

In Search of a Safe Port

The Marian Cult on Lampedusa amid Mass Tourism and the Migrant Crisis

Francesco Vietti

Abstract. This contribution focuses on the popular devotion to Our Lady of Porto Salvo on Lampedusa, looking at the transformations that have reconfigured it over time as a prism through which to analyse the tensions between local dynamics and global forces that affect the island. The article suggests that the study of the sacred cartography of the contemporary Mediterranean should be part of the process of “remapping” of the network of interactions, connections, and hybridisations that characterise the area.

Keywords: Popular devotion, Mobility, Social Navigation, Mediterranean, Lampedusa.

1. Lampedusa, 22 September 2018

The church of Saint Gerlando is crowded with people waiting for the start of the Solemn Eucharistic celebration for the Feast of Our Lady of Porto Salvo. In the front row is the mayor, Totò Martello, with the tricolour sash, and next to him some military representatives from the Coast Guard. Behind them a heterogeneous crowd of Lampedusans, in party dress, and tourists in t-shirts and shorts stand in silence. There are also members of the Red Cross and various NGOs present on the island, easily identifiable by the slogans and logos clearly visible on their uniforms.

From the altar, the parish priest, Don Carmelo, is greeting the authorities present and is ready to give the floor to Giuseppe Marciante, bishop of Cefalù, who has come here for the occasion.

All around us the church shows traces of the exceptional attention that Pope Francis has reserved for this small parish lost in the Mediterranean Sea. At the entrance, a crystal case holds a small installation reminiscent of a nativity scene, donated by the pontiff, which represents the Holy Family on a fishing

boat in the act of rescuing an African migrant from the sea. On the opposite side, a marble plaque on the wall reads “During the visit to migrants and to the parish community of Lampedusa, Pope Francis paused in prayer in this church”. In the sacristy, a small museum has also been set up dedicated to the historic event of July 2013 which displays, in addition to many photographs, the chalice and the crosier that Pope Francis used to celebrate mass made by a carpenter on the island with wood from the boats of shipwrecked migrants. When the bishop of Cefalù begins his homily, its evocation of the “Gospel of Welcome” as outlined by the Pope becomes evident:

Lampedusa is the incarnation of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, an island-womb which, like a mother, welcomes humanity and generates children. Lampedusa is a land that has always welcomed people – Maltese, Greeks, Spaniards – just as Mary has always welcomed the prayers that come to her from her children – Italians, Arabs, Christians and Muslims [...]. I came here in the footsteps of Pope Francis, to meet the migrants and experience the devotion of the Lampedusan community to Mary. It was a dream of mine to come to Lampedusa because this island is a symbol for me, a sign of humanity. This is the island of hospitality, a welcome to people who come from all over the world and who are blessed by God. A welcome which has your well-being at heart, with so many other people also arriving on the island attracted by this beautiful sea, which is also a blessing from God. This morning I too had the pleasure of taking a tour of the island accompanied by Don Carmelo and I admired the beauty of this land [...]. At the dock I met a group of migrants, Christian Eritreans and Muslim Tunisians, and I promised that I would take their prayers and invocations to Mary. I do so here now: Holy Mary, protect and accompany them on their journey of hope!

2. The Holy Portolano: navigating in a sea of uncertainties

The words of the bishop that I heard that day in the church on Lampedusa raised several questions for me: what processes led the cult of Our Lady of Porto Salvo to bring the local community of residents together with the global flow of tourists and migrants passing through the island? How does the procession that every September carries the statue of the Madonna along the streets of the town respond to the anxieties and aspirations of the multiform crowd that joins it? What different interpretations of this collective rite emerge from the Lampedusan faithful and the representatives of the hierarchies of the Catholic Church who arrive on the island following «in the footsteps of Pope Francis»?

The tradition of Marian devotion is intertwined with the modern history of Lampedusa, which essentially dates back to the time of the Bourbon colonisation, which took place in the mid-nineteenth century. As in the case of other small islands (which, despite being in marginal conditions compared to the national states to which they belong, play an important role in the cultural,

political, and economic context of the Mediterranean), Lampedusa for two centuries has suffered all the difficulties of its peripheral position with respect to Italy. Nevertheless, it appears to be a crucial hub in the system of exchanges and interactions between Sicily, Malta and Tunisia, from whose coasts it is almost equidistant.

The landing of settlers from the different islands and territories of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the arrival of the Greek and Maltese fishermen attracted by the discovery of the sponge banks, the rapid passage of the mackerel schools that allowed the survival of many families at the beginning of twentieth century, the long voyages of Lampedusan fishermen who embarked on deep-sea fishing vessels in the Atlantic, post-World War II emigration to other regions of Italy, the arrival of the first tourists and entrepreneurs interested in investing in hotels and restaurants, the landings of migrants and the consequent flows of soldiers, journalists, volunteers, activists, artists and various personalities: to evoke the well-known formulation proposed by James Clifford [1997], Lampedusa has always appeared to be “rooted in mobility” and has become today a “transit site” passed through by different types of travellers, as well as by powerful global forces such as media images and commodities, that have transformed it into a symbol of the intersection of different “regimes of mobility” in the contemporary world [Shamir 2005, Glick Schiller, Salazar 2013].

