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## The (Re)Birth of a Mediterranean Migration System. The Case of Tunisian Migration in Sicily

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### ABSTRACT

The appearance of Tunisian communities in Sicily towards the mid-1960s was one of the very first cases of international migration towards twentieth-century Italy. However, the coexistence of immigration with the difficult economic situation of the destination area still raises interpretational difficulties: how is it possible that one of the poorest European regions became an area of immigration and, the very first in its own country? This article suggests an answer to this question adopting a comprehensive approach integrating political, social, and economic elements. The article defines and frames migrants movements in the Channel of Sicily as components of a broader migration system connecting Sicily and Tunisia. The deconstruction of the migration system follows three directions: the Italian institutional and diplomatic background against which Tunisian migrations emerged, the economic salience of transnational economic activities in the Channel of Sicily, and the history of connections between the opposing shores of the Central Mediterranean.

### RIASSUNTO

Lo sviluppo di comunità tunisine in Sicilia verso la metà degli anni '60 rappresenta uno dei primissimi casi di migrazione internazionale verso l'Italia del XX secolo. Ciononostante, la concomitanza di immigrazione e di un difficile contesto economico nelle aree di destinazione solleva ancora delle difficoltà interpretative: come è possibile che una delle regioni più povere d'Europa divenne un'area di immigrazione e, per di più, la prima in Italia? Attraverso un approccio che integra dinamiche politiche, sociali ed economiche questo articolo avanza una risposta. I movimenti migratori nel Canale di Sicilia vengono qui presentati come elementi di un più ampio sistema migratorio che collega la Sicilia alla Tunisia. La decostruzione del Sistema migratorio segue tre direttrici: il contesto istituzionale e diplomatico che faceva da sfondo ai primi flussi tra Tunisia e Sicilia; la rilevanza delle attività economiche transnazionali nel Canale di Sicilia e la storia dei rapporti tra le due sponde del Mediterraneo centrale.

**KEYWORDS** migration history; Sicilian history; Tunisian emigration; Italian immigration; Mediterranean migration

**PAROLE CHIAVE** storia delle migrazioni; Storia siciliana; Emigrazione tunisina; migrazioni italiane; migrazioni mediterranee

The night between the 8 and 9 of April 1981, a ferry-boat of the shipping company Tirrenia coming from Tunis berthed at the port of Mazara del Vallo, a maritime town on the south-western tip of Sicily. More than 400 Tunisian citizens disembarked from the ship heading towards border controls. While they declared to officers to be in Sicily for touristic reasons, Italian border police knew well that many of those people were already permanently residing on the island. Some of them had lived in Sicily since the early 1970s, whereas newcomers were looking for jobs rather than touristic attractions.<sup>1</sup> After the check, many of them headed towards the Casbah, the historical city center of Mazara del Vallo, a typical medieval citadel characterized by its small houses and intricate urban fabric. Sicilians had pretty much abandoned it after the 1968 earthquake, and Tunisians were now taking over, turning the Casbah into the beating heart of Arab immigration into Italy.

The Italian press, still not used to deal with migration, wondered how was possible that Sicily, the most impoverished region of the country, became in the 1970s the first area to experience significant levels of international migration: 'Who are these people, who ... have given so many Sicilian towns, which suffer from emigration, the grotesque dimension of a "host country"? ' From what reality have they been catapulted here, to a place from which people have always fled?<sup>2</sup> The growing presence of Tunisians was apparently 'inexplicable ... in a region where unemployment and consequent emigration represent an element dramatically evident'.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, since the 1970s, the presence of Tunisian communities has turned into a structural element of Sicilian society, especially but not only, in its southern and western provinces. The roughly 20,000 Tunisians living in Sicily compose the largest non-European community, counting for more than 10 per cent of the total foreign population of the island.<sup>4</sup> The presence of Tunisian dwellers has come to represent a characteristic feature of the province of Trapani, paving the way for ethnic and cultural diversification. Today, the Tunisian community of western Sicily – which in the meantime has seen the growth of a second generation of young *Italo-Tunisini* – provides a yardstick for historical-comparative observations of more recent migration flows towards the country (Ben-Yehoyada 2011). Moreover, the renewed centrality of irregular routes between Sicily and Tunisia has turned the spotlight on the history of diplomatic and transnational relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean (Cuttitta 2012; Paoli 2015). In 2020, Tunisian citizens represented the most numerous national groups among those trying to cross the central Mediterranean through irregular routes at sea.<sup>5</sup> Judicial inquiries have provided most of the available accounts on the role of Tunisian communities in illegal migration between the two shores of the Sicilian Channel.<sup>6</sup> Still, researchers are now exploring the implication of this link, exposing how historical migrant networks interact with the organization of informal movements at sea (Punzo & Scaglione 2020). Especially with regard

to the so-called *sbarchi fantasma* (ghost landings), frequently unnoticed by the authorities, it has been remarked that the organization of crossings often originates in Sicily rather than in Tunisia. Migrant communities on the island also provide first reception services, acting as initial stage for wider migration trajectories.

Thus, in many senses, Tunisian immigration to Sicily represents a *fil rouge* crossing (and connecting) the various phases of the history of Italy as a country of immigration, from post-colonial mobilities up until the establishments of dangerous Mediterranean journeys.

The emerging literature on the history of Italian immigration has unanimously identified Tunisian immigration to Sicily as one of the very first cases of international migration towards Italy.<sup>7</sup> Early pioneer migrants arrived in western Sicily as far as the mid-1960s, introducing the country to a new social phenomenon that will come to play a major role in Italian public life.

