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**Hanging Ships:  
Ex-Voto and Votive Offerings  
in Modern Age Messina Churches**

**Giuseppe Restifo**

**Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche**

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## **Hanging Ships: Ex-Voto and Votive Offerings in Modern Age Messina Churches**

Giuseppe Restifo

In a city every day starving for wheat, the arrival of ships loaded with that valuable cargo is always eagerly awaited and welcome; moreover if the wind fills the ships sails in a period of protracted famine, the event is considered by the inhabitants as a miraculous favour.

This happens many times in Messina during Modern Age, being famine a structural fact.

Particularly, once a cargo of wheat coming from the sea was so fundamental that Messina inhabitants wanted to show with a votive offering their gratitude and their devotion to "Madonna della Lettera". This is the title given to Our Lady as protectress, patron of the city of Messina<sup>1</sup>.

The wonderful event occurred in 1636, when the city of Messina was prey to a shortage of grain. The famine was felt strongly in March, during the Holy Week.

Supplies were sufficient for two or three days and the Easter Holidays were approaching. People were starving and clamouring. The city of Messina was in distress on the Good Friday. Pious and religious people prayed the "Madonna della Lettera" in order to avoid the danger of a popular tumult. The following day, on 22 March, the Holy Saturday, the face of the city was shaken and sad, everyone looking everywhere for bread.

The grain was not enough for the necessary bread, as it was eaten by a large population constituted by more than one hundred thousand souls. Some of their supplies were kept partly by Syracuse and Trapani and partly by the galleys of Malta.

Messina was in troubles; the Senate decided a public procession on 5 April.

The procession left the Cathedral with a rich "Bara" (a machine with the empty coffin of the Virgin Mary) containing the famous sacred hair relic of the Virgin, closed in a large, well-worked glass.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Sicilian legend, she honoured the people of Messina by writing a letter to them, dated from Jerusalem, «in the year of her Son, 42». In the effigies of the «Madonna della Lettera», she holds this letter in her hand.

Countless were the people coming for the procession. In the same day were setting sail in Apulia some great vessels full of wheat. They appeared in the Channel on Tuesday, day dedicated to the "Vergine d'Itria", object of a particular devotion in Messina.

On the following day, 9 April, other two big ships were kept not so peacefully. But danger and hunger ended completely when three ships with wheat arrived in the harbour, prevented before by the storms and after assisted by a calm sea and a prosperous wind.

According to Messina inhabitants was the Virgin Mary to swell the sails of those, leading them to the need of "her" Messina. The recipient of so great miraculous favours gave signs of grateful devotion to her. In memory of the received relief come on the Holy Saturday the city consecrated to the Virgin Mary three silver little ships of fine workmanship and forty-pounds-heavy<sup>2</sup>.

The memory of that favour was still alive in the early 1800s and so George Russell writes:

no person doubted that the corn was a present from heaven, and, in order to acknowledge this pledge of divine favour, the senate ordered three ships to be made of silver, which were presented as a votive offering to the Holy Virgin<sup>3</sup>.

The little silver ships were to hang perpetually in front of the altar of "Letterio" in the Cathedral<sup>4</sup>, the same chapel which the emperor Charles V visited in 1535. The "city chapel" in that occasion was adorned with twenty silver lamps hanging from the ceiling<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The Messina silversmith school was famous in Europe. Among the artists are remembered: Alfonso Franco, Vincenzo D'Angioia, Giovanni Artale Patti, Pietro Juvara and sons, Francesco and Giuseppe Bruno, Antonio Dominici, Diego and Michele Rizzo and others. Via Argentieri was the street of their shops. Giuseppe ARENAPRIMO, *Argenterie artistiche messinesi del secolo XVII*, Firenze, 1901; Maria ACCASCINA, *I marchi delle argenterie e oreficerie siciliane*, Busto Arsizio, 1976; Sebastiano DI BELLA, "Argentieri messinesi del Seicento, da documenti notarili", in *Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Arte Medioevale e Moderna*, Facoltà di Lettere – Università di Messina, II, 1987, pp. 53-62; Grazia MUSOLINO, *Argentieri messinesi tra XVII e XVIII secolo*, Messina, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> George RUSSELL, *A tour through Sicily in the year 1815*, London, Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1819, p. 254.

