

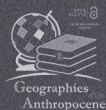
Gaetano Sabato

# Communities and Cruise Ship Tourism

A Geographical Perspective on  
the Cases of Palermo and Siracusa, Sicily



*Preface by Girolamo Cusimano*  
*Introduction by Lorenzo Bagnoli*



IL Sileno  
Edizioni

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Geographies *of the*  
Anthropocene

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SERIES

il Sileno  
Edizioni  
ISSN 2611-3171

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is a monographic volume of the Open Access and peer-reviewed series  
“Geographies of the Anthropocene” published by Il Sileno Edizioni

[www.ilsileno.it/](http://www.ilsileno.it/)



*Cover:* Photo by Gaetano Sabato, Palermo, "Evening Departure" (2024)

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International Scientific Publisher, VAT 03716380781  
Via Piave, 3/A, 87035 - Lago (CS), Italy, e-mail: [ilsilenoedizioni@gmail.com](mailto:ilsilenoedizioni@gmail.com)

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ISBN 979-12-80064-69-1





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*To Jenny and Flavio Sebastiano*



## **Abstract**

A typical Mediterranean cruise makes stops in different ports and passengers (cruisers) can disembark to visit the destination. This contact implies peculiar kinds of relationships between cruisers and visited localities. Several studies have focused on how communities perceive the impact of cruisers, but it must be recognized that this perception can be very different depending on the geographical, social and cultural contexts considered.

The ways in which a community (re)produces specific images of cruise ship tourism include cultural and physical (urban) landscapes, conflicts, strategies of resilience that semantize peculiar spaces through private (and public) narrations. The relationship between the host communities and the hosted tourists can be potentially conflictual or find forms of peaceful and/or constructive coexistence. The peculiar (re)production of private and public narratives that reflect ways of thinking and perceptions of spaces, Identity and Otherness is of great importance in this process. Like other forms of tourism, cruising can therefore be characterized by communities as sustainable/unsustainable, as a threat or an asset, as an economic resource or even as a foreign body that impoverishes the community. By using a cultural geographical approach this book aims to investigate this dynamic taking into account different spatialities. Starting from fieldwork conducted using participant observation and including some interviews this work aims to analyze the ways in which the communities of two cruise destinations in Sicily, Palermo and Siracusa, perceive the cruise tourism and the passengers who disembark as tourists, especially in the period of crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both of the destinations have an important cultural heritage as declared “World Heritage Sites” by UNESCO. However, the two communities are exposed to cruises with a different maturity. The perceptions of the host communities and their narratives are reconstructed through the contextualization of cruise tourism in the two Sicilian destinations.

## **Keywords**

*Cruise Ship Tourism – Cultural Geography – Communities – Perception of cruising – Palermo – Siracusa*



## Preface

*Girolamo Cusimano*

For the past decade or so, many tourism studies have undergone a reorientation. The themes linked to the development of the tourism industry and activities, which were decidedly prevalent in past years, have given way to issues of sustainability, the many declinations of which have, more recently, clustered around the growing interest in ‘overtourism’, a term that summarizes the critical nature of certain forms of tourism that seem to consume territories rather than enrich them. Certainly, the change of pace (which has affected various social sciences) is also dictated by a new scientific sensibility that, as far as possible, maintains an open dialogue with the demands coming from the media and society. However, it is worth remembering that this is not really new: since the 1970s, tourism studies have paid great attention to the transformations faced by small communities exposed to mass tourism flows, often emphasizing their negative effects to the point of predicting, in certain cases, the disappearance of some traditional societies.

From the point of view of human geography, this shift has interesting implications. Although geographers have always studied tourism by considering the interaction (not taken for granted, nor predictable in its forms) between tourists, communities and territories, in more recent times this has implied a greater concentration on the perspective of sustainable reception. How do communities and the territories in which they live receive or are able to receive tourism? What effects does sustainable interaction in shared spaces have for communities, and therefore also for tourists? How do we build a fruitful welcome for the stakeholders involved in the territory and for tourists? A scientific approach to questions of this tenor is more essential than ever if we want to reconstruct a map of tourism ‘in’ and ‘of’ destinations. It is necessary to use epistemologically and critically grounded tools within the various tourism sciences also to avoid sterile ideological polarizations that risk flattening out on surface issues. It also seems necessary to return the debate on the sustainability of tourism to analytical questions, using perspectives capable of reading the complex interactions that affect the territories involved (in various ways and to varying degrees) by tourism. Geographers, for their part, could do this by using the tools that are their own and that they already master: by varying the scale of observation and analysis of these interactions, taking into account the territorial context that is the object of interest and its relations with its broader context. Indeed, the very concept of community is

a theoretical abstraction, given the variety of situations that it brings together under a single hyper-name. Nevertheless, it is essential to analyze locally located realities without losing touch with the dynamics at work at a more global level.

Today, not only within the European context, many localities are being hit by fast processes of ‘touristification’ that depend on an intertwining of various agentivities: such accelerations (to which new digital systems and media also contribute) not only test the resilience of communities, but also often increase opportunities for conflict. Localities (and communities) that quickly become tourist destinations may be faced with difficult choices, as they lean towards the opportunities afforded by rapid growth and a certain reluctance towards visitors themselves that may even become hostility. Communities thus find themselves caught between the need not to distort ways of living (and thinking) perceived as reassuring and the instances of change, of opening up to mobility flows, experiencing consequent economic, social and cultural transformations. However, these dynamics can similarly affect localities (and communities) that have been hosting tourism for longer and in greater numbers: although they are more structured destinations and less exposed to radical change, the suddenness with which certain dynamics take place can give rise to criticalities and conflicts.

It must also be said that the same concept of touristification may be a synthetic label to describe very different and often concomitant dynamics: for example, a destination-location may be the destination of mass tourism that does not entail in-depth modifications in the urban fabric, while in the same places a niche but big spender tourism is grafted as an agent of urban transformation. Moreover, depending on the time of year, a destination may be exposed to tourist flows of varying intensity that have different impacts and repercussions.

Among the different types of tourism acting on a location, cruise tourism is a particular case. Usually (and especially in the Mediterranean area) it involves large concentrations of passenger-tourists disembarking for a visit to the location in a rather limited time and without overnight stays. Consequently, the encounter between these tourists and their host communities takes place in a peculiar way, both in terms of rapidity and intensity.

This book investigates some of the aspects mentioned so far, using a geographic perspective to study two Sicilian cases, Palermo and Siracusa, two cities of ancient foundation that have a significant cultural heritage, both inscribed in the list of UNESCO sites and that, in addition to hosting various types of tourism (cultural, gastronomic, seaside), at different times and in different ways have also become cruise tourism destinations. Using a typically

geographic epistemological tool, that of comparison, Gaetano Sabato puts side by side two types of destinations that, within the same regional context, present a different maturity as cruise ports: on the one hand, Palermo, Italy's fifth largest city and, for several decades, among the top twenty Mediterranean ports in terms of passengers handled; on the other hand, Siracusa, which, especially since 2017, can count on port infrastructures that have marked its growth as a cruise destination, placing it among the top fifteen ports in Italy. The study, conducted by the author during the pandemic period, uses a dual perspective, also typically geographical, confirming the usefulness of reasoning at different scales. In fact, the analysis of the two cases makes use of a predominantly qualitative and geographic-cultural approach based on fieldwork, while providing an overview through quantitative data. In this sense, the more general contextualization allows a better understanding of the micro-context, that is the perception some members of the two communities have of cruise tourism in their respective city-destinations. The reconstruction of these perceptions (moreover, recorded at a moment of particular collective and individual vulnerability, such as the pandemic) and of their symbolic universe of reference returns an interesting picture in which the brightest colours tend to fade. In fact, a multifaceted reality emerges from the interviews, composed of even contrasting visions of cruising and value systems within the same location. And this brings us back to the centrality of communities and territories. If tourism is based on an encounter, this takes place in a space that is (already) experienced, semanticized, represented, and therefore territorialized. This means that any type of tourism planning aimed at making tourism more sustainable must listen to communities. Otherwise, these shared spaces should be transformed into contested spaces.





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# Introduction

*Lorenzo Bagnoli*

In the 1970s, when air travel almost completely replaced sea travel between Europe and other continents, some ocean liners were converted to cruise ships. Cruise tourism, which was already partially present in many maritime regions, especially in the Mediterranean, was thus strengthened, partly due as well to the emergence of a new media-induced fashion. The less young will certainly remember the television series *Love boat*, produced in the United States between 1977 and 1987 and broadcast in Europe in the 1980s, which was so important in renewing the tourist taste for cruises. This type of tourism, which initially occupied a niche in luxury tourism, has since become increasingly successful, reaching the mass market, that is, on the eve of the pandemic, some 30 million passengers a year.

A market of this size could not fail to interest tourism geographers, who have devoted themselves to the study of cruises from various angles: economic, first and foremost, but also environmental, human, social, political, cultural, and so on. In this respect, the studies on the environmental, social and economic costs and benefits of the presence of cruise ships in the Venetian lagoon for Venice and other lagoon cities are well known.

Gaetano Sabato's volume belongs to this line of studies, focusing on the social and cultural impact of cruise tourism on two Sicilian port centres - Palermo and Siracusa - with at least two aspects of originality.

The first concerns the interesting question of the usual subdivision of tourist areas. The traditional geography of tourism distinguishes in fact three main types of tourist regions: the active tourist region, where tourists leave (also called the outbound region); the passive tourist region, where tourists arrive (also called the inbound region); and the transit region, which is usually limited, in addition to the communication routes, to the embarkation and disembarkation points (airports, ports, train stations, etc.) and their immediate surroundings. However, the author rightly does not attribute a single tourist function to the port cities considered in his research. Both Palermo and Siracusa are undoubtedly regions of transit tourism (where not only cruise ship passengers and personnel stop for a while, but where goods, services, and capital, connected and not connected to tourist activities, are also quickly exchanged), but at the same time they are also regions of passive tourism (where cruise ship passengers also spend part of their time, even if only with one- or even half-day eat-and-go visits) and regions of

active tourism (from which the local residents, in turn, leave for their holidays).