Although historiography recognized the importance of movements between Tunisia and Sicily for the history of Italy as a country of immigration, interpretational difficulties that bewildered observers in the 1970s and 1980s remain somewhat unsolved. Despite the importance of the Sicily-Tunisia nexus and of its most recent evolutions, some misunderstanding still surround the moments of emergence of the first flows of Tunisians towards Sicily. The aim of this article is precisely to address the doubts concerning the causes of the emergence of migrations between Tunisia and Sicily in the 1970s and to show the institutional and social space in which those flows emerged and thrived. The article will deconstruct the development of Tunisian migration and identify the main drivers behind the emergence of these flows, showing how the articulation between international relations, transnational connections, and post-colonial movements shaped the history of Italy as a country of immigration from its very beginning.

### **The 'darkest south'**

Explaining the emergence of international migration towards western Sicily result challenging because of the peculiar socio-economic situation of this area, especially if considered comparatively with other Italian and European contexts. If a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic condition of Sicily is beyond the scope of the present article, it is useful to begin by reminding the historical background against which Tunisians migrations emerged.

The 1950s had marked another encounter of Italy with the 'backwardness' of its south. The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on misery as the investigations of Danilo Dolci or Carlo Levi *Words are Stones* showed to an Italian society on the road to gentrification, the harshness of living conditions

in many Sicilian areas. The awareness of terrible sanitary and economic conditions in many Sicilian areas prompted authorities to restore the 'Sicilian question' as a national priority.

Backed by the national parties, the Sicilian administration launched a vast program of investments and infrastructural works (Miccichè 2017). The documentary *Sicilia 58* showed this activism: development programs included road, ports, industrial plants and agricultural optimization. At the inauguration of the river Platani dam, the president of the Region, Giuseppe La Loggia spoke of the new face of Sicily 'a region that . . . through its generous work, is creating the premises for a future that will make it a living factor of progress for the whole nation'.<sup>8</sup>

However, the most evident drivers of change came from elsewhere: once removed the fascist block on international movement, emigration got back to being the safety valve it had been at the beginning of the century. Workers' quest for economic stability, the easiness with whom they left the island, and the land reform coalesced to make the old rural Sicily disappear. The process of urbanization swelled the most important centres and depopulated vast areas of the interior provoking a profound reorganization of Sicily social structures (Giarrizzo 1987).

Significant transformations notwithstanding, at the half of the 1960s, Sicily was an area where old social and economic problems remained, whereas new challenges emerged. While labor markets in central and northern Italy experienced full employment, the rate of unemployment in Sicily lingered beyond 10 per cent, the highest of the country. In the meanwhile, almost half of the workforce in active employment had occasional or precarious jobs. Industrial activities were incapable of fostering significant growth and attract capitals, while agriculture still relied on traditional non-mechanized methods.<sup>9</sup>

The 1968 Belice earthquake dramatically exposed the state of abandon in which western Sicily still lived; the weakness of its infrastructures, the insufficiency of housing conditions coexisted with 'the most obnoxious forms of exploitation of small farmers'.<sup>10</sup> Assessing the developments of the 1950s and 1960s, the historian Francesco Renda, wrote: 'it was very uneven and often contradictory, it created areas of important transformations alongside areas of desolate abandonment involving populations of entire territories'.<sup>11</sup>

Economist Paolo Sylos Labini depicted two distinct economic situations: from one side, eastern Sicily was experiencing on the heels of general development in the whole country, slow but steady growth of standards of living and economic activities. On the other, central and western Sicily struggled to get out of a situation of endemic poverty, poor sanitary conditions and absence of economic initiatives.<sup>12</sup> Challenges were not just material: according to the National Institute of Statistics, in 1971, 44.9 per cent of Sicilians still fell in the two categories of 'illiterate' or 'literate without primary schooling'.<sup>13</sup> For the characteristics of its labor market, schooling levels, and demographic

structure, economists referred to Sicily, and its western provinces in particular, as *underdeveloped* areas, not different from other regions of what had recently been defined the 'Third World'.

In this context, emigration, especially in the interior, remained the main structural traits of this Sicilian society and the most common investment strategies of Sicilian families. In the period 1961–1971 alone, more than 287,000 Sicilians left the island towards northern European countries, with Germany and Switzerland being the most popular destinations before France and Belgium. In the same time, 341,000 people left Sicily to resettle in other regions of the country, mostly but not only, in the north west.<sup>14</sup> Thus, still in 1972 the American anthropologist Peter Schneider noticed that the island was 'still largely a pre-industrial and agriculturally under-developed region, closely resembling other parts of southern Europe, Latin America and the Philippines, all of which share with it a common history of early Spanish or Portuguese colonization'.<sup>15</sup> In 1970, Nicio Giuliani, prefect of the Trapani province, urged Italian authorities to operate a 'massive intervention to remove or at least mitigate ... an economic depression reflected in all the province sectors, economic, social, cultural'. Giuliani deemed the conditions of the province to be 'really serious and worrying', drawing the attention of the government to the fact that growing unemployed protests could pose a threat to public order.<sup>16</sup>

Given this background, the emergence of foreign immigration in this region raises now as then, several questions: how is it possible that western Sicily, one of the most relevant areas of emigration in the Mediterranean, also became an area of immigration, and – moreover – the very first in its own country? Through which stages 'the deepest and darkest south of Italy'<sup>17</sup> became the 'north' of Tunisian migrants? Why – despite the presence of laws explicitly giving priority to Italian workers – immigration was growing in a territory with high rates of unemployment? If traditional 'push' factors like a weak economy, unemployment, a culture of migration, and rising demographic pressures were present in Tunisia, Sicily, and especially its western provinces seemed to lack any pulling dynamic attracting foreign labor (Huetz de Lempis 1958). The Sicilian economy, as the Tunisian one, was at that time characterized by high rates of unemployment, and the entry in a narrow job market depended on a thorough understanding of the local social dynamics or personal connections based on affiliation or familism. Mechanisms of active recruitment of foreign labor were absent, as were relevant industrial activities. While workers earned four times more than their Tunisian counterparts, thousands of Sicilians were not able to access the job market, composing a large sub-proletariat forced to live at the margin of society (Cusumano 1978).

