

Posidonia
Collana di studi insulari

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ISLANDS AS CROSSROADS

Reimagining mobilities
in the Mediterranean

Giovanna Di Matteo

(ed)



Roma TrE-Press

2025



Roma Tre

Università degli Studi Roma Tre
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici

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Collana diretta da Arturo Gallia

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Chapter 1

Liquid Islands: Mobility and Territoriality in the Mediterranean. The Socio-Ecological System of the Fishermen of the Island of Ponza (XIX-XX centuries)*

Arturo Gallia, Università Roma Tre

Abstract

The history of fishing in the Mediterranean between the 18th and 20th centuries reveals the trajectory of complex socio-ecological systems of considerable interest. Through the case study of the community of Ponza, the image of islands as static ecosystems is deconstructed to show how Ponza fishermen developed an economic model based on mobility and the creation of outposts, which evolved into the creation of an ‘archipelago’ of permanent settlements throughout the Tyrrhenian Sea. The analysis aims to reconstruct this system: from its foundation in the Bourbon era, to its 19th-century heyday supported by dense social networks, to its gradual decline in the 20th century, triggered by the convergence of technological innovation, environmental pressure on fish stocks and the emergence of tourism. The legacy of this centuries-old maritime vocation remains deeply imprinted on the landscape, social structure and cultural identity of the island, testifying to the ability of coastal communities to build territories and project their influence far beyond their physical boundaries.

Keywords: maritime geohistory, social networks, Mediterranean mobility, environmental history, cultural heritage.

Riassunto

La storia della pesca nel Mediterraneo tra il XVIII e il XX secolo rivela la traiettoria di complessi sistemi socio-ecologici di notevole interesse. Attraverso il caso studio della comunità di Ponza, l'immagine delle isole come ecosistemi statici viene de-costruita per mostrare come i pescatori di Ponza abbiano sviluppato un modello economico basato sulla mobilità e sulla creazione di avamposti, che si è evoluto nella creazione di un ‘arcipelago’ di insediamenti permanenti in tutto il Mar Tir-

* The text is the result of reflections arising from the project “Islands 4 Future. Protecting next generations from marginalization: a field-based, multi-dimensional and participatory intervention on promoting cultural heritage, future opportunities and tourism on small islands” – PRIN 2022 (2022T4P5WP) Funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU.

reno. L'analisi mira a ricostruire questo sistema: dalla sua fondazione nell'era borbonica, al suo apice nel XIX secolo sostenuto da fitte reti sociali, fino al suo graduale declino nel XX secolo, innescato dalla convergenza di innovazione tecnologica, pressione ambientale sugli stock ittici e l'emergere del turismo. L'eredità di questa vocazione marittima secolare rimane profondamente impressa nel paesaggio, nella struttura sociale e nell'identità culturale dell'isola, a testimonianza della capacità delle comunità costiere di costruire territori e proiettare la loro influenza ben oltre i propri confini fisici.

Parole chiave: geostoria marittima, reti sociali, mobilità mediterranea, storia ambientale, patrimonio culturale.

1. A Transforming Sea: Towards a Social and Environmental Geohistory of Mediterranean Fishing (19th-20th Centuries)

The history of traditional fishing in the Mediterranean between the 19th and 20th centuries is a complex field of study, situated at the intersection of historical geography, social history, economic history and environmental history. Analysis of this period reveals the slow but inexorable transformation of productive and cultural worlds rooted in centuries-old practices, in the face of the pressures of modernisation, the formation of nation states and the advent of a capitalist market economy. The term ‘traditional’ here refers to a socio-productive system based on customary knowledge and pre-industrial technologies, this usage deconstructs any static or romantic interpretation of these worlds. Tradition, in fact, is not an immutable given but a dynamic process of selection, innovation and cultural transmission (Clemente and Dei, 2005). Coastal communities, and island communities in particular, serve as privileged observatories for understanding the resilience, adaptation and ultimately the crisis of these socio-ecological systems. As highlighted by the recent debate within Island Studies, islands can be considered true ‘special observation points’ for understanding contemporary geographical, environmental and geopolitical dynamics (Cardillo *et al.*, 2021). In order to reconstruct their history, it is necessary to integrate different theoretical approaches, capable of capturing both long-term structures and the specific dynamics of local contexts. The analysis of these historical dynamics is fundamental to understanding the current challenges of the blue economy, which attempts to harmonise ecological, economic and social interests inherited from centuries of transformation. After all, this sea has never been a monolithic entity; it is «a thousand things together. Not a landscape, but countless landscapes. Not a sea, but a succession of seas. Not a civilisation, but a series of civilisations piled one on top of the other» (Braudel, 1987, p. 8). It is precisely within this complex human and natural ecology that the events of fishing communities take place.

Fishing communities perfectly embody the Mediterranean dimension described by Fernand Braudel (1987), understood not only as a geographical space, but as a system of human, economic and environmental relationships shaped by slow rhythms: without being reduced to geographical determinism, for centuries their existence has been marked by the season-

ality of fish species and weather conditions. These practices were governed by what Fikret Berkes defined as a complex «traditional ecological knowledge», i.e. an adaptive system of knowledge, handed down orally, which integrated empirical observations, management practices and local cosmologies (Berkes, 2017). This unwritten knowledge, which lies at the heart of traditional fishing, represents a methodological challenge for historical-geographical research. The reconstruction of this submerged world relies heavily on oral sources and the study of collective memory, tools that provide access to the «poetics and politics of memory» through which communities have narrated and given meaning to their experience and its dissolution (Clemente and Dei, 2005).

