

STUDII

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A FEMALE MARITIME ECONOMY. WOMEN ON THE ISLAND OF PROCIDA (18TH-19TH CENTURY)

Pornind din diferite unghiuri de interpretare articolul examinează viața femeilor din Procida, o insulă a Regatului Napoli înainte de unificarea Italiei. De la povestea inventată a unui bust cu două fețe, clar vizibil pe un geam de pe insulă se ajunge la omagiul adus femeilor puternice ale mării de către preotul și martirul Republicii Napolitane din 1799 Marcello Eusebio Scotto din Procida în Catehismul său nautic din anul 1788. Studiul tratează profilul femeilor și puterea lor economică în domeniul maritim, prerogativă exclusiv masculină de-a lungul secolelor.

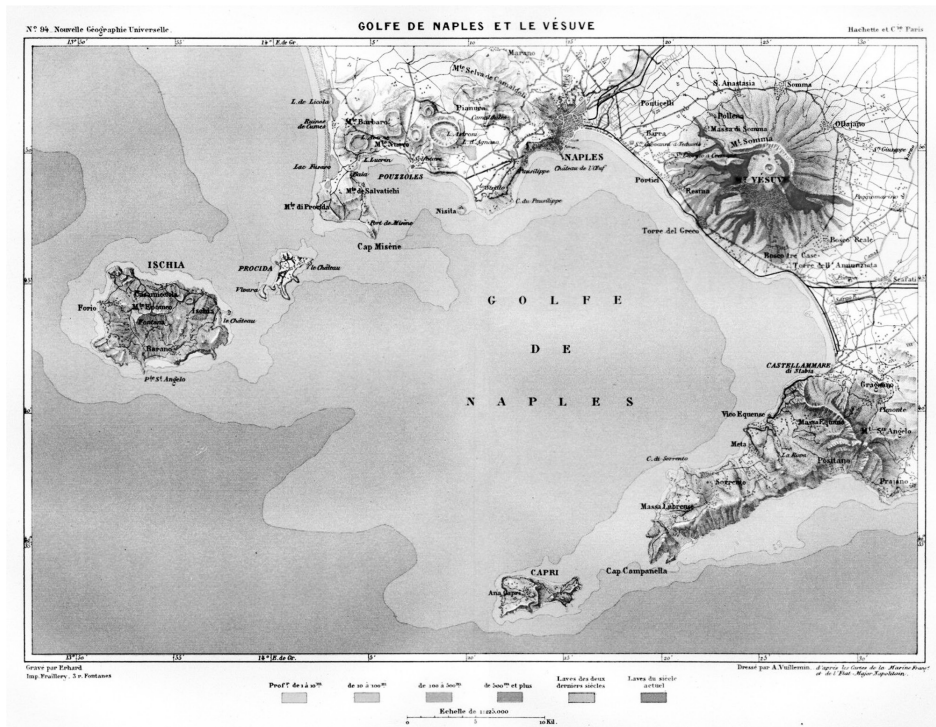
1. The busts of San Rocco

For those who appreciate fine art, number 52 on the Salita di San Rocco, situated in close proximity to the Corricella in Procida's island, offers a unique visual experience. The entrance door is adorned with two impressive busts crafted from hard stone and exhibiting remarkable artistic skill. The sculpture on the right portrays a young woman gazing out to sea (although this is not visible from that angle). On the left, however, we find a striking representation of the two-faced Janus, who marked the boundaries of Roman property. In this case, instead of the bearded god of transitions, the bust portrays two faces with explicitly North African features, distinguished, however, by the colour of the stone: one white and one much darker.

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Map of the Naples Gulf with the Procida's Isle

The two statues are displayed in a manner that is designed to attract the attention of passers-by. However, those who are curious about the statues will be disappointed to find that they are not accompanied by any plaque that explains their significance or origin. Indeed, the only source that mentions them is a 1951 guidebook in which the author, Federico Ferrajoli, links the two statues to an event that occurred in the 9th century AD, at the time of Duke Sergius II. However, Ferrajoli's induction is based on the assumption that the two statues are of a medieval age and mediocre workmanship¹.

It is evident that Ferrajoli has made an error in judgement, as the two sculptures, despite being unsigned, appear to be of 18th-century workmanship and neoclassical style. This is evident from the workmanship and style, which are not consistent with the period in which they were created. A recent restoration has in fact confirmed the 18th-century 'fine marble' workmanship of the two statues. Furthermore, the restoration has proposed a totally allegorical interpretation of the 'two Moors' as the two 'ages of life,' namely youth and old age².