Speaking of local residents, the second aspect that the research takes into account with originality is the relationship between them and cruise ship passengers. Currently, Gaetano Sabato's field research shows that in the two Sicilian cities considered, among the main ways in which hosts and guests usually relate to each other - uncertainty, separation, enthusiasm, and imitation - uncertainty still prevails. However, in a historical period in which turismophobia is much debated - and sometimes runs the risk of taking on worrying dimensions, as in the well-known case of Barcelona and other towns where overtourism is evident - the author emphasizes how important it will be for both Palermo and Siracusa to find a meeting point between the way of experiencing the territory that is peculiar to the locals (the *frui*, that is the fruition) and that which is peculiar to cruise ship passengers (the *uti*, that is the use), in order to minimize problems by giving both groups the greatest possible satisfaction.

The study is limited to the pandemic period, but it would be interesting if the author would continue his research in more recent years. After the health emergency, cruise tourism seems to have returned to previous levels, but along with new opportunities, it is also facing new risks that threaten our society and our way of doing tourism.



# Chapter 1

## 1. Introducing the context and the problems

The past twenty years have witnessed an evident growth of cruise ship tourism, both in terms of supply and demand. According to the Cruise Lines International Association, CLIA (2020a), the number of passengers and destinations offered have increased despite the emergence of some economic crises that, in the same twenty years, characterized other sectors. However, as stated in another recent study (Sabato 2023): “For the first time in the last decade, the growth of the cruise market has globally come to a halt due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The optimistic predictions made by market analysts for the year 2020, based on the excellent results of cruise tourism in 2019, were contradicted [...]. Any realistic analysis of the situation before the pandemic could not have taken into account the blocking of all tourist activities all over the world in order to contain the virus. The lockdown imposed a no entry to the routes [...] [and] the freezing of national and international travels and various tourist services would have caused anyway the drastic reduction of passengers unable to reach most destinations. [...] [The] interruption of cruising activities for several months [...] meant very high costs. In 2019, the total number of passengers predicted for 2020 was around 32 million, instead the total number reached was 5.7 million passengers, that is 80.6% less than the expected figure (CLIA 2020b, p. 2)”. In 2019 the nearly 30 million cruisers and hundreds of ports represented a healthy tourism sector. In the global cruise market, 2020 and 2021 represented an important setback. However, according to the latest available data (CLIA 2022, p. 2), 2022 has already shown encouraging signs of recovery. Global passengers volume in 2022 reached 20.4 million with a percentage growth of 329% compared to 2021. The result is also due to the fact that all CLIA registered cruise ships were back in full operation by the end of 2022. Current forecasts for 2023 show further growth, with 31.5 million global passengers (CLIA 2023, p. 9).

The ship itself represents a kind of a mobile “destination” (Löfgren 1999; Albano, Sabato 2013 and 2016; Sabato 2017 and 2018), considering that a typical Mediterranean cruise makes a number of stops in different ports. Usually, many of these stops offer a number of attractions, including relevant cultural-historical, fashion-oriented and culinary itineraries: for all of the above



reasons, the destination itself becomes a fundamental element of cruising, by implying a spatial dimension where passengers (who become “tourists”) and locals (who become unintentional hosts) meet each other. This space is obviously both physical and symbolic. As Foucault (1995 and 2004) and Lefebvre (1991) stressed, the space is always socially and culturally built and this is also true for spaces involved in cruise tourism: indeed, some community spaces can become meeting spaces for passengers-tourists and locals. In this sense, “significant” community places (such as monuments, churches, squares) can temporarily become “visiting spaces” for disembarked passengers (Sabato 2017). It is precisely in these physical spaces – that also have a symbolic relevance – that encounters take place. Of course, it should be considered that passengers-tourists and locals refer to the same spaces by attributing different meanings to them (de Certeau 1990; Augé 1992; Amin, Thrift 2002; Lussault 2017). This encounter gives rise to a cultural dynamic as it implies symbolic and identity (re)productions. Moreover, it can generate conflicts or even temporary “positive” forms of alliances, in the sense of peaceful coexistence based on mutual benefits (e.g. economic benefits for communities and good hospitality for tourists; cultural exchanges in the anthropological sense, etc.). In other terms, cruise ship tourism makes meetings happen with certain specific features depending on the availability, perception and use of “space” and “time”. The meeting is often random and occurs in a short time, as passengers only stop for some hours in one location. Moreover, the same meeting spaces are often limited because, due to lack of time, cruise passengers are able to visit only some topical places of a destination. If this makes cruising similar to other types of “hit and run” tourism, it is also true that this modality structurally characterizes cruising and is chosen on purpose by some tourists who prefer to have a more mediated contact with Otherness. In any case, that does not prevent these fleeting contacts from being significant. Indeed, this transience of the meetings can give rise to misunderstandings, to conflicts or contribute to the cruise passengers having had a good experience of the destinations visited. In the same way, meetings marked by a mutually beneficial exchange may help the locals get a positive impression of cruise passengers and of this type of tourism, which will be considered a resource by the whole hosting community.

Recently, a great number of studies on communities which host cruise tourism, using different approaches, have focused on different and important aspects, such as the economic, social, environmental, and perceived impacts on the locality (e.g. Bishop 2010; Klein 2011; Tommasini 2012; Pinnock 2014; Thureau et al. 2015; Alonso, Alexander 2017; Del Chiappa et al. 2018; MacNeill, Wozniak, 2018; Chen et al. 2019). Lately, Vega-Muñoz et al.

stated that one of the most developed research scopes on tourism is precisely the impact of tourism on local communities. However, “the differential element of the impact of cruise tourism is the massive arrival of thousands of tourists in a port, primarily in small towns” (Vega-Muñoz et al. 2020, p. 2). Although cruise tourism is a highly interdisciplinary field of study, the article shows how it does not constitute a final research area for the scholars who deal with it. Most of the authors, in fact, dedicate themselves to a broader field of research which concerns other sectors of tourism and hospitality<sup>1</sup>.

Some studies that are part of the broad reflection on the impact of cruise tourism on local communities have also focused on how residents perceive cruise tourists (Brida et al. 2011a and 2011b; Brida et al. 2012; Jordan et al. 2023;) or how the latter perceive the locality (Sanz-Blas 2019). In general, quantitative studies on perception have many merits, especially regarding the possibility of synthesis and overview. However, they also can have some limitations, which consist of a lower effectiveness in taking into consideration the symbolic aspects mentioned above. More specifically, within the broad field of studies on the perception of cruise tourism by residents it may be useful to focus on the way in which some inhabitants of a community conceive tourists who disembark from a cruise ship. As de Certeau has shown, in the context of a city, its inhabitants enact a symbolic process of “space appropriation” simply by walking through the streets (de Certeau 1990). Symbolically, therefore, city spaces are continually semanticized by the community that lives its everyday life there. Therefore, the members of a community tend to represent (also through specific public and private narratives) the “otherness” of cruise passengers in the context of given urban spaces (Sabato 2017, 2018 and 2023). Somehow, residents temporarily “share” those same spaces with tourists who disembark for a few hours from a cruise ship. In other words, residents’ perceptions and representations of cruise tourists (and cruise tourism) are not divorced from a precise spatial, geographical context, a physical and symbolic *hic et nunc*. The way in which the inhabitants of a community perceive and represent cruise tourists is inevitably linked to the way in which these inhabitants frequent certain places that are symbolic for them, starting with the historic centre,

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<sup>1</sup> Vega-Muñoz et al. (2020) carried out an analysis of many studies on cruise tourism conducted by various disciplinary approaches and methods. This work took into consideration a broad spectrum of 320 articles published in 142 Web of Sciences journals, in the time span between 1980 and 2018. In addition to the aforementioned points, the study indicates that another problematic element is that there are few connections between the institutions (located in 11 countries) to which the researchers belong and, consequently, between authors of different backgrounds. According to the same study Italy is an exception to this analyzed trend, because a certain degree of collaboration among universities (and researchers) emerges.

which (at least in medium-sized European cities that are cruise destinations) also assumes a strong identity value. In addition to the symbolic processes related to space, in order to understand how cruise tourism is represented by a community, it is important to consider another important process: the type of exposure to cruise tourism that a destination may have. Certainly, local representations are influenced by this element, since more established and mature cruise destinations (this refers to those places accustomed to receiving greater flows of cruise passengers and for longer) and larger in terms of inhabitants may express different ways of perceiving cruise tourists compared to more recent, less mature destinations and with a lower number of inhabitants.

Given the symbolic nature of these themes, from a cultural geographical perspective this means it is important to study in a qualitative manner at least: 1) the representations (e.g. personal narratives) that residents of a community produce about cruise tourism and cruise passengers; 2) how these representations imply the spatialities of a cruise city-destination (and their possible transformations) and the perception of possible threats (from cruise tourism and the otherness of cruise passengers). Starting from these reflections, this book aims to investigate both these aspects. With respect to the two starting points, more specifically, this work seeks to reconstruct: i) whether a community perceives cruise tourism in a conflicting way, considering contact with disembarked passengers in the spaces frequented by residents; ii) whether a community perceives environmental or health<sup>2</sup> threats linked to this type of tourism in relation to the space of the city; iii) in what way, in the process of representing cruise tourism, mass media representations can intervene.