<sup>4</sup> Stefano BOTTARI, *Il Duomo di Messina*, Messina, 1929, p. 70: «Packed with stucco and gilding, however, is the right apse dedicated to the *Sacramento* and performed on a model designed by Jacopo del Duca».

<sup>5</sup> Cajo DOMENICO GALLO, *Annali della Città di Messina*, vol. 2, Messina, Gaipa, 1758, p. 509.



Some days before 3 June, feast-day consecrated to Madonna patron of the city, the Senate determined that for thanksgiving that feast will be solemnised with the greatest glory.

On 2 June the gift was followed by a solemn procession of a countless crowd of people; more than six thousand had lighted torches. With great devotion and tears they followed the Sacred Relic of Hair of Our Lady, with three companies of Messina soldiers, firing their harquebuses everywhere they passed.

A festal array was made above the main altar: a silver and golden pyramid and over this was placed the miraculous picture of "Madonna della Lettera". Behind the altar was depicted the sea, surrounded by mountains, and in the middle it was placed a silver ship well-proportioned, symbol of the Virgin.

Everything was done in thanksgiving to the Virgin Purveyor of the wheat<sup>6</sup>.

Nowadays one of the silver ships is exhibited in the Museum of the Cathedral treasure, as "A hanging lamp vessel – Messina silversmith, 1636, embossed silver, engraved, punch: FF, (trademark of Messina), 36"<sup>7</sup>.

The hanging lamp vessel was a votive gift of Messina Senators that entrusted to a silversmith from Messina in 1636. This information comes from the inscription engraved on the side of the vessel: VOTUM PRO MIRACULOSA FAMIS LIBERATIONE ANNO 1636 / SENATORES 1636 / DON BARTOLOMEO PAPARDO SEBASTIANO MARINO DON ANDREA STAITI PLACIDO GIONA DON PLACIDO PORTIO SIMEONE FOTI.

The particular shape of the sacred *ex-voto* with the image portrayed on the stern of the Risen Christ and at the same time the Good Shepherd, takes on symbolic meanings.

The boat, often cited in several gospel passages, is a representation of the Church fishing out Christians in the great sea of life and guides and helps them in their difficult paths. Aft is the helmsman, the Risen Christ sailing the boat and winning the adversity of evil, freeing humanity from hunger and death. He is also

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<sup>6</sup> Placido SAMPERI, *Iconologia della gloriosa Vergine madre di Dio Maria protettrice di Messina*, foreword of Giuseppe LIPARI - Enrico PISPISA - Giovanni MOLONIA, Messina, Intilla, 1991, pp. 59-61. In the left wing of the Cathedral it was the altar with the ancient image of "Madonna Odegitria", called of "Itria" (p. 85).

<sup>7</sup> The Treasury of the Cathedral of Messina, guarded and exposed in the body added on the south side of the temple, is a rich collection of precious objects of worship belonging to the cathedral since the Middle Ages, mostly silver work of the renowned goldsmith school of Messina.

the Good Shepherd who watches his flock before him and leads it to the shore of eternal life.

The work in embossed silver falls within a typology used in some works of sacred art for theological meanings referred.

In the same Cathedral treasure is preserved a second lamp donated in 1647 by Messina Senators for the release of another famine, laying astern in the ship the Christological portrayal of the sacrifice of pelican.

Originally the lamps, placed in the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, were four but two of them have been stolen in recent years<sup>8</sup>.

Among those there was probably another silver ship, previous gift and *ex-voto* of the year 1603.

«In the year of our salvation 1603» reigning the Catholic King Philip III, governing Sicily the Duke of Feria, because of the shortage of the crop in previous season and of excessive export, Sicily drained corn. So it gave rise to an universal famine.

Messina tried too late to win due supplies, almost going to ruin, also because of a law published by the Viceroy; after that law some greedy and powerful men hid the grain.

Messina was almost desperate. Besides, some supplies obtained and loaded on ships for Messina were kept in other ports involved in the same famine. A ship charged with three thousand *salme* was rudely kept by the Malta galleys. «The Knights of Malta, who were not well off for supplies, regularly watched the Sicilian coast. Their behaviour there was hardly different from that of the Tripoli corsairs. They paid up, it is true, but they boarded ships in the same manner as pirates».