One could think that Sicily was just the first step to broader migratory trajectories: Northern Italy was undergoing an abrupt process of industrialization requiring the input of a non-local workforce (Castronovo 2010). In this sense, Sicily would have been a good entry point to reach the ‘industrial triangle’ of northern Italy. However, the intense flows of internal migration on the south–north axis fulfilled the needs for industrial labor. Statistical data shows how Tunisian immigration towards Sicily – at least until the 1980s – did not spread extensively towards other regions of Italy. The rates of immigration remained much more relevant in the island than in the rest of the country. Thus, Sicily registered an increase of foreign residents of 1.333 per cent in the period 1961–1981, a figure four times higher than the rest of Italy, 336 per cent for the same period.<sup>18</sup> So, how can we interpret the emergence of Tunisian communities in Sicily? An answer to this question implies an understanding of connections between origin and destination areas, the routes linking them, and the history they shared.

To better frame the history of Tunisian migration to Sicily, it is necessary to look closer at the forms and features characterizing its emergence.

### International Threads

The 2 April 1971, Italian Minister of the Interior Franco Restivo, received a letter signed by Leonardo Pisciotta, Nicolò Salluzzo and Benedetto Fiore, representatives of the three main Italian Trade Union associations (C.G.I.L., C.I.S.L. and U.I.L.) of Castelvetro, a small rural village in the south-western part of Sicily. In the missive, the trade unions vigorously denounced the illegal employment of Tunisian workforce in the agricultural enterprises around the village. According to the senders, this foreign labour was

... abundant, hired by employers in all the different production sectors of the village with starvation wages and with a working hour of 14–16 hours a day.

Trade Unionists pointed to the ministerial authorities that:

... taking into account the occupational features of our areas, where jobs have always been scarce, and indeed, emigration plays and has always played a central role, employers take advantage of the situation, blackmailing the local workforce to impose on it the same salaries of Tunisian workers. ... This is causing an understandable state of unrest among local workers ... also because the phenomenon is growing day after day, affecting other villages of the Provincia.<sup>19</sup>

Through this letter, the attention of Rome’s authorities was, for the first time, brought to the phenomenon of Tunisian migration towards Sicily. It was one of the very first time in which the Republican government had to deal with the question of international labor immigration (Colucci 2018). After the denunciation of Castelvetro Trade Unions, the Ministry of the Interior in

concert with the Ministry of Labor started an investigation to shed light on what was happening in Sicily. The government ordered its representatives to find out information about scales and the features of the phenomenon. From 1971 to 1973, the Police Headquarter of Trapani (Questura), the Prefecture, the Carabinieri and the Labour Inspectorate of Trapani (Ispettorato del Lavoro) conducted an inquiry in the area, regularly reporting to the authorities in Rome.

Almost immediately, it became clear that Trade Unions correctly claimed that the presence of Tunisians in the area was by no means confined to the village of Castelvetro. Soon, the authorities realized that other towns and cities presented concentration of foreign workers all the more relevant. Among these, Campobello di Mazara, Marsala, Partanna, Salemi, Trapani and especially Mazara del Vallo.

While circular trajectories between Tunisia and Sicily made migrants identification and quantification arduous, local authorities appraised that around 2000 Tunisians lived stably in the Province of Trapani.<sup>20</sup> The importance of these foreign communities as the realization that the onset of the phenomenon predated the denunciation of Trade Unions of a few years forced the authorities to enlarge their inquiry. The discussion around the presence of Tunisian workers in Sicily and migration flows between the two shores of the Channel of Sicily took an international dimension, involving the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tunisian authorities.

The documents produced in the context of the government inquiry on the phenomenon and the correspondence between Italian and Tunisian authorities provide essential insights on the institutional and social space against which movements between Tunisia and Sicily took place.

A first element comes from the opposed attitudes of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since the first denunciation, the Ministry of the Interior and its local detachments aimed exclusively at the eradication of the phenomenon through coercive measures as repatriation and refoulements. The Ministry of the Interior's main concerns were the rigorous enforcement of the rules concerning the residence of foreigners and the maintaining of public order.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs led by former prime minister Aldo Moro instead, once involved in the discussion, pointed out that the question of Tunisian immigration mobilized dynamics going beyond the local labor market and the maintaining of law and order. In the close correspondence with other authorities between 1972 and 1973, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the mediation of plenipotentiary Minister Norberto Cappello, lobbied for an extraordinary regularization of Tunisian workers in Sicily. To justify the position of the Ministry, Cappello indicated that while the Tunisian population in western Sicily counted roughly 2000 people, 12,000 Italians still resided in Tunisia. Alongside them, significant



Italian interests endured in the country. Reckless initiatives could have endangered not only Italian–Tunisian relations but also the conditions of all Italians living on the opposite side of the Channel of Sicily. On several occasions, the Tunisian Embassy in Rome pointed to the Italian authorities that the end of repatriations and refoulements as the regularization of Tunisian workers were Italian obligations because the precarious conditions of the Tunisian economy notwithstanding, in 1972, 7.816 Italian citizens owned a permanent permit to work in Tunisia.<sup>21</sup>

