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THE *BAROQUE* OF SOUTH EAST SICILY

FROM A NATURAL DISASTER TO THE
SPLENDOR OF THE BAROQUE REBIRTH

By *FRANCESCO MESSINA & PAOLA GIUFFRIDA*

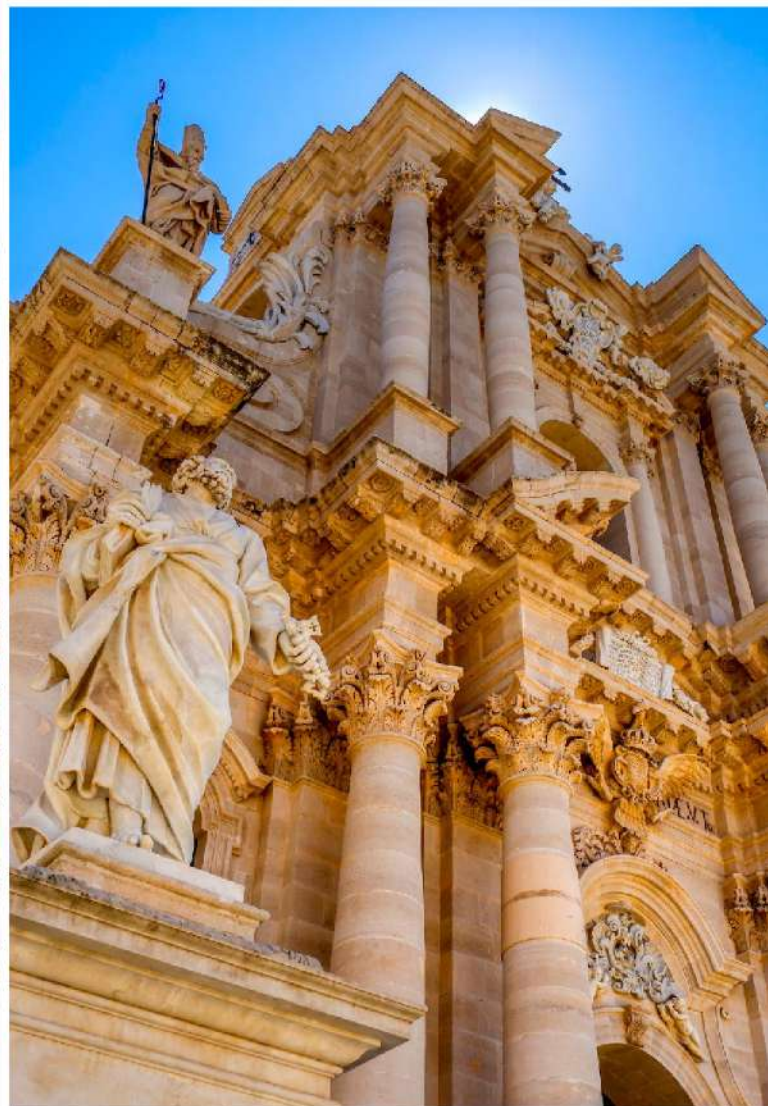
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We must go back to January 11, 1693, the day when it all started. A massive earthquake, considered to be the strongest ever recorded in Italian history, struck Val di Noto, in the South Eastern of Sicily. More than 60,000 casualties, 45 villages were completely destroyed, and the population was decimated at rates of 30% or 40% in some villages. A couple of minutes later, a Tsunami followed, making the wounds and tears of the earthquake even worse. All coastal settlements and the most important cities on the Ionian Sea, including Catania and Siracusa, were flooded and seemingly destroyed forever. Society at that time being under a strong religious grip may have construed this as an Apocalypse. However, what followed was the unthinkable. The rebirth of entire communities, the revival of art and society like never before.

With the contribution of local artists, the Spanish government ruling over Sicily and the influence of the Italian baroque developments, namely in Rome, the beginning of the 18th century shaped the beautiful late-baroque South Eastern Sicily we are able to visit today.

Here we would like to show a selection of the Val di Noto UNESCO World Heritage baroque cities worth visiting on your next Mediterranean trip.



