

The Archaeology of Sicily under the Bourbons: A Reappraisal

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In the past few decades, there has been a consistent rise of interest in the history of archaeology, and modern Italy is no exception. Several studies have focused on the development of archaeological theory and practice between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and particular interest has been devoted to the problem of continuity and change before and after Unification, when Italy became one nation. Overall, these studies tend to emphasize the continuity in the study and preservation of the archaeological heritage between the old, pre-Unitarian states and the new Italian nation. Archaeology is presented as a discipline with a long-established tradition going back to the Renaissance, promoted by subsequent generations of popes, kings, and elites and perpetuated by the new Italian government after Unification. Ultimately, from this perspective, the study and preservation of antiquities is considered part of the cultural identity of the Italians, with a glorious past and an age-long tradition.¹

When it comes to Sicily, however, scholars have not always been keen on the idea that there was continuity in the development of archaeological theory and practice before and after 1860, when Garibaldi occupied the island and put an end to Bourbon rule. Many narratives, old and new, are in fact shaped around two main tenets. The first is that from an intellectual point of view, the island was quite isolated. Under the Bourbons, the study of the antiquities of Sicily was in the hands of local, noble antiquarians cast away from the rest of Europe; archaeology as a scientific pursuit came to the island only after Unification. The second tenet is that despite some interest in local antiquities, there were no systematic archaeological investigations, and there was no system for the protection of cultural heritage. The same well-intentioned aristocrats who studied local antiquities occasionally devoted some of their time and money to the excavation or restoration of an ancient building; a system in charge of the archaeological heritage was introduced in Sicily only after Unification.²

This notion that Unification marked a radical paradigm shift in the development of the study and preservation of the cultural heritage of the island, however, is fundamentally wrong. And the aim of this essay is to present a reappraisal of the archaeology of Sicily under Bourbon rule based on the reexamination of archival sources, which offer quite a different picture from those in print.³

In order to appreciate the major transformation that took place in the archaeology of Sicily during the eighteenth century, it is important to consider that antiquarian studies and the care for antiquities were practiced long before the Bourbons. Antiquarian studies date back to *De rebus Siculis* by Tommaso Fazello, which was first published in 1558.

¹ Settis 2002.

² See, e.g., De Vido 1993; Barbanera 1998; Salmeri and D'Agata 1998; Iozzia 1998.

³ Lo Iacono and Marconi 1997; Lo Iacono and Marconi 1998; Lo Iacono and Marconi 1999; Pagnano 2001.

This work adopts the new approach of humanistic historiography, discussing both the ancient and modern history of Sicily. Fazello devotes the first part of his work to a topographic description of ancient sites on the island, based on ancient literary sources and on his personal observation.⁴ The interest in the preservation of local antiquities dates even earlier than Fazello, back to at least 1465, when the theater of Taormina was given in concession to a local nobleman on the condition of not causing any damage to its structure.⁵

It is precisely by looking at these precedents that one can better appreciate the transformation that took place under the Bourbons. The first step was the birth of a new antiquarian movement, around the middle of the eighteenth century. This new movement argued that the study of the ancient history of the island should be based on monuments and not on literary sources, as it had been since Fazello. The proponents of this new movement were young Sicilian aristocrats who had been educated in Palermo by scholars coming from Central and Northern Italy, which explains why their approach was fully in line with the new trend in antiquarian studies in Italy and Europe. The investigation of Classical antiquity in Europe meant excavating, collecting, and classifying coins and inscriptions, and this is what this new generation pursued in relation to local antiquities. They also maintained close ties with the rest of the antiquarian movement in Italy and Europe, as indicated by correspondence in the archives.⁶

This new generation was also responsible for a second major transformation in the archaeology of Sicily under Bourbon rule: the creation, in 1778, of a system in charge of the protection of the antiquities of the island. The Bourbons had become interested in the remains of Classical Sicily soon after their arrival in Naples. Charles III, best known for his particular involvement with excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum, was also the sponsor of a large publication project on the antiquities of Sicily, which was carried out only in part, with two volumes on Agrigento.⁷ Charles III was no less interested in issues of preservation. In 1745, he entrusted the Duke of Santo Stefano with the protection of the theater of Taormina and gave him the right to punish anyone who attempted to damage the building.⁸ This is evidence of an interest in the ancient remains of the island before the middle of the century, and the fact that it took so long to create a system in charge of those antiquities is best explained by the absence, for some time, of a solid network of local antiquarians.