Beside, Tunisia had already been identified by Italian diplomacy as a bridgehead for its relations with North African countries. In a meeting held in Tunis with the ambassadors in North Africa and the Middle East, the Minister of foreign affairs and former Prime minister Aldo Moro affirmed that ‘our vision of preferential relations of the EEC with the Maghreb is taking shape ... it adapts with our quest to reinforce relations ... with Maghreb countries and in particular with Tunisia’. According to the Italian governments, the end of colonialism and the projects for European integration made the country a geopolitical key-player in a reorganized Mediterranean. The discard of French rule over the Maghreb left a void in the relations between North Africa and Europe, and ‘reasons of geographical proximity, historical ties, and commercial tradition’ seemed to put Italy in the best position to fill that space.<sup>22</sup> In this context, Tunisia, the nearest among Maghreb countries, with its long history of relations with Italy, was the privileged interlocutor. Moreover, the audacious strategy of the Italian multinational oil and gas company E.N.I., was opening spaces for a new role of Italy in the global energy market. Right at that time, in the early 1970s, E.N.I. was, testing the feasibility of a crucial infrastructural project: the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline, a gas pipeline connecting Algeria to Italy through Tunisia.

All these arguments turned Tunisian migration in western Sicily in a piece of the broader puzzle of Italian–Maghreb relations. A piece that could not be moved ignoring all the other adjacent elements.

The solidity and complexity of the question at stake pushed authorities to follow the Foreign Affairs line. Initial rejections and repatriations notwithstanding, a different approach was adopted, and in 1973, authorities issued an extraordinary regularization for Tunisian workers.<sup>23</sup> Despite the poor results of the regularization and the enduring illegal status of many Tunisians, the distention of the tension between Italian authorities and migrants contributed to the progressive rooting of the communities in western Sicily. If denunciation of Unions and the coercive actions carried out between 1971 and 1972 seemed the end of Tunisian settlements in Sicily, international considerations forced the representatives of the Ministry of the Interior to reconsider their initial attitudes. From that moment on and

throughout all the 1980s, despite the moments of tensions between locals and Tunisians, authorities tolerated the presence of Tunisian workers in Sicily as an acceptable evil to maintain good relations with a strategic neighbour.

From the very beginning of its history as a country of immigration, Italy could not conceive its immigration policy ignoring its web of international relations. However, while international concerns represented the scenario that prevented Italian authority from pursuing securitarian approaches against immigration, other dimensions contributed to turning Sicily into an attractive destination area for Tunisians.

### **Geographical and institutional border crossing**

A second element stemming from the governmental inquiry relates more directly to the way in which Tunisians found a space in the problematic socio-economic circumstances of 1970s' western Sicily. As seen, the Trade Unions of Castelvetro denounced to the authorities the impossibility to absorb foreign labor in an area 'where jobs have always been scarce, and indeed, emigration plays and has always played a central role'. Concerned by the ambiguity of foreign settlements in such an economic context, the Ministry of Labor, in concert with its local detachment, the Provincial Office of Labour, tried to understand the ground of this international labor migration. The distribution of the communities in the region showed that despite the first complaints had come from the rural village of Castelvetro; other areas were more touched by Tunisian immigration. The fishing town of Mazara del Vallo, in particular, hosted almost half of the total number of Tunisian living in Sicily, the local fleet, and its related activities employing the bulk of these workers.

At the beginning of the 1970s, seafaring in Mazara del Vallo was living a moment of rapid expansion that was turning the town into the first fishing port of the Mediterranean. This evolution was initially due to the constant flows of capitals coming from the development program of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, a governmental scheme conceived in the 1950s to narrow the economic gap between northern and southern Italy. The Cassa financed the motorization and construction of trawlers employed in deep-sea fisheries (Lentini 2004). The creation of jobs related to the fishing industry and the proliferation of trawlers in Mazara del Vallo greatly benefited Tunisian newcomers. This state of affairs begged the question from the Ministry of Labor: how is it possible that one of the few dynamic realities -in an otherwise economically depressed area – favored foreign labor over the local workforce? Why shipowners preferred workers from the Tunisian city of Mahdia over the indigents of nearby villages like Campobello, Partanna, or Menfi?

According to the investigation conducted by the local Inspectorates of Labour, Tunisian employment in the fleet was not connected to a labor shortage. It was instead a component inherent to the dynamic of expansion

of the fleet. In a letter to the Ministry of Labor dated November 1971, Piccione and Abate, respectively chief of the Provincial Office of Labour and director of the Provincial Labour Inspectorate, claimed that in Mazara del Vallo was widespread the belief of

... the inevitability of the employment of Tunisian workforce, probably produced by the awareness of the needs of the fleet to secure relations allowing the approaching of the Tunisian coasts. ... This belief is embedded at every level, because it is clear that the economy is based on fishing activities. The needs of the latter become, therefore, general needs, sometimes basic ones.<sup>24</sup>

The presence of Tunisians should be linked neither with the absence of local workforce nor with the refusal of domestic workers to take on jobs in the fleet, but rather to needs inherent fishing activities. The forms of depth-sea fishing practiced by Mazarese trawlers, the distribution of fish stock in the Channel of Sicily, and the sustainability of the fleet swelling required an expansion of fishing operations beyond Italian waters and an approaching of the Tunisian coasts. The combination of these three factors convinced Mazarese shipowners to hire Tunisian fishers in the belief that their presence would represent some sort of 'free pass' for their vessels in Tunisian national waters.

Already in the mid-1960s, Tunisian authorities had seized Sicilian trawlers caught in illegal fishing activities, creating an international affair that embarrassed the diplomatic authorities of the two countries.