Maritime anthropology offers a further analytical tool for understanding these societies. Gísli Pálsson has proposed analysing coastal economies as integrated systems in which subsistence practices, social relations and cosmologies are inseparable (Pálsson, 1991). Applying this model to the Mediterranean, the fishing boat is not simply a tool of production but a social space; fishing techniques are not just technical procedures but expressions of local ecological knowledge (ethno-ichthyology); and the division of labour on board and on land reflects hierarchies and kinship ties that structure the entire community. Furthermore, fish stocks, which are by their nature mobile and difficult to fence off, are a classic example of a ‘common resource’. In this sense, many traditional communities have developed sophisticated systems of self-governance to manage these resources, based on shared rules and social sanctions, in order to prevent their depletion (Ostrom, 1990). These informal institutions, such as the customary definition of fishing areas or rules for the distribution of catches, ensured a sustainable balance for a long time, before state regulation and competition from industrial fishing profoundly altered it.

In the Italian context, the process of national unification marked a turning point. The new unified state showed a growing interest in cataloguing and rationalising the country’s economic resources, including fishing. The Survey on Fishing in the Kingdom of Italy, launched in 1872, is a primary source of great interest. Its volumes depict of an extremely fragmented and backward sector, characterised by a myriad of local practices, small rowing and sailing boats, and living conditions for fishermen marked by endemic poverty and economic dependence on intermediaries and boat

owners (Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, 1872), not unlike those described by Giovanni Verga. The survey was not only an act of knowledge, but the prelude to a policy that, over the following decades, would seek to modernise the sector, often without understanding or respecting the socio-economic logic of traditional communities.

The introduction of the internal combustion engine on boats had consequences that went far beyond increased productivity (Gabrielli, 1931). Motor fishing boats made it possible to reach more distant fish stocks and to use heavier and more invasive equipment, such as trawl nets. This triggered both an ecological disruption, increasing pressure on fish stocks, and a social disruption. A new stratification was created within communities between the owners of the new mechanical vessels and the fishermen who continued to use traditional techniques, who found themselves progressively marginalised. The ancient skills related to knowledge of the winds, currents and seabeds lost their value, replaced by the power of the engine. The memories of Sicilian fishermen testify to how this transition represented the end of a world, a cultural fracture that emptied the relationship with the sea of its meaning, a relationship based on listening and respect (Castro, 2018).

These dynamics are interestingly reflected within Italian island communities. Geographical isolation has often fostered the development of highly specialised maritime economies and strong cultural identities. Sicily, with its smaller islands, is perhaps the best-known example, particularly for bluefin tuna fishing through the *tonnare* system, which was not simply a fishing activity but a complex productive and social apparatus that transformed entire stretches of coastline during the *calata* season. In the 19th century, entrepreneurs such as the Florio family acquired control of the main tuna traps in the Egadi Islands, particularly Favignana, integrating them into a modern industrial cycle that ranged from catching to processing and canning the product, destined for national and international markets (Cancila, 2008).

Sardinia also has a significant history linked to tuna traps, especially in the Sulcis area. Here, communities such as Carloforte, on the island of San Pietro, show a further specificity. Founded by fishermen of Ligurian origin from the Tunisian island of Tabarka, Carloforte has maintained its own linguistic and cultural identity for centuries, strongly oriented towards

the sea (Puggioni, 1967; Salice, 2025). In contrast to the description of inland Sardinia offered by geographer Maurice Le Lannou, who paints it as a land of shepherds and farmers historically wary of a sea perceived as a source of danger (Le Lannou, 1979), Sardinian coastal communities represent worlds apart whose economic and social history is entirely linked to maritime activities, from tuna fishing to coral fishing.

The tonnara did not have a single economic dimension; the *mattanza*, the climactic and bloody moment of the tuna catch, was a true collective ritual. It was a hierarchical event, dominated by the charismatic figure of the rais, the head of the tonnara, and governed by ancient language and gestures. The entire crew acted as a single body, in a performance of strength, skill and courage that strengthened the identity and cohesion of the community. In the tonnara, proto-industrial work organisation was grafted onto an archaic cultural and ritual structure. Its decline after World War II, due to ecological factors (the decline in tuna stocks) and technological factors (competition from more effective fishing methods), marked the end not only of an industry but of an entire social universe (Lentini, 2018).

A different model of island community can be found in the Campania archipelago. Islands such as Procida did not develop ‘industrial’ forms of fishing such as the tuna fishery, but based their livelihood on a widespread maritime industry that combined small-scale coastal fishing, coastal shipping and enlistment in commercial fleets. Procida’s identity, as emerges from local historical reconstructions, is intrinsically linked to the sea, which has shaped urban planning, family organisation and economic strategies. In these communities, boat ownership and knowledge of the trade were the main forms of capital, in a social fabric dense with family ties and patronage networks that governed access to resources and work.