For this purpose, by using a cultural geographical approach and a qualitative methodology, I will take into consideration the case of two cruise destinations in the Mediterranean Sea in Sicily, Italy, in a comparative approach: Palermo and Siracusa. The former, Palermo, is the capital of the island (and the fifth largest metropolitan area in Italy) and has been a cruise destination for a long time, has the highest number of arrivals in Sicily and it is also a home port. The latter, Siracusa, instead, is the fourth city in Sicily in terms of population: here cruise tourism is more recent (the city is a port of call), although it is slowly growing. Both cities were declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO (the entire city of Siracusa and the Arab-Norman Palermo itinerary, respectively in 2005 and 2015). Furthermore, the harbours of both cities are also the main gateways to the old city centres. Therefore, the two communities are exposed to cruises with a different level of maturity, in terms

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of conducting the research, the communities studied were still subject to certain restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

of demand and supply, number of passengers, services, contacts with cruisers. The comparison of the two destinations is based on fieldwork carried out by using participant-observation and including 20 interviews (ten for each destination). The methodology used for the research of this study is described in detail in the next section together with an indication of its main limitations.

## 2. Methodology employed

This study is part of a more extensive research<sup>3</sup> I conducted in both the Sicilian cities between 2020 and 2021. In the first part, already published (Sabato 2023), I focused on the Siracusa case, “where public narratives of cruise tourism were told about the presence of two ships that, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, had stopped for technical reasons in the port and stayed for a few months”. There, in order to study the link between risk perception and public narratives, I analysed from a cultural geographical point of view some significant texts in articles found in local online newspapers. Instead, as already stated in the previous section, this second study aims to investigate: i) whether a community perceives cruise tourism in a conflicted way, taking into account the contact with cruisers in the spaces usually frequented by residents; ii) whether a community perceives environmental or health threats linked to this type of tourism in relation to the urban space; iii) how mass media can interfere in this process of representing cruise tourism by communities. In this case, therefore, the work will pay attention to the two tourist destinations and to the vision of cruising conveyed by private narratives.

The methodology is based on participant-observation, a qualitative method of investigation used and theorized for the first time by cultural anthropologists and used today by many social scientists, including cultural geographers. Within anthropology it is variously defined, according to different schools and approaches and it implies relevant epistemological (and ethical) problems. Although interesting, here it is not possible to take into account the historical and modern debate which over time has redefined the purpose and modalities of ethnography (Geertz 1973; Malinowski 1978 and 1989; Clifford, Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Montes 2020).

My fieldwork was conducted between 2020 and 2021 in both Palermo and

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<sup>3</sup> The research on which this book is based began a few years ago. Over time it has been enriched with new perspectives, points for reflections and insights. In this regard, I would like to thank Stefano Montes for his valuable advice, as well as the lively interest and curiosity with which he followed the genesis and development of this research and of the book itself.

Siracusa with a participant-observation method and involved the researcher's presence in the field for a period of time of about 3 months (with some breaks, mainly due to the restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic) for each of the two destinations. During the fieldwork, for this research I was able to interview 10 informants in each city, therefore 20 in total. The purpose of the research was made clear to informants in accordance with the ethical principles of transparency and fairness. The informants were equally divided on the basis of their declared gender, their age (between thirty and seventy), their education level (they have a high school or university education) and they all live in the city of Palermo or Siracusa. They have never been on a cruise but have declared that they wanted to take at least one in the future, without specifying time and method. The interviews were conducted according to the ethnographic methods, without the use of a questionnaire: the same questions were asked to all informants, although not always in the same order, as part of guided conversations with them during the fieldwork. The interlocutors were, in this manner, encouraged to respond freely, by articulating their responses according to the ways they preferred. Furthermore, informants are made completely anonymous, both in order to respect their privacy and because it is not necessary to reveal their identity for research purposes. The interviews, which varied in length, were recorded live on audio equipment and then transcribed. After this phase, the interview texts were analyzed, extracting the most significant and relevant passages from the original answers in relation to the respective questions (extrapolating irrelevant parts where necessary) and comparing the answers with each other. The textual analysis was conducted using a qualitative method, focusing on the symbolic aspects of the answers and (where possible) taking into account information and experiences acquired during participant observation in the context of the whole fieldwork. For the analysis, I also used two geographical methods: a multi-scalar perspective and the principle of comparison.

In chapter 2 (sections 2 and 3) are reported the questions asked and, very briefly, some significant excerpts of the relevant answers of the informants. For convenience, these excerpts have been joined (where possible), reporting a summary of the most significant sentences. The answers are also presented in six tables (Tables 1-6) to make the content more readable and to facilitate comparisons between the two cases studied. Moreover, the answers, considered meaningful, given by at least two informants, and which are similar, are indicated in italics.

The limitations of such an approach are well known and the writer is aware of them. Conducting ten interviews per destination further emphasizes that the research can open only a small window into the communities studied, leaving aside

many other issues and problems regarding the relationships established between the communities and the cruise tourism they host. This is congruent with the fact that it is clear that any research conducted about a community can only be partial.

Surely, with qualitative research it is not feasible to recreate the general view and way of thinking of an entire community, especially if this is represented by an entire city or a metropolitan area of over one million inhabitants, as in the case of Palermo. Nevertheless, by using a qualitative approach and ethnographic interviews it is possible at least to reconstruct a partial picture of the symbolic universe of reference of the people who make up a community.





# Chapter 2

## 1. Cruising in Sicily

In this chapter the two cases studied are presented in detail (Palermo in section 2 and Siracusa in section 3). For each of the two, the answers obtained from the informants during the interviews are reported only briefly, quoting some significant passages and summarizing them by topic in three identical groups for both cases studied: 1) questions/answers about cruise tourists and urban spaces; 2) questions/answers about Cruise tourism (and cruisers) as a threat; 3) questions/answers about cruise tourism and mass mediatic representations.

However, first of all, applying a scalar approach, it is useful to offer a brief introduction on the situation of cruises in Sicily to contextualize the research framework.

Cruising is an important resource for tourism in Sicily: for some years the region<sup>4</sup> has been ranked first in Italy for the number of cruise ship ports and currently fourth (in 2022 after Liguria, Lazio and Campania) for handled passengers (more than 1.23 million in 2019 and 1.23 million in 2022) (Risposte Turismo 2020 and 2023). In Sicily there are 11 cruise ports (Palermo, Messina, Catania, Siracusa, Giardini Naxos, Trapani, Porto Empedocle, Licata, Lipari and, before 2022, even Milazzo and Pozzallo), located on the three sides of the island and this geographical condition ensures a high number of cruise ship calls at ports (734 in 2018, 793 in 2019 and 919 in 2022) (Risposte Turismo 2019, 2020 and 2023). Indeed, in 2022 Sicily occupied the first place in Italy for number of cruise ship calls; actually, the island had been in second place for several years: until 2019 Lazio was the first region, with 842 cruise ship calls (Risposte Turismo 2019, 2020 and 2023).

As far as seasonality is concerned, considering the first three cruise ports in Sicily (Palermo, Messina and Catania) it should be noted that there is a trend similar to the national one in the 2018-2019 period and 2022, with the presence of cruising throughout the year but with an evident concentration in the period between April and October and significant peaks in the summer months (Risposte Turismo 2019, 2020 and 2023). Moreover, it emerges that in the three ports the largest number of passengers in 2019 was concentrated

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<sup>4</sup> The island is one of the 20 administrative regions of Italy.

in October, instead in 2022 Palermo and Catania had their peak in August. However, it is possible to detect differences – even substantial – between these ports: Palermo can count on regular traffic even in the winter months (in 2022, 20.8% of its annual total; in 2019 this was 27.5%); Messina is confirmed, above all, as a summer destination (in 2022, 55.3% of its annual total; in 2019 it was 51%); in Catania, until 2019, cruise traffic increased in spring and autumn (almost 53% of its annual total), in 2022 it was mainly concentrated in the summer months (almost 71% of its annual total). Thanks to the two ports of Messina and Palermo, Sicily in 2017 also registered visits by more than a third of the cruise companies that sail in Italy: the port of Messina hosted 33% of all the cruise companies that have itineraries in the country, whereas Palermo had 29% (Risposte Turismo 2017). In the same year, the port of Siracusa, with its 12% (Risposte Turismo 2017), was close to half of these figures.

The next sections will illustrate more in detail the two destinations and cruise ship ports chosen for this research: Palermo and Siracusa.

## **2. The case of Palermo**

Palermo is the capital of Sicily: by population (in 2022 about 630,167 inhabitants in the city area and about 1,201,000 in the metropolitan area) (ISTAT 2022) it is the first city of the island and the fifth of Italy. It is a city with a history dating back more than two thousand years and, consequently, its artistic and cultural heritage is conspicuous. In 2015, part of its heritage, some of the best-preserved monuments and Arab-Norman buildings (from medieval times), for its uniqueness, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. This includes two palaces, three churches, a Cathedral, a bridge, as well as the Cathedrals of Monreale and Cefalù (respectively 3 km and 70 km far away from Palermo). The UNESCO website presents it as follows: “Collectively, they are an example of a social-cultural syncretism between Western, Islamic and Byzantine cultures on the island which gave rise to new concepts of space, structure and decoration. They also bear testimony to the fruitful coexistence of people of different origins and religions (Muslim, Byzantine, Latin, Jewish, Lombard and French).” (UNESCO 2015). The recognition by UNESCO is undoubtedly an important tourist attraction for the city and has added to the already rich culture on offer for visitors.