The “migrant crisis” that brought the pope to the island in 2013 is in fact only one of the many crises that have marked the history of Lampedusa. Although the era we are living in is characterised by a significant acceleration of economic and political turmoil, the island society has faced many other moments of difficulty and necessary transformation in the past. The failure of the colony’s original agricultural vocation in the late nineteenth century, the loss of profitability of fishing during the twentieth century, unemployment and youth emigration after the Second World War, the environmental impact of overbuilding and pollution on the fragile local ecosystem in the last decades are some of the factors that have forced the Lampedusans to cope with uncertainties, proving themselves to be resilient and imagining possible new futures.

Adopting a now-consolidated approach in the Mediterranean anthropology, in my contribution I would like to build on one of the “classic” themes of this field to disentangle the stratified network of interactions, connections, and hybridisations that characterise the “Great Sea” [Abulafia 2011, Shryock 2020]. Specifically, I intend to focus my attention on Marian devotion to Our Lady of Porto Salvo, looking at the transformations that have reconfigured it over time and especially in the last decade as a prism through which to analyse

the tensions between local dynamics and global forces that affect the island in the era of migration and mass tourism.¹

As outlined by Dionigi Albera [2006], in the last twenty years the emergence of interest in the anthropology of the Mediterranean about the themes of globalisation, borders and diasporas has given rise to the renewal of this field of study, thanks also to a new centrality of what had previously been marginal (in terms of topics and national research traditions) and to a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue, especially with history [Viazzo 2003]. The Mediterranean has thus emerged as a context of study, rather than an object of study per se, marked by correspondences in terms of similarities as well as differences. Attention to contemporary forms of mobility and transnational connections must be accompanied by an awareness that such processes do not occur in a vacuum, but are rooted in local contexts shaped by history. Dealing with the future, or rather with the futures of the Mediterranean, does not therefore mean forgetting the anthropology of yesterday, but on the contrary presupposes the ability to localise global processes in regional fields of knowledge [Albera, Blok, Bromberger 2001].

The anthropological archive relating to studies on the ritual dimensions of religious experience in the Mediterranean, on popular devotion and on the interactions between different cults around and across the “faithful sea” [Husain, Fleming 2007] is extraordinarily rich. Here, I would like to refer to two specific areas of study concerning the intersection of religion and mobility that I consider particularly relevant to framing the Lampedusa case. The first concerns the so-called “shared sacred spaces” – shared by two or more different religious groups [Albera, Couroucli 2012]. These sites are very numerous in the Holy Land because of the importance that this territory has for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but they are noted throughout the whole Mediterranean world. Indeed, it is worth noting that while they are near the geographical and symbolic “centre” of the three monotheisms, the logic of the “division between” groups (i.e., a *sharing out* of the sites) groups prevails, therefore producing a segmentation of sacred spaces subjected to strict controls; moving towards the “margins” of the central and western Mediterranean, the possibility of a “*sharing with*” between the various religious groups is affirmed in a more concrete way. This more flexible and relaxed character is expressed through the recognition of common hopes that lead people of different faiths to frequent the same places of prayer; the existence of a certain “continuity” in ritual practices which, benefiting from mutual attendance, teach the value of a common “devotional

¹ This article is based on the ethnographic research that I conducted on Lampedusa between July and September 2018 thanks to the research grant I hold from the University of Milan Bicocca. The contribution is part of my wider interest in the intersection of mobility and heritage that from 2013 on has brought me to carry out fieldwork several times on Lampedusa, Lesvos and other Mediterranean islands (Vietti 2017, 2019, 2020).

vocabulary” beyond doctrinal differences; and the importance of some saints and Biblical figures (patriarchs, prophets, kings) capable of going beyond the boundaries of different theological traditions by “building bridges” between different places and religions, as in the emblematic case of Mary of Nazareth [Albera, Barkey, Pénicaud 2018]. As Jeremy Walton [2005] points out in his comparative study of two “shared sacred spaces” in Turkey and Croatia, although these places are often rhetorically celebrated as sites of “multi-religious tolerance”, they are not immune to tensions and dissonances between the discourses of “cultural intimacy” and the practices of “spatial intimacy” that connote them.

The figure of Mary as a cultural and spiritual bridge between different places and faiths is the focus of the second research perspective considered in my case study. Over the centuries the Madonna has experienced several “iconographic migrations”, travelling along with migrants from one coast of the Mediterranean to the other and thus acquiring her own peculiar interreligious effectiveness. Significant is the case of the Madonna of Trapani, who arrived in La Goulette, near Tunis, in the nineteenth century, with Sicilian emigrants. After having gone through all the various phases of the history of the Italian community in Tunisia during the twentieth century, in more recent years she has returned to being invoked as a protector of the poor, the marginalised and the exploited, today personified by migrants who reach the Mediterranean coasts from the countries of sub-Saharan Africa [Russo 2020]. In other cases, the mobility of the Marian cult is linked to the dynamics of power of the colonial and post-colonial era: so it was, for example, in the story of the Virgin Mary of Santa Cruz, “transplanted” to Oran following the French conquest of Algeria in the mid-nineteenth century, and “repatriated” a century later, at the time of the independence of the former colony, to become a pilgrimage destination for *pied-noirs* in Nîmes [Slyomovics 2019].