In May 1779, the government appointed Gabriele Lancillotto Castello, Prince of Torremuzza, and Ignazio Paternò, Prince of Biscari, as royal guardians (“custodians”) of the antiquities of Sicily, respectively, of the Valle di Mazara and the Valli di Noto and Demone. These appointments were not symbolic, because an annual endowment was created the next year, along with two more offices, those of architect and painter for the antiquities of Sicily. These two officers served as technical support for the guardians and

⁴ Fazello 1560. On Fazello, Momigliano 1980 is still valuable.

⁵ Muscolino 2020.

⁶ On antiquarian studies in Sicily in the eighteenth century, see Momigliano 1980; Salmeri and D’Agata 1998; Salmeri 2001; Pafumi 2012.

⁷ Pancrazi 1751–1752.

⁸ Marconi, in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1998, 45ff.

helped them to form a plan listing the local antiquities and identifying those monuments that were in need of restoration. Ultimately, the work of the two guardians was not limited to the formulation of those two plans. They were in charge of excavation, restoration, and preservation, and they also supervised the export of antiquities. In conducting these activities, they were assisted by a network of local correspondents, who could be either public officers or private individuals with a particular interest in the antiquities of their own towns or provinces.⁹

The second half of the century, in fact, was marked by the diffusion of antiquarian studies all over Sicily. In a short period of time, a whole host of local aristocrats developed an interest in studying, excavating, and collecting antiquities. Local imitators of figures such as Torremuzza and Biscari, these antiquarians were nevertheless quite critical in promoting archaeological investigation at many ancient sites.¹⁰

This new trend had its downsides, though. The proliferation of local antiquarians caused, in the long run, a fragmentation of the guardianship of the antiquities of the island, while the concurrent lowering of intellectual standards after the deaths of Torremuzza and Biscari had a negative impact on the study, excavation, and conservation of archaeological sites. Circumstances worsened in 1818, with the introduction of a new system of civil administration, which passed the supervision of the antiquities of Sicily into the hands of the chiefs of the provinces. These officers were mostly concerned with public order and had little interest in ancient monuments.¹¹

These problems concerning the administration were partly compensated for by significant progress in legislation concerning the antiquities.¹² Since the creation of the system of guardianship in 1778, the government had issued a series of norms directed to the guardians, vice guardians, and local correspondents concerning both ancient buildings and artifacts. A dispatch of 1811 stated that the remains of ancient monuments on the island were under royal control and forbade private individuals to dismantle them or cause damage through new construction. Concerning artifacts, in 1814, the government warned customs officers not to allow the export of sculptures, vases, coins, paintings, and other antiquities and works of art, under the penalty of losing their jobs.

A major step forward in terms of legislation came in 1822, when two decrees were issued in Naples on May 13 and 14, both inspired by similar legislation issued in 1820 by the Papal State. The first decree prohibited moving from their location antiquities and works of art on both public and private land; demolishing or damaging the remains of ancient buildings, including those on private land; or exporting works of ancient and modern art, including those from private collections, without proper authorization from the government. The second decree established that a permit was needed in order to carry out excavations; specified the conditions for obtaining such permits and the measures to be taken for overseeing the excavations; and affirmed the need to inform the central authority about any discoveries made in the course of such work.

⁹ Giuffrida 1983; Giuffrida 1984; Marconi, in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1997, 15ff.; Pagnano 2001.

¹⁰ See esp. Pace 1958; and, more recently, Marconi, in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1997, 15ff., and in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1998, 13ff., with earlier bibliography.

¹¹ Marconi, in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1997, 15ff.

¹² In general, see Emiliani 2015; and D'Alconzo 1999.

Given the deregulation at the administrative level, in the early 1820s, things would go very differently. On the one hand, there was the acquisition of the collection of Greek vases owned by Giuseppe Panitteri in Agrigento by Prince Ludwig of Bavaria in 1824. This acquisition was illegal, for it broke the existing laws concerning the export of antiquities; nonetheless, it took place without any opposition from local authorities.¹³ On the other hand, a similar episode had a different resolution. In 1823, two young British architects, Samuel Angell and William Harris, excavated the metopes of Temples C and F in Selinus and attempted to ship them to the British Museum. They were caught, and the metopes ultimately ended up in Palermo, but this episode was enough to spur the government to drastically revise the system of administration of the antiquities of the island.¹⁴

In 1827, the Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti was created, based in Palermo, which would act as a consultant for the government in the administration of both the “antiquities” and the “fine arts.” Not much was known about this commission until a few years ago, before the publication of its archives. What we know now makes it one of the most significant such organs for the study and preservation of the archaeological heritage and works of art in an Italian region before Unification.¹⁵

The government was inspired to create the Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti by a similar commission already existing in Naples. Under Ferdinando I, the Bourbons made a systematic effort to assimilate the administrative system of Sicily to that of Naples. The creation of the commission was just part of this trend; however, the ambitions and accomplishments of the commission in Sicily reached far beyond its counterpart in Naples.