The seaport of Palermo is one of the most important in the Western Mediterranean Sea, both for handled goods (more than 7.7 million tons in 2022) and passengers (over 1.98 million in 2022) (Adsp Palermo 2022). As a cruise port,

Palermo (Fig. 1) with its 554,279 handled passengers and 238 ship calls in 2022 (501,281 cruisers and 160 ship calls in 2019) (Risposte Turismo 2020, and 2023; Adsp Palermo 2022) is ranked among the top twenty ports in the Mediterranean Sea and has been among the top ten cruise ports in Italy for several years.



**Figure 1** – Palermo, Italy. A view of a part of the seaport in 2021. (Ph. by Gaetano Sabato).

Furthermore, Palermo, the first cruise port in Sicily, is a multipurpose port, being both a home port (especially for Costa and MSC companies) and a port of call. Moreover, the seaport has been undergoing expansion for some years. The modernization works of the main maritime station (which was partially opened to the public in 2021) are part of a larger project that concerns the sustainable redevelopment of the entire waterfront of Palermo under the responsibility of the *Autorità di Sistema Portuale del mare di Sicilia Occidentale* (Western Sicilian Sea Port System Authority)<sup>5</sup>. The executive project, carried out

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<sup>5</sup> In October 2023, a part of the Palermo waterfront between the main port and the tourist port (for small boats) adjacent to the ancient historic centre, was completely redeveloped and was opened to the public. This is the Palermo Marina Yatching (Fig. 3), a 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> space that was created from the demolition of 30,000 m<sup>3</sup> of now dilapidated structures, many of which were illegal and/or impossible to be transformed. In this space, designed according to modern architectural ideas and overlooking the sea, have been created 14 moorings for mega yachts and around ten buildings intended for reception (shops, restaurants, hotels, conference centre). There is also a large artificial swimming pool (7,000 m<sup>2</sup>) which acts as a musical fountain, now considered the largest in Italy. The intervention,

according to the *Piano regolatore portuale* (Port Regulatory Plan) and the *Piano Integrato di Trasformazione portuale* (Integrated Port Transformation Plan), spreads for approximately 400 meters on an area of approximately 52,000 square meters. The cost of the current intervention is 35.5 million euros, already financed. The works are modifying the port of Palermo and making it more welcoming for large cruise ship manoeuvres. This process, which includes the dredging of one basin and the shortening of another, will enhance the current capacity of the docks for hosting cruise ships. Indeed, in 2008, the *Piano Regolatore Portuale* (New Harbour Master Plan – Piano Regolatore Portuale 2008) established that the port areas functional to cruise shipments could be extended from 21,759 square meters to 55,420 square meters. This modernization and expansion of the port does not concern only cruise ships, but the entire port waterfront area (Mercatanti, Privitera 2017, pp. 57-66): subsequent amendments and additions also envisaged the modification of the viability outside the port area, partially already realized (Fig. 2 and 3).



**Figure 2** - Palermo, Italy (2021). The entrance of the harbour and a cruise ship on one of the quays. (Ph. by Gaetano Sabato).

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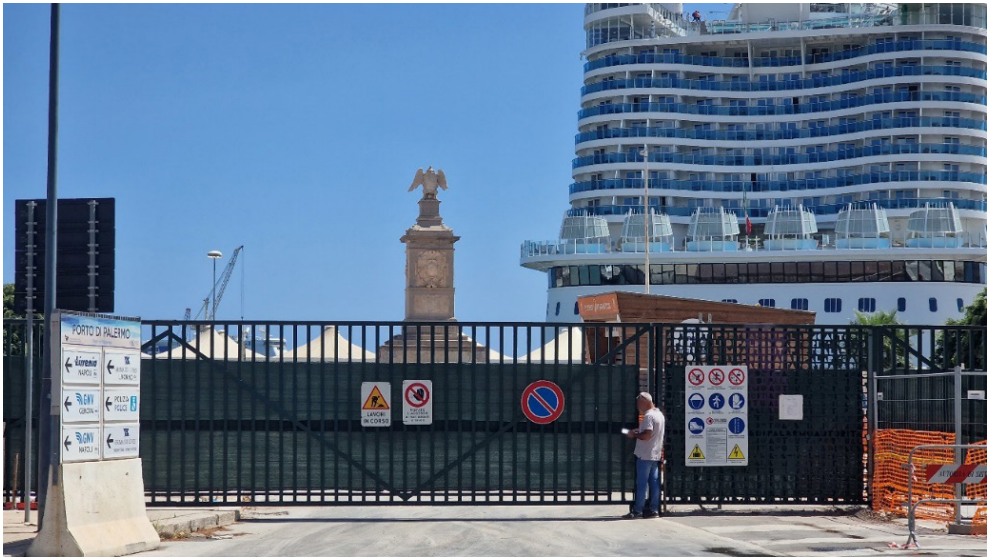
one of the most important since the Second World War in the Sicilian capital, had a total cost of over 30 million euros and was well received by the local and national media.



**Figure 3** - Palermo, Italy (2023). The large fountain at the new Palermo Marina Yatching. In the background, the remains of the ancient Castello a Mare encompassed in the area. *(Ph. by Gaetano Sabato).*

In this regard, it should be mentioned that the viability around the seaport has important implications for sustainability and anti-pollution regulations: because of that, it is at the centre of the “Interface” project, co-financed by the European CEF Transport Programme. Indeed, the city-port interface project envisages a system of public spaces at different levels which smooth out the current border between the port and the city, allowing the city spaces to remain projected onto the sea (Fig. 4).





**Figure 4 - Palermo, Italy (2023).** Works in progress at the entrance of the harbour. (Ph. by Gaetano Sabato).

More generally, with regard to sustainability, the modernization project of the Western Sicily port system (which also includes the seaports of Termini Imerese, Trapani and Porto Empedocle) involves important works that, within twenty years, will contribute to achieving zero emissions in the various ports (e.g. cogeneration plants for electrical and thermal energy; “green” infrastructures; implementation of vehicles parking).

The seaport of the city is in a position of access to the more recent historic centre (Eighteenth-Nineteenth century), but within a radius of about 2 km, it is possible to reach some of the most important destinations of medieval (or older) and UNESCO heritage. This means that independent passengers<sup>6</sup> can visit some of the main recommended and advertised monuments in the city (and in Sicily) by simply walking or by using public transports (Sabato 2017 and 2018).

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<sup>6</sup> In the cruise industry, passengers who usually do not purchase excursion packages and decide to freely visit the landing destination are indicated with this term. However, it remains generic and often unsuitable for accommodating a variety of types of tourists.

## 2.1 Cruise tourists and urban spaces in Palermo

This section includes answers<sup>7</sup> to questions posed to informants in Palermo (the same as in the twin section 3 on Siracusa's informants) to understand whether the community perceived cruise tourism in a conflicted way, taking into account the contact with cruisers in the spaces usually frequented by residents. Questions and answers are then briefly summarized in the corresponding tables.

1) One of the first questions asked during the interviews aimed to know the way in which the informants conceived of cruise tourism (and cruisers), asking for an explicit positive or negative attribution of value: «What do you think of cruise tourism and cruise passengers? Are they a resource or a problem for your city [Palermo]?» all 10 informants referred that they had few opportunities for meeting cruise passengers, these usually occurred in shops or on the street when asking for directions. Five of the interviewees replied that they consider them a resource, not only in economic terms, since *this type of tourism is a very positive opportunity of development for the city of Palermo*<sup>8</sup>. The other half of the informants (5 out of 10), instead, believe that *cruising and cruise passengers can be both a resource and a problem, like other types of tourism and tourists, and that the difference stands only in the way local governance (public and private) manages (or will manage) cruises.*

2) The two following questions during the interviews focused directly on the issue of the perceived and lived space: «Have you ever met (or do you happen to meet) cruise passengers on your daily routes? [before the pandemic] » and «Do you regularly walk around the old centre?». In this case it is possible to summarize the answers of three groups. Four interviewees (4 out of 10) answered that *they meet cruise passengers (before the pandemic) only when they are in the historic centre (2-3 times a week, for work or leisure)*; three (3 out of 10) replied that *they rarely meet cruise passengers* and they go to the historic centre on average once a week; and finally, three of the informants (3 out of 10), who usually go to the historic centre about twice a month, declared that *they had never met cruise passengers and / or that they could not distinguish them from other tourists.*

3) After the first exploration aimed at by the first questions presented above,

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<sup>7</sup> All answers (here and in the other sections) have been translated by the author from the original Italian.

<sup>8</sup> In this book, the answers considered significant given by at least two informants and which are similar are indicated in italics.



informants were asked what they thought of the possible urban transformation that cruise tourism could bring to the locality: «In what way do you think cruise tourism can change the city?». The question aimed to reconstruct more in depth their representation of the urban space in relation to cruises.

In this case, the answers were divided into two groups: one group (4 out of 10) believes that this kind of tourism cannot make (or has made) significant changes. The other group, 6 out of 10 informants who, on the other hand, have an opposite opinion, were asked to be more specific. Therefore, in this group, five persons (5 out of 6) attributed a very positive value to the changes made to the city, emphasized the fact that *Palermo has increasingly become an international tourist destination also thanks to cruises*. On the other hand, among those who believe that cruise tourism has brought about some changes, 4 respondents out of 5 think that this process is contributing to *transforming several places in the historic centre*. Nevertheless, *business activities change to respond to the tourist demand (with a prevalence of shops related to food and wine and, to a lesser extent, clothing and accessories, as well as souvenir shops along the streets closest to the port)*. Finally, *tourism (and cruises) in the historic centre have attracted greater attention from the public administration and the Municipality of Palermo in particular (in terms of organization of services) towards the most accessible districts to visitors, at the expense of the more peripheral ones which have a low tourist appeal*.

**The case of Palermo**  
**Cruise tourists and urban spaces**

1) «What do you think of cruise tourism and cruise passengers? Are they a resource or a problem for your city [Palermo]?»