On the edge of ruin and after unbroken prayers, a ship going from Volo to Naples with wheat, enjoying a fresh sirocco wind, while in the Straits, was attacked by the north-west wind. The vessel was forced to enter Messina harbour. There with general wonder the sirocco wind returned; people believed in a miracle. But the grain was sufficient only for some days. It was necessary to provide the city with other supplies, otherwise a popular fury could burst. So the Senate provided that a French galleon, at that time in the harbour, went out armed with nobles and other citizens "alla ventura".

This was not the first time the city turned to the sea – the last great resource when everything else failed - to watch out for grain

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<sup>8</sup> Ed. Giusy LARINÀ, *Per crucem ad lucem*, Messina, Arcidiocesi di Messina, 2004, p. 30.

ships and seize them. «In October 1557, the local authorities made ships carrying wheat from Apulia and the Levant unload at Messina»<sup>9</sup>.

Another miraculous event, again in 1603, concerns a galleon with five thousand "salme" of grain.

Passing near Cape Passero, it was attacked by sudden gale and stormy winds. There was a persuasive terror in this storm<sup>10</sup>.

Being seized by despair, sailors thought of the Madonna del Piliere in Messina and built a small boat. On that pinnace they arrived safely at the desired port.

Disembarked with many tears went to greet the Madonna, donating the boat in thanksgiving. The Senate provided to retrieve the galleon that came flourishingly in the Port of Messina and saved from hunger the people.

The City made a triumphal and devotional procession for thanksgiving to God and His Blessed Mother. In that occasion was presented to "Letterio" chapel, in perpetual memory of such a great relief, a silver galley of adequate size of twenty-five pounds of weight and of one hundred scudos of value beyond the over-elaborate manufacturing<sup>11</sup>.

But even before these four or five small votive ships of the seventeenth century, in 1575 the sailors founders of the Confraternity of "Santa Maria di Porto Salvo" created the "Vascelluzzo". It is a three-masted ship about one meter long with the soul of wood covered with silver foils finely engraved and reproducing in a very faithful manner a galleon. In that little galleon stand three masts and on the top it is granted a reliquary containing the hair with which, according to tradition, the Virgin tied up the letter to Messina inhabitants. The "Vascelluzzo" follows the devotional iter of the *Corpus Domini*, in which there is the superimposition of the religious element on the popular element<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Fernand BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, vol. I, Los Angeles - London, University of California Press, 1995, p. 331.

<sup>10</sup> Carmine STARNINO, *Credo*, Montreal, McGill University Press, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe BUONFIGLIO COSTANZO, *Dell'istoria siciliana*, vol. I, Venezia, 1604, pp. 690-692.

<sup>12</sup> Paolo D'AGOSTINO, *Il Vascelluzzo di Messina tra storia, tradizioni e simboli: cronache della guerra e della libertà, della carestia e dell'abbondanza e della protezione della Madonna della Lettera*, Messina, 1985; quoted by Carmelina GUGLIUZZO, *Maritime feasts in Messina during Modern Age*, paper submitted to the 5th International Congress of Maritime History, IMEHA - International Maritime Economic History Association, University of Greenwich - Greenwich, 23-27 June 2008.



1. The Vascelluzzo in front of the Cathedral of Messina

For devotional aspects the “Vascelluzzo” refers to the miracles of the Virgin of the Letter, who several times, according to legend and popular belief, saved the population from terrible famine, with sudden arrivals at the port of ships laden with wheat. The solution of famine due to the arrival of ships laden with food, common to many maritime cities of the Mediterranean, is recalled in Messina in the feast of Corpus Domini. On this occasion is taken around swinging along a little litter topped by a silver ship laden with ears of corn: the “Vascidduzzu”<sup>13</sup>. In commemoration of the Madonna act of mercy, “a little silver ship is carried in procession yearly, during the month of June, which has been made for *la Madonna della Lettera*’ too<sup>14</sup>.

For other aspects of the iconography inherent the ship, in the opinion of some scholars, it refers to a profane origin, mainly in

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<sup>13</sup> Sergio BONANZINGA, *Riti musicali popolari e devozioni ‘francescane’ a Messina*, in Carolina MICELI - AGOSTINA PASSANTINO (eds.), *Francescanesimo e cultura nella Provincia di Messina*, Palermo, Officina di Studi Medievali, 2009, p. 33. Result of misunderstanding is what wrote George William David EVANS, *The Classic and Connoisseur in Italy and Sicily*, London, 1835, p. 239: «A picture of the Virgin, which adorns the Cappella della Lettera, is supposed to have been painted by St. Luke; and a model of the galley which brought so precious a charge to the Sicilian shores is kept to accompany it in procession».