The explicit invocation of the Madonna as protector of the journeys of migrants, introduced by Pope Francis on Lampedusa in 2013 and expanded in the following years to make this a consolidated attribute of the Marian figure, in my opinion opens up the possibility of including the events relating to the Madonna of Porto Salvo in the broader picture of the sacred topography of the Mediterranean in the twenty-first century. With this perspective, I would like to recall here the heuristic value of the image of the “Holy Portolano”. This concept usually refers to the medieval conception of the sea «as a homogeneous, though ‘liminal’ space, whose borders, in the sailors’ experience, were thought to be dotted with an almost uninterrupted network of holy sites directly associated with the maritime dimension and the evocative power of coastal landscape» [Bacci 2014, 7]. The sailors therefore relied on these “mnemonic maps” to orient themselves during navigation and, in case of difficulties or danger, the crews and passengers of the boats turned in prayer to the saints and sanctuaries named after them so that they could find the

route and survive the stormy sea [Salis 2018]. My hypothesis is that this “cartography of salvation” is also reflected in the most recent phases of the history of the Mediterranean, and that its transformations over time and its current configuration can be reconstructed and analysed. This exercise may prove useful by giving substance to the invitation that Henrik Vigh [2010] put forth in an influential contribution a few years ago: to use the concept of “social navigation” not only as a metaphor, but as an analytical tool to study the concrete ways in which individuals and communities interact and move in a social environment that is in turn mobile, influenced by structural forces and subject to sudden threats of instability, trying to reach a position of greater well-being and security.

In the next section, I will therefore begin by showing how the population of Lampedusa, starting with the colonisation of the island and throughout the twentieth century, turned to Our Lady of Porto Salvo in search of a reference point to call upon in order to navigate through the sea of uncertainties that it repeatedly had to cross.

3. Lampedusa and its Madonna: a history of resilience

Lampedusa is a small island with an area of just 20 square kilometres and about 6,000 inhabitants. Along its coast, there are several beaches and inlets. One of these, Cala Madonna, was the spot where an unexpected discovery marked the very first step of the Bourbon colonisation of the island. Here, in fact, Bernardo Sanvisente, the governor of Lampedusa, found a statue of the Madonna, which he immediately declared the patron saint of the new colony. As Sanvisente himself wrote in his report to Ferdinand II of Bourbon in 1847:

In the Vallon de la Madonna there was a small church with ancient dwellings, a ruined house and several caves. In the small church, which I found in a poor state, there was a mutilated statue of the Virgin thrown to the ground, which I had restored, and I arranged for a Mass to be sung every 22 September to solemnise the day of the restoration itself and the possession of the island [quoted in Taranto 2015, 14].

The frigate captain Bernardo Sanvisente arrived on Lampedusa on a steamship on 22 September 1843, bringing with him ecclesiastical and administrative authorities, a military detachment under the command of an officer and 120 settlers, mostly farmers and artisans. This event marked the beginning of the modern history of Lampedusa, which had been uninhabited for a long time². The arrival of the new population continued throughout the following year, thanks to a series of edicts that encouraged the transfer

² For a documented history of Lampedusa before the Bourbon colonisation, see the detailed work of local historian Giovanni Fragapane [1993].

to Lampedusa of inhabitants from Pantelleria, Ustica, Agrigento and other islands and territories of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies [Fragapane 1993].

In this first phase, the Madonna of Porto Salvo was therefore essentially a protector “of the land”, invoked to support the difficult process of settlement on the island and the putting down of roots by the new community. The Marian cult thus appears to be a fundamental tool for overcoming the heterogeneity of the settlers’ origins and consolidating a sense of mutual recognition in the common feeling of belonging to the new colony, consecrated by the Marian presence. With the celebrations on 22 September that Sanvisente wanted, the Lampedusan community celebrates itself, its birth embodied in the protective womb of the Madonna of Porto Salvo [Taranto 2015].

According to the initial plans, the colony was expected to have an agricultural vocation, so the settlers were assigned portions of land for cultivation. However, in the first decades of colonisation serious planning errors were made, with excessive deforestation and a failure to achieve the correct crop rotations. The consequence was a real environmental disaster: the ecosystem of the island was upset, leading to the disappearance first of plant species and then of animals. In the last years of the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of Lampedusa therefore had to face the first serious crisis of the island’s economy and society. Reduced to extreme poverty, many families asked to be allowed to leave the colony, which ran a real risk of disintegrating. At this juncture, it was the sea, and not the land, that offered the possibility of a new future. In fact, in 1887 a large colony of sea sponges was discovered not far from the coast of the island, which in a short time attracted a multitude of fishermen from Tunisia, Greece, Dalmatia and Turkey to Lampedusa. The resident population thus became more numerous and made up largely of “spongers”: Lampedusa became the centre of a thriving Mediterranean trade, which led to a significant improvement in living conditions on the island [Brignone 2014].

From this time on, the fate of the Lampedusans was linked to fishing. Once the sponge season ended, in the first decades of the twentieth century Lampedusa became the “island of mackerel”: this was highly seasonal fishing, taking place between May and September, during the period when shoals of the blue fish passed through the stretch of sea between Lampedusa and Tunisia, and was capable of employing almost all of the men at sea and the women on land in fish processing companies [Roghi 2013]. This profound transformation of island society was reflected in an equally significant variation in Marian devotion. It is in this period, in fact, that the Madonna of Porto Salvo acquired its specific maritime character, becoming in effect a protector “of the sea.” It is now the fishermen who entrust themselves to her grace, pray to her every time they leave the port and invoke her during storms. Those who remain

ashore turn to Our Lady to protect loved ones who are in the open sea and to give them abundant fishing [Brignone 2014].

