Another Sicily, tuna-fishing structures and landscape: a diachronic and contemporary photographic journey along the sicilian western coast

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ANOTHER SICILY,
TUNA-FISHING STRUCTURES AND LANDSCAPE:
A DIACHRONIC AND CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHIC
JOURNEY ALONG THE SICILIAN WESTERN COAST

Mauro Fontana[1]
[1]Politecnico di Torino, phone +39 389 696 1530, e-mail: mauro.fontana@polito.it

Abstract – The conducted research includes a photographic and not photographic analysis about the Sicilian western coast landscapes starting with an historical study about *tonnare*, architectural heritage and physical expression of the tradition of the tuna fishing.

The first part of the research study the origins of tuna fishing in Sicily, also focusing on the architecture of *tonnare*. The second part, instead, includes a diachronic photographic reading through the photographic comparison between a reportage taken between 1986 and 1987 by Ernesto Scevoli and the photos taken by the writer in March 2018.

The results of the photographic research, which coincides with the last part of the paper, demonstrate that the Sicilian coastal landscape has undergone changes whose meaning is to be investigated in order to recover the coast qualities for the purposes of targeted actions of preservation and enhancement of architectural and landscape heritage.

Origins of tuna fishing

Thanks to its 1637 km of coastline and its strategic geographical position in the Mediterranean Sea, Sicily has a natural inclination towards activities related to the sea and fishing, so much so that it is the leading Italian region in terms of number of ports, fishing fleet and fished product. In particular, tuna fishing brings with itself stories that have their origins in a very distant time and that, over the centuries, have been greatly influencing the development of traditions and identity traits of people and societies. The tuna-fishing structures, called *"tonnare"*, are the physical expression of that tradition: through these architectures along the coast, true instances of industrial archaeology findings, an identarian architectural and landscape heritage is conveyed.

Some graffiti painted on the walls of the Genovese Cave on the Island of Levanzo evidence that tuna-fishing was already practiced in prehistoric age. Several poets, philosophers, and historiographers of the classical world, such as Aristotle, Horace, Pliny, have written on tuna fishing. Its representation is very common in iconography, pottery, and coinage too. In some way, the Mediterranean civilisation is closely linked to the trade of tuna: already the Phoenicians fished and traded the tuna throughout the Mediterranean Sea starting from the 12th century b.C., along with purple, grains, oils, cheese and all other trade.

The *thunnus*, in fact, migrates from the ocean to the warmest waters of the Mediterranean Sea at the beginning of spring, making their fishing inside the labyrinths of nets that were built near the coasts favourable. In Sicily, thanks to its geographical position, there were numerous passages of tuna herds.

It is believed that the Muslims (Arabs, Berbers, Persians, Spanish) brought the almost industrial culture of tuna fishing, implemented its trade, and improved its technologies. Referring to the ideals of freedom, justice and tolerance of the teachings of Mohammed, the tuna trap was managed in a collective way, as if it were a co-ownership, with the absence of a single capital holder and with an equal distribution of income.

With the Normans and the introduction of the feudal system, economic and social history changed radically: the *tonnare*, in fact, were given in concession to barons, bishops, abbey, churches and convents and were subject to heavy taxes and services. With the organization that was established during the Middle Ages, the tuna-fishermen lost their autonomy and became simple "workers" who were paid a monetary compensation.

During the nineteenth century there will be an important growth in the trade and consumption of tuna, thanks to the effects of some technological innovations, such as the storage in oil and industrial processing.

During the first half of the 20th century, however, a slow process of divestment of *tonnare* began, and the reasons for which are to be found both in the difficulties of the archaic production process and in the competition from modern fishing systems practised by fishing vessels with the so-called "flying traps", which catch tuna on the high seas before they approach the coast.

The practice of tuna fishing, however, has left both material and immaterial legacies: on the one hand, architectures, equipment, industrial archaeology relics, on the other the important social reality that this practice represented, with its almost sacred nature that have left in the collective imagination stories of people who built their identity around the traditional tuna fishing.

Tonnare: nets and architectures

The term *"tonnara"* originally referred to the system of equipment and nets that were necessary for fishing, which were mounted at strategic points on the coast. In fact, the so-called *"tonnare of sea"* are nothing more than an underwater architectural system of nets anchored to the seabed, which form a series of interconnecting rooms. The last room was called the "death chamber" and allowed, through the lifting of the bottom net, the capture of the tuna that surfaced on the surface.

