

Rural Architecture in Sicily

If recent decades have in general seen a trend to deruralisation and the abandon of agricultural activity, the progressive breaking-up of the rural environment has in Sicily been strongly characterised by the cultural stratification that had developed there over the centuries. Present housing in Sicily is an expression of the history and culture of a people as a whole; its protection and conservation is a problem concerning the character of a civilisation.

There has been a long series of different types of construction: from the period of the Greek migrations which were consolidated in geometrical urban sites along the coast or on precise lines of internal propagation; from the Roman conquest of the hinterland, rationalised by a system of varied communications; from the links with the Byzantine East and the Moslem Mediterranean; from the Norman period; from Sicily's insertion within the Spanish administrative system and from the period of subsequent Bourbon reform.

The geographical features of Sicily and in particular the contrast between the easily accessible coastal strip, immediately blocked by mountains, and the inland territory, have led to the concentration of the population in limited area. Data gathered in the 1881 census, before the general exodus from Sicily, show that more than two thirds of the population lived at an altitude of less than 500 m.

Leaving aside the early period, of which we have no significant traces apart from villas of the Late Empire and indistinct Moslem remains, the phenomenon of rural settlements begins to have a significant effect on the Sicilian countryside from the Norman era with the formation of hamlets, an operation directed by the feudal centre being eager to increase its lands.

The church appears in settlements of the 12th century as a factor promoting colonisation and bringing together the peasant forces within a religious but also administrative

sphere .

By the 14th century , the pattern of open villages has ended and the inhabitants are grouped together in fortified lands. As elsewhere in Europe at this time , an agricultural crisis occurred in Sicily linked to demographic decline and a decrease in exchanges between city and country .

The appearance in the 15th century of numerous sugar cane plantations and their accompanying mills along the north and east coasts , began the slow process of land reclamation .

In this period a close network of towers was also set up in order to protect the labour force from the pirate raids which menaced the Mediterranean up to the end of the 16th century . (1)

Although the creation or repopulating of agricultural centres was , on the whole , rare before the last decades of the 16th , a massive return to the land took place between 1583 and 1714 , doubling the number of settlements on the island . The newly founded centres encouraged by the barons were mainly concentrated in the cereal-growing centre in the west of Sicily , had been virtually abandoned since the end of the middle ages .

This growth in Sicily can be compared with similar changes in the countryside of Tuscany , Venice and Lazio and indicates a turning-point in the history of the Italian agrarian landscape . The founding of the new carefully planned centres was partly to the disadvantage of those centres that already existed , particularly in the cities , which lost half of their inhabitants .

The new hamlets , which were essentially rural towns , were located on a slight slope and determined subsequent changes to the countryside . Nevertheless , in many cases they lacked with the outside world and their isolation was often further aggravated by geographical factors .

The church and the palace constituted the emergent signs of this new geometry superimposed on the natural . Thus urban geometry was itself reflected in the country design .

In this same period , between the 16th and 18th centuries, the power of the barons , which had prompted the building of the new rural villages , also contributed to the building of sumptuous residences in the principal cities and generated a need for suburban dwellings . (2 - 3)

Palermo , the capital of the vigorous baronial class , thus saw the spread into the surrounding countryside of a series constructions (bagli and villas) in a new city/country relationship .

As the population lives for the most part in compact agglomerations , according to the custom of most of southern Italy , with isolated houses having a subsidiary place , rural dwellings in Sicily can be divided into those of the plains and those of the mountains .

The individual mountain dwelling is of one or two storeys above the stalls and storage rooms . The roof is gently sloping , with tiles in terracotta . Frequently found is an external stairway , often supported by an arch which shelters the entrance . The material mostly used is compact limestone.

Along the coastal strip , dwellings are constructed of blocks of calcareous tufa which is then plastered . A flat roof and external stairway are common . In the Palermitano , especially along the coastal strip , there are groups of houses built in rows with an external loggia or terrace . In the Conca d'Oro and on the hills of Monreale , and in the Eleuterio , houses are scattered among citrus orchards on terraces with capillary irrigation systems .

While the large estates for cereal-growing and pasture have tenaciously resisted on the hills of the interior , olive and almond trees have since to end of the 18th century tended to surround the residential centres of Platani and Salso .

In the western part , at Erice , a typical dwelling is arranged around an internal courtyard with well and oven , and with small windows on the external facade . The settlements located in the Madonita area , in keeping with the mountainous terrain , are animated by spires and steeples , often

decorated with majolica tiles .