The presence of Arab workers on Sicilian boats gave the shipowners at least a chance to negotiate with the Tunisian coast guard. This attitude, also mentioned by the representatives of the provincial offices of Labor, is still present in the memory of Mazarese people, Italians and Tunisians alike. It is a common opinion that an informal agreement between shipowners and Tunisian authorities allowed the operations of Italian trawlers in Tunisian national waters, despite this being expressly forbidden by a series of Italian–Tunisian bilateral agreement (Scovazzi 1994). The rising employment of Tunisians became, for prominent Mazarese shipowners like the future major Ignazio Giacalone, an opportunity to make the dramatic enlargement of their fleet sustainable and rentable (Ben Yehoyada 2017). Through a double mechanism of system feedback, the settlement of Tunisians in western Sicily helped the scaling up of fleet operation. In its turn, the spatial and economic enlargement of the fleet operation gave a new impulse to the flow of Tunisian migration. Despite the resistance of peculiar elements like a narrow job market and random expulsion measures, the Mazarese fleet became a central element in the migration system between Sicily and Tunisia, an element that needed Tunisians to perform its practices of geographical and institutional border crossing.<sup>25</sup>

However, while the expansion of the fleet and the acceleration of Tunisian migration formed a circuit of mutual reinforcement, they were not related to a cause–effect relation in which one of the two elements preceded the other. Mazarese shipowners produced a transnational system of labor recruitment to hire Tunisian workers drawing from small groups of Tunisians already present in western Sicily. The first pioneer migrants did not arrive in Sicily attracted by the enlarging operations of the Mazarese fleet but following a somewhat different form of transnational mobility.

### Old system, new direction

While the assumption of liberal migration policy composed the institutional landscape of the migration system between Sicily and Tunisia, the transnational operation of the fleet carved out significant space for the employment of foreigners in a job market otherwise closed. The potential of both translated in actual migration flows through the historical connections between Tunisians and Sicilians.

These ties have a long history, which goes back to the nineteenth century when Sicily was becoming the cradle of a mass emigration with little precedents in European history. While the island presented levels of extreme destitution and political unrest, its ‘maritime centrality’, as well as the importance of its ports, gave it a position of relative connectedness with a globalizing world. The convergence of these factors turned the ‘choice of migration’ in one of the most valuable strategies of economic investment for Sicilian families. Among the different links created by migration between Sicily and different regions of the world, the one with Tunisia remains one of the least known. Thanks to the influence of a small Italian speaking community, significant flows of Sicilians started to appear in the country towards the middle of the nineteenth century (Triulzi 1971). The growth of ‘Sicilian cities’, such as La Goulette or Sidi Daoud, played a fundamental role, creating a transnational network that connected Trapani and Tunis, making possible the spreading of news about the possibility of making a better living on the other side of the Channel. Similarly to their Tunisian counterpart a century after, the movements of people across the sea initially took the form of circulations, Sicilians started to cross the Mediterranean in search of seasonal works and by 1881, year of the establishment of the French Protectorate, the Italian population with its Sicilian majority had already overcome 10,000 units, becoming Tunisia largest foreign community (Kazdaghli 1999)

The attractiveness of the Regency also stemmed from the will of the Husaynid dynasty to ‘modernize’ the country which implied the construction of ‘modern’ infrastructure and, consequently, ‘European’ workforce. In this context, Sicilians, who first arrived as seasonal fishers and agricultural workers, turned to constructions and the building sector (Finzi 2003). The

establishment of the French protectorate scaled up these dynamics of circulation; thus, between the 1920s and the 1930s, after four decades of migration, the Italian population of Tunisia counted almost 100,000 people.<sup>26</sup> Even if the geographical origins of Italians became more heterogeneous over time, its overwhelming majority (more than 70 per cent) had come or had their roots in Sicily.<sup>27</sup>

The changing political scenario of the 1930s turned this community in a pawn in the international confrontation between Italians and French but, the persistent efforts of the French Protectorate to determine a massive change of nationality of Italians remained ineffective (Finzi 2003). Even after World War II, when French was in a position of strength in relation to the subjects of 'loser' Italy, naturalization and expulsion reduced the number of Italians significantly but did not bring the hoped disappearance of the community. Thus, in 1956, year of Tunisian independence, the census still counted 67,000 Italians (Kazdaghli 1999).

However, the new State, led by Habib Bourguiba, showed from the beginning that the space for Italians in independent Tunisia was dramatically narrowing down. In a few years, the Tunisian governments denied the renovation of many work permits for foreigners and ordered the replacement of foreign low skilled workers with Tunisian nationals. This gradual enforcement of laws narrowing the room for movement of Italians – culminated in the nationalization of foreign-owned lands in 1964 – eroded the economic bases for the permanence of large Italian communities in Tunisia.

The 50,000 Italians departed during the 1960s, followed three main routes.<sup>28</sup> The first, stemming from decades of living and working in a society organized on colonial rules, led to France. Despite the hostile and often threatening attitude of French authorities towards Italians, many families had undergone a cultural process of *Frenchification*, which turned their identity in a unique composition of French, Italian, and Tunisian characters. After World War II, the institutional claims of Italy over Tunisia must disappear; thus, while the role of Italy as a political player in the Tunisian landscape faded away, the *Metropole* remained present with its political and propagandistic apparatus. Beyond the belligerent attitude of the two imperial powers and the moments of high tensions between the two communities, Italians and French living in Tunisia had behind them several decades of coexistence, which could not but result in a multitude of relations. In the particular historical conjuncture, France was also a much more attractive destination for migration, not just for Italian-Tunisians but for all Italians. In 1951 Italy and France had signed an agreement on migration sanctioning the facilitation of movement from the Peninsula towards the Hexagon (Mourlane 2016). Thus, many Italian-Tunisians families joined the ranks of the thousands of workers leaving the country towards France.

