include accountant registers, diaries of the *raisi* (indisputable leader of the *tonnara* workers on land and sea), and notary contracts that regulated individual and collective relations. There are also fiscal records and reports compiled by experts and technicians as well as legal documents recording disputes between owners and managers of the *tonnare* quarrelling over territorial fishing rights. Whereas the archives of numerous 19th century

¹⁷ P. Pavesi, "Relazione alla Commissione Reale per le Tonnare", cit., pp. 101-109.

¹⁸ G. Valussi, *La casa rurale nella Sicilia occidentale*, L. Olschki, Firenze, 1968; B. Spano, "La casa del latifondo centro-meridionale", in *Case contadine*, Touring Club Italiano, Milano, 1979, pp. 164-197.

¹⁹ G. Mondini, *Le saline della provincia di Trapani*, Trapani, 1881; G. Bufalino, *Saline di Sicilia*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1988; S. Costanza, *Tra Sicilia e Africa. Trapani. Storia di una città mediterranea*, Corrao, Trapani, 2005.

²⁰ S. Addamo, *Zolfare di Sicilia*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1989; G. Barone – C. Torrisi (edited by), *Economia e società nell'area dello zolfo*, S. Sciascia, Caltanissetta-Roma, 1989.

industries (citrus fruit, metal-works, wine, sulphur, etc...) have been lost or destroyed, sometimes deliberately, with surprising nonchalance, in the case of the *tonnare*, an abundance of diverse writings and documentation for both the large and small enterprises is available from the second half of the 19th century. This material includes a vast number of photos taken by highly regarded professionals as well as amateurs photographers all attracted to the cruel ritual of the *mattanza*²¹ (the slaughter of the ensnared tuna with clubs). From this visual evidence, striking analogies and variations among the different architectural styles emerge. Moreover, even if there are no two identical *tonnare*, the photos – more so than written documents – illustrate essentially intact spaces, phases of work and portraits of the workers, offering a coherent picture of what the different production sites – today totally unrecognizable – had in common.

A further reflection, in closing, regards the difficult relation between the architectonic and preindustrial elements that need to be protected and the areas in which they are located. This is not irrelevant and I only mention it here to point out the complexity and the difficulty of any heritage restoration project in which different levels of competence and responsibility are involved. In the specific case of the *tonnare*, a more detailed analysis I conducted some years ago regarding the pre-existing structures in the area around Palermo²² has shown that the grave discordance between these structures and their respective contexts was due to economic-productive variations over time and to uncontrolled private initiatives, often resulting in damage to the property in question. However, a census of these aggressions along the coast in the past decades and in particular of the damage to the towers and the *tonnare*, should not only arouse public indignation, but should also induce the local authorities to adopt rigorous policies that can no longer be postponed. Though a complete return to prior environmental conditions is not possible, provisions are urgently needed to impede further disruption of the surrounding areas before the remaining architectonic complexes are definitely destroyed.

Though the Sicilian *tonnare* no longer perform their original function, they remain a precious testimony to the extraordinary experience of the culture of work and to the material

²¹ Besides V. Consolo, *La pesca del tonno* cit., see also, in particular: G. Lazzaro Danduso – E. Zinna, *La mattanza. Il ritorno di Ulisse*, G. Maimone, Catania, 1987; R. La Duca, *La tonnara di Scopello*, Grifo, Palermo, 1988; M. Lo Curzio, *L'Architettura delle Tonnare*, EDAS, Messina, 1991; G. Martorana, *Tonnara*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1995; N. Ravazza, *L'ultima muciarà. Storia della tonnara di Bonagia*, G. Maurici, Trapani, 2000; F. Morreale, *Tonnare di ritorno. Santa Panagia e le altre*, Natura Sicula, Siracusa, 2009; Burri – Freed – List – Salgado – Scianna, *Tempo di tonni. Favignana, lo stabilimento Florio*, con un testo di Silvio Governali, Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA., Trapani, 2009; R. Alongi – G. Gini – R. Lentini (edited by), *Lo Stabilimento Florio di Favignana. Storia, iconografia, architettura*, testi di Rosario Lentini, Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA., Trapani, 2008.

²² R. Lentini, “Da Magazzinazzi a Cefalù: le tonnare palermitane tra storia e recupero”, in M. Gangemi (edited by), *Pesca e patrimonio industriale. Tecniche, strutture e organizzazione (Sicilia, Puglia, Malta e Dalmazia tra XIX e XX secolo)*, Cacucci, Bari, 2007, pp. 91-124.

culture of Sicily. To keep the identity of the Island alive, we have a moral imperative to consign this fragment of historic, architectonic and environmental patrimony to future generations.