The history of fishing in the Italian Mediterranean between the 19th and 20th centuries is the chronicle of a profound transformation. Socio-ecological systems that had guaranteed the subsistence of entire populations for centuries, based on a balance between resource exploitation, empirical knowledge and community self-government, entered into crisis under the pressure of external forces. The centralising logic of the state, technological innovation and integration into a global market gradually eroded the material and cultural foundations of that world. Due to their

specialisation and relative isolation, island communities clearly highlight both the strength of these traditions, capable of shaping lasting collective identities, and their fragility in the face of change that was not only economic but also involved the loss of an entire heritage of knowledge and meaning, offering insights into the relationship between local communities, resource management and sustainable development models.

2. Nodes in a Liquid Network: Islands as Hubs of Maritime Circulation

The collective imagination tends to represent the small islands of the Mediterranean as closed worlds. Yet, to understand their history, it is necessary to reverse this perspective and see the sea not as a void, but as a lived space. In the words of Fernand Braudel, the sea «is an immense liquid plain, a space of circulation that unites, much more than it separates, the worlds that surround it» (Braudel, 1987, p. 24). Fishing communities, more than any other, have embodied this reality, transforming their islands from isolated outposts into dynamic hubs within a dense network of circulation, mobility and contacts that extended far beyond their coasts. This perspective aligns with the recent push within Italian geography to move beyond the categories of ‘isolation’ and ‘vulnerability’ to embrace an idea of relational and networked insularity (Malatesta and Cavallo, 2017). For these communities, the sea was not a barrier, but the main means of communication and the fundamental resource that drove constant movement. It thus became a true social space, a produced and lived territory whose apparent fluidity did not imply an absence of order or meaning (Steinberg, 2001). Their history is one of balance between a deep-rooted identity, linked to their own rock, and an external projection dictated by ecological necessities, economic strategies and social ties.

The maritime vocation of small islands did not arise from a choice, but from a necessity imposed by geography. The scarcity of arable land, the limited terrestrial resources and demographic pressure made subsistence based exclusively on agriculture unsustainable for most of the population. The sea therefore became the primary economic horizon. Within the Mediterranean, a ‘liquid continent’, a mosaic of micro-regions interconnected by short and long-range maritime routes (Braudel, 1987), island

fishermen were key players, whose mobility was not random but followed precise logic. Their existence was marked by a periodicity that combined winter sedentariness with extended seasonal mobility, transforming them into agents of connection between different coasts and archipelagos.

The most basic form of this mobility was linked to the life cycles of fish species. Fishermen moved following schools of blue fish, the migratory routes of tuna or in search of favourable fishing grounds for prized species. This involved temporarily leaving their home island to establish seasonal outposts, known as *stazzi* or *scale*, along the mainland coast or on other islands, which were generally uninhabited. The fishermen of Ponza, for example, were a constant presence along the entire coast of Lazio and Campania, pushing as far as Tuscany and Sardinia. Similarly, the fleets from the Aeolian or Egadi Islands operated within a radius covering large areas of the southern Tyrrhenian Sea. This short- and medium-range circulation created a human geography of the sea, a mental map of landing places, shoals and landmarks known only to those who spent their lives at sea.

Alongside this subsistence mobility, there were more structured and long-range forms of circulation linked to specialised fishing that required capital, skills and complex work organisation. Coral fishing is a significant example of this. Communities such as those of Torre del Greco (although not insular, it acted in close connection with the islands of Campania and Ponza) and Trapani and Sciacca in Sicily developed a veritable coral industry that projected their fleets throughout the western Mediterranean. Sicilian coral fishermen ventured as far as the coasts of Sardinia, Corsica and, above all, Barbary. During these fishing campaigns, which lasted for months, temporary and cosmopolitan communities were created, where Sicilian, Campanian, Ligurian and Catalan fishermen worked side by side, exchanging techniques and information, but also entering into bitter conflict over control of the richest shoals.

Another factor contributing to mobility was the spread of new fishing technologies. The introduction of the *cianciolo* gillnet and the use of lamps to attract blue fish at night, starting in the last decades of the 19th century, revolutionised anchovy and sardine fishing. This technique, which required large and specialised crews, spread rapidly thanks to the mobility of the fishermen who mastered it. Crews from Cetara, on the Amalfi coast, or from the islands of Ischia and Procida, were hired seasonally to work in

Liguria, Tuscany or on the island of Elba, bringing with them not only their skills but also technological innovation. In this way, small island communities acted as centres for the dissemination of technical knowledge, contributing to the modernisation and standardisation, at least in part, of fishing practices in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

The intense movement of people and boats had profound social and cultural consequences. Fishermen on the move were carriers of news, stories and material cultures. A type of boat, a modification to a net, a new technique for salting fish could spread rapidly from one end of the Tyrrhenian Sea to the other through these informal channels. Mobility also encouraged the creation and consolidation of extra-local kinship networks. It was not uncommon for a fisherman from Procida, after years of seasonal work in Viareggio or Porto Santo Stefano, to marry a local woman, starting a new family and strengthening the ties between his community of origin and his host community. This led to real inter-island migrations, which also involved the mainland coasts, leading to the creation of communities of fellow countrymen who maintained strong ties with their home island.