Nevertheless, confrontations between Italians and French left a strong sign in the history of Italian-Tunisians, thousands of Italians refused to resettle in France and chose the *'Patria'*. The second identifiable route brought many Italian Tunisians to refugees' camps in Italy, like those of Tortona in Piedmont or Latina in Lazio. These camps, conceived and built for foreign refugees mainly from eastern Europe, came to host a significant exodus of Italians coming from Istria, Dalmatia, and North Africa.<sup>29</sup> In many cases, the permanence over generations in foreign countries made ties with their country of origin ephemeral, making the choice of heading towards refugees' camps a mandatory one. Their stay in these camps was often short; once resettled, those families tried to rebuild their lives in the developing cities of northern Italy.

A third flow brought Italian-Tunisians back to their places of origin, to the same shores of western Sicily, from where their parents or grandparents had left for Tunisia, composing small communities of returnees. As archival documents show, before the arrival of the first 'Arab' Tunisians, the Sicilian police used the word *Tunisini* (Tunisians) to refer to these groups of people repatriating after years of life on the other shore of the Channel.<sup>30</sup> They reached Sicily with boats like the *Campania Felix*, whose stops in Trapani and Palermo, before the final landing in Naples, reveals that even after decades, strong bonds still linked Italian-Tunisians to their place of origin.<sup>31</sup>

It was this last trajectory that brought the first pioneer migrants in the provinces of western Sicily: decades of coexistence in Tunisia had generated the interwoven of human relations between Sicilians and Tunisians, in a few cases, these resulted in shared migratory projects. Some Sicilian-Tunisian entrepreneurs had maintained strong ties with their land of origin and found ways to move their businesses and economic activities to the other side of the Mediterranean. In doing so, they brought with them their Tunisian employees. The same boat, *Campania Felix*, who had brought Sicilians back to their land of origin, led the first Tunisian migrants to Sicily.

Interviews and inquiries conducted over the decades among Tunisian migrants trace this foundational mechanism:

Before coming to Italy, I worked as a fisherman in Sousse. I had never thought to leave and never heard of Mazara del Vallo. I was young and had a friend who worked for an Italian in the salt pans of Sousse. After independence, many foreigners lost their privileges and were forced to go back to their origin countries. The Sicilian employer of my friend decided to go back to exploit the salt pans of Trapani and brought with him his Tunisian employee. During one of his return to Tunisia, my friend told me that he was feeling lonely in Sicily and proposed to reach him. In 1968, I left for Trapani on a small boat. . . . In 1970, I received the work permit; afterwards, I was sent to work in Mazara del Vallo.<sup>32</sup> (Hannachi 1998, 50)

Hassen Slama, linguistic and himself coming from the Tunisian community of Sicily, interviewed a migrant landed in Sicily in 1963:

I worked in a factory owned by a Sicilian in Sousse, he left the country to escape the socialist experiment of Ben Salah, having remained unemployed and having found by chance his address in Sicily, I wrote him, he answered straight away: you can come, I have work for you.<sup>33</sup>

These testimonies show that the first pioneer migrants reached Sicily following the return flow of Sicilians coming from Tunisia. The arrival of the early Tunisian migrants in Sicily was not related to the attractiveness of the Sicilian economy and the opportunity it offered; it was instead a side effect of the profound transformation and rebirth of the century-old migration system between Sicily and Tunisia. The decision of Tunisian authorities to erase the space for foreigners in their society provoked the onset of different return flows. The presence of Europeans in Tunisia was so entrenched in the history and characters of the country that their departure inevitably set in motion collateral migration flows. After 1956, the intrinsic transnationality of Tunisian societies moved from being an internal character to be projected elsewhere through the rising levels of international emigration. While France remained the preferred destination for Tunisian migrants, another trajectory determined the continuation of contact between Tunisia and the neighboring island. The erosion of a large Sicilian presence in Tunisia did not bring the demise of all the elements composing the migration system between the two shores of the Channel of Sicily. Social relations between Sicilians and Tunisian endured and, while the departure was sudden and dramatic, still in 1971, 12,000 Italians resided in Tunisia. This presence ensured the perpetuation of relationships and the flows of information; the two countries worked to maintain and improve logistical and transport connections while diplomatic and commercial relations remained – considered the shocks provoked by decolonization- optimal.

Thus, the first migrants came through the path beaten by Sicilian emigrants and built by the elements of the migration system between Sicily and Tunisia. When the Mazarese fleet begun its expansion, these small groups of Tunisians present in western Sicily became ‘devices’ of mediation between potential newcomers and the needs of shipowners. While the growth of the Mazarese fleet and its enlarging operations created the economic space for larger Tunisian communities in western Sicily, its mechanism of international recruitments rested on the transnational social capital of pioneer migrants.