<sup>14</sup> Fredrika BREMER, *Travels in the Holy Land*, London, Hurst and Blackett, 1862, vol. I, p. 34.

Northern Europe, where such items were used in rich houses and were then offered to the churches to keep the incense or Holy relics related with sea or navigation<sup>15</sup>.

Messina, throughout its history, was visited by a large number of foreigners and foreign sailors, also from Northern Europe, but was principally a Mediterranean port city. Its culture and its traditions refer to the Mediterranean.

In Mediterranean countries, maritime *ex-votos* are fairly common. Sailors or other people who travelled by sea, vowed when they were in danger, they would dedicate a gift to the Virgin Mary or another saint if their lives would be spared.

Maritime *ex-votos* were often made in the form of paintings, but ship models were not unusual either. This originally Roman Catholic tradition of donating ship models to churches was adopted by the congregations of protestant churches in Scandinavia, England, Germany and the Netherlands during the sixteenth century.

In Mediterranean countries, ship models were given to churches as far back as the fifteenth century<sup>16</sup>.

From immemorial time dualism between gratitude and suffering, day after day, was shared by all members of maritime communities in the Mediterranean, those who board and those who remain grounded. The *ex-voto* will be brought to the shrine which houses the saint of devotion. Many times the *ex-voto* is reproducing the boat of the fisherman or sailor. For example, behind the coastal villages of Catalunya there are many little churches that still retain some of their *ex-votos*<sup>17</sup>.

Miraculous rescues from shipwrecks afford a great devotion to "Madonna del Piliere" in Messina; a chapel in the Church was consecrated to the Holy Virgin. The sanctuary was crowded with a great number of votive tablets, *ex-votos*, covering all around the walls of the temple and showing thousands of desperate cases supernaturally rescued by the Blessed Virgin; as can be easily known by a remarkable event occurred in 1523.

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<sup>15</sup> Caterina CIOLINO, *L'arte orafa e argentaria a Messina nel XVII secolo*, in *Orafi e argentieri al Monte di Pietà. Artefici e botteghe messinesi del sec. XVII*, Palermo, Regione siciliana - Assessorato beni culturali e ambientali della P. I., 1988, pp. 119-121.

<sup>16</sup> Sjoerd DE MEER, *The nao of Matarò: a medieval ship model*, in <http://www.iemed.org/activitats/2004/mediterraneum/documentacio/anau.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> *Costums i treballs quotidians en els ports*, in "Drassana", 16, 2008, p. 150.

When the city of Rhodes was conquered by Ottomans, the Grand Master and his Knights of Jerusalem with four galleys and a great galleon went to Messina. In the navigation they met a sudden and furious storm and by common agreement made a vow to Our Lady, arriving in Messina, men had to walk barefoot and women in loose hair, in noble procession, with lighted torches in their hands, to the Church of "Maria Vergine del Piliere". Arrived in the port of Messina, they did it.

From the ceiling of the Church were hanging little ships, galleys, vessels, boats of all kinds, placed by seamen in memory and thanks for being saved in danger of shipwreck, after appealing Madonna sacred name. And still there were hanging candles in large quantity, cracked harquebuses, swords, daggers, cables, marine instruments, crutches left by healed cripples, and many other items donated for received graces, therein hanging up in eternal memory<sup>18</sup>.

Masters of vessels and sailors found and promote the Oratory of "Santa Maria di Porto Salvo" entrusting to Catalan the Old the painting of Our Lady Patroness<sup>19</sup>. Their devotion makes progress for unbroken assistance and support, that continuously in their dangerous sea voyages experienced. Then all the walls of the church were covered with votive tablets, broken cables, chains, anchors, marine iron goods, hanging vessels, and a lot of wax, living memories of the graces received by "Madonna di Porto Salvo"<sup>20</sup>.

At the entrance of the port there was the Church of "Santa Maria di Porto Salvo", who was entrusted with the safety of every vessel, large or small. Not far from the Church of Porto Salvo in the sixteenth century was built the Oratory of "Gesù e Maria del Buonviaggio" by Don Lorenzo Abbate. Where navigation started, sailors could take the blessing and good wishes to travel. The Madonna, with her powerful hand, would have made quiet the waters, with the help of the angels that are around her are ready to run her commands<sup>21</sup>.