¹ Ferdinando Ferrajoli, *Guida di Procida*, Napoli, Gallina, 2018, pp. 90-92.

² „I Mori di Via San Rocco”, *Procida Oggi*, 20 febbraio 2021, p. 3.

This interpretation is as plausible as many others, but what is surprising is that, like Ferrajoli's, it leaves the female figure with whom the two-faced Moor is clearly related completely out of the story. Not even the most recent tourist guide to Procida reveals the mystery of this pair of busts. Indeed, the majority of the local population, including many of those who live in the area for their entire lives, are unaware of the historical or symbolic references. However, not all islanders are unaware of the story. Indeed, there are some islanders who recall having learned the story from their grandparents or great-uncles and who are able to recount it in great detail³.

As might be expected, the oral versions of the tale differ from one another. However, they all revolve around a similar core narrative: that of a beautiful local noblewoman, a mother-widow, who, at a time when the island had fallen into the hands of the Moors (or the Turks in other versions), had been brought before the conquering sultan to enter his harem. However, the woman had brought along her seven or eight-year-old son, who had approached the sultan's son and had taken to playing with him, thereby restoring the latter's lost smile. Upon witnessing this joyous prodigy, the Sultan had consented to the widow's request not to admit her into his harem but to allow her to act as a governess to both young men and to educate them in accordance with local customs. From that moment on, the two had become inseparable and virtually indistinguishable from each other. In some versions, the Spaniards had returned to retake the island, and in others, the Bourbons had returned. In both cases, the Moors had prepared to leave in a hurry, and the Sultan's guards had mistakenly taken the Procidan boy and left the legitimate heir on the island.

From this point onwards, there are discrepancies in the oral accounts of this story regarding the number of years – 1, 10, 20! – in which the Procidan fishermen or merchants sailed to the seas frequented by those Moors, and the distance off Procida at which the Moors were finally intercepted and the exchange of the two young men carried out. In some versions, a fable-like conclusion is added to this resolution, referring to the Sultan's gift to the Procidan woman of as much gold as the weight of the young man returned to his mother and her island. In comparison to the 'historical' interpretation of Ferrajoli and the 'historical-artistic' interpretation of the restoration, this oral tradition places a Procidan woman and a tradition of Mediterranean belonging to the island at the centre of the story, which is far more historically relevant than ascertaining the actual or symbolic events to which the statues were linked.

The oral tradition in question has developed since the time when the two statues were created (the 18th century) or is of much more recent manufacture. Regardless of its origin, it speaks to us first and foremost of a fully-fledged count-

³ Claudio Fogu, *The Fishing Net and the Spider Web. Mediterranean imaginaries and the Making of Italians*, USA, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2020, pp. 50-52.

er-memorial to the traditional 'Mamma li Turchi!' and the celebration of the miraculous defence of the island from the siege of Barbarossa by the Archangel Michael in 1535. The narrative illuminates the historical connectivity of the Mediterranean basin, which transcended political and religious divisions without negating them. Instead, it underscores the inherent reversibility between trade and piracy.

Like the architecture of the Corricella, therefore, the oral history of the busts of San Rocco—invented from scratch or not—presents us with a Procida in continuous dialogue with Arab culture; of an island embedded in that complex network of cultural interactions and hybridisations that from the ninth century BC to the Risorgimento had characterised the Mediterranean as a veritable liquid continent whose capitals were its islands, and of these, the geographically most central and significant one had certainly been the Italic island. 'Island,' and not peninsula, precisely as it was depicted on so many medieval maps, surrounded entirely by the sea on all sides.

It is similarly important to consider the variations that characterise the different versions of the story in terms of temporal and spatial indications. For example, it is significant to note whether it was the Moors or the Turks who occupied the island, the Spanish or the Bourbons who reconquered it. These political, religious and racial distinctions do not touch the symbolic core of the story, which is the continuity of the relationship between Procida and a *mare nostrum* and simultaneously *aliorum*. A sea in which fishermen ventured as far as 1,000 miles from the coast and for 20 years continued to seek contact with the invading Moors.

And finally, we come to the figure of the Procidan noblewoman who austere-ly refuses to give herself to the invader, but continues to love and care for her son even when they have taken hers away from her. The bust unequivocally portrays a woman of rank: that in the oral tale she is always referred to as noble is significant precisely because of the historical incongruity of the appellation. One cannot in fact speak of a local aristocracy. At most, of a wealthy merchant class that already in the 18th century was a candidate for the economic and social leadership of the island. In fact, it is highly probable that the commission for the two statues came from this very class, and one could therefore hypothesise that some important woman from this emerging class wanted to celebrate—with the immortalisation in stone of our history—the social rise of the maritime-merchant class to which she belonged together with the island's great matriarchal tradition. The gentlewoman's 'nobility' would thus be highly symbolic, as an indication of longevity and tradition rather than blue blood.