5/10 of interviewees	Informants consider cruise tourism a resource: <i>this type of tourism is a very positive opportunity of development for the city of Palermo.</i>
5/10 of interviewees	Informants consider cruise tourism <i>both a resource and a problem, like other types of tourism and tourists, and that the difference stands only in the way local governance (public and private) manages (or will manage) cruises.</i>

2) «Have you ever met (or do you happen to meet) cruise passengers on your daily routes? [before the pandemic] » and «Do you regularly walk around the old centre?».

4/10 of interviewees	Informants declared <i>they meet cruise passengers (before the pandemic) only when they are in the historic centre (2-3 times a week, for work or leisure).</i>
3/10 of interviewees	Informants declared they <i>rarely meet cruise passengers</i> , and they go to the historic centre on average once a week.
3/10 of interviewees	Informants declared they usually go to the historic centre about twice a month. They <i>had never met cruise passengers and / or that they could not distinguish them from other tourists.</i>

3) «In what way do you think cruise tourism can change the city?»

4/10 of interviewees	Informants stated that this kind of tourism cannot make (or has made) significant changes.
6/10 of interviewees	Informants stated that cruise tourism can make (or has made) some changes.

More in particular:  
5 informants out of 6 attributed a very positive value to the changes made to the city, emphasized the fact that *Palermo has increasingly become an international tourist destination also thanks to cruises.* 4 informants specified that this process is contributing to *transforming several places in the historic centre [...]. Business activities change to respond to the tourist demand (with a prevalence of shops related to food and wine [...] clothing and accessories, as well as souvenir shops along the streets closest to the port). [...] Tourism (and cruises) in the historic centre have attracted greater attention from the public administration and the Municipality of Palermo in particular (in terms of organization of services) towards the most accessible districts to visitors, at the expense of the more peripheral ones which have a low tourist appeal.*

**Tab. 1**

## 2.2 Cruise ship tourism (and cruisers) as a threat in Palermo

Some questions of the interviews aimed to understand whether cruise tourism poses a potential threat to the community for local residents, both in terms of sustainability, specifically regarding the pollution in the urban context of Palermo (and in section 3 in the urban context of Siracusa) caused by ships, and in terms of health risk, the possible risk of contagion represented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

1) The first theme was presented to the interviewees with this question: «Do you think that cruise tourism is sustainable, from an environmental point of view, for Palermo?». All the informants answered the first question by mentioning above all pollution and the urban landscape. The answers can be divided into three groups, each one illustrating three different attitudes.

The first group, 6 out of 10, stated that *cruise tourism is not different from other types of tourism, therefore it does not pollute more than others*. According to these informants, however, *the number of ships berthed at the port at the same time should not exceed the present one* (at the time of the interview), and they declared *to trust the current anti-pollution regulations*. Furthermore, this first group finds *the impact on the urban landscape to be minimal or unimportant*.

Another little group of informants, 2 out of 10, said that they *were worried about the environmental impact that cruise ships have, as strongly contributing to the pollution of the city*. Regarding the landscape impact, informants affirmed that *the presence of such large ships in the port was intrusive*. Finally, the last little group, 2 out of 10, showed a more radical view, by considering *this type of tourism unsustainable, both for the pollution it produces* [attributed to ships], *and for the alteration of the landscape*, and proposed to *create a landing area for cruise ships far from the historic centre*.

2) As for the second question on health risk: «Do you think it is safe to allow cruise passengers to visit the city in this period [after the lockdown, nationally and internationally]?» the informants divided into two groups. Seven informants (7 out of 10) replied that they *do not consider cruise passengers more dangerous than other tourists*. These informants considered *the [then] current governing rules for landing and embarkations effective: it is not possible to meet cruise passengers outside the planned routes*. Moreover, two informants (2 out of 7) added that *the presence of cruise passengers makes them feel safe because cruise ships are only partially filled at the moment, and*

passengers spend a little time on the ground. On the contrary, the remaining three informants (3 out of 10) said *they felt in danger knowing that thousands of tourists from different places were landing in the city*. As a matter of fact, *they believe that it is difficult to guarantee anti-covid regulations both on board and on the ground*.

<b>The case of Palermo</b> <b>Cruise tourism (and cruisers) as a threat</b>	
1) «Do you think that cruise tourism is sustainable, from an environmental point of view, for Palermo?»	
6/10 of interviewees	Informants stated that <i>cruise tourism is not different from other types of tourism, therefore it does not pollute more than others</i> . [...] However, <i>the number of ships berthed at the port at the same time should not exceed the present one</i> (at the time of the interview), <i>and they declared to trust the current anti-pollution regulations</i> . Informants find that <i>the impact on the urban landscape to be minimal or unimportant</i> .
2/10 of interviewees	Informants said they <i>were worried about the environmental impact that cruise ships have, as strongly contributing to the pollution of the city</i> . Regarding the landscape impact, informants affirmed that <i>the presence of such large ships in the port was intrusive</i> .
2/10 of interviewees	Informants consider <i>this type of tourism unsustainable, both for the pollution it produces</i> [attributed to ships], <i>and for the alteration of the landscape, and proposed to create a landing area for cruise ships far from the historic centre</i> .
2) «Do you think it is safe to allow cruise passengers to visit the city in this period [after the lockdown, nationally and internationally]?»	
7/10 of interviewees	Informants declared they <i>do not consider cruise passengers more dangerous than other tourists</i> . [...] <i>The [then] current governing rules for landing and embarkations effective: it is not possible to meet cruise passengers outside the planned routes</i> .  More in particular:  2 out of 7 Informants declared <i>the presence of cruise passengers makes them feel safe because cruise ships are only partially filled at the moment, and passengers spend a little time on the ground</i> .
3/10 of interviewees	Informants declared they <i>felt in danger knowing that thousands of tourists from different places were landing in the city</i> . As a matter of fact, <i>they believe that it is difficult to guarantee anti-covid regulations both on board and on the ground</i> .

**Tab. 2**

## 2.3 Cruise tourism and mediatic representations in Palermo

Finally, the interviewees were asked to express their possible interest in media coverage on cruise ship tourism by the media (local and / or national).

1) «Are you interested in news concerning cruise tourism? Do you happen to read (or search) specialized information on cruises in your city in printed papers / online newspapers and magazines?». Seven interviewees (7 out of 10) stated that *they do not habitually search news on cruises and only casually read about it*. However, a part of them (4 out of 7) stated that *they found the topic interesting and curiously read news regarding both cruises in general, and especially cruise tourism in Palermo*. The other three informants (3 out of 10) said *they did not seek out cruise tourism news*.

The case of Palermo Cruise tourism and mass mediatic representations	
1) «Are you interested in news concerning cruise tourism? Do you happen to read (or search) specialized information on cruises in your city in printed papers / online newspapers and magazines?»	
7/10 of interviewees	<p>Informants stated that <i>they do not habitually search news on cruises and only casually read about it</i>.</p> <p>More in particular:</p> <p>4 out of 7 informants stated they found the topic interesting and curiously read news regarding both cruises in general, and especially cruise tourism in Palermo.</p>
3/10 of interviewees	Informants said <i>they did not seek out cruise tourism news</i> .

**Tab. 3**

### 3. The case of Siracusa

Siracusa is the fourth Sicilian city by population (just over 116,311 inhabitants in 2022) (ISTAT 2022) and is located on the southeastern coast of the island. In its long history, which begins mainly with its foundation by the ancient Greek colonists from Corinth, in the eighth century BC, the city was for several centuries the most important in Sicily: in ancient times its political and military power made it one of the most influential centres in the whole Mediterranean.

It was also the island's capital for a few centuries, at least until the Middle Ages, when the primacy passed to Palermo. In 2005, its very rich cultural heritage also obtained the prestigious UNESCO recognition together with the Necropolis of Pantalica (the site is less than 40 km away from Siracusa).

The UNESCO website presents it in the following summary: «Ancient Siracusa, includes the nucleus of the city's foundation as Ortygia by Greeks from Corinth in the 8th century BC. The site of the city [...] retains vestiges such as the Temple of Athena (5th century BC, later transformed to serve as a cathedral), a Greek theatre, a Roman amphitheatre, a fort [...]. Many remains bear witness to the troubled history of Sicily, from the Byzantines to the Bourbons, interspersed with the Arabo-Muslims, the Normans, Frederick II of the Hohenstaufen dynasty (1197–1250), the Aragons and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Historic Siracusa offers a unique testimony to the development of Mediterranean civilization over three millennia» (UNESCO 2005).

As a cultural destination of great value, Siracusa has experienced an interesting tourist growth in the last two decades. In particular, its main tourist attractions are concentrated in the oldest part of the city, the island of Ortigia (connected to the mainland and the rest of the city by bridges) and in the ruins from classical antiquity situated within the archaeological park and which includes one of the most important museums in Europe (the “Paolo Orsi” archaeological museum). The ancient Greek Theater every year, between May and June, hosts classical performances which attract remarkable national and international tourist flows.

Siracusa has grown only in recent years as a cruise port, despite its proximity to the more established port of Catania. The number of welcomed passengers increased from less than 7,500 in 2016 to over 10,000 in 2019 (Risposte Turismo 2017 and 2020), growing by over 33% (Sabato 2023). In 2022 Siracusa ranked fifteenth (just after Catania) among the major Italian cruise ports, welcoming 109,500 passengers (Risposte Turismo 2023).