A reason for this is that the Duke of Serradifalco, an exceptional intellectual force, was the power behind the activities of the commission in Palermo. The duke was born in Palermo in 1783 but spent much of his youth in Milan, where he studied with the Neo-Classical architect Luigi Cagnola. This experience directed his interest toward the study and the practice of architecture, and he soon became a follower of the ideas of Von Klenze and Schinkel. Returning to Palermo, he soon became interested in the antiquities of the island. In 1823, he was a major consultant to the Bourbon government in the affair concerning Harris and Angell, and one cannot exclude that he had a major responsibility in the creation of the Commissione in 1827.¹⁶

Without a doubt, the duke used this commission to pursue a systematic investigation and publication of the antiquities of Sicily. He must have devised this project since the early '20s, and he must have been inspired by works such as the *Antiquities of Athens* by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, a publication that in the same years served as a source of inspiration for the German-French architect Jakob Ignaz Hittorff.¹⁷ One is struck by how systematically the duke pursued the completion of his project. A necessary

¹³ *Ein griechischer Traum* 1986, 67ff.; Wünsche 1988; Marconi, in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1997, 17ff.

¹⁴ Marconi 1995.

¹⁵ Lo Iacono and Marconi 1997; Lo Iacono and Marconi 1998; Lo Iacono and Marconi 1999.

¹⁶ On Serradifalco, see Cianciolo Cosentino 2004; see also E. Sessa in Ruggieri Tricoli 1993, 262ff.

¹⁷ Marconi, Kiene, and Lazzarini 2017.

comparison to make is between the dates when the commission promoted research, excavation, and restoration and the publication dates and subjects of the volumes of the *Antiquities of Sicily*. The commission focused on Segesta and Selinus in the years 1827–1834, and the duke illustrated them in 1834 in the first two volumes. The commission focused on Agrigento in 1835–1836, and the duke illustrated its monuments in 1838 in the third volume. The commission focused on Syracuse and Acre in 1839–1840, and the duke illustrated them in 1840 in the fourth volume. The commission focused on Catania, Taormina, and Tindari in 1841–1842, and the duke illustrated them in 1842 in the fifth and last volume of the series. The *Antiquities of Sicily* thus became the official report of the activities of the commission.¹⁸

By focusing on individual sites, the commission did not limit itself to study and excavation, but it also addressed critical issues such as restoration, preservation, and what we now call site maintenance.¹⁹ The first step was to appoint local correspondents who were expected to supervise the sites and keep the commission informed about the state of the antiquities. The next step was to hire guards and build a house to lodge them. At this point, everything was in order to start studying the general topography of a site, excavating in and around specific monuments, and pursuing restoration work. The duke, as the director of the opera house in Palermo, had a particular interest in buildings for spectacles. One is hardly surprised that his main interest, after temples, was theaters, which he systematically studied, restored, and sometimes partly rebuilt in Segesta, Syracuse, Catania, Taormina, and Tindari.²⁰ The final steps in the work carried out by the commission at the various archaeological sites in Sicily were the construction of a guesthouse for travelers and the restructuring of the access roads.

With these last two activities, we confront one of the main intellectual frameworks for the work of the commission. Since the last decades of the eighteenth century, Sicily had become a regular stage on the Grand Tour.²¹ Many aristocrats from Europe visited the island, its monuments, and its public and private collections of antiquities, and they described them in what had now become a literary genre. These publications were particularly influential in singling out sites and monuments worth visiting, especially the lavishly illustrated *Voyages pittoresques* that made it possible to visualize them.²² In a relatively short period of time, a canon of antiquarian attractions was created, and it seems the commission intended to meet the expectations of traveling European aristocrats, making those attractions better known, visible, and visitable. This effort is hardly a surprise, considering that aristocrats in cities such as Palermo and Catania wanted to look the least provincial and the most European as possible. But this attitude had its problems. Most significant was that the focus remained on “Classical” sites and

¹⁸ Lo Faso 1834–1842. Segesta: Marconi, in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1997, 39f. Selinus: id., 42. Agrigento: Marconi in Lo Iacono and Marconi 1998, 27ff. Syracuse: id., 40ff. Acre: id., 26f. Catania: id., 30ff.; Taormina: id., 47ff.; Tindari: id. 50ff.