2. The women of the sea by Marcello Eusebio Scotti

It has been posited that Procida is a matriarchal island, with women occupying a pivotal role in the construction of a model and a family economy based

on the absence of husbands. However, despite the historical and cultural significance of the island's noblewomen, their legacy remains largely unknown and underappreciated. Similarly, the island's toponymy, or name and history, seems to deliberately obscure this aspect of its heritage. With the exception of the recent Piazzetta Concetta Barra, the only street dedicated to a woman is the lane near the Catino, as mentioned by Michele Parascandolo. This lane was named after a woman named Lorenza, after whom the staircase that descended to the seashore was named Zi' Lurenza and is now known as Silurenza⁴. Nevertheless, numerous sources attest to the island's long-standing matriarchal influence. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *Archaeologia Romana*, the island's name is derived from a woman, namely Aeneas' nurse, who was buried on the island. It would be remiss not to mention Graziella, the young protagonist of Lamartine's celebrated novel, who, like so many of her contemporaries, was engaged in the labour-intensive practice of coral working⁵.

In the numerous chronicles and travel guides pertaining to the Grand Tour, the Greek-style dress is lauded as a symbol of the island, representing Mediterranean influence and its profound connection with the East. The dress was a valuable yet costly item, as Parascandola observed: "Foreigners who come here for pleasure the first thing they look for is to see our Greek costume. If the practice of Greek dress has declined, it is so as not to be subjected to the heavy expense of gala dress; and this is also the reason for the transformation of some of these garments"⁶. It can be reasonably asserted that the art of weaving was the most prevalent among women. In 1788, Marcello Eusebio Scotti was convinced that it could compete with the canvases of Holland in terms of results. It appears that the advent of the French Revolution of 1799 prevented the establishment of a communal weaving workshop. A study of the professions recorded in the volumes of the Civil Status kept at the Procida Town Hall indicates that in the mid-19th century, the majority of women were engaged in spinning, while the number of weavers was relatively limited. In 1874, writes Parascandola, there were about 200 looms in private homes. Unlike today, it was up to the women of Corricella to mend fishing nets and make buttons for linen⁷. The house nuns or "bizzoche" (a woman was to be attired in a nun's habit or in dark and demure clothes) were instead entrusted with the reading of the "quadrilli", reliquary paintings that were 'interrogated' to know the fate of those far away⁸. The island is connected to Apulia, the region from which the

⁴ M. Parascandolo, *Procida dalle origini ai tempi nostri*, Benevento, De Martini, 1893, p. 25; p. 281.

⁵ Alphonse De Lamartine, *Graziella*, Paris, Librairie de L. Hachette, 1853.

⁶ Michele Parascandola, *Cenni storici intorno alla Città ed Isola di Procida*, Napoli, De Martini, 1892 p. 26.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 184.

⁸ Gea Palumbo, *Quadrilli. Le donne e la religione delle cose nell'isola di Procida e al di là dei suoi confini*, Napoli Fioranna, 2021.

‘quadrilli’ are thought to have originated with St Alphonsus Maria dei Liguori. A considerable number of images of women from the island are depicted in traditional ‘Procidan’ dress. In contrast, in Alinari’s photographs, the women are depicted in pivotal locations within the island’s maritime history. In the group of individuals gathered around the monument erected by the sailors in 1845, which still stands today on the commercial port of Marina Grande, there is a representation of daily life, with a family joined by women and children who are intrigued by the photographer’s choice. But where sculptural traces, oral traditions, and images give us eloquent clues to a particularly significant link between women and the sea on the island of Procida, it is the words of a Procidan prelate who became an Academician in Naples, Marcello Eusebio Scotti, who give us proof of this in his *Catechismo nautico* (1788). “Unfit to bargain, only destined to sit in a corner of the house for the simple ministry of keeping it clean and neat, to cook and handle a needle or a spindle and a rock, shouldering all the burden of important business with their husbands”, he writes, “women had the sole virtue of obedience, obsequiousness and service. It was not so in the maritime cities where the husbands, having to take care of navigation and sea-traffic, were absent from home and from the house, and the woman was left not only with the domestic care but also with the management of affairs”⁹. And immediately below, referring to the Bible and specifically to Solomon, he said: ‘Who will find a strong woman? Her worth far exceeds that of the precious things that come from distant countries. The worth, the excellence, the rarity of such a woman compares her to precious stones. Let the inhabitants of the maritime cities therefore grow together with industry and zeal to purchase the rare and precious things abroad,’ and he returns to the concept of a special education to have strong, good and valuable women: ‘The women coveted by men outside the island, have made their spouses triumph with joy, have put their houses in excellent condition, have increased their incomes, have won the affection, veneration and respect of their sisters-in-law and daughters-in-law, who are by a certain natural jealousy the perpetual and irreconcilable adversaries, and have made themselves the object of the admiration and praise of all their neighbours, and the Procidan name has acquired new lustre for them. One continually sees many serious and experienced men competing to marry a strong Procidan woman’¹⁰. The model of a woman that Marcello Scotti describes is in accordance with the prevailing ideologies of the era. She instilled fear and respect, yet simultaneously exhibited aloofness and responsibility, displaying a minimal inclination towards vanity and a notable distance from human frailties. The society in question placed its trust in her and entrusted her with a significant responsibility: the establishment of a fam-