The attribute of Our Lady of Porto Salvo as “protector of fishermen” was further consolidated after World War II, when many young men from Lampedusa began to dedicate themselves to so-called “Atlantic fishing,” embarking on large fishing boats for deep-sea fishing in the ocean and staying away from the island for a good part of the year. The Lampedusan Madonna accompanied these fishermen in their wide-ranging work and became a symbol for them of the longed-for return to the island. As sixty-five-year-old Franciscu says:

We fishermen all keep an image of the Madonna in the cabin ... you know, you have to change it every year, because it can be ruined quickly with sea water. For me it is always like being under the blessing of her gaze. I have always been in the habit of going to the sea with her, ever since I was a child and I used to go out with my father’s boat, together with my brothers, to fish around the island, up to when I went to ‘*Maroccu*’, as we say. For me the money and the house, like everyone here, I got with the sea blowing in my face ... I sailed for years, I even did stretches for six months. It was tough, and you had to live with everyone on board, with us Lampedusans and there were people from other countries, Tunisians, Somalis... they prayed to Allah and we our little Madonna, always asking her to let us return home, to our families, safe and sound. I’ve been everywhere, Morocco, the Bermuda Triangle, New York, Canada. What times! ... now I am at ease, I only take tourists around the island, but as you can see, I always keep the image of the Madonna of Porto Salvo close to the helm!³

Deep-sea fishing expeditions were a way in which the new generations of Lampedusan fishermen, in the second half of the twentieth century, tried to cope with the poverty and harshness of life linked to the traditional subsistence fishing conducted near the island. As clearly emerges from the pioneering study on oral culture and illiteracy on Lampedusa conducted by Matilde Callari Galli and Gualtiero Harrison [1972], the second post-war period was a time in which the isolation of Lampedusa was particularly severe and emigration became massive: in this way numerous communities of Lampedusans were created outside the island, both in Italy (particularly numerous in Anzio, Ancona, Rimini, Viareggio) and abroad. The conditions on the island were affected by a lack of basic services: until the 1960s there were no sewage systems, medical centres or secondary schools, and connections with Sicily by a ship that reached the Pelagie Islands were only guaranteed twice a week.

In this context, the procession of Our Lady of Porto Salvo on 22 September acquired a new, important social significance: the Marian feast in fact became the time of the year when all those who had left the island looking for fortune

³ Interview with Franciscu conducted by the author on Lampedusa on 18 September 2018.

“on the mainland” returned to visit loved ones who remained on Lampedusa. The Madonna was thus once again called on to protect the sense of community of the islanders, to strengthen the parental and friendship ties thrown into crisis by emigration, to guarantee the social stability of the island by renewing, every September, the collective identity of a community eager for cohesive imaginaries, despite their dispersion. Lisa, born on Lampedusa and now living in Naples with her family, remembers:

When I was little, there was no inhabitant of the island who did not participate in the procession of the Madonna. It was certainly the most important day of the year and we had to prepare in advance. At that time, in the sixties, in the weeks before the party, everyone who sold clothes arrived on the island. They came in ships from Sicily and held a big market and we all went there to buy a new dress for the feast of the Madonna, or, if you couldn't afford that, at least some fabric to modify the old dress a little and make it look new! Then, when we moved to Naples with my parents and brothers, we brought the Madonna with us; even now in our apartment we have hung images of the Madonna of Porto Salvo. Every year, when I come here to Lampedusa for Our Lady, I buy a new image from the Shrine and the first thing I do is go and say a prayer to thank her. My brothers also had their children baptised here at the Shrine and one came here to get married; a lot of Lampedusans do this.⁴

For over a century, therefore, devotion to the Lampedusan Madonna has expressed, through its gradual stratification of symbolic meanings, the needs and questions of significance of the local population. In the next section I will try to show what further changes in the Marian cult were triggered by the eruption on the local Lampedusan scene of two powerful forces, which took place starting from the 1980s and then more significantly with the new millennium—the global transformations of tourism and international migration.

4. Our Lady of Immigrants: back to the future(s) of the Mediterranean

At the beginning of the 1970s, the construction of a civil airport and other infrastructure created the conditions for the island to begin welcoming visitors, who came from other Italian regions. Then, in 1986, the massive media coverage of the so-called “incident of the Gaddafi torpedoes” targeting the NATO base that had been installed in the meantime on the island indirectly gave international notoriety to the beaches and waters of Lampedusa, attracting a growing number of foreign tourists. Driven also by the new and more restrictive rules imposed by the European Union on the fishing sector, many fishermen sold their fishing boats and invested their money in the

⁴Interview with Lisa conducted by the author on Lampedusa on 24 September 2018.

construction of houses to rent to holidaymakers, as well as hotels, restaurants and commercial activities aimed mainly at guests for the beach holiday season [Orsini 2015]. In the following two decades, the Lampedusan tourism industry consolidated itself more and more: in 2008 there were about a hundred accommodation facilities and more than 128,000 arrivals on the island by the end of the year [Vietti 2019]. In that same year, however, Lampedusa was at the centre of the public and media debate for another reason: in 2007 the CSPA (Centre for Aid and First Reception) was built in the district of Imbriacola, which, together with a blockade of migrant transfers implemented by the government in the winter of 2008, transformed Lampedusa into the “island of landings” [Cutitta 2012, Gatta 2012]. Since then, the island has become one of the main national and international political arenas where the humanitarian and security rationale for management of and disputes over Mediterranean migratory flows have been articulated [Aime 2018, Proglgio, Odasso 2018]. In particular, with the so-called “North Africa Emergency” of 2011 (the year in which over 50,000 migrants arrived on Lampedusa), the collective imagination on Lampedusa was polarised around the symbolic extremes of shipwrecks and refusals on one hand, and reception and rescues on the other [Melotti, Ruspini, Marra 2018].