During the 20th century, especially after World War II, this model of mobility began to decline. While the motorisation of the fleet increased the range of individual boats, it also made the seasonal migration of entire crews less necessary. The development of industrial fishing, with deep-sea vessels capable of staying at sea for long periods, changed the economic logic of the sector. At the same time, the crisis in fish stocks and the emergence of new economic opportunities on land, such as tourism, reduced the attractiveness of the fishing profession, especially for the younger generations. The dense network of circulation that had characterised life on small islands for centuries gradually loosened, and with it, part of the heritage of knowledge and relationships that constituted its essence was lost. Social organisation and power networks were closely linked to maritime activities and their dynamics; their decline also meant the transformation of those same social structures.

3. The Ponzese Trajectory: From Colonisation to Mediterranean Expansion (18th-20th Centuries)

The maritime history of the Mediterranean is woven from a complex tapestry of local micro-histories, whose socio-economic dynamics have frequently projected their influence far beyond their geographical boundaries of origin, helping to define trade networks, migratory flows and cultural exchanges on a large scale. Within this panorama, the story of the fishing community on the island of Ponza is an interesting case study. Its history is not that of a sedentary population engaged in a mere subsistence economy, but rather that of a highly specialised and mobile group of people, capable of exerting an economic presence over large areas of the Tyrrhenian Sea for over a century and establishing permanent settlement networks from the Tuscan coast to the coasts of North Africa. An analysis of Ponza's historical trajectory, from its modern origins in the 18th-century Bourbon colonisation to the profound economic reconfiguration of the 20th century, sheds light on the complex mechanisms of adaptation, technological innovation and migration that have characterised maritime economies in the modern and contemporary eras.

3.1. The Foundations of a Maritime Community: The Bourbon Colonisation (18th Century)

The roots of Ponza's maritime identity were laid in the second half of the 18th century, in a context of renewed strategic interest in the island territories of the Kingdom of Naples. For centuries, the Ponza archipelago had remained in a state of almost total abandonment. Its small population, mainly consisting of fishermen who settled there seasonally, was subject to constant raids from the sea (Gallia, 2019). Starting in 1734, Charles III of Bourbon promoted a broad and systematic policy of territorial control and economic development of the coastal and island areas of the kingdom, encouraging a systematic colonisation project. The island was populated, fortified and equipped with a port, creating the conditions for a secure settlement. The new inhabitants were recruited mainly from Ischia (1734 and 1768) and, to a lesser extent, from Torre del Greco (1772), communities that already possessed a consolidated wealth of knowledge and practices related to the sea. This founding act can be interpreted as the beginning

of an intense process of territorialisation, in which the new settlers, supported by Bourbon power, began to project a new social and productive order onto the almost uninhabited island, starting with the management of primary resources such as water and land (Gallia, 2019).

This founding act is documented with remarkable precision in the *Monografia per le isole del gruppo ponziano* (1855) written by Giuseppe Tricoli, a Bourbon official whose report offers a detailed snapshot of the nascent island society, describing its economy, demography and social organisation. Tricoli observes how, from the outset, «fishing [was] the main, and almost the only, industry of these islanders» (Tricoli, 1855: 87), emphasising the speed with which the maritime vocation became the backbone of the entire community. The fusion of groups from different parts of Campania in a geographically isolated environment entirely focused on the sea favoured the rapid formation of a cohesive community with a strong esprit de corps and an autonomous cultural identity. As local historian Ernesto Prudente pointed out, colonisation was not a simple transposition of pre-existing models, but a generative process that gave rise to «a new people, forged by the necessities of the island and the vastness of the sea» (Prudente, 1989: 54). The survival and future prosperity of this new community depended entirely on its ability to exploit marine resources efficiently and innovatively.

3.2. *A Mobile Enterprise: The Ponzese Expansion in the 19th Century*

It was during the 19th century that the Ponza community reached its economic peak and maximum geographical expansion, transforming itself from a small colony to a major maritime power in the Tyrrhenian Sea. The success of Ponza's fishermen was based on their mastery and refinement of a specific fishing technique: the *paranza*. This method, which involved the coordinated use of two lateen sail boats, usually tartanas, to pull a large trawl net along the seabed, proved to be extraordinarily effective. It allowed for the mass capture of both valuable demersal species, such as shrimp, scampi and mullet, and large quantities of blue fish, particularly anchovies and sardines, which were then salted and marketed on a large scale (Mazzella, 2018).

The organisation of the work was equally efficient and was structured around the figure of the boat owner, a true maritime entrepreneur who

owned the means of production (the boats and nets) and managed a crew of about ten men. These crews were often linked to the owner by family ties or neighbourhood ties, creating a socio-economic system that combined family ownership with a rigidly hierarchical and disciplined organisation of work. The internal dynamics of these micro-seafaring communities were complex; life on board was a system of mutual dependence governed by unwritten codes of loyalty and hard work. This model ensured exceptional operational flexibility and high production efficiency, allowing the Ponza fleets to remain at sea for months, maximising profits.

The activity of the *paranze* was marked by marked seasonal mobility. With the arrival of spring, the fleets left the port of Ponza to embark on long fishing campaigns that followed the migratory routes of fish stocks. Their range covered the entire Tyrrhenian basin. They sailed up the coast of Lazio, operating off Anzio and Civitavecchia; they pushed on to the Tuscan Archipelago, establishing temporary bases in Porto Santo Stefano, Talamone and on the Island of Elba; they continued towards the Ligurian coast and frequently reached Corsica and the northern and western coasts of Sardinia (Mazzella, 2018).