CATANIA

Nowadays, the second-largest city in Sicily, Catania, features some distinctive traits. Above all, its baroque identity as a result of the 1693 earthquake. Yet, this city managed to make its own, peculiar version of baroque, drawing the resources ironically from that land which brought about so much destruction. Indeed, Catania had chosen to give a special color to its baroque, thus creating the signature Baroque of Catania. Black and white was the chosen color palette.

A blend of local materials such as the white limestone of Southern Sicily and the black lava rock sourced from the next-door Volcano Etna. A prime example of this signature Baroque is visible in Piazza del Duomo, where buildings harmoniously alternate black and white in a consistent pattern. Not to be missed are also the Benedictine Monastery of San Nicolò, Via Crociferi and Palazzo Biscari.

SIRACUSA

Once the second-largest city of the Ancient Greek world after Athens, Siracusa suffered the same destiny as the other Sicilian cities following the earthquake.

Here though, the foundations for its rebirth rooted back onto a glorious past, the one of the Greek Classical Age. Every time we visit Siracusa, we get goosebumps when we observe the wall of the baroque Cathedral. Why is that? Because the columns sustaining the whole structure are the ones of the Greek Temple of Athena. Over centuries, this place managed to be a sacred place for Greeks, Arabs and Christians. A mix that only Sicily can offer in the Mediterranean scene.



NOTO

Maybe this is the most noteworthy example of the late-baroque Sicilian rebirth, the most noble, authentic expression of it. One key example is Palazzo Nicolaci and its iconic balconies, sustained by typically baroque angels and winged horses. Or the Cathedral, standing on an elevated terrace and dominating with its baroque facade a large square from the top of a lovely limestone staircase. Palazzo Ducezio and many more examples make Noto unique. Exaggerated at times in a baroque fashion, charming and very instagrammable.

Not surprising, Noto has become a popular destination for weddings in Sicily. It is chosen by Italians and foreigners also thanks to the lovely countryside which is rich in olive and almond trees and plenty of stylish boutique hotels. The crystal-clear beach, 20-min away from Noto, completes the list of all the criteria for a perfect leisurely holiday.

RAGUSA & MODICA

Moving further South and inland, we get lost in the small streets of Ragusa Ibla, the baroque historical city center of Ragusa. All of a sudden the view opens up on the San Giorgio Cathedral, another masterpiece of the Sicilian late-baroque age. A similar setting can be seen in the sister town of Modica, with baroque narrow streets and surprisingly impressive churches in size and decorations. However, what distinguishes Modica is its proud, long and well-preserved tradition around chocolate making. The *Cioccolato di Modica*, it's unique in its genre. Despite industrialization bringing new and refined methods of making chocolate, what is special here in Modica is that the production method has not changed since the age of the Spanish conquistadors.

Indeed, when Spain was in the midst of the New World discovery, Sicily was part of the Spanish Kingdom and hence a lot of exchange of goods, knowledge and people happened between the island, mainland Spain and the Americas. The known chocolate-making process back then was the one employed by the Aztecs for the cocoa beans processing, and as such it survived in Sicily through the centuries, except the additional ingredient of sugar. Nowadays, the Modica Chocolate is characterized by a grainy texture and very strong aroma. Antica Dolceria Bonajuto with its authentic and ancient production methods is probably the best example to be found.



SICILI

Last but not least, the town of Scicli might be a little bit underrated among the major tourists' routes. However, it was made popular by the TV series *Il Commissario Montalbano*, at least across Italians and those abroad with a special passion for Sicily and crime shows. Before traveling to Sicily, you might want to start experiencing the baroque of the South East by watching an episode of this typical Sicilian movie shot in Scicli. Alternatively, you might want to read the book by the author, Andrea Camilleri. He is recognized to be a truly authentic Sicilian storyteller, hence providing you with a great introduction to the island.

Should you have liked this article, another way of discovering South East Sicily, is to consult our ebook travel guide *A long weekend in South East Sicily*. There we gathered all the travel ideas not to be missed in a five-day visit to the baroque towns of Sicily with plenty of itineraries, restaurants, experiences, hotels and more.

Thanks to their passion for their homeland, Francesco and Paola have created www.timeforsicily.com with the objective of delivering true local advice for demanding travelers eager to discover the beauty of the largest island of the Mediterranean. Sicily. 🌿



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