The visit of Pope Francis in July 2013 was therefore part of this context, contributing significantly to the construction and global dissemination of the discourse about the hospitable, supportive and charitable spirit of the island. The exhortation to make Lampedusa a “safe port” for migrants represented the first step in defining the “Gospel of Welcome” that has characterised Bergoglio’s pontificate [Guzik 2018, Bardon 2021] and was symbolically expressed through a specific prayer to Our Lady of Porto Salvo:

Mary, Mother of God and our Mother, turn your sweet gaze to all those who face the dangers of the sea every day, to guarantee their families the sustenance necessary for life, to safeguard respect for creation, to serve peace among peoples. Protector of migrants and itinerant people, you offer maternal assistance to the men, women and children forced to flee their lands in search of a future and hope.

Just as the Shrine of Cala Madonna has always offered protection and refuge, in Pope Francis' message the whole of Lampedusa must become a "sanctuary", a place of peace, justice, welcome and charity towards displaced people [Lenard, Madokoro 2021]. The conferral, by a preeminent global personality such as the pope, of a universal message of salvation for migrants attributed to the grace of the Lampedusan Madonna, has clearly had a significant impact on the relationship between the island community and its patroness. From 2013 onwards, various components of Lampedusan society have moved to “re-locate” the global reach of Bergoglio’s message, connecting it to the recovery of some aspects of Marian devotion which, until then, had remained hidden and secondary to the dominant tradition. In

particular, two distinct but connected processes have developed which have examined the period prior to the institutionalisation of the Marian cult at the time of the colonisation of Lampedusa to try to imagine future scenarios for the island and the Mediterranean.

The first aspect concerns the enhancement of the interreligious role of the figure of the Madonna and of the historical testimonies that identify the presence on the island of a “shared sacred space” between Christians and Muslims, active between the twelfth and early nineteenth centuries [Taranto 2015]. Thanks in particular to the work of the Historical Archive of Lampedusa, another passage was highlighted from the memoir of the first governor of the island, Bernardo Sanvisente, who, in his 1847 report to Ferdinand II of Bourbon, wrote about the place where he had found the statue of the Madonna:

The aforementioned church was initially used for dual purposes, as I have thus observed since I arrived on the island [...]. This place was used by the Arabs who passed through here and who yearned for the prayers of their religion. Further along, once the gate was opened, there was a second room where the faithful who wished to visit the miraculous image could find the Christian altar with the Holy Virgin mentioned above [cited in Taranto 2015, 14].

The image of the Madonna as a “bridge figure” for dialogue between adherents of different faiths was relaunched not only by the Lampedusan parish but also by the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy (FCEI), present on the island through “Mediterranean Hope”, its permanent observatory on migrations, which since 2014 has promoted an ecumenical celebration at the Shrine of Our Lady of Porto Salvo on the occasion of the celebrations for October 3. On this date, in fact, institutionalised as “National Day in Memory of the Victims of Immigration” after the tragic shipwreck of 3 October 2013, various initiatives are held on Lampedusa, including a march to the “Gate of Europe” which over the years has become almost an extension of the Marian procession of 22 September [Vietti 2017].

A second dynamic that I was able to observe concerns a re-reading of the Marian cult that goes beyond its sacred and religious meaning, attributing in addition a social and political value to it. A crucial role in affirming this radical and libertarian interpretation of the Madonna of Porto Salvo was played by Askavusa, a collective of young Lampedusan activists, and in particular by Giacomo Sferlazzo, a local artist whose works have repeatedly awakened the interest of social researchers. Federica Mazzara, who carefully followed the creation of “Porto M”, a space where objects recovered from migrant boats become interlocutors of Askavusa’s political initiatives, has clearly defined its specific “aesthetic of subversion” capable of promoting «a counter-discourse [...] resisting the process of making the island a stronghold of the European border patrol system» [Mazzara 2016, 131]. In recent years Sferlazzo has

done much work around the symbolism of the Madonna of Porto Salvo, reclaiming a story, somewhere between reality and legend, associated with Marian devotion. According to tradition, the Lampedusan Madonna saved and assisted the escape of a certain Andrea Anfossi, a native of Liguria, who was taken prisoner by pirates and landed on Lampedusa around 1560 [Arnaldi 1990]. After freeing himself from his chains, Anfossi lived for many years as a hermit in the caves where there was a “shared sacred space” used by Christians and Muslims in the Vallon della Madonna, and he eventually returned to his Liguria thanks to “miraculous navigation” using the canvas of a sacred image of the Virgin as a sail. From this starting narrative, Sferlazzo created a version in the form of a *cantata* in the Lampedusan dialect in which Anfossi becomes a symbol of all the slaves and oppressed people to whom the Madonna of Porto Salvo is called upon to offer help and protection. The story was sung by Giacomo Sferlazzo on the occasion of the feast of the Madonna in September 2018, in a square adjacent to that of the parish, crowded with several hundred Lampedusans and tourists, and was revived the following year on the occasion of the donation to the parish and installation in the Shrine of Cala Madonna of a wooden statue of the Madonna found by the Askavusa activists, in the early 2000s, on board one of the shipwrecked migrants’ boats on the island. The statue, until that moment kept in Porto M, inspired Sferlazzo to create a secular prayer that expresses its political significance:

Our Lady of the Insulated Blankets/help us save those we cannot kill by
bombing/and when we lock them up in detention centres/let us look after them
as the God of armies commands [...].