⁹ Marcello Eusebio Scotti, *Catechismo Nautico*, Napoli 1788, per le citazioni si considera la riedizione con *Introduzione* a cura di Raffaella Salvemini, Napoli, 2001, pp. 155-156.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 162.

ily as the fundamental unit for the formation of a state and a nation. In fact, as in other maritime realities, although women had greater freedom of action at sea, it was still a 'conditional' freedom, i.e. by proxy of their husbands. From his appeals to modesty, it is evident that the lives of women on the island diverged from the portrayal presented by the priest, as evidenced by recent studies¹¹.

3. Graziella the coral worker, Rosina the mathematical genius

In a story about strong women born on the island, one could also include the prelate's niece, Rosina Scotti. Born in Procida on 25 March 1786, the daughter of Antonio Scotti and Teresa Amante, she was educated by her uncle and married at a very young age to Pasquale Borrelli, born in Chieti in 1782. However, her life was short and she died of consumption on 14 August 1806, aged 20. Despite her short life, Rosina was a very special girl. It was the Risorgimento politician and man of letters Raffaele Liberatore who spoke of her in a booklet published in 1808 entitled *Monumenti poetici alla memoria di Rosina Scotti*. After praising her beauty and maturity, Liberatore goes on to praise the merits of Rosina's education, which he attributes to her uncle Marcello Eusebio Scotti. She was so young, Rosina, that her uncle used to sit her on his lap and teach her everything there was to know about a science 'completely without light'. She was only fourteen when her uncle was executed and everything was confiscated from her family. At the age of 17, she moved to Naples, where she met her future husband, Pasquale Borrelli, a friend of Scotti who was exiled in 1799. He was dazzled by both her beauty and her love of mathematics and physics. Rosina loved the first lines of geometric demonstrations, was enthusiastic about the construction of problems, was fascinated by the mysteries of continuum theory, the abysses of the infinitely small and the theory of the infinitely large, Isaac Newton's mathematical principles and, in fact, all of physics. A few months was all it took for her to fall in love with algebra, a subject that usually required years of study. And it was her skill in the hard sciences that influenced Borrelli in his studies of *Zoaritmia*¹².

Rosina was not a sea woman, but she was born on the island and had the good fortune to be brought up by an enlightened priest who knew Eleonora Pimentel Fonseca, the writer and martyr of 1799. The story of young Rosina, which is certainly highlighted in the short and rich volume written in her memory, is very different from the literary invention of Graziella di Lamartine. In the novel, Graziella was the daughter of a fisherman who died for love, willing to leave her island and her history to follow her beloved. Rosina was the granddaughter of an intellectual and had an extraordinary intelligence at the service of science and knowledge. It is understandable that the romantic and mytho-

¹¹ Giovanni Romeo, *L'isola ribelle: Procida nelle tempeste della Controriforma*, Bari, Laterza, 2020.

¹² Pasquale Borrelli, *Principi di zoaritmia scoperti da Pasquale Borrelli e preceduti da un ragionamento storico su la moderna Medicina matematica*, Napoli, presso Angelo Coda, 1807.

poetic image of the unfortunate Graziella, sung by a famous French writer, has become almost indelibly associated with the island and its self-celebration in the Sagre del Mare (Sea Festivals), where every year a young Procidan girl is chosen as Graziella. But it is certainly the image of Rosina that comes closest to characterising how much the maritime and commercial world that developed in Procida between the 18th and 19th centuries contributed to the emancipation of women on this island.