Its intended use for cruise tourism is confirmed mainly as a port of call

and, only minimally, as a home port. For several years, in fact, cruise ships were forced to remain at anchor in the large port, lacking adequate docks to accommodate ships of standard tonnage. The completion, in 2017, of a suitable quay and, subsequently, of a second one in 2019, allowed for the boarding and landing of a greater number of cruises, avoiding the disembarkation of passengers through the tenders (Sabato 2023). The port of the Sicilian city is located on the border of the oldest historic centre, the island of Ortigia (which today is also a city district). Therefore, cruise passengers, once disembarked, can directly access one of the most attractive areas of the city.

Also on the occasion of the fieldwork carried out in Siracusa between 2020 and 2021, I was able to interview ten informants (with very similar characteristics in terms of gender, age, training and previous cruise experiences) who live in the city and to whom I asked the same questions I previously presented when illustrating the case of Palermo.

### 3.1 Cruise tourists and urban spaces in Siracusa

The questions as used previously, and answers referring to the first theme of this research are given below:

1) When asked: «What do you think of cruise tourism and cruise passengers? Is it a resource or a problem for your city [Siracusa]? » six informants (6 out of 10) replied that they consider *this kind of tourism as a possible problem and a scarcely productive resource for the city's economy*. When asked to give further information on the reason of their view, they replied that *this tourism was invasive*, referring to the fact that *Ortigia is a fragile urban context in terms of size, mobility and services, capable of welcoming tourists, but in the most classic ways (accommodation facilities, renting apartments or hiking)*. *For these reasons, having thousands of tourists around Ortigia in a few hours is a risky critical impact on the historic centre*. The four remaining informants (4 out of 10) instead, declared that they considered cruising and cruise passengers as *an important resource, and hope that this type of tourism in Siracusa could grow in the future and become more rooted*.

2) The two questions that follow are functional to the reconstruction of the relationship of informants with the spaces and their representation: «Have you met (or do you happen to meet) cruise passengers on your daily routes? [in the period before the pandemic] » and «Do you hang around the historic centre?».

The informants gave different answers, forming two halves. The first five (5 out of 10 who hang around the historic centre an average of 3 times a week) replied to have met cruise passengers (in the period before the pandemic) *only in Ortigia and sometimes also in the neighbouring areas of the historic centre*. Three of these informants (3 out of 5) also added that they *had never had direct interactions with cruise passengers despite having met them (on the street, in shops or in cafés)*.

The other five (5 out of 10) respondents (those who go to the historic centre about twice a month), instead, stated that they *had never met cruise passengers or had not distinguished them from other tourists*. Furthermore, three (3 out of 5) of these informants considered cruising a resource for the city of Siracusa.

3) When asked: «How do you think cruise tourism can change the city?» six interviewees (6 out of 10) said that the possible *changes are minimal on an economic level, as the accommodation facilities in the area did not benefit from it, as well as the commercial activities of the historic centre, which benefit very little from it*. And, moreover, that *on a social level, cruising will contribute to changing the face of Ortigia even more* [already affected by a gentrification process for years]. This aspect is negatively evaluated due to *the price increases, the progressive “touristification” and the abandoning of the historic centre by the residents*. The other 4 informants (4 out of 10) instead stated that *cruising could be a further development opportunity for the city, both for shops and for supporting services (supplies, logistics) related to this type of tourism*.



**The case of Siracusa**  
**Cruise tourists and urban spaces**

1) «What do you think of cruise tourism and cruise passengers? Are they a resource or a problem for your city [Siracusa]?»	
6/10 of interviewees	Informants consider <i>this kind of tourism as a possible problem and a scarcely productive resource for the city's economy</i> . [...] <i>This tourism is invasive [...] Ortigia is a fragile urban context in terms of size, mobility and services, capable of welcoming tourists, but in the most classic ways (accommodation facilities, renting apartments or hiking). For these reasons, having thousands of tourists around Ortigia in a few hours is a risky critical impact on the historic centre.</i>
4/10 of interviewees	Informants consider cruising and cruise passengers as <i>an important resource, and hope that this type of tourism in Siracusa could grow in the future and become more rooted.</i>
2) «Have you ever met (or do you happen to meet) cruise passengers on your daily routes? [before the pandemic] » and «Do you hang around the historic centre?».	
5/10 of interviewees	Informants (who hang around the historic centre an average of 3 times a week) replied to have met cruise passengers (in the period before the pandemic) <i>only in Ortigia and sometimes also in the neighbouring areas of the historic centre.</i>  More in particular:  3 out of 5 also added that they <i>had never had direct interactions with cruise passengers despite having met them (on the street, in shops or in cafés).</i>
5/10 of interviewees	Informants (who usually go to the historic centre about twice a month) declared they <i>had never met cruise passengers and / or that they could not distinguish them from other tourists.</i>  More in particular:  3 out of 5 also added to consider cruising a resource for the city of Siracusa.
3) «How do you think cruise tourism can change the city?»	
6/10 of interviewees	Informants said that the possible <i>changes are minimal on an economic level, as the accommodation facilities in the area did not benefit from it, as well as the commercial activities of the historic centre, which benefit very little from it. And, moreover, that on a social level, cruising will contribute to changing the face of Ortigia even more [already affected by a gentrification process for years]. This aspect is negatively evaluated due to the price increase, the progressive "touristification" and the abandoning of the historic centre by the residents.</i>
4/10 of interviewees	Informants stated that <i>cruising could be a further development opportunity for the city, both for shops and for supporting services (supplies, logistics) related to this type of tourism.</i>

**Tab. 4**

### 3.2 Cruise ship tourism (and cruisers) as a threat in Siracusa

Also for Siracusa, the informants were asked the same questions as in section 2.2 (for Palermo) to understand if they viewed cruise tourism as a threat, specifically in regards to pollution and COVID-19 pandemic risk.

1) «Do you think cruise tourism is sustainable, from an environmental point of view, for Siracusa?». The responses were broader and articulated. Seven informants (7 out of 10) stated that *cruise ships polluted, and it would be better to have a port farther away from Ortigia and the historic centre*. All the informants mentioned the two ships, the Spirit and the Dawn of the Norwegian Cruise Line which since August 2020<sup>9</sup> following the pandemic, had been parked in the port (alternating the roadstead and the quay to be kept running) with only the crew on board (nearly 300 members in total), for a few months long technical stopover (Sabato 2023). The departure was scheduled in November 2020, but already in mid-September 2020 the Spirit had left Siracusa and was repositioned in Brindisi (Sabato 2023) (Fig. 5 and 6).



**Figure 7** - Siracusa, Italy. A small beach in Ortigia and, in the background, one of the Norwegian Cruise Line ship (August 2020). (Ph. by Filippa Seminara).

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<sup>9</sup> The Italian government, after the lockdown that began in March (and ended in May) and the blocking of all non-essential transport (land, sea and air), has authorized the resumption of cruise activities in national ports starting from mid-August 2020.

2) As far as the perception of health risk is concerned, when they were asked «In this period [after the national and international lockdown] do you think it is safe to disembark cruise passengers to visit the city?», answers from 7 informants (7 out of 10) could be summarized in a threat that is not specifically perceived as such: *cruise passengers do not represent a particular danger for the community, not differently from other types of tourism if the anti-covid rules are applied*. The other 3 informants (3 out of 10) instead claimed that they would feel less safe if there were thousands of cruise passengers in Ortigia and in the historic centre.



**Figure 5** - Siracusa, Italy. A view of the Norwegian Dawn on the quay and in the background a glimpse of Ortigia. (Ph. by Marcella Cifali).



**Figure 6** - Siracusa, Italy. One of the cruise ships in technical stopover. (Ph. by Filippa Seminara).

They stated that the *two ships, although without passengers, keep their engines running for technical needs and consequently, continuously release dangerous substances into the environment, precisely in an area of the city that should be better preserved*. In addition to the pollution issue, the interviewees mentioned the one related to the landscape (Fig. 7), stating that *the ships disfigure the urban landscape of Ortigia, by blocking the view from the island of some of the city's landmarks*. The respondents' utterances are connected to a heated controversy that animated the Siracusan community in August and September 2020, with two opposing positions: those who are in favour of the presence of ships for the economic impact that the community can benefit from; and those who instead are against this presence due to environmental effects (Sabato 2023). On the same question, the remaining 3 informants (3 out of 10) instead commented that they *did not consider the presence of polluting ships to be as problematic for the environment as other means used in tourism*. With regard to the two ships in technical stopover, however, they added that *apart from the engines running all day there were no other side effects, indeed their presence in recent months could be a resource for the future of cruising in Siracusa*.

**The case of Siracusa**  
**Cruise tourism (and cruisers) as a threat**

1) «Do you think that cruise tourism is sustainable, from an environmental point of view, for Siracusa?»

7/10 of interviewees	<p>Informants stated <i>that cruise ships polluted, and it would be better to have a port farther away from Ortigia and the historic centre.</i></p> <p>All the informants mentioned the two ships, the Spirit and the Dawn of the Norwegian Cruise Line which since August 2020 following the pandemic, were parked in the port (alternating the roadstead and the quay to be kept running) with only the crew on board (nearly 300 members in total), for a few months long technical stopover. <i>The two ships, although without passengers, keep their engines running for technical needs and consequently, continuously release dangerous substances into the environment, precisely in an area of the city that should be better preserved.</i> In addition to the pollution issue, the interviewees mentioned the one related to the landscape, stating that <i>the ships disfigure the urban landscape of Ortigia, by blocking the view from the island of some of the city's landmarks.</i></p>
3/10 of interviewees	<p>Informants said there <i>they did not consider the presence of polluting ships to be as problematic for the environment as other means used in tourism. With regard to the two ships in technical stop, however, they added that apart from the engines running all day there were no other side effects, indeed their presence in recent months could be a resource for the future of cruising in Siracusa.</i></p>

2) «In this period [after the national and international lockdown] do you think it is safe to disembark cruise passengers to visit the city?»

