

Settlements of Albanian Origin in Calabria

Introduction

In the last few years there has been in Southern Italy a gradual weakening of the relations between town and country. The separation between human settlements and their surrounding territory, which was determined prevalently by the lack of economic assistance to the area, has undermined the traditional functional identity of the Calabrian urban centres. In its historical evolution Calabria enjoyed its major moments of splendour and importance when it exercised a central function with respect to the Mediterranean basin, in other words when it had the power to impose on other regions its model of territorial organization, particularly during the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods. However, Calabria played a secondary role when it failed to adhere to its own natural model of territorial organization, under the influence of other economies structured on quite different principles. The present study is an attempt to analyse some significant areas of the Crati River valley in Calabria, where the presence of settlements of Albanian origin has given rise to a model of territorial organization different from those produced by the local culture prior to Albanian immigration. The Albanian settlements, even though they are tightly linked to the local political and economic systems, have produced a noteworthy form of territorial organization which presupposes a different relationship between urban space and territory. An analysis of these urban centres can help us to understand the formation of new models of urbanization and the urban crisis which characterizes settlement structures in southern Italy.

History

From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century several waves of Albanian immigration succeeded one another in various areas of southern

Italy. These migrations were made possible by the close relations between Alabanian sovereigns, the Pope and the King of Naples and Sicily. The first important immigration took place in 1448, when Albanian troops led by Demetrio Reres came to Italy to subdue a revolt of Calabrian and Sicilian barons against King Alfonso I of Aragon. Various territories in Sicily were thus offered to the victorious Albanian troops so that they might establish themselves there and, at the same time, assume a position of leadership in the defense against French incursions. Consequently, during this period many settlements arose in Northern Sicily. In 1461 there was a second expedition headed by Prince Giorgio Castriota Skandenberg, who came to the aid of Pope Pius II. The help the Albanians offered was useful and decisive, and for this reason they received feudal lands in Puglia, which were inhabited and repopulated by Albanian people. But the largest settlements were formed between 1465 to 1506, after Giorgio Castriota's death (1464), when all the cities and fortresses of Albania fell definitively to the Turkish army, and when many Albanians were forced to seek refuge in Southern Italy in order to escape atrocious persecution. From that time on numerous settlements developed in Calabria both on abandoned urban centres and *ex novo* on territories assigned to the Albanians. In 1534 there was a massive exodus from the city of Corone in the region of Morea, and many Albanians settled in Puglia, in Lucania and in Calabria. The most recent settlement took place in 1744, as the last refugees from Morea established themselves in Lucania.

Urban Structure

Albanian settlements in Italy, which are typical of the area and original in conception, continue to represent a rich anthropological-cultural and architectonic-urbanistic patrimony in which the aspiration to urban form has constituted a unique example of its kind. In fact the Albanian urban plan, generated by successive stages of settlement, establishes itself in the urban centres of Southern Italy by introducing new schemes and solutions into the local urban culture. The "rione," which forms the largest portion of the village, is delimited by the most important roads. In general the main roads which cross the village separate the higher "rione" from the lower one. Each of the "rioni" is provided with services of different types

(church, "cantina," etc.) which make it autonomous with regards to other "rioni."

The closest urban spatial dimension to the "rione" is the "quartiere" which forms an identifiable fraction of the urban agglomerate. Physically, the "quartiere" represents the basic building block of the city, since it consists of elements that define urban reality by simple aggregation. In the development of Arberesch (Albanian) villages, the "quartieri, each assume a distinct role in the commercial and social life of the urban system. The most important characteristic of the "Arberesch" town plan is that it is made up of smaller units of the urban fabric known as *Gijtonia*. Underneath the "rione" and the "quartieri" the "Gijtonia" is physically represented by an urban microstructure consisting of a "piazzetta" (small square) with narrow "vicoli" (roads) leading into it and surrounded by buildings which together form a circular space. The tendency to build along curved lines is a new element introduced by the Albanian community in the urbanistic—structural system of southern Italy. This circularity is in fact an indication of a non-hierarchical culture very often found in Eastern societies. The aggregation of the various urban microstructures creates a polycentric system peculiar to the Arberesch city. In fact, even if at times the urban agglomerate can be compared to others of a different nature, the Albanian urban system cannot be defined as monocentric. The various *Gijtonie*, in fact, function as gravitational areas which, when connected to one another form the peculiar urban setting of Arberesch cities. The typical southern Italian settlements, which have medieval urban characteristics, clearly differ from those based on the Albanian system. Since the urban centres of southern Italy have inherited pre-roman models based on the establishment of settlements on hills and mountains—that is to say on strategic locations and in close touch with the surrounding landscape—they generally include a wall around the village which is an element added in medieval times. Other indications of this medieval structure are large walls and fortresses, narrow and interwoven roads, and patterns implying political and social hierarchy. It should also be mentioned that the economic administration of the city is based on a self-sufficient system. The settlement, even if it adheres to the Latin orthogonal scheme, offers a very compact structure with very few open spaces in the urban network. This type of

settlement also includes a potential for growth towards the mountains and fields along straight lines, and this gives the urban plan a linear scheme. The result is an urban system with a central point on which all of the community's activities are focused. It is to be noted that, when the centre is particularly large, the poles—which are all always functionally interconnected—become more than one. In the central pole, which is represented by the main “piazza,” are located the ruling powers: the church and the lord's palace.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Arberesch villages belong to a very complex urban conception and are constantly subject to urbanizational processes which give a sense of anonymity to the urban structure and disaggregate the old morphology. The arberesch city, even if it presided over locations which had shown to be for a long time poorly accessible and which local people considered of little interest, in a short time gave rise to relations of reciprocal dependency with the territory. In the last few years the relation between city and territory has been weakened, given the continuous depauperation of the land and of the urban centres. The various initiatives of recovery (for example, the improvement of historical sites, the “Piani di Recupero,” the “Comunità Montane,” the mountainous tourist-roads, parks, etc.) do not resolve the problem but make the product anonymous. As a result of this, the most important problem for the centres, which is to find a self-identity with respect to the territory, becomes always more difficult. The rebirth of the city is tied not only to factors deriving from the political and social situation but also from an awareness of the problem. Consequently, the search for an urban plan to co-ordinate the centres of Albanian origin seems more important than ever.

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