3.3. From Mobility to Settlement: The Ponzese Expansion in the Mediterranean

The evolution of the Ponza model took place during the transition from a system of seasonal mobility to one of permanent settlement, which led to the creation of a veritable diaspora. The long stay in fishing areas encouraged the creation of permanent commercial outposts during the second half of the 19th century and, later, actual colonies, giving rise to a sort of ‘Ponzese archipelago’ scattered throughout the Mediterranean. This process was not random, but followed precise economic and strategic logic, projecting the island’s socio-economic model far beyond national borders and leaving a profound and lasting material and cultural legacy.

In Sardinia, for example, numerous families from Ponza settled permanently in places such as La Maddalena, Palau, Stintino and, above all, Carloforte, but also Arbatax and Alghero. In these new contexts, they demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt, specialising in fishing for prized species, particularly lobster, for which they introduced innovative techniques such as the systematic use of traps and the conversion of ships for

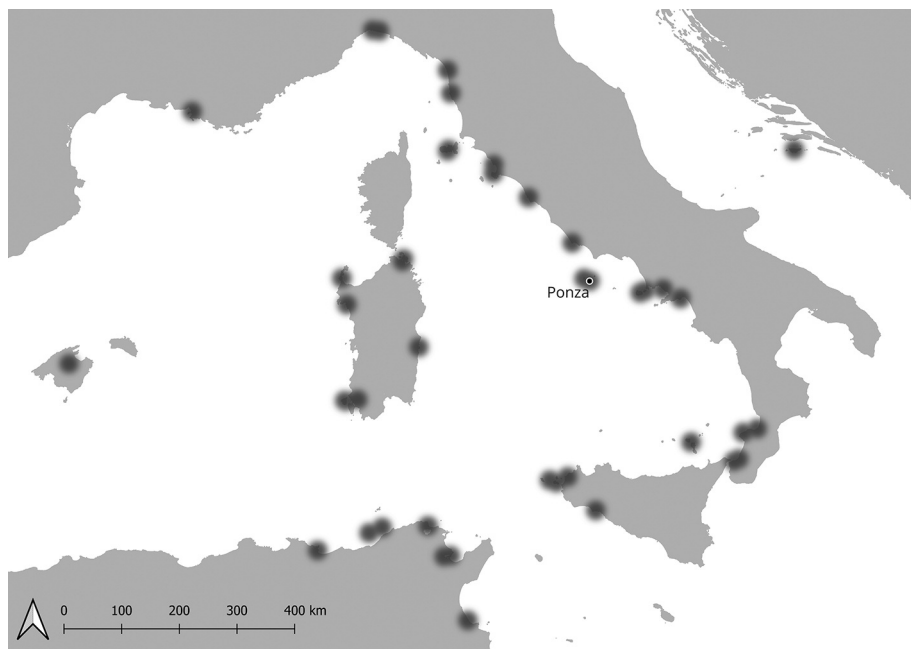


Fig. 1 – The areas of expansion of the Ponza fishing communities in the 19th and 20th centuries. Author's elaboration.

their transport while still alive¹. They organised a lucrative trade that bypassed local markets and supplied the richest cities on the continent, such as Genoa, Marseille and Livorno, directly. This economic integration was accompanied by a cultural heritage that can still be traced today. Typical Ponza surnames, such as Vitiello, Mazzella and D'Arco, have become an integral part of the demographic fabric of these localities. In the Maddalena dialect, there are lexical borrowings related to the techniques and equipment introduced by the new arrivals. As reported in local Sardinian stories, «the Ponza people brought an entrepreneurial spirit and expertise that changed lobster fishing in northern Sardinia forever» (Mancini, 2001: 67), testifying to how their impact was not only demographic, but also technological and economic.

Another fundamental direction of Ponza's expansion was towards the

¹ Lobster fishing, like coral fishing, has been extremely important for the Ponza community, both economically and in terms of identity. It is not mentioned in this text due to lack of space and because it would require further research, including quantitative analysis. On this subject, please refer to Silverio Mazzella (2018).

coasts of North Africa, joining the wider Italian migratory flow towards Tunisia and Algeria, then under French control. As analysed by Francesco Migliorino, Ponza fishermen formed the backbone of many fishing communities in ports such as Sousse and Bizerte in Tunisia, and Bône (now Annaba) in Algeria (Migliorino, 2002: 78-95). Unlike other Italian emigrants who arrived as labourers, the Ponza fishermen presented themselves as holders of technical and entrepreneurial skills, reproducing their organisational model. Here too, economic settlement was inseparable from the creation of a social and cultural microcosm that replicated that of the mother island, as happened on the island of La Galite, which became a Ponza colony. The strongest evidence of this persistence was the export of the cult of San Silverio, who was also venerated in these places, and celebrating the patron saint's feast day allowed them to maintain a spiritual and identity bond with Ponza. Memories of this 'Ponza overseas' speak of a dual belonging, a hybrid identity nourished by nostalgia for the island and life in the new colonial context (Mazzella, 2018).