"About two miles further", north of the Church of "Gesù e Maria del Buonviaggio", "stands close to the sea the picturesque church, della Grotta". Richard, Duke of Buckingham, in his carriage ride along the shores of the Straits on 27 December 1828, stops in that church.

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<sup>18</sup> Placido SAMPERI, *Iconologia della gloriosa Vergine madre di Dio Maria protettrice di Messina*, cit., pp. 122-124.

<sup>19</sup> Vito Amico, *Dizionario topografico della Sicilia*, Palermo, 1859, p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> Placido SAMPERI, *Iconologia della gloriosa Vergine madre di Dio Maria protettrice di Messina*, cit., p. 156.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibi*, pp. 583-584.

«The inside has nothing to recommend it», but his attention is drawn to something special: the church «is full of *ex voto* offerings, hung up by mariners who have escaped from shipwreck, and have thus testified their gratitude to Divine mercy»<sup>22</sup>.

There was possible to see, «for pious curiosity», presents, candles and, in everlasting memory, votive tablets in the walls of the Church of «Santa Maria delle Grazie» called «di San Raneri». Mostly sailors, in the most dangerous storms, in the sudden assaults of the pirates, in shipwrecks, in captivity or any other catastrophic accident, appealed to “Madonna delle Grazie” in Messina. The spread of this veneration is also evidenced by the similar Sanctuary of “Maria Santissima delle Grazie”, founded in 1545 in Roccella Jonica (Calabria) by a crew survived with their vessel in a storm. In it are preserved as votive offerings little models of sailing ships and on it converge the devout followers of “Madonna dei marinai”<sup>23</sup>.

The devotion to Messina “Madonna delle Grazie” has remained ever strong since the sanctuary foundation. Every day, in memory of received graces, in that church were hanging votive tablets, silver lamps, candles, broken cables, swords, harquebuses, marine devices, crutches, and many other marks of granted favours. In fact, models of ships and galleys hung from the ceiling in such large numbers that few years ago – Samperi wrote in 1640 – were removed because they hindered religious services in the church.

All the authorities of shrines that attracted great numbers of votive offerings had from time to time taken the same sort of action as was taken by those of Loreto in 1673. There were also, among other votive offerings, «a lamp and a silver ship» donated by the city of Paris<sup>24</sup>.

They made a clean sweep from their overcrowded walls of all «useless monuments and superfluous testimonies to the holiness of the place» and «converted those made of gold and silver plates and sheets to a more useful purpose». Most of the *ex-votos* had a transitory character and many objects were, by their very nature, ephemeral.

«The custodians of the sanctuary – usually monastic communities and confraternities – were entrusted with the management of the *ex-voto* display and old *ex-votos* were frequently cleared away to make

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<sup>22</sup> Richard GRENVILLE, *The private diary of Richard, Duke of Buckingham and Chandos*, London, Hurst and Blackett, 1862, vol. I, pp. 225-226.

<sup>23</sup> Giuseppe Maria VISCARDI - PAUL LEROU (eds.), *La pietà popolare in Italia*, vol. I. *Calabria*, Paris-Roma, Letouzey & Anè-Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996, p. 195.

<sup>24</sup> “Sacred Chapel of Loreto”, in *The Christian Spectator*. Vol. 1, 1827, p. 470.

room for new ones». Silver votive offerings became popular beginning in the fourteenth century as a form of conspicuously expensive material display. Of course, «these silver *ex-votos* were more carefully conserved and were treated as a form of valuable income to the sanctuary»<sup>25</sup>.

In a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary, near Bastia in Corsica, the walls were covered with *ex voto* offerings in such numbers that the old ones had often to be removed to make way for the new ones. This happened probably in Messina too, in "Santa Maria delle Grazie" case. So it is possible to understand why little has been done for the history of that important form of Christian devotional art, the votive offering. No doubt in part this is because most *ex-votos*, as monument of individual or corporate thanksgiving, cannot in the nature of things, expect an existence that long outlasts the life of the donors or the protection that their descendants or successors can afford them.

It must also be admitted that many *ex-votos* never have been more than very modest works of art<sup>26</sup>.