Today, the term *"tonnara"* is used to refer indiscriminately to both the nets and all the constructions on land that were used to store the equipment and process the tuna. Although the functions of the buildings were the same throughout the island, in order to deal with the architecture of the *tonnare* it is necessary to read the different complexes, which are developed in different ways and at different times. The development of the "*tonnare of land*" depended from several factors: the availability of construction materials, technical innovations, the morphology of the coast.

The system of the architectures of the *tonnare* is also intertwined with the system of territory control's towers. Buildings in fact, was equipped with a tower that had the dual function of sighting tunas and pirate attacks. For this reason, *tonnare*'s plants have a fortified conformation, like the traditional Sicilian countryside architectures: a planimetric scheme with a closed courtyard, equipped with walls to defend against possible incursions.
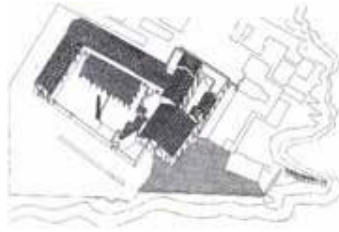
Figure 1 - Axonometry of a *tonnara*. From Ginex G. (1997) – *Luoghi della Memoria*, Jason, Reggio Calabria

The coastal building is called *"marfaraggio"*, a term of Arabic origin which indicates the complex of buildings used as warehouses, storage, dormitories, etc. [25], and it is the pivotal place of the fishermen community: in fact, the *tonnare* often became the places where fishermen lived during the months when the nets were down (fig. 1).

During the months of fishing, the workers were a real community that lived inside the *tonnare*: for this reason, in fact, in addition to the places predisposed to the processing and preservation of tuna, there were spaces used as accommodation, a church or a chapel, kitchens and canteens, laundries.

The complexes, both in terms of typology and construction techniques, depended on local cultures and architectural style of the period: thus, there are *tonnare* with buildings with barrel vaults or flat roofs, with pointed or round arches, in neo-gothic or rationalist style. The materials used also are different in relation to the local materials and the economic factors. For all these reasons, each *marfaraggio* represents, as a settlement difficult to trace back to predetermined types, a historical and architectural heritage, but also cultural and anthropological, of considerable value and interest, whose reading is often complex [26]. The *tonnare*, moreover, are always located in places of extreme landscape value, characterized by precise physical conditions, in situations where the relationship between the sea and the anthropization of the coast has taken on particular characteristics and strong values [19].

From the *Royal Acts* to the diachronic photographic analysis

The starting point of the photographic research was the comparison of two temporally distant "sources": the *"Royal Commission Acts for the tuna fishing structures"*, established by the Chamber of Deputies of the *"Kingdom of Italy"* from 1883 to 1887, and a photographic reportage by the Sicilian photographer Ernesto Scevoli, dating back to 1986/87 and published on the magazine Domus in 1992.

During the 19th century, tuna fishing was the topic of an important debate in the Chamber of Deputies of the *"Kingdom of Italy"*. In fact several *tonnare*'s owners have requested a political debate to various ministries of the Italian Government since 1879, complaining that the price of Italian tuna in oil on the market was too low compared to products from others countries, such as Portugal, Spain and Tunisia.

A special Parliamentary Committee was thus set up in 1883 with the task of

"ascertaining the conditions of the Italian *tonnare* industry and indicating whether and what customs or other measures are needed to protect the industry and promote its development". The Commission works began with an analysis about the activities of the five previous years (1879-1883) and a requesting to the maritime authorities of the ports all documents in their possession relating to both active and abandoned *tonnare*. The Commission's work was concluded with the drafting of the final report in 1887 and the acts' publication in 1889.

The Royal Commission Acts are an exact description of the activity of tuna fishing at the end of the 19th century. The maps are a precise mapping of active and abandoned *tonnare* throughout the Mediterranean Coasts (fig. 2). The maps show that the highest concentration of *tonnare* is distributed along the Sicilian coasts and that the active ones at the end of the 19th century were located in in the current provinces of Trapani and Palermo.

Figure 2 - General map from *Royal Commission Acts for the tuna fishing structures*.

The latter point should be taken into consideration since the photographic reportage of Scevoli has focused mainly on tonnare along the West coast of the island. For this reason, this conducted analysis concerned the buildings of Torretta Granitola, Favignana, Nubia, San Giuliano, San Cusumano, Bonagia, San Vito Lo Capo, Scopello, Cinisi, Vergine Maria, Arenella e San Nicola l'Arena.

Figure 3 - Ernesto Scevoli's reportage published on Domus in 1992. General map from *Royal Commission Acts for the tuna fishing structures*.