4. Women and business

The first incontrovertible evidence of the historical role of women in the economy of Procida can be found in the bank accounts opened in the name of Procida women in the public banks of Naples. These banks played a decisive role in the economy of the Kingdom from the second half of the 16th century thanks to the credit instrument they were authorised to issue, the “fede di credito” and its derivatives, contributing to the acceleration of the circulation of money for more than two centuries¹³. There was no citizen of the capital of the kingdom, and even of other localities, who had not at least once opened a current account at one of the eight until 1702, and then seven banks that had their centre of action in the Neapolitan capital. Among them was Candida Lubrano, who opened an account in her name at the Banco dello Spirito Santo in 1754, and with her many other Procidan women, whether they were sailors’ wives, widows or nuns, all of whom testify to the important economic role they played in managing the family economy¹⁴. However, a more fundamental issue arises when considering the relationship between women and the sea in business matters, in comparison to women on land. The 1809 Code of Commerce stipulated that women in the Kingdom of Naples were on the list of those unable to contract. A married woman was required to obtain her husband’s consent to engage in public trading, unless she was a widow. Article 138 of the Civil Code of 1861 reaffirmed this regulation, which was only abolished in 1919. This is the prevailing norm, but was there a discrepancy between the norm and practice? It would appear that this was indeed the case. In Amalfi, by the 15th century, wives were already legally capable of administering affairs in the absence of their husbands. In the 19th century, women in Procida were involved in investments and business related to navigation. Four women are listed in the records of the navy in the Gulf of Naples (1833-34). Donna Lucia Cacciuttolo owned a brig, while the other three women,

¹³ Paola Avallone, Raffaella Salvemini, *Between charity and credit. The Evolution of the Neapolitan Banking System (16th – 17th Century)*, in Lilia Costabile, Larry Neal (edited by), *Financial innovation and resilience. A comparative perspective on the public banks of Naples (1462-1808)*, USA, Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2018.

¹⁴ Daniela Ciccolella, Luigi de Matteo, *Nei banchi pubblici napoletani, repertorio dei conti con maggiore movimentazione tra il 1734 e il 1804*, Napoli, CNR, 2021.

Maria Pascasio, Maria Cacciuttolo and Margherita Assante, owned a felucca.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is Maria Luisa Ambrosino, the 20-year-old wife of Captain Domenico Scotto di Santillo, who assumed the role of managing the business and the ship in his absence following his untimely demise during the long voyage to Mexico. It is unclear whether they were involved in the administration and economic decisions of these companies. Thus far, the impression is that they were more the owners of ships' carats, brought as dowries, than the owners of ships.

Nevertheless, recent research has revealed that some Procidan women were capable of managing the ship business¹⁶. In 1854, the first maritime insurance company was established in Procida, Italy, under the name of the Società Anonima di Assicurazioni La Marina di Procida. Among the 47 founding partners were four women who sought to participate in the company's constitution with the inheritance left by their fathers or husbands. These women were Errichetta and Rosa Schiano, both unmarried sisters, and Speranza Massa and Anna Maria Galatola, both widows. Of particular interest is Speranza Massa, who was directly involved in her husband's business even before his demise. Her aptitude and flair for business, which had led her to become a point of reference in Procida's ship-owning sector, were so well known that she was the one who intervened in the business of granting maritime exchange or requesting loans in order to be able to arm her husband's boat in her place. Furthermore, she had acquired shares in the company in exchange for a loan granted to Pasquale Scotto di Freca for the construction of a boat. Her aptitude for financial management and maritime affairs led her husband, Giambattista Sichenzio, to publicly acknowledge her abilities in a notarial deed. In this document, he not only stipulated that half of the vessel being constructed in the Marina della Lingua was to be registered in her name, but also that its management, once launched, would be in her name alone. This was due to her reputation for diligence, exactitude, and discernment¹⁷.

¹⁵ Paola Avallone, Raffaella Salvemini, *Gente di mare. Capitale umano e finanziario a Procida nell'Ottocento*, in Salvatore Capasso, Gabriella Corona, Walter Palmieri (eds.), *Il Mediterraneo come risorsa: prospettive dall'Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, p. 491.

¹⁶ Lamberto Radogna, *Storia della Marina Mercantile delle Due Sicilie, 1734-1860*, Milano, Mursia, 1982, p.199

¹⁷ Archivio di Stato di Napoli, Archivi dei Notai XIX secolo, scheda 1249, vol. 12, ff. 129-131.