The presence of these migrants, mostly employed by their former Sicilian-Tunisian employers, caused a threefold transformation of the migration system between Tunisia and Sicily. First, their presence transformed the labor market at the destination end, allowing audacious perspectives for the shipowners and contributing decisively to the expansion of the fleet’s

operations. In its turn, the development of seafaring boosted an acceleration of migrations from Tunisia, turning isolated groups of individuals in the first foreign communities of Sicily. Third, the change in the labor market resulted in a demand for a specific kind of migrant worker: fisher. The interrelation between the fishing activities of Mazara del Vallo and Tunisian migration determined the localization of migrants' origin areas. By the 1970s, the majority of Tunisian migrants in Sicily came from two fishing villages on the western coast of Tunisia: La Chebba and Mahdia. Migrants from this region met two necessities: they had skills and experience as fishermen, and they came from the very same area in which Mazarese trawlers operated. Thus, Tunisians assumed an ambiguous status: from one side, they were full-fledged international migrants; from the other, they worked at sea, often near their home villages. This geographical structure of labor in the Mediterranean and its related maritime connections determined a reorganization of the migration system between Sicily and Tunisia, preserving the Channel of Sicily transnational dimensions and its related migratory characters.

## Conclusion

The history of the emergence of Tunisian communities in Sicily provides some suggestions about the way in which we understand the emergence of Italy as a country of immigration.

If popular interpretations see immigration as a byproduct of economic development and industrialization in northern Italy, the history of Tunisian migration to Sicily suggests that in its first stages, migration towards the country was connected with older historical dynamics and influenced by international and transnational connections. The economic strength of Italian regions did not influence flows directions, modalities, and composition. To better understand the features and evolution of international mobility towards Italy, we need to take into account other elements. This article used the articulation between diplomatic relations, transnational economic activities, and the history of Italian emigration as an alternative reading key to illuminating migration motives.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries involved in a migratory flow often say more than what economic data can reveal. This because the movement of people is often a fundamental element in diplomatic relations between two States. As seen in the Tunisian case, migrations to Sicily added to a discussion that included wider commercial and geopolitical considerations. Studying immigration to the United States, Donna Gabbaccia (2012) identified the importance of integrating the study of diplomatic history and



migration history to better understand both. The case of Tunisians in Sicily suggests that even for Italy, a more careful analysis of diplomatic ties may clarify some aspects of the country's migration history.

Secondly, shifting from a national to a transnational vision of economic activities and organizations allows the identification of economic spaces produced by the very presence of migrants. The case of seafaring in Mazara del Vallo is, in this respect, paradigmatic. Tunisians brought with them experiences, legacies, and characters unique in their destination area, determining a transformation of economic possibilities and horizons for Sicilian shipowners. The creation of transnational commercial spaces in conjunction with the establishment of foreign communities is worth studying to better frame the insertion of migrants in destination regions, especially in those apparently less adapted to host an international workforce. This approach responds to the apparent 'inexplicability' of some migratory movements.

Conversely to other European countries, migration to Italy has rarely been structured through an explicit request for a foreign workforce. It is, therefore, crucial to look at the specific economic activities that have deemed necessary to use foreign labor for their internal purposes. While the exploitation of less demanding workers must be kept as one of the main reasons for the use of non-Italian labor, the case of the Tunisians in Mazara del Vallo suggests that other types of economic considerations entered the reasons underlying the use of foreign workforce.

Moreover, migrants' economic and social integration turned western Sicily into a bridgehead for North-African migration. Following the French (1986) and Italian (1990) imposition of visa requirements for Maghreb States, Tunisian communities contributed to the formation of Mediterranean informal routes. The creation of the Schengen area with the subsequent strengthening of European external controls made regular migration between the two shores of the Sicilian Channel much more arduous (Paoli 2018). The securitarian evolution of European migration policies has led to a restructuring and reorganization of migrations systems linking Europe with North and sub-Saharan Africa. In this sense, for its geographical positioning and its common practices of border crossing, the Sicilian-Tunisian migration system took on a strategic value becoming a device for the expansion of Mediterranean irregular routes. Thus since the 1990s, the Sicilian Channel has become a bottleneck in which migration flows originating in and beyond Tunisia converge (Fleri 2019).

Finally, the long experience of Italy as one of the most important countries of emigration in Europe cannot be ignored when we study the history of Italy as a country of immigration. Scholars have shown how returns from former colonies shaped the way in which Italy constructed and construed immigration (Deplano 2014; Marchetti 2011; Ballinger 2007). The case of Tunisia points to the fact that not only colonial peopling but also other forms of

Italian mobility have shaped migration systems composing the varied landscape of Italian immigration. Through their migrations, Italians intertwined significant relationships with many countries around the world. In the second half of the twentieth century, while Italy took on a peculiar structure in which incoming and outgoing flows coexist at significant levels, places that had traditionally been importers of Italian labor turned into emigration countries. The transformation of these old migration corridors and the relationship between the history of Italian emigration and the history of Italy as a country immigration country is still to be fully written.

Eventually, while the Italian public debate has built immigration, and especially Mediterranean ones, as phenomena that the country is subjected to, the Tunisian–Sicilian case invites us to start looking at the history of immigration towards Italy as a part of a broader history that connected Italian territories with the rest of the world.