7/10 of interviewees	<p>Informants declared cruise passengers <i>do not represent a particular danger for the community, not differently from other types of tourism if the anti-covid rules are applied.</i></p>
3/10 of interviewees	<p>Informants declared <i>they would feel less safe if there were thousands of cruise passengers in Ortigia and in the historic centre.</i></p>

**Tab. 5**

### 3.3 Cruise tourism and mediatic representations in Siracusa

As in Palermo’s case (see section 2.3), finally the interviewees were asked to express their possible interest in media coverage on cruise ship tourism by the media (local and / or national).

1) When asked the question «Are you interested in news on cruise tourism? Do you happen to read (or search) on paper / online newspapers and magazines specialized information on cruising in your city?», 6 informants (6 out of 10) replied that they *only occasionally read news related to cruise ship tourism*, while the remaining 4 participants (4 out of 10) declared that they *read with interest the news regarding this kind of tourism in Siracusa and, in particular, when it concerned the two cruise ships on a technical stop*.

The case of Siracusa	
Cruise tourism and mass mediatic representations	
1) «Are you interested in news on cruise tourism? Do you happen to read (or search) on paper / online newspapers and magazines specialized information on cruising in your city?»	
6/10 of interviewees	Informants stated that <i>they only occasionally read news related to cruise ship tourism</i> .
4/10 of interviewees	Informants stated they <i>read with interest the news regarding this kind of tourism in Siracusa and, in particular, when it concerned the two cruise ships on a technical stop</i> .

**Tab. 6**





# Chapter 3

## 1. Perceptions of the cruise tourism

As shown above, the interviews with the residents gave the possibility to reconstruct some views related to cruising and cruise passengers that the two communities of Palermo and Siracusa have produced. Furthermore, it also allowed for a comparison between the (private) narration of the informants. The two cruise destinations, Palermo and Siracusa, are at two different degrees of maturity. Indeed, the first destination can count on increasingly adequate infrastructures (and on which important investments are underway), decades of experience and a volume of passengers that make it one of the main Italian ports and among the most important in the Mediterranean, with a perfectible balance in its position as a home port and / or as a port of call. The second city, on the other hand, is a younger destination, which only in recent years, thanks to the modernization of the port, has seen its cruise volume grow, while remaining essentially a port of call. The interviews with the informants (private narration) reveal some representations of the communities. In this regard it is useful to make a comparison based on the data collected.

With respect to the first point investigated by this research, as to whether a community perceives cruise tourism in a conflicted way, taking into account the contact with cruisers in the spaces usually frequented by residents, similar outcomes can be observed between the two Sicilian destinations. Answers to the first question asking informants for a direct opinion on their perception of cruise tourism are not very different for the two cities. In the case of Palermo, it can be seen that informers are divided in two: for 50% of respondents cruise tourism is an asset, while for the other 50% it is a problem. However, interviewees point to the fact that what makes the difference between a development opportunity and a problem is the way in which the city's stakeholders manage cruise tourism. The situation is a bit different in Siracusa, where 60% see this type of tourism as a potential problem due to the fragility of the historic centre (Ortigia). On the other hand, 40% see cruise tourism as an important resource that could even grow in the future.

The second question was mainly aimed at understanding whether the perception of cruise tourism could in any way depend on the direct contact the informants had had with cruise passengers. In both cases, apart from some



small differences, it appears that residents of both cities who visit the historic centre several times a week (40% of respondents in Palermo and 50% in Siracusa) have met cruise passengers in person. This would confirm that the image of cruise passengers in the two cities remains essentially linked to the places and spaces of the two historic centres.

The third question aimed to ascertain whether residents consider cruise tourism a driving force for urban transformation (in an ameliorative or detrimental sense). In this case, the answers of the Palermo and Siracusa informants are similar in percentage figures, but opposite in attribution of meaning: according to those in Palermo (60%), cruise tourism is contributing to transforming, above all, the historical centre and, moreover, it is perceived as a positive internationalization agent. According to informants in Siracusa (60%), cruise tourism has little impact on the economic transformation of Ortigia, where most of the accommodation facilities are used to receiving resident tourists instead of cruisers; on the contrary, informants consider there is a risk due to the rapid change at the social level, brought about by the acceleration of the process of touristification of the historic centre. On the other hand, in the smaller figures, the informants' answers show a different picture: while 40% of respondents in Palermo think cruise tourism cannot make significant changes, the same percentage of respondents in Siracusa show a certain optimism, considering this tourism an economic development opportunity for the city.

The second point covered by this study, namely whether a community perceives environmental or health threats linked to this type of tourism in relation to the space of the city, gives rise to two types of responses. On the issue of pollution, 60% of respondents from Palermo do not consider cruise tourism to be more polluting than other forms of tourism, as long as the number of ships in the port does not increase. The same percentage of respondents considered the impact on the urban landscape to be negligible. In Siracusa, on the other hand, 70% of respondents consider cruise tourism to be polluting and, indeed, believe that the port for cruise ships should be located farther away from Ortigia. In the context of Siracusa, the (already mentioned) affair of the two Norwegian Cruise Line ships in technical stopover during the pandemic has a certain weight. Similarly, also in the case of Siracusa, the same informants believe that ships in the port disfigure the urban and coastal landscape. Finally, to a lesser extent, in Palermo, 20% of informants appear concerned about the pollution issue, while the remaining 20% consider cruise tourism unsustainable, imagining a disembarkation area far from the historical centre to reduce the impact on the urban landscape. In the case of Siracusa, 30% of informants say that cruise tourism is no more polluting or troublesome

than other forms of tourism and, indeed, consider it an important lever for the development of the sector.

Regarding the COVID-19 contagion threat, the respondents from both cities show a similar distribution: in both cases, 70% of them do not consider disembarked passengers a greater threat than other tourists, showing a certain confidence in the pandemic prevention measures taken by local administrators and companies. Some informants (2 out of 7) also reported that they did not consider cruise tourism dangerous because the ships were only partially filled with passengers. On the other hand, 30% of respondents in Palermo considered the presence of thousands of disembarked tourists to be dangerous and mentioned the difficulty of control on board and ashore. In Siracusa 30% of respondents linked the issue of health security to the presence of thousands of passengers around the historical centre of Ortigia.

Finally, regarding the third point investigated by this study about how mass media can interfere in this process of representing cruise tourism by communities, the answers of the informants from Palermo and Siracusa show some similarities only in the major figures. In the capital of Sicily, 70% of the informants stated that they do not habitually seek or read news on cruises; in Siracusa 60% of informants only occasionally read news related to cruise ship tourism. On the other hand, while in Palermo 30% stated they did not seek out cruise tourism news, 40% of respondents in the second city stated they read with interest the news regarding this kind of tourism, especially when it concerned the two ships on a technical stopover. Thus, looking at the data, it does not appear that mass media information plays a major role in the process of representing cruise tourism to informants. However, this point should be explored in a separate study, since, as I have shown in a previous work (Sabato 2018), the imaginary of cruise tourism is also substantiated by many forms of public media narrative, such as novels, films and advertisements (as well as private narratives, such as word of mouth and social networks). In this research, however, it seemed appropriate to ask the informants how much interest they had in media news, especially in order to explore this aspect in a preliminary way. In fact, the study of Palermo and Siracusa mentioned above (Sabato 2023) examined the way in which the local mass media constructed public narratives about cruising.

## **2. Possible comparisons**

The results of the research, observed from a comparative perspective – a

typical method of human and cultural geography – made it possible to observe some of the symbolic processes involved in the representation of cruise tourism by some members of the two Sicilian communities. As already mentioned, the limitations of this research are well known: the ethnographic method concentrates its efforts on a few informants, without claiming that the research results are representative of an entire community. However, this method seems to be one of the most suitable for working on symbolic issues. In recent years, several studies have focused on the perception of the economic, social and environmental impacts of cruise tourism on communities (Bishop 2010; Brida et al. 2011a and 2011b; Klein 2011; Brida et al. 2012; Tommasini 2012; Pinnock 2014; Thurau et al. 2015; Alonso, Alexander 2017; Del Chiappa et al. 2018; MacNeill, Wozniak 2018; Chen et al. 2019; Jordan et al. 2023). Certainly, some of the most recent studies (conducted with quantitative or qualitative methods), have posed the need, which can be shared, to study the community’s point of view taking an in-depth look from the inside. There are some significant cases in geographically diverse local contexts. Thus, for example, Salgado-Gómez et al. (2022) studied the perception of different stakeholders on the environmental impacts of cruise ship activity (in the Roatan ports). Or Brida, Riaño et al. (2011) emphasized the need to adopt an “emic” viewpoint, centred on communities or, rather, from the communities that observe and welcome cruise passengers (in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia). Or finally, there is Gutberlet (2024), who showed how cruise tourism lies at an intersection of cultural productions that influence local tourism planning (on the Arabian Peninsula).

It is not easy, when studying symbolic productions, to return the complex picture they imply and in which they are implicated. In our case, the research conducted on two Sicilian cruise destinations with different maturities sought to highlight differences and similarities in the way some members of the respective communities construct their own perceptions of this type of tourism and of cruise passengers disembarked for a few hours. This work, conducted using a qualitative method, with the limitations already highlighted, can therefore be placed in the context of studies on the perceptions that the communities of certain cruise destinations develop with respect to this type of tourism with particular reference to the symbolic aspects. The study of the perception of cruise tourism, also understood as a process of construction and narration of otherness, has here taken into account the (physical and symbolic) spatialities of the two cities. Indeed, the way in which informants narrate their experience of cruise tourism implies symbolic productions that also concern space.