In the monotonous hilly landscape of central Sicily, settlements are concentrated in large agglomerations located in dominant positions , distant from each other.

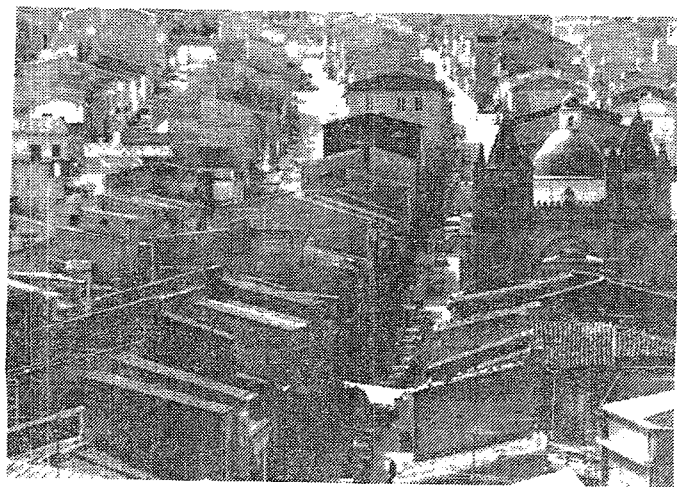
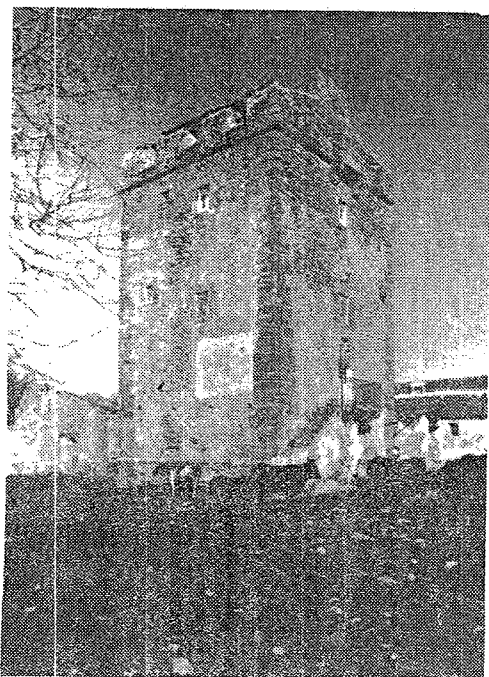
In the solitude of the country , the farms almost always retain the look of fortifications . (4)

On the main side , the residence of the owner is situated on the first floor with storage and other rooms below .

