

Antiquated Renaissance City-States built walls around their cities, while Southern Italy led Europe into nation-state era

Tom Verso (July 03, 2012)



Scholar 'par excellence' Barbara M. Kreutz writes: "Southern Italy has been largely ignored by most non-Italian historians of medieval Europe...they typically glance south only briefly to consider the Normans, and thereafter have largely concentrated on developments from Rome northward ("Before

the Normans" p. xxiii)". Further, I would argue that such neglect of the history South of Rome is not limited to "medieval Europe" or "non-Italian historians". Historians of Italian descent in the American university system have no peers when it comes to the neglect of southern-Italian American Patria Meridionale history – a neglect so comprehensive and pervasive that it borders on a cultural conspiracy against the near seventeen million Americans of southern-Italian descent.

Preface

Currently, in the American university system, there is virtually (literally?) no opportunity for Americans of southern-descent to study the history of their ancestry before they reached Ellis Island.

Consider three (what I judge to be representative of the whole university system) examples of undergraduate programs:

New York University – Italian Studies

Twenty-two courses offered for the Fall 2012 semester and not one (NOT ONE!), not one single course dedicated to the study of the history and culture south of Rome – "Italy ends at the Garigliano."

SUNY Stony Brook – Italian American Studies

The catalogue lists seven dedicated Italian American courses and an additional 11 sundry undergraduate courses on Italian and Italian American art, literature, and culture.

A total of 18 courses offered and not one (NOT ONE!), not one single course dedicated to the study of the history and culture south of Rome – "Southern-Italian American history begins at Ellis Island."

University of Connecticut – General History Major

From the Fall Semester of 2009 to the Spring semester of 2012 there were 5 courses offered by the History Department in Italian History (that's right...you guessed it) not one (NOT ONE!), not one single course dedicated to the study of the history and culture south of Rome – "Italy south of Rome is not part of history."

Guidos and Gangsters

How sad that the southern-Italian American literati and prominenti (i.e. the professors and professionals), the people who are capable of initiating and promoting post-secondary curriculums, show absolutely no regard for the cultural education of young southern-Italian Americans and have no respect for the mighty history of our people before Ellis Island.

Rather, these same 'teachers' and 'professionals' spend untold amount of time complaining, debating, holding conferences and teaching courses about 'guido and gangster' mass media representation of southern-Italian Americans.

In short, southern-Italian American youth have no opportunity to study the history of their ancestry. To add insult to injury, the youth of all European Americans have no opportunity to study the profound affects that southern Italy and Sicily have had on the history and culture of Europe as a whole.

Renaissance Art vs. Renaissance Government

The complete absence of the history and culture of Italy south of Rome in the American university system is not only an insult to Americans of southern-Italian descent, more importantly such historiographic neglect is flat-out intellectually wanting.

How can people who call themselves humanist scholars and intellectuals possibly ignore such an important component of the history of Western Civilization?

Consider for example, Renaissance Studies. There is no doubt that the artistic production of Renaissance northern Italy was truly phenomenal in terms of creativity and absolutely mind-boggling volume. Truly, such a phenomena deserves the type of intensity of scholarship and curriculum that our Italian Studies programs allot to them.

However, a comprehensive historiographic study of Italy during the Renaissance, not limited to the Arno Valley artistic wonders, would note that the ancient Greek revival fountainhead of Renaissance aesthetics was also the basis for the arcane form of government known as the city-state.

While Renaissance artists were taking ancient Greek art to new heights, Renaissance city-states were reliving the Peloponnesian (city-state) War. For example, classical scholar and world historian A.J. Toynbee writes regarding northern Italian city-states:

"...the city-state as a political institution was not a new creation, but was a ghost evoked from the life of the antecedent Hellenic Society" (see: *Study of History* vol. iv, p. 352 n. 2)

Southern Italy rejects city-state model and leads Europe to nation-state government
While Renaissance city-states were building walls around their cities, much of Europe was moving towards the nation-state form of government.

Arguably the prototypical origin of the nation state movement can be found in southern Italy as early as the eleventh century, ultimately coming onto fruition as the 'nation-state' of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

All the cities of southern Italy rejected the concept of autonomous city-states as early as the eleventh century. Toynbee writes:

"There is every indication that in the eleventh century [in southern Italy] the autonomous principalities of Benevento, Capua, Salerno and Amalfi were ripe for a development of civic institutions like those ...in Tuscany and the Basin of the Po... However, they [rejected the city-state model]"

The case of Naples is most instructive about the rejection of city-state in favor of a broader national mentality that prevailed south of Rome many centuries before it took hold in northern Italy.

Toynbee writes:

Naples, for example, who surrendered her city-state autonomy to the Normans to become the petty-Constantinople of the Kingdom of Sicily-beyond-the-'Faro.. (see: Study p. 353 n. 2)

"The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was a Western 'successor-state of the East Roman Empire, and its talent for efficient administration on a large scale was a legacy which came as a windfall (see: Study vol. iv p.406 n. 3)

This is to say, as early as the eleventh century; Neapolitans realized that there was no advantage to reverting to the ancient Greek pre-Roman city-state form of government.

Rather, they looked to the contemporary Byzantine model of government; realizing the political, economic and military advantage of large integrated states vis-a-vis city-states. Accordingly, they set their sights on a unified state of southern Italy and Sicily with the possibility of Naples being the capital.

Almost immediately the benefits of unification were realized. The historian Will Durant writes:

"In 1100 A.D., the 'two Sicilies' - the island and southern Italy - were already a power in the politics of Europe. Roger II made Palermo his capital, extended his rule in Italy to Naples and Capua...(The Age of Faith p. 703)

By 1300 A.D., difference between northern Italy and the south in terms of political organization is stunning. Between seventy and eighty northern city-states versus one state of Two Sicilies.

Toynbee:

"At the opening of the fourteenth century of the Christian Era, the North and Central Italian regions of Lombardy, Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria were partitioned between seventy or eighty city-states"

By the sixteenth century (four hundred years after southern cities rejected autonomy in favor of national unit) the north had achieved some consolidation but still was nowhere near a nation state...Toynbee:

"By 1527, the number of sovereign states in the same Italian area had been reduced from seventy or eighty to ten [principalities]..."

"However, by the end of the fifteenth century every one of the latter-day Italian principalities had been decisively out-classed in political strength by the Louis XI in France and Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain and Henry VII in England." (Study vol. iii p. 355)

Conclusion

The documentary evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that Italy south of Rome was at the forefront of the European nation-state movement, while north Italy desperately clung to the self-destructive pre-Roman Greek city-state model of political economy.

Yet, the South does not exist in the American university Italian and Italian American Studies history curriculums - go figure!

Instead of a conference about bias against southern-Italian Americans in the media, I would like to see a conference about bias in the American university system against southern-Italian Americans - with special emphasis on the bias that Italian American scholars have against the history of their own people.



states-built-walls-around-their-cities

Links

[1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/33855twosicil1340620443png>