The Madonna of Porto Salvo therefore appears in yet another guise, as a symbol through which a message of radical criticism of the dominant rationale for the management of migration and the militarisation of Lampedusa and the Mediterranean can be “translated” into a language capable of reaching a greater portion of both the local population and the tourists who visit the island.

Tourism, in particular, seems to be playing an increasing role in the process of reshaping the Marian celebration in September. Whereas in the past, as the islanders recall, the Feast of Our Lady of Porto Salvo took place after the end of the short summer tourist season and marked the moment when Lampedusa “belonged again only to the locals”, now the whole month of September is part of the “high season”, and the Feast has become one of the moments that attract a lot of tourists to the island. Reading the visitors' book kept in the Shrine of Cala Madonna, one can note many messages left by tourists:

Dear Madonna, thank you for giving me and my family these wonderful
holidays on this wonderful island. Protect our loved ones and all those poor
people who cross the sea in search of a better future.

We came here on a visit with the solidarity tourism group and we were moved by listening to the testimonies of the doctors, volunteers, fishermen and all the citizens of this island of peace and solidarity. As Pope Francis says, we cannot be indifferent to the drama of migrants!

Tourists are also the main target of a whole series of souvenirs that Lampedusa's craftsmen and traders offer for sale in shops in the town centre. Objects of this type include small crosses made from the wood of the wrecked boats of migrants which reproduce the crozier used by Pope Francis on the occasion of his visit to the island [Vietti 2017]. Overall, the reference to Lampedusa as an island of hope and solidarity, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for the hospitality shown by its inhabitants towards migrants, has become an integral part of the tourist branding process of the island. It has also attracted a specific category of "voluntourists" who come to Lampedusa to combine a pleasant stay with a volunteer experience with the numerous NGOs that operate on the island or that run work and training camps [Di Matteo 2020].

A large part of the island's population therefore seems to have assimilated the new meaning of Marian devotion introduced by Pope Francis through a logic of reification and commercialisation aimed at sustaining their work and commercial activities. In this sense, Pope Francis' message has been welcomed as an opportunity for the economic revival of the island in the face of the risk of a crisis due to the dominant discourse on the "invasion of irregular migrants". Nevertheless, this process has not occurred without negotiations, friction and conflict within some sectors of the local community. For example, the members of the Committee for the Promotion of the Feast of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, made up largely of (former) fishermen, are very active in organising the procession and all the surrounding events and initiatives that take place during September. Among them a vision of the Madonna prevails, anchored in her traditional role as protector of sea workers and the island's population. Gaspare, one of the Committee members, observed in this regard:

I'm not against the Africans who arrive here, I think it is right to help them. But for us, our Madonna is something much deeper, something that has been inside us since we were children, and that we have inherited from our fathers. That is why in recent years we have been carrying the statue not only through the streets of the town, but we also load it onto the boat, down at the port, to take it out to sea accompanied by all us fishermen. We organise initiatives mainly for the local people, such as dances and games in the square for young people, to pass on to our young people the true sense of celebration, of belonging to our community⁵.

⁵ Interview with Gaspare conducted by the author on Lampedusa on 26 September 2018.

This emphasis on the defensive and protective dimension attributed to the figure of Mary has been evident during the spring of 2020 in the aftermath of the global spread of the Covid-19 pandemic: while the lockdown blocked any possibility of movement to and from the island, the balconies of the houses of Lampedusa revealed sacred images of the Madonna of Porto Salvo, to whom the inhabitants entrusted their health. Given the impossibility of physically gathering at places of worship, the faithful of Lampedusa found in the Facebook pages of the parish of San Gerlando and the Shrine of the Madonna of Porto Salvo a space to gather in prayer so that the community was protected from the feared arrival of the coronavirus:

Our dear Mother, look at the people who belong to you. You have always kept this island under your mantle [...]. Once again, we ask you to show your fondness for our Community: be our help in the present tribulation. You, who are salvation in storms, extend your patronage over us, be a watchful sentinel, so that no evil afflicts us. Give these people of Lampedusa protection from every evil of body and spirit.

During the summer, then, the persistence of an uncertain situation caused a sharp decline in tourist numbers, clearly showing the fragility and poor sustainability of a local economic system entirely dependent on the dynamics of national and international mobility. The further restriction of the possibility of landing on the island because of the health risk has also made the migrants' situation particularly dramatic, when for long weeks, in July and August 2020, they were stuck near the coast of Lampedusa on board quarantine ships in precarious psycho-physical conditions. Finally, in September, the persistence of the emergency situation at the Italian and European levels led to an unprecedented event even in the history of the celebrations for Our Lady of Porto Salvo: the statue was, in fact, normally moved from the Shrine dedicated to her to the church in the centre of the town, but the cancellation of the processions meant that she was then "locked down" in the parish of San Gerlando, with no possibility of her usual return to the Shrine. This decision drew criticism from some residents and local politicians, who questioned the mayor of Lampedusa's decision to authorise the events on 3 October in memory of the victims of immigration. Several messages appeared on the parish's Facebook page, complaining that while migrants were allowed to move around and arrive on the island, local people and the Madonna were locked down.