More specifically, this research adopts an internal, “emic” point of view

(Geertz 1973), i.e. that of the two Sicilian communities hosting cruise tourism, at different times and in different quantities. The picture that emerges does not allow easy simplifications. However, it may be useful to conclude with a critical summary of the informants' responses presented in detail earlier:

i) The informants of the two communities do not seem to be clearly in favour or opposed to cruise tourism, dividing on the issue of cruise tourism as a resource or as a problem. Regarding urban spatialities, in both cases a strong connection with the historic centres of both cities emerges: they remain the main meeting place for residents and cruise passengers. Moreover, the two communities ascribe a different role to cruise tourism in terms of urban transformation. While in Palermo (which is more exposed to cruise tourism in terms of both time and arrivals) residents are almost divided on whether to consider it as an additional element of change and internationalization or an element without agentivity, in Siracusa its transformative action is seen as modest from an economic point of view, but one accelerating the process of touristification already underway.

ii) On the perception of possible threats associated with cruising, the following observations can be made. In the two locations, sustainability themes, that in our case are pollution and landscape issues, have different weights with respect to how cruise tourism is perceived in terms of threat. Residents of Palermo tend to be more divided both on the environmental issue and on the landscape issue implied by the presence of ships: those who are not concerned about environmental pollution from cruise tourism are not concerned about landscape pollution either. In contrast, community members in Siracusa, more clearly place a negative value on environmental and landscape pollution in relation to cruise tourism. In both destinations (during the pandemic) informants do not associate the threat of contagion with the presence of disembarked cruise passengers, except in a few cases.

iii) Finally, as mentioned above, it does not appear that respondents from both destinations show much interest in mass media reports on cruise tourism. Only in Siracusa, and especially in relation to the story of the ships in technical stopovers, were some of the informants more interested in media news than those interviewed in Palermo. Looking at this data it could be deduced that the image of cruise tourism disseminated by the information media does not play a major role in the process of representing cruise tourism to informants.



## Conclusions

This study is based on broader research (carried out between 2020 and 2021) that aimed to reconstruct, through a cultural geographical approach, the ways in which two communities in Sicily, Palermo and Siracusa, hosting cruise tourism, represent it. To this end, the research considered the public narratives (those of the media) and the private narratives (those of the individual informants met and interviewed during the fieldwork) produced by the two communities. The former were analysed in the first study mentioned above (Sabato 2023). The latter are the subject of the present study. Given that, the ways in which the communities represent cruise tourism and cruise passengers imply different symbolic productions and a complex cultural dynamic, in order to reconstruct both, we chose to use a qualitative approach, a fieldwork in which the researcher was personally involved, the methods of which are described before (see chapter 1, section 2). More specifically, the study of how cruise tourism is perceived by some residents of the two communities took into account the spatial dimension that remains implicated in this process of signification, starting from the idea that any spatiality (in this case urban) is invested (and therefore “constructed”) through a stratification of symbolic productions (de Certeau 1990; Lefebvre 1991; Augé 1992; Foucault 1995 and 2004; Amin, Thrift 2002; Lussault 2017). Indeed, from a geographic-cultural perspective the relationship between the communities that host cruise tourism and cruise passengers implies various multi-layered “spatialities” (Soja 1996) semantized by private (and public) narratives (Sabato 2017, 2018 and 2023). In other words, as shown in the case of Palermo and Siracusa, the attribution of meaning to spaces (e.g. the ship, the port, the city, the historic centre) perceived as close or extraneous is a negotiation process (Geertz 1973) that goes from the particular to the general and vice versa, (re)producing personal and collective (or private and public) narratives that mutually (re)define the Identity and Otherness of communities and tourists. Furthermore, from an epistemological point of view, including communities in the study of cruising (and cruise passengers) is fundamental, as it would avoid considering destinations as mere “objects”. Even more, this means taking into account the spatial dimension – including the symbolic spaces and “borders” (Lotman, Uspenskij 2001) – involved in a relationship that both cruise passengers and residents are forced to negotiate according to cultural modalities (de Certeau 1990; Lefebvre 1991; Foucault 1995 and 2004).

The perception that locals have of cruise passengers cannot ignore the specific urban spaces where the encounters between communities and

passengers disembarking in many European destinations in the Mediterranean Sea frequently take place. These spaces are often within the historic centre, where the cities' best-known cultural attractions are located. This is particularly true for Palermo and Siracusa, where the ports of call for the cruise ships are very close to the attractions. Moreover, although the two port areas are contiguous with the two historic centres, they remain a kind of "symbolic border", as Lotman (Lotman, Uspenski 2001) would say: in fact, they are spaces from which the otherness of the cruise passengers comes (also physically) when it becomes part of the "space of Us" of the communities. This (symbolic and physical) separation of space is then partially recomposed in the places of the historic centres, where the encounter between cruise passengers and locals is most frequent. To gain a better understanding of how the two communities constructed the Otherness of cruise passengers by implicating urban spaces, we focused on three aspects from the residents' perspective: (i) potential conflicts between locals and cruise passengers in shared spaces, (ii) the potential association of cruise tourism with environmental or health risks, and (iii) the possible influence of mass media representations on the construction of cruise tourism and its passengers.

It would be worthwhile even to investigate how cruise passengers perceive the communities studied here. The encounter between cruise passengers and locals often leads to a reciprocity of representations that can influence each other in various ways.

The two cities were selected to compare two cruise destinations with varying levels of maturity in terms of exposure to this type of tourism, within the same regional context of Sicily. Additionally, both destinations boast significant cultural heritage recognised by UNESCO (2015, 2005).

In Palermo, the presence of cruise tourists who disembark for a few hours and visit the historic centre is more established, while in Siracusa this presence is more recent. A comparison was made (see chapter 2) between the responses of informants from both destinations, revealing both similarities and differences in the way members of the communities perceive cruise tourism and landed cruise passengers. As mentioned in the previous section, by using a qualitative approach it is not easy to provide an overall picture without delving into the differences expressed by the informants. This is worth reflecting on. Here one can add that this very variety shows that it is not easy to establish an automatic correlation between the maturity of the location and the way cruise tourism and cruise passengers are perceived. However, some evidence can be gleaned upon initial examination.

In Palermo, informants are divided on whether to view cruise tourism as



a problem or a resource; it is perceived as an agent for urban transformation, particularly in the historic centre (Messina, Sabato 2019), and internationalization; cruise tourism is not considered more polluting than other forms of tourism. In comparison to informants from Palermo, those from Siracusa appear to be more inclined to view cruise tourism as a critical issue. There the interviewees view the cruise ship industry as a potential problem for the community; they do not perceive it as an agent of urban transformation in an economic sense, but rather as an element that can damage the historic centre; they see it as a source of environmental pollution and disfigurement (of the historic centre), to the extent that they hypothesize a move away from the port dedicated to cruise ships. Finally, these residents show a greater interest in news about cruise tourism, particularly from local media compared to people in Palermo. Considering the period in which the research was carried out, the residents' narratives are to some extent affected by the presence of two cruise ships on a technical stopover.

Based on these premises, it can be hypothesized that in Palermo, where the community has had more time and opportunities to become accustomed to the presence of cruise tourism (e.g. the number of cruise ship landings), residents tend to perceive the positive aspects rather than the negative ones. Conversely, in Siracusa, where cruise tourism is more recent and less frequent, the community is more critical of this type of tourism that has not yet taken root. However, it is important to consider another aspect. Palermo and Siracusa, despite their aforementioned similarities, are cities of different sizes with distinct tourist attractions. Sicily's capital is the fifth largest city in Italy by population, boasts one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country, and has one of the largest historic centres in Europe. Therefore, it has a higher likelihood of mitigating the impact of the thousands of cruise tourists. Siracusa, the fourth largest city in Sicily by population, is experiencing rapid touristic development in its historic centre, the small island of Ortigia, which has accelerated in the past decade. These are elements that can make the historic centre "exposed" to a more concentrated tourism in a smaller space.

In conclusion, Palermo and Siracusa in Sicily offer the opportunity to compare two different cruise tourism destinations with distinct histories and intensities, resulting in the creation of diverse images of cruise tourism. By studying private narratives produced by residents, it was possible to reconstruct the processes of signification of the identity/alterity dynamic involving some urban spatialities. Subsequent comparative studies, conducted with a geographical and qualitative approach on the presence of cruise tourism in the two destinations, could thus bring out some of the lines of research outlined here. Furthermore, it would also be useful to introduce a diachronic approach:



the way in which communities perceive cruise tourism (as well as other types of tourism) may obviously vary over time.



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*The author would like to thank Ian Michael Robinson for the care and attention with which he carried out the proof reading of this work.*

*In addition, another heartfelt thank you goes to the professional and patient work of the staff of the publishing house Il Sileno, and especially Francesco De Pascale for the helpfulness with which he embraced the project of this volume.*

ISBN 979-12-80064-69-1

The ways in which a community (re)produces specific images of cruise ship tourism include cultural and physical (urban) landscapes, conflicts, strategies of resilience that semantize peculiar spaces through private (and public) narrations. The relationship between the host communities and the hosted tourists can be potentially conflictual or find forms of peaceful and/or constructive coexistence. The peculiar (re)production of private and public narratives that reflect ways of thinking and perceptions of spaces, Identity and Otherness is of great importance in this process. By using a cultural geographical approach, this book aims to investigate this dynamic. Starting from fieldwork conducted using participant observation and including some interviews this work aims to analyze the ways in which the communities of two cruise destinations in Sicily (Italy), Palermo and Siracusa, perceive the cruise tourism and the passengers who disembark as tourists, especially in the period of crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both of the two communities are exposed to cruises with a different maturity. The perceptions of the host communities and their narratives are here reconstructed through the contextualization of cruise tourism in the two Sicilian destinations.

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