The conducted research includes a diachronic photographic reading, using the photographic method of before-and-after for the comparison between the photographs taken between 1986 and 1987 by Ernesto Scevoli and the photos taken by the writer in March 2018, investigating around photography's relationship with time and imagination too (fig. 4-5).

If Ernesto Scevoli's reportage was born with the aim of being published on the magazine Domus, giving the subject national and international visibility, the diachronic analysis clearly demonstrates how little has been produced over the last 30 years in terms of preservation and enhancement. In 2018s images, in fact, are no longer evident signs of fishing (anchors, nets, etc.); instead, what emerges are different spaces, which have not always found a proper function within the landscape in which they fit.

In fact, photography always chooses what to show, sometimes forcing some views and preferring them over other ones. If in 1987 it was right to focus only on the divestiture in progress in a "romantic" way, today we must give photography a different role: it must become a language to discover, know, represent and understand the complexity of reality without constraints and aesthetic-formal obsessions, without hiding or removing parts.

Figure 4 - Tonnara of Bonagia, diachronic comparison. On the left: 1987, © Ernesto Scevoli/Studio Camera. On the right: 2018, © Mauro Fontana.

Figure 5 - Tonnara of San Vito Lo Capo, diachronic comparison. On the left: 1987, © Ernesto Scevoli/Studio Camera. On the right: 2018, © Mauro Fontana.

Another Sicily: the contemporary journey along the coast

As expression of cultural and historical identities, the landscape is an inalienable right of people and communities. However, "other landscapes", almost invisible, often appear right in front of our eyes, rendering us unable to narrate them. Those are territories that need to be redesigned, landscapes that need to be repossessed, reinvented, or rebuilt.

The Sicilian coastal landscape is made up of changing fragments, it changes and damage by physical and social phenomena, due to both individual behaviour and inefficient planning and maintenance. The last century building development, in fact, has gone through a phase of development mainly quantitative, occupying sensitive areas and territories with low-quality architectures and spaces. And these architectures are the one that affects the appearance of the most remote territories and landscapes.

Italo Calvino said that "[...] to see a city is not enough to keep eyes open. First of all, we must discard everything that prevents us from seeing it, all the received ideas, the pre-constituted images that continue to fill our visual field and our ability to understand; then it is necessary to know how to simplify, reduce to the essential of the viewer, and connect the scattered fragments in an analytical and unitary drawing […]"[1].

For this reason, it was necessary to interpret a broader context in order to identify those landscapes that tell a familiar and invisible world along the coast, close to everyone and removed from the common eye. Talking about landscape, however, does not mean enlarging the field of observation to embrace wider portions of territory[2], but it just must be a different way of looking at the same things. It is also necessary to assume the awareness that contemporary landscape is a "hybrid landscape", heterogeneous, generated by contrast and juxtaposition of different elements.

Figure 6 - Bonagia, Trapani. 2018, © Mauro Fontana.

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[1] Calvino I. (1995) - *Una pietra sopra*, Mondadori, Milano.
[2] Zardini M. (1996) - *Per il ritorno del pittoresco*, "Paesaggi Ibridi. Un viaggio nella città contemporanea", p. 22, Skira Editore, Milano.

"Another Sicily" was born from the need for a new interpretative and critical reading of the landscapes around the *tonnare* along the Sicilian western coast. The photos of *Another Sicily* don't tell the story of tonnare and their traditions, but the present status of the coast today, its accesses to the sea, its infrastructure, the casual use of many fringes, the low-quality architecture that invades the territories, the distance from essential services, and the social-spatial fragility, trying to establish a relationship between heritage and landscape.

Figure 7 - Vergine Maria, Palermo. 2018, © Mauro Fontana.

Figure 8 - Trapani. 2018, © Mauro Fontana.

Photography then becomes an instrument to discover, know, represent and understand reality, in a continuous dialogue between landscape and traces of man, between natural and built environment, an instrument to stimulate people to look at places in a

different way, making visible the imbalance that is sometimes generated between the cultural heritage and the context landscape. The aim is to offer the possibility to analyse aspects and values that allow to know the places that can be or will be object of transformation and design processes.

In this "contemporary grand tour", the *tonnare* only were a small part of the journey, scattered points throughout the territory and the landscape. And the new photographic and topographic project tells about the territories close to them, territories of passage, the areas in the middle between heritage and nature, between the landscape and the built environment.

Figure 9 - Torretta Granitola, Trapani. 2018, © Mauro Fontana.

Figure 10 - Favignana, Trapani. 2018, © Mauro Fontana.

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