The opposition, sometimes veiled and other times more explicit, to the "new course" indicated by Bergoglio that emerges in the microcosm of Lampedusa, appears in this sense to be an interesting reflection of the wider tensions within the Catholic Church that have accompanied the definition in recent years of the particular theological and political positions expressed by the "Criollo Pope" [Napolitano 2019].

5. Conclusions

Reaching the conclusion, it seems to me that these considerations have outlined some answers to the questions that the bishop's homily and participation in the procession through the streets of Lampedusa aroused in me in 2018. At the same time, however, the unexpected global spread of the Covid-19 epidemic raises new questions and calls into question what I have analysed in the meantime.

The process of symbolic stratification of the cult of Our Lady of Porto Salvo that I tried to reconstruct in the previous sections has shown how Marian devotion has, with its transformations, accompanied the different phases of the island's social and economic history. The cult's connection with the theme of mobility has remained constant, due to which it has been called on from time to time to counter risks and support opportunities: the Madonna was at first invoked to bless the movement to the island of the people who settled here from different areas of the Mediterranean, then to protect the movements at sea of fishermen who left Lampedusa to provide sustenance for the community, and then to call back to the island at least once a year those who have emigrated and live far away. In periods of uncertainty and "rupture", with respect to the configuration of social ties and the production dynamics consolidated within the community, the Lampedusans found in the rites of invocation and entrusting to the grace of the Madonna an instrument to represent their anxieties and fears, to seek resources that would allow them to react in the face of difficulties and to collectively set out on a journey towards futures imagined as possible and desirable.

Finally, in the last decade, new global meanings have been added to the local tradition of the island Madonna. Once again, a mobile population, made up of tourists on vacation, migrants travelling across the Mediterranean and a varied group of visiting personalities, took part in the Lampedusa scene, interacting with the repertoire of meanings expressed by the rituality of the Marian celebrations on 22 September. The message launched by Pope Francis in 2013 was reworked in the following years, restoring the interreligious and universal value of Our Lady of Porto Salvo as protector of suffering humanity, forced to flee their homes in search of a "safe port" in which to take refuge. From this point of view, the recent history of the Marian cult of Lampedusa can be read in the context of the broader moral and political history of immigration in the central Mediterranean. As Naor Ben-Yehoyada [2016] clearly illustrated with his analysis of the meaning of the mass celebrated at sea by the bishop of Mazara del Vallo, in which the evangelical exhortation to become "fishers of men" was connected to the need for rescues at sea, recourse to classical themes such as hospitality, and the sacred and popular rituals, can provide effective keys for interpreting the transnational dynamics that are shaping the future of the area.

My contribution suggests that the study of the “Holy Portolano”, of which Our Lady of Porto Salvo constitutes one element, can be taken as part of the “remapping” effort that Ben-Yeoyada, Cabot and Silverstein [2020] have recently indicated as the horizon of a renewed anthropology of the contemporary Mediterranean:

This temporal combination of premodern, colonial, and contemporary Mediterraneans correlates to a particular cartography: a Mediterranean space which hovers above our bordered world, variously connected with it but also pointing to a different kind of geography premised on other forms of socio-spatial relatedness—not necessarily fully coherent or always peaceful, but marked by intimate forms of proximity and distance. This Mediterranean presents itself as a re-mapping, a challenge to the official geographies of the contemporary world [Ben-Yeoyada, Cabot, Silverstein 2020, 3].

A new “cartography of connections” that tries to represent the complex “social navigation” routes of the populations moving around and across the Mediterranean will necessarily have to take into account the further, dramatic crisis generated by the Covid-19 epidemic starting from the spring of 2020. The current condition of “forced immobility” of the statue of Our Lady of Porto Salvo on Lampedusa seems to symbolically express the difficulties and uncertainties which not only the inhabitants of the island are called on to confront these days, but also all those who depend on the possibility of mobility between the shores of the Mediterranean and who are instead forced into isolation at this juncture. The construction of the post-pandemic future of the “Great Sea” will largely depend on their capacity for resilience and imagination.

6. Bibliography

Abulafia D. 2011, *The great sea: a human history of the Mediterranean*, London: Allen Lane.

Aime M. 2018, *L'isola del non arrivo. Voci da Lampedusa*, Milan: Bollati Boringhieri.

Albera D. 2006, *Anthropology of the Mediterranean: Between Crisis and Renewal*, «History and Anthropology», 17 (2): 109-133.

Albera D., Blok A., Bromberger C. (eds) 2001, *L'anthropologie de la Méditerranée/Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.

Albera D., Couroucli M. (eds.) 2012, *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*, Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press.

Albera D., Barkey K., Pénicaud M. (eds.) 2018, *Shared Sacred Sites*. New York: NYPL, CUNY, The Morgan Library.

Arnaldi I. 1990, *Nostra Signora di Lampedusa. Storia civile e materiale di un miracolo mediterraneo*, Milano: Leonardo Editore.

Bacci M. 2014, *On the holy topography of sailors: An introduction*, in Bacci M., Rohde M. (eds.) 2014, *The Holy Portolano. The Sacred Geography of Navigation in the Middle Ages (Fribourg Colloquium 2013)*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 7-16.