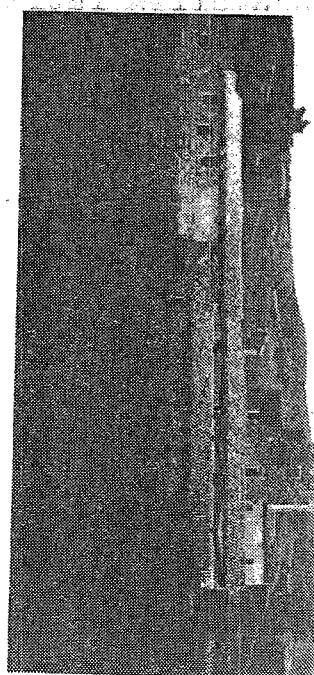
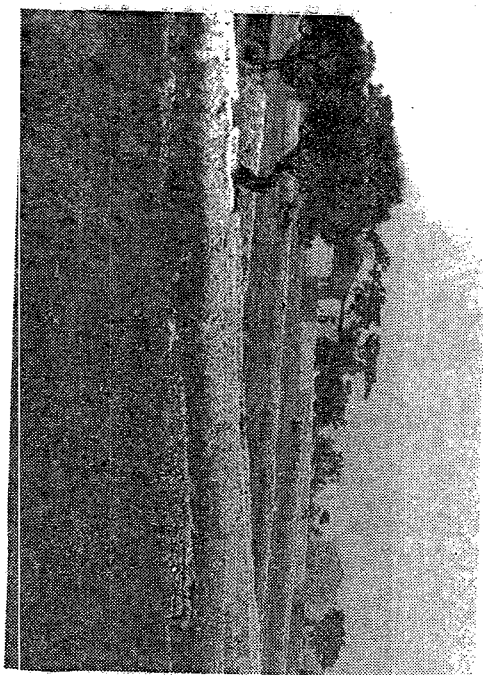
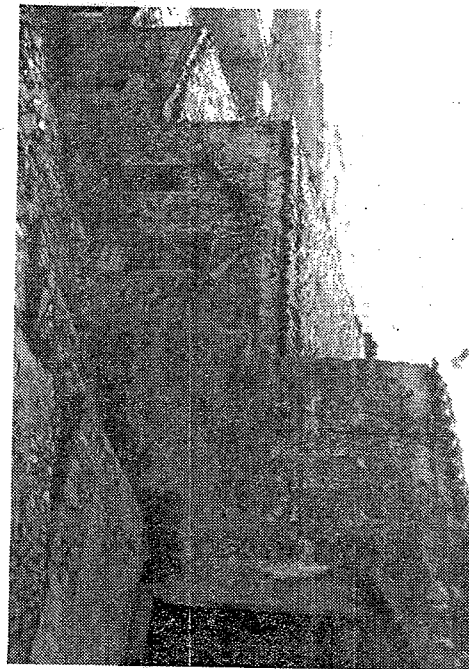
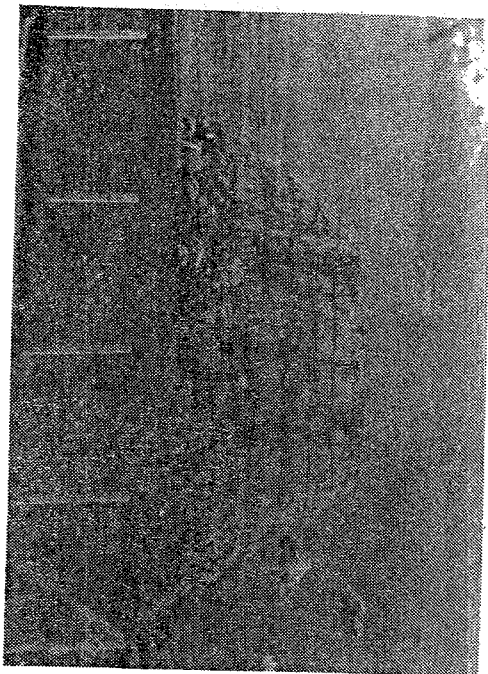
Small shelters for the seasonal shepherds , the pagliari, can also be often found . (5)

The organisation of agricultural communities in the south-east region has always been a special case . The lands are divided up by a close network of dry-stone walls which mark the boundaries of the fields and the edges of the roads . This is characteristic of the high plateaus of Ragusa and Modica . (6)

Finally , along the densely populated and intensely cultivated strip to the east of Etna , building is in mainly regular forms with roofs of two or four sides . Particular here is the use of lava rock , in the block walls and in windowsills and decoration .



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Illustrations

- 1) A tower built for the protection of the landscape, Partinico;

The rural hamlets built between 16th and 18th ,

- 2) Valledlunga ,

- 3) Aliminusa ,

- 4) A farm in the solitude of central Sicily ;

- 5) Pagliari , are small shelters for seasonal shepherds in the Madonia region ;

- 6) The characteristic land of dry-stone walls of the high plateaus of Ragusa and Modica .

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L'Architecture rurale en Sicile

Au cours des dernières décennies qui ont été partout marquées par l'abandon des campagnes et des activités agricoles, on a assisté en Sicile également à la dégradation progressive d'un environnement rural profondément influencé par une stratification culturelle séculaire . Compte tenu du fait que la majorité de la population vit dans des agglomérations denses, suivant en cela la tradition de l'Italie méridionale qui assigne une fonction subalterne aux maisons isolées , les habitations rurales de Sicile se distinguent entre elles selon qu'elles sont bâties en plaine ou en montagne .

Dans la région de Palerme , on peut voir des rangées de maisons munies de loggias ou de terrasses , en particulier sur la cote . Les agglomérations de la région des Madonie reproduisent le relief montagneux sur lequel on les a construites tandis que les habitations du centre de l'île sont concentrées dans de grandes bourgades situées sur des hauteurs et éloignées les unes des autres . Dans la campagne solitaire , se dressent des fermes ayant presque toujours conservé l'aspect de fortifications .

Enfin , au pied du versant Est de l'Etna , la plupart des bâtiments présentent des formes régulières et des toits à deux ou quatre pentes . L'architecture s'y caractérise par l'emploi de roches volcaniques tant dans l'appareillage des murs que dans la construction des appuis de fenêtre ou la décoration .