This expansion, both in Sardinia and North Africa, demonstrates the ability of the Ponza group to project its economic, social and cultural model far beyond the visible boundaries. The material and immaterial traces left in La Maddalena or La Galite testify to the extraordinary ability of a small island community to build worlds, demonstrating how the sea can be not a barrier, but a bridge and even a territory for the construction of a transnational maritime system.

3.4. The Decline of a Model: Innovation, Tourism and the End of an Era

The twentieth century brought a series of radical changes that profoundly altered the socio-economic structure of the Ponza community, leading to the gradual decline of its traditional fishing model. The introduction of the internal combustion engine in the early decades of the century marked the end of the era of sailing and *paranza* fishing. New boats, motor fishing boats, and new techniques, such as lampara fishing and purse seine fishing for blue fish, gradually became established. While motorisation increased fishing power and drastically reduced navigation times, it also required much larger capital investments and changed the organisation of work on board, eroding the traditional structure of the family crew.

At the same time, increasing fishing pressure throughout the Mediter-

ranean, intensified by new technologies, led to a gradual and, in some cases, drastic depletion of fish stocks. Fishing campaigns became less profitable and more uncertain, increasing the business risk for boat owners. Fishing statistics, produced by bodies such as ISTAT since the Second World War, show a steady decline in yields per unit of effort, a clear indicator of the ecological crisis underway.

The 20th century marked a profound transformation of the Ponza fishing community, leading to the decline of its traditional socio-economic model. The primary driver was technological change, specifically the adoption of the internal combustion engine, which supplanted sail-powered vessels. This transition to motorised boats and new techniques, such as *lampara* and purse seine fishing, enhanced fishing power but also demanded greater capital investment and disrupted the traditional family-based crew structure. Concurrently, this increased technological capacity intensified fishing pressure throughout the Mediterranean, causing a significant depletion of fish stocks. As a result, fishing became less profitable and economically riskier for vessel owners. This ecological crisis is empirically supported by post-World War II fisheries statistics, which demonstrate a consistent decline in catch per unit of effort.

However, the final blow to Ponza's traditional fishing model came from an external factor: the development of mass tourism, which transformed Ponza into a renowned holiday destination. This process has progressively defined a veritable «seasonal geography» (Malatesta and Gallia, 2025), where the main determinant of demographic life, resource exploitation and local economies has become the mono-economy of summer tourism. This dynamic is part of a broader revolution in Western sensibilities, which has gradually transformed the coastline from a place of work and danger to a place of desire and hedonistic consumption (Corbin, 1988). The transformation of Ponza was therefore not only economic but also cultural: it imposed an external view on the island that redefined it in terms of a «need for nature», transforming it from a productive territory to a landscape to be consumed (Malatesta, 2021). Starting in the 1960s, the island's economy underwent a rapid and radical conversion. This transition, common to many Italian islands, was not without negative consequences, such as the «consumption of land resulting from widespread urbanisation [...], the alteration of landscape values» and the «development of port in-

frastructure of stretches of coastline for recreational boating» (Gallia and Malatesta, 2022, p. 165). Tourism-related activities offered more stable, less strenuous and often more lucrative opportunities than the risks and hardships of deep-sea fishing. Many shipowners converted their vessels for tourist transport or recreational charter. Faced with the prospect of a less harsh life, the younger generations abandoned their fathers' trade *en masse* to find employment in the hotel and restaurant sector or in tourism-related services. This is a well-documented dynamic for island economies, where the dominance of the tourism market «inevitably corresponds to the decline of primary production activities» (Doumenge, 1985, cited in Gallia and Malatesta, 2022, p. 164). Deep-sea fishing, which for almost two centuries had defined Ponza's identity and guaranteed its prosperity, was reduced to a local activity, practised by an ever-decreasing number of operators and often supplemented by new forms of income such as fishing tourism. However, there is a deep and persistent cultural heritage that continues to shape the island's collective identity, its gastronomy and its historical memory, bearing witness to the extraordinary adventure of a small community.

4. The Legacy of a World: Material and Immaterial Traces of Fishing in Ponza

The identity of an island is never simply a product of its physical geography; rather, it is a complex tapestry in which human activity, carried out over centuries, overlaps and modifies the natural environment, generating unique landscapes, social structures and cultural systems. For the island of Ponza, fishing has not only been the main economic driver for almost two centuries, but also a real shaping force, a «total social fact» (Mauss, 2022) that has sculpted the territory, organised the community and projected its influence far beyond the borders of the archipelago. An analysis of the effects of this centuries-old maritime vocation reveals a complex legacy, composed of material traces – visible in the urban layout of the port, architecture and land use – and a profound intangible heritage, manifested in the social structure, vocabulary, religious practices and collective memory, both on the island and in the 'other' communities once touched by the

diaspora of its fishermen. This heritage, eroded in its economic foundations, is now being reinterpreted and valued within a new logic. As outlined in the Sea Plan (*Piano del Mare*), fishing culture and its traditions, despite having lost their economic centrality, have become a strategic asset for the ‘Sea Product’, a key element for tourist appeal and the identity of the national brand (Presidency of the Council of Ministers – CIPOM, 2023).