Bardon A. 2021, *The Pope's Public Reason*, «Migration and Society», 4 (1): 137-148

Ben-Yehoyada N. 2016, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”: The moral and political scales of migration in the Central Mediterranean, «Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute», 22 (1): 183-202.

Ben-Yehoyada N., Cabot H., Silverstein P.A. 2020, *Introduction: Remapping Mediterranean anthropology*, «History and Anthropology», 31 (1): 1-21.

Brignone A. 2014, *Lampedusa. La vita marinara e le attività di pesca*, «Quaderni dell'Associazione Culturale Archivio Storico di Lampedusa», 3.

Callari Galli M., Harrison G. 1972, *Situational signs and social attentiveness: The conception of reality among a group of Sicilian illiterates*, in Loflin M.D., Silverberg J. (eds.) 1972. *Discourse and Inference in Cognitive Anthropology. An Approach to Psychic Unity and Enculturation*, The Hague: Mouton, 167-198.

Clifford J. 1997, *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Cuttitta P. 2012, *Lo spettacolo del confine. Lampedusa tra produzione e messa in scena della frontiera*, Milan: Mimesis.

Di Matteo G. 2020, *Confini visibili e invisibili a Lampedusa. Il caso degli spazi vissuti dai volunteer tourists*, in Zilli S., Modaffari G. (eds.) 2020. *Memorie Geografiche. Confìn(at)i/Bound(aries)*. Firenze: Società di Studi Geografici, 521-528.

Fragapane G. 1993, *Lampedusa*. Palermo: Sellerio.

Gatta G. 2012, *Corpi di frontiera. Etnografia del trattamento dei migranti al loro arrivo a Lampedusa*, «AM.Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia medica», 33/34: 129-161.

Glick Schiller N., Salazar N. 2013, *Regimes of mobility across the globe*, «Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies», (39)2: 183-200.

Guzik G. 2018, *Communicating migration – Pope Francis' strategy of reframing refugee issues*, «Church, Communication and Culture», 3 (2): 106-135.

Husain A.A., Fleming K.E. 2007, *A faithful sea: The religious cultures of the Mediterranean, 1200-1700*, Oxford: Oneworld.

Lenard P. T., Madokoro L. 2021, *The Stakes of Sanctuary*, «Migration and Society», 4(1), 1-15.

Mazzara F. 2016, *Lampedusa: Cultural and artistic spaces for migrant voices*, «Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture», 7 (2): 129-133.

Melotti M., Ruspini E., Marra E. 2018, *Migration, tourism and peace: Lampedusa as a social laboratory*, «Anatolia. An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research», 29 (2): 215-224.

Napolitano, V. 2019, *Francis, a Criollo Pope*, «Religion and Society», 10 (1): 63-80.

Orsini G. 2015, *Lampedusa: From a fishing island in the middle of the Mediterranean to a tourist destination in the middle of Europe's external border*, «Italian Studies», 70 (4): 521-536.

Proglio G., Odasso L. (eds.) 2018, *Border Lampedusa. Subjectivity, visibility and memory in stories of sea and land*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roghi G. 2013, *Lampedusa. L'isola degli sgombri*, «Quaderni dell'Associazione Culturale Archivio Storico di Lampedusa», 2.

Russo C. 2020, *Nostra Signora del limite. L'efficacia interreligiosa della Madonna di Trapani in Tunisia*, «Quaderni di Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni», 24, Brescia: Morcelliana.

Salis M. 2018, *Migrazione e variazione di iconografie mariane nel Mediterraneo occidentale tra Italia Meridionale, Baleari e València*, in Gómez-Ferrer M., Gil Saura Y. (eds.) 2018. *Ecos Culturales, Artísticos y Arquitectónicos entre Valencia y el Mediterráneo en Época Moderna*, Valencia: Universitat de València, 227-245.

Shamir R. 2005, *Without Borders? Notes on Globalization as a Mobility Regime*. «Sociological Theory», 23 (2): 197-217.

Shryock A. 2020, *Rites of return: Back to the Mediterranean, again*, «History and Anthropology», 31 (1): 147-156.

Slyomovics S. 2019, *The Virgin Mary of Algeria: French Mediterraneans* En Miroir, «History and Anthropology», 31 (1): 1-21.

Taranto A. 2015, *Storia del Santuario della Madonna di Porto Salvo a Lampedusa*. Lampedusa: Associazione Culturale Archivio Storico di Lampedusa.

Viazzo P.P. 2003, *What's So Special About the Mediterranean? Thirty Years of Research on Household and Family in Italy*, «Continuity and Change», 18: 111-137.

Vietti F. 2017, *Mare morto. Tracce ed evocazioni dei missing migrants a Lampedusa*, «Studi Tanatologici», 9: 41-67.

Vietti F. 2019, *Turisti a Lampedusa. Note sul nesso tra mobilità e patrimonio nel Mediterraneo*, «Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo», 21 (1). DOI: 10.4000/aam.1252

Vietti F. 2020, *WELCOME TO LESVOS! Incontri di confine tra locali, turisti e migranti nelle isole dell'Egeo settentrionale*, «Scritture Migranti», 13: 205-230.

Vigh H. 2010, *Motion squared: A second look at the concept of social navigation*, «Anthropological Theory», 9 (4): 419-438.

Walton, J.F. 2015, *Labours of Inter-Religious Tolerance: Cultural and Spatial Intimacy in Croatia and Turkey*, «The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology», 33 (2): 59–76.