In fact, the Church of "Madonna delle Grazie" was to be overcrowded, because in every case the figure of the Virgin Mary as Mediatrix and Protectress occupies a prominent place in the rank of invocations. Her relationship with the maritime world is linked with medieval allegory and symbolism as the star of the sea or "stella maris" and as the ship. There are many examples in literature and iconography that can be made around this issue. The mother of God is considered rescuer of shipwrecked persons.

About the Marian representations it is possible then to establish a differentiation among general cults, local cults of specified locations and then the particular and personal cults of sailors<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Megan HOLMES, *Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory, and Cult*, in eds. Michael W. Cole-Rebecca ZORACH, *The Idol in the Age of Art. Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*, Farnham-Burlington, Ashgate, 2009, p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald W. LIGHTBOWN, *Ex-votos in gold and silver: a forgotten art*, in "The Burlington Magazine", Vol. 121, No. 915, 1979, p. 353. In the year 1882 were removed from the Church of "S. Francesco all'Immacolata" in Messina, after a terrible fire, even items that had been offered as *ex-voto*: Diego CICCARELLI, *S. Francesco all'Immacolata di Messina*, Palermo, Officina di Studi Medievali, 2008, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Hortensia BLANCO, *La devociò marinera a l'illa de Mallorca. Els exvots de l'Església de la Sang*, in *Actes del III Congrés d'Història Marítima de Catalunya*, Museu Marítim, Barcelona, 2008, p. 5 (paper on cd-rom).



The reasons for a votive offering should be looking for in gratitude for an escaped risk, an event that the devout worshipper considers miraculous in the highest degree.

«Mediterraneans are not known for their gratitude, (though when they do thank, they make many promises and believe in them)»<sup>28</sup>.

For what it is possible to find in the seaman mentality, acknowledging that his fears and his ancestral terrors are not unfounded at all, can not be of any surprise that the marine *ex-votos* represent a majority of the *ex-votos* now available in Sicily (but not in the city of Messina)<sup>29</sup>. As Lombardi Satriani recalls, sea is «labour space» and a “dangerous area». Sicilian and Calabrian coasts have been, in Modern Age times, targets of invasions: sailors and fishermen are well aware of it. On them have befallen storms, vortices causing wrecks almost always fatal. This, too, say the legends that don't tell specific stories to be submitted to the test of historical accuracy but are poetic interpretations of the world and witness of the deepest human hopes<sup>30</sup>.

The relationship with the sea has never been an easy affair. Sea was often perceived as a space more or less abandoned by God, left to the devil. It is the space of evil, of sin and of fatal danger. There is not the sacrament of extreme unction, no burial in consecrated ground in the Catholic world. There are on it to some extent wandering souls.

Seafarers need then to appeal to the Virgin Mary or the privileged saints with their propitiatory or thanksgiving rites. Precisely the *ex-votos* have a special function, which is also to tie the sailors to the land<sup>31</sup>.

The custom is maintained in the Mediterranean in Classical times up to the threshold of the late Latin period; the ancient Christian churches had often present the “pergola”, which was used to hang up the votive tablets and *ex-voto* objects, models of ships etc. And then the same custom returns around the second half of the fifteenth century.

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<sup>28</sup> Predrag MATVEJEVIĆ, *Mediterranean. A cultural landscape*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Rocco SISI, *Ex voto marinari*, in Sergio TODESCO (ed.), *Miracoli. Il patrimonio votivo popolare della provincia di Messina*, Messina, Magika, 2007, pp. 78-79.

<sup>30</sup> Luigi Maria LOMBARDI SATRIANI, *Il sogno di uno spazio*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2004, pp. 138-139.

<sup>31</sup> Alain CABANTOUS, “Histoire maritime ou histoire sociale? L'approche des gens de mer”, in *Actes del III Congrés d'Història Marítima de Catalunya*, Museu Marítim, Barcelona, 2008, p. 10 (paper on cd-rom).