4.1. *The Material Imprint: How Fishing Shaped the Insular Territory*

The landscape of Ponza, now mainly seen through the lens of tourism, is actually a historical artefact shaped by the needs of deep-sea fishing. The most obvious element of this transformation is the Bourbon port, the epicentre of economic and social life. Designed in the 18th century with a strategic and military vision, its semi-circular shape and quays were quickly repurposed by the nascent fishing community (Gallia, 2019). As described by Giuseppe Tricoli, by the mid-19th century, the port was not only a landing place but also an open-air workshop: the quays were perpetually occupied by loading and unloading operations, the maintenance of tartanas and, above all, the repair of nets, a collective activity involving both men and women (Tricoli, 1855: 91). The warehouses located at pier level, now converted into shops and restaurants, were originally used to store salt, barrels for salting anchovies and fishing equipment.

This functional logic extends to the entire urban fabric that develops close to the port. The cluster of colourful houses climbing up the hill not only responds to an aesthetic canon, but also to a precise socio-spatial organisation. Ponza’s architecture, with its domed houses (*domus*) and simple facades, reflects the life of a fishing community. This functional logic was not only aesthetic, but also embodied sophisticated water management knowledge: the domed roofs, inherited from the Ischian model, were designed to maximise rainwater collection, channelling it into private cisterns that guaranteed water autonomy for each household (Gallia, 2019). Often, the ground floor or an adjoining room (*u’ vasso*) was used to store smaller equipment or process the catch. The layout of the dwellings reflected the social hierarchy of fishing: the largest houses, in a dominant position with a direct view of the harbour, belonged to the boat owners and shipowners, who could thus monitor their boats and the activities of the crew. The living area was, therefore, an extension of the working space.



Fig. 2 – Repairing fishing nets and traps on the Molo Musco in 1960s, Ponza. Ponza Racconta Archive.

The influence of fishing was not limited to the urban centre. The entire coastline of the island was conceived as a widespread infrastructure serving navigation. Minor coves and landing places, such as Santa Maria, Cala Feola or Frontone, were not simply inlets, but strategic shelters used by boats to shelter from prevailing winds or as temporary bases for maintenance or specific coastal fishing activities. Even the agricultural landscape of the hinterland was indirectly linked to the economy of the sea. Small terraced crops were mainly managed by women, who ensured the family's food supply during the long absences of the men, who were engaged in fishing campaigns for months at a time. The land economy was, in essence, complementary and subordinate to that of the sea².

² Unlike other locations, such as the Aeolian Islands (Maffei, 2013), women were not frequently involved in activities directly related to fishing.



Fig. 3 – The beach of Santa Maria and the shipyards for boat maintenance in 1960s. Ponza Racconta Archive.

4.2. The Immaterial Legacy: Social Structure, Faith and Identity

While the material traces are still visible in the landscape, the immaterial ones are perhaps even deeper and more persistent, as they have shaped the very soul of the community. The social structure of Ponza, at least until the mid-20th century, was a direct reflection of the organisation of work on the fishing boats. At the top were the shipowners (owners), holders of capital and decision-making power, followed by the captains and trusted men, and finally the crew. This stratification was not only economic, but permeated every aspect of community life, influencing marriage alliances, access to credit and social prestige.

This cultural universe has produced an extraordinarily rich linguistic heritage, which, through gestures, words and objects, unites the different shores of the Mediterranean basin. The Ponza dialect, like other island dialects, is steeped in a specific and detailed maritime lexicon, with precise terms for every type of wind (from the tramontana to the sirocco), current, seabed, fish and fishing equipment. This is not simply a folkloric curiosity,

but a vital necessity, a distinctive feature of the culture that Predrag Matvejević defined as the «civilisation of detail». «On the sea and along the coast, everything has a precise name» he writes in his *Breviary*, «seafarers cannot tolerate approximation: their route, their cargo or their very lives may depend on it» (Matvejević, 1987, p. 69). This ‘language of the sea’ was not only a technical tool, but the expression of a specific conception of space and time, not geometric and linear, but qualitative and cyclical, based on a universe of signs, places and natural rhythms that constituted the true cosmology of fishermen (Mondardini Morelli, 1988; Malatesta and Gallia, 2025). It was a shared system of knowledge that allowed them to read and interpret the environment, ensuring the safety and success of their expeditions, and which became a marker of cultural identity.

At the heart of this identity system is the cult of San Silverio, patron saint of the island and guardian deity of fishermen. The choice of this saint is neither random nor imported. Silverio, a 6th-century Pope, died in exile on the nearby island of Palmarola. His figure as a martyr, linked to the geography of the archipelago, was adopted by the Ponza community in a process of symbolic appropriation. The patron saint was chosen because his sacred biography is intertwined with the geography and secular history of the community, sanctifying their daily experience: for the people of Ponza, San Silverio was not a distant saint, but a ‘Saint of their islands’, an intercessor who knew the harshness of isolation and the dangers of the sea. The feast day on 20 June, the culmination of the Ponza ritual calendar, is a powerful manifestation of this symbiosis between faith and the sea. The procession of the saint’s statue on a fishing boat, followed by the faithful on other boats, is not only an act of devotion, but also an annual reaffirmation of the pact between the community and its protector, and at the same time the sanctification of the workplace – the sea – which is blessed and made propitious. This maritime ritual encapsulates the entire Ponzese cosmology, uniting the community, blessing the work and appeasing adverse natural forces.