¹⁹ Stubbs 2015.

²⁰ Marconi 2012.

²¹ Tuzet 1955; Paloscia 1989; Kanceff and Rampone 1992; Bignamini and Wilton 1996; Cometa 1999; Di Matteo 1999–2000; Giuffré, Barbera, and Cianciolo Cosentino 2006.

²² See esp. Saint-Non 1781–1786; and Houel 1782–1787.

“monumental” architecture; the existence of temples and theaters was the precondition for selecting sites and carrying out archaeological investigation, restoration, preservation, and maintenance.

A turning point in the archaeological investigation of Sicily was the failed revolution against the Bourbons that took place in 1848. Serradifalco was deeply involved in that revolution, and in 1849, he left Sicily in exile. His absence had an impact on the activities of the commission, since the more active and creative members were interested in medieval and Renaissance monuments. As a result, there was much less interest in pursuing archaeological investigation except for random topographical research. The supervision and preservation of the antiquities, however, remained intense. The commission did not depend on individuals, so as a result, there was no discontinuity in its work. For a considerable amount of time after Unification, the new Italian government maintained the commission and the laws regulating archaeological research and preservation.²³ Reasons for this were the lack of an alternative and that the rules established under the Bourbons were considered more than appropriate.

Ending this story, one is brought right back to the beginning. Since this narrative has been mainly constructed based on archival material, one wonders why it varies so greatly from the traditional narrative. The main question is how an entire age of archaeological research and preservation has almost disappeared, for so long, from modern historiography.

One answer is that some modern historiographers prefer to deal more with printed sources than with archives, and printed sources do not always tell the full truth. For a long time, modern historiography of the archaeology of Sicily has ultimately relied on two very detailed publications from 1872 and 1873.²⁴ These were sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Culture and describe the archaeological investigation of the island under the Bourbons and during the first years of the Italian government. The authors were two distinguished Sicilian scholars, Francesco Saverio Cavallari and Antonino Salinas, who had previously conflicted with the Bourbons. Cavallari (b. 1809) began his career by helping Serradifalco with his publication of the *Antiquities of Sicily*. In 1852, he was appointed as a member of the Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti and as a professor of architecture at the University of Palermo. Cavallari left Sicily in 1854 and returned ten years later (following Unification) when the minister of culture, Michele Amari, appointed him director of antiquities for the island.²⁵ Salinas (b. 1841) was much younger and had served in the army of Garibaldi. From 1861 to 1865, he traveled throughout Italy and Europe obtaining an education in classical art and archaeology with the financial support of the same minister of culture, Amari. In 1865, he was named professor of archaeology at the University of Palermo, and in 1873, he also became the director of the Royal Museum in Palermo.²⁶

Representatives of a new political and intellectual generation, Cavallari and Salinas became two of the most productive scholars working on the antiquities of Sicily in the

²³ Lo Iacono and Marconi 2000; Marconi 2002.

²⁴ Cavallari 1872; Salinas 1873.

²⁵ On Cavallari, see Cianciolo Cosentino 2007.

²⁶ On Salinas, see Spatafora 2014; Crisà 2018.

second half of the century. Their recounting of the history of archaeology in Sicily up to 1872, however, is problematic, because it represents a deliberate act of censorship of the Bourbon past. As a result, these publications fail to mention the system in charge of the island's antiquities and its accomplishments; the laws and rules regulating excavation, preservation, and export; and the hundreds of interventions documented by archival sources. By contrast, the first years of the new Italian government are presented as a renaissance in the archaeological investigation of the island. Particularly revealing about this narrative's ideological roots is the argument that the island was culturally isolated while under Bourbon rule. Evidently, the main source of inspiration for both Cavallari and Salinas was the new post-Unification historiographical paradigm, which, for generations to come, would present the age of Bourbon rule in Sicily as a period of cultural isolation and of social and economic crisis.²⁷ It was the new Italian government that promoted this paradigm, which eventually has come to shape modern historiography on the archeology of Sicily.

Today, those who travel through Sicily experience an interesting paradox. They experience an archaeological landscape that was consistently shaped during the years under Bourbon rule, and they might hardly believe that under a “foreign dynasty,” monuments so important for the Sicilian and Italian identity were of any concern at all.

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²⁷ On this paradigm, see, among others, Iachello 1998.

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