## Notes

1. Salvatore Parlagreco, Sfruttamento e lavoro nero ecco il miraggio del Tunisino, in «Giornale di Sicilia», 12-4-1981.
2. N. Giaramidaro, Il Raro Caso D'essere Più Povero Di Noi, in «L'Ora», 17-10-1975.
3. Antonio Buttitta, Prefazione in Cusumano, *Il ritorno infelice*, 10.
4. A comprehensive account of statistics on Italian immigration can be found in Istat, 2018. *Permessi di soggiorno dei cittadini non comunitari: Provincia e cittadinanza*.
5. UNHCR, *Italy. Sea arrivals dashboard, February 2021*.
6. Italian procure have conducted many investigations on irregular flows in the Central Mediterranean. Among these: *Scorpion fish* (2017), *Scorpion fish 2* and *Caronte* (2018); *Abiad, Barbanera* and *Sea ghosts* (2019).
7. See Colucci, 2018; Einaudi 200; Colombo and Sciortino, 2004. "Italian Immigration: The Origins, Nature and Evolution of Italy's Migratory Systems." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9 (1): 49–70; Pugliese, 2006. *L'Italia tra migrazioni internazionali e migrazioni interne*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
8. R. Sileoni, 1958. *Sicilia '58*, Istituto Luce Archives: [www.archivioluce.com](http://www.archivioluce.com)
9. The work of economist Paolo Sylos Labini resulting from his period of teaching at the University of Catania, represent an important point of reference for the understanding of the economic situation of the island in the 1960s: Sylos Labini, 1966.
10. *Ivi*. p. 6.
11. Renda, 1979. Il movimento contadino in Sicilia, in Amato et al., *Campagne e movimento contadino nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi*. Bari: De Donato, vol. I, 692–694.
12. Important references documenting the economic situation of western-Sicilian villages can be found in the proceedings of the conference 'Condizioni di vita e di salute in zone arretrate della Sicilia occidentale' organized by 'Centro studi e iniziative per l'occupazione' of Danilo Dolci, held in Palma di Montechiaro in April 1960. Among the contributors: Carlo Levi, Ignazio Buttitta, Francesco Renda, Ferruccio Parri, Paolo Sylos Labini, Silvio Milazzo and Giorgio

Napolitano. See Costantino S., and A. Zanca (eds.) 2014. *Una Sicilia "senza". Gli atti del Convegno di Palma Montechiaro del 27–29 aprile 1960 sulle Condizioni di vita e di salute in zone arretrate della Sicilia occidentale, curati da Pasqualino Marchese e Romano Trizzino*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

13. Istat, 2018. *Popolazione residente in età da 6 anni in poi per livello di istruzione e ripartizione geografica ai censimenti – Censimenti 1951–2011*.
14. Istat, 2016. *Espatri e rimpatri per regione e ripartizione geografica – Anni 1876–2014*. Roma
15. Schneider 1972.
16. Prefect of Trapani to the Ministry of the Interior, 11 November 1970, Trapani Situazione economia e industriale, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'Interno, Gabinetto 1967–1970, b.172.
17. A. Santini, Il ritorno degli Africani, «Europeo», 26-8-1971.
18. Istat, 2005. La popolazione straniera residente in Italia al primo Gennaio 2005, *Statistiche in breve, Serie Storiche*, p. 11.
19. C.G.I.L., C.I.S.L., U.I.L. of Castelvetrano to the Ministry of the Interior, 22 March 1971, in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Gabinetto, 1977–1980, *Lavoratori stranieri in Italia e lavoratori italiani all'estero*, b.210.
20. Ministry of Foreign Affairs DGEAS to the Minister of the Interior, 7 June 1972, in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Gabinetto, 1977–1980, «Lavoratori stranieri in Italia e lavoratori italiani all'estero», b.210.
21. *Note Verbale de l'Ambassade de Tunisie*, 30 January 1973 in ACS Ministero dell'Interno, Gabinetto, 1977–1980, *Lavoratori stranieri in Italia e lavoratori italiani all'estero*, b.210.
22. *Verbale sulla riunione di capi missione in paesi arabi e del Mediterraneo*, Tunis, 6 September 1970, in ACS, Fondo Aldo Moro 1953–1978, b.130.
23. Ministry of Foreign Affairs DGEAS to the Ministry of the Interior, 20 March 1973, in ACS Ministero dell'Interno, Gabinetto, 1977–1980, *Lavoratori stranieri in Italia e lavoratori italiani all'estero*, b.210.
24. Provincial Office of Labour to the Ministry of Labour DGCM, 8 November 1971, in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Gabinetto, 1977–1980, *Lavoratori stranieri in Italia e lavoratori italiani all'estero*, b.210.
25. Naor Ben-Yehoyada showed the decisive role of the Mazarese fleet for transnational region formation in the Channel of Sicily. The the scaling up of the Mazara fleet and its fishing grounds became 'devices' which made possible the 'reappearing' of the transnational dimension of the Central –Mediterranean (Ben Yehoyada 2017).
26. Direction Générale de l'Intérieur, *Dénombrement de la population civile européenne et indigène en Tunisie au 20 Avril 1926*, Tunis, Société Anonyme de l'Imprimerie Rapide, 1926.
27. F. El Ghouli 2003, 8.
28. The bulk of the literature on the history of the Italian community of Tunisia stops with the events of World War II. Because of this historiographical limit, little is known about what happened to Italian-Sicilians repatriating to Sicily in the decades after independence, where they went and what they left behind. A first reconstruction of the the trajectories can be attempted drawing from the State Archives of Trapani (A.S.T.). The register of convictions in the fonds of the Questura (Police Headquarter) of Trapani contain files about consular repatriations and draft dodgers give some ideas about Sicilian-Tunisians' movements in the 1960s.

29. Reports about the life of the Italian-Tunisians returnees in the refugee camps can be found in *Inchiesta ad un gruppo di profughi Italiani*, about 1961, Archivio della Memoria Italiana in Tunisia (AMIT), Italiani di Tunisia miscellanea.
30. Consular repatriation of D'Alberti Rosa, 5-11-1965, Commissariato di P.S. di Marsala, in AST, Persone Indagate o Pregiudicate, Questura 1951-1968, b.188.
31. See AST, Persone Indagate o Pregiudicate, Questura, 1951-1968.
32. Hannachi, A., 1998. *Gli immigrati tunisini a Mazara del Vallo: Inserimento o integrazione*. Gibellina: CRESM, 50.
33. Slama 1986.

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