5. Conclusion: Dynamics of a Maritime World in Transformation

Analysing the histories of fishing communities from small Italian islands, such as that of Ponza, is, ultimately, to lend significance to those narratives that too often remain at the margins of the grand historical account. It means recognising, as Predrag Matvejević wrote, that «the history of the Mediterranean is not made solely of great ports or naval battles [...]. It is also, and perhaps above all, made of stories of small boats, of mended nets, of horizons awaited at dawn» (Matvejević, 1987, p. 13). These histories perfectly encapsulate the dialectic between continuity and change that defines the maritime culture of Mediterranean coastal communities: systems capable of reproducing their knowledge and social structures for centuries, yet constantly exposed to external pressures for change (Mondardini Morelli, 1985). Such communities, particularly insular ones, were not mere repositories of archaic traditions destined to succumb passively to the forces of modernisation. On the contrary, for a long time they proved to be dynamic actors, capable of devising sophisticated economic and social strategies based on a profound knowledge of the marine environment and on a structured mobility that projected them far beyond the confines of their own rocky shores. Theirs is a story of continuous adaptation, a remarkable capacity for innovation, and a progressive crisis, determined not by a single factor, but by the convergence of technological, economic, environmental, and political transformations that undermined their material and cultural foundations.

The interpretative model proposed by Fernand Braudel, which describes the Mediterranean as an interconnected «liquid continent» of slow rhythms and constant exchanges, continues to be the essential framework for understanding the logic of these societies (Braudel, 1987). Insular fishers fully embodied this dimension, interpreting the sea not as a barrier but as a unified space for work and life, within a Mediterranean composed of interconnected micro-ecologies and human strategies for risk mitigation (Horden and Purcell, 2000). Seasonal mobility, which evolved into a strategy of permanent settlement, was the key to their economic success. This model finds further analytical depth within the framework of Gísli Pálsson's maritime anthropology, which has highlighted how, in coastal economies, subsistence practices, social relations, and ecological knowledge are inseparable.

arable (Pálsson, 1991). The organisation of labour aboard the *paranza* (a type of paired trawler), the hierarchical structure of the *ciurma* (crew), and the oral transmission of a body of technical-environmental knowledge all confirm that the boat was a social space and the fishing technique an expression of a specific cosmology.

However, a comprehensive analysis of these systems must include a more profound reflection on their environmental impact, an aspect that merits further investigation. The narrative of the decline of traditional fishing is often centred on the ecological rupture triggered by the internal combustion engine (Gabrielli, 1931). While this is undeniable, it is necessary to recognise that even the most efficient ‘traditional’ technologies, such as the *paranza*, represented a significant intensification of fishing pressure. This system was not in a stationary equilibrium with the environment, but an expansive one whose sustainability depended on the ability to move continually towards new fishing grounds. Its predatory efficiency likely contributed to a long-term process of seabed impoverishment, anticipating dynamics that subsequent technologies later exacerbated. This phenomenon fits into the broader history of resource exploitation that has marked the Mediterranean environment in the modern era, profoundly altering its ecological balances (McNeill, 2000). This phenomenon can be interpreted in the light of concepts developed by historical ecology, such as the «shifting baseline syndrome», according to which each generation of fishers tends to perceive the depleted state of marine resources they experience as a normal condition, losing the memory of greater past abundance (Pauly, 1995).

The dissolution of this world, which accelerated in the 20th century, was the product of a convergence of forces. Technological innovation devalued the body of empirical knowledge that constituted the fishers’ primary human capital, altering a relationship based on an intimate understanding of and respect for the sea. Concurrently, the economic transformation of the islands, driven by tourism, offered alternative sources of income that modified the very perception of the maritime space, from a place of production to one of consumption. Then the island itself becomes a product consumed through extractive processes by tourism-related activities (Devine and Ojeda, 2017).

Finally, state intervention completed the process of dismantling com-

munity-based logics. This process can be interpreted through the lens of James C. Scott, who described how state-led modernisation projects tend to impose a simplified and legible grid upon complex, vernacular local systems, such as the customary rules of fishing, ultimately destroying their internal logic and flexibility (Scott, 1998). The community governance of the commons was thus progressively replaced by an external bureaucratic apparatus (Ostrom, 1990).

Ultimately, the study of the community of Ponza and its expansion demonstrates how a small Mediterranean island was, for over a century, one of the driving forces behind wide-ranging economic and cultural dynamics. Its history compels us to overcome the dichotomy between rootedness and mobility, showing how the most profound identity can coincide with the widest movement. The study of these histories holds not only historical value; it also offers points for reflection for the present, prompting us to question models of development and the resilience of local communities. The parable of Ponza, from a community founded on fishing to an economy dependent on tourism, reveals itself to be an exemplary case of a radical transformation that is now fully recognised at the level of national strategy. Indeed, the crisis of its traditional model and the advent of mass tourism have generated that ‘seasonal insular geography’ which public policies today, from the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) onwards, attempt to govern and mitigate through strategies for seasonal adjustment and sustainable development (Gallia and Malatesta, 2022; Malatesta and Gallia, 2026).

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