So it is possible to affirm that relating to the votive production Church authorities accepted the *ex-votos*. Convents too at Messina host *ex-votos*: «in that of 'Monte Alto' I found – John George Francis writes at the middle of nineteenth century – an entire wall covered with votive offerings in descriptive pictures, which is the old Roman custom of Horace's day surviving to our century»; «The sanctuary of the Capuchin friars is full of Madonnas. and at her shrines are placed numerous *votive tables* of her superstitious worshippers»<sup>32</sup>. Gold and jewels, votive lamps, a decorated ambo or "via crucis" offered by faithful persons for the received grace were accepted within the church and accepted in relation to the needs of worship, and indeed highly significant as evidence of the trust in God.

«The *ex-votos* covering the walls of shrines were silent testimony to favours granted and pilgrimages undertaken»<sup>33</sup>. They were sometimes the signs of collective worship and other times of personal devotion. In the first case they were added to the symbols of municipal pride; for instance in the case of Messina, the great banner of the municipality of Florence, abandoned by Charles of Anjou in his retreat from the siege and hung up as a votive offering in the principal church of the city<sup>34</sup>.

However, the lack of consideration of social and cultural dimensions of folklore may lead to a loss of meaning and ease of handling. This is the opinion of scholars like Lombardi-Satriani, in Italy, or Xavier Fàbregues, in Catalunya. They intend to say that popular culture, only for its existence, denies the essentialist claims of official culture or hegemonic, to use the expression of Antonio Gramsci<sup>35</sup>.

Moreover, the votive production appears to constitute an eminently "secular" way to manage the relationship with the sacred sphere, so contesting the "accredited" way in relating to God.

The vow made to the saint took on the form of a bargain struck between patron and client, and the *ex-voto* assumed the dual role of

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<sup>32</sup> John George FRANCIS, *Notes from a Journal Kept in Italy and Sicily, During the Years 1844, 1845, and 1846*, London, Longman, 1847, p. 226; R. Maxwell MACBRAIR, *Sketches of a Missionary's Travel*, London, Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1839, pp. 45-46.

<sup>33</sup> David GENTILCORE, *From bishop to witch. The system of the sacred in early modern Terra d'Otranto*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 120.

<sup>34</sup> Michele AMARI, *History of the War of the Sicilian Vespers*, London, Bentley, 1850, vol.I, p. 306.

<sup>35</sup> Eliseu CARBONELL, "Veure l'invisible: el patrimoni cultural immaterial marítim", in *Drassana*, 16, 2008, p. 33.

compensatory offering and liberating *scongiuro* serving to exorcise the malady or misfortune which had prompted the vow<sup>36</sup>.

It may, in this context of personal negotiation, recall the objects that refer to the person, like clothes, combs, crutches, cots, uniforms, work tools, ships models, gold and jewels of various types<sup>37</sup>.

Anyway

the shapes given to votive offerings were not individual and capricious, but fall into fixed types, one might almost say, recognised genres. Votive offerings are in fact a form of devotion transferred to Christianity from the pagan religions of Antiquity, and most of the artistic forms they have assumed were already well established in classical times – from the painted *ex-voto* or sculptured image of a ship offered by sailors and travellers delivered from death to images of the gods in precious metal<sup>38</sup>.

«The *ex voto* stems from popular pagan beliefs and results in untold shrines along the Mediterranean»<sup>39</sup>: following Predrag Matvejevic researchers have many interesting steps to move onward.

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<sup>36</sup> David GENTILCORE, *From bishop to witch. The system of the sacred in early modern Terra d'Otranto*, cit., p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> Sergio TODESCO, *Cosa accade quando i mondi si incontrano. Note per un'antropologia dell'ex voto*, in Sergio TODESCO (ed.), *Miracoli. Il patrimonio votivo popolare della provincia di Messina*, cit., pp. 18, 20, 27, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald W. LIGHTBOWN, *Ex-votos in gold and silver: a forgotten art*, cit., p. 353.

<sup>39</sup> Predrag MATVEJEVIĆ, *Mediterranean. A cultural landscape*, cit., p. 32. «An interesting pendant that combines rock crystal and coral is that one depicting a head of Medusa, which is part of the rich treasure related with St. Agatha in Catania's cathedral. It's significant that in the Greek world the coral was linked to the myth of the Gorgon, so it becomes highly symbolic this pendant bearing a head of Medusa in coral, pagan talisman, donated as votive offerings to a prominent Christian virgin and martyr»: Maria Concetta DI NATALE, *Il corallo nei gioielli siciliani*, in <<http://congresos.um.es/imagenyapariencia/11-08/paper/viewFile/2031/1991>>.

