

## Agricultural silk production in Calabria in the XV and XVI century

The main characteristic of Calabria in the XV century was the silk industry. In this century Calabria made considerable improvements in this industry, not only in the expansion of the cultivation of the silk worm and at the same time the cultivation of the mulberry in the country, but also in the increasement and the elaboration of this noble art.

Catanzaro, the most important town in this region at that time, achieved great fame with its damasks — the so-called « catanzarito » — and its velvets so popular at the Court of Naples which were favorably compared to those of Genoa, Venice, and Florence (1). Catanzaro was at that time the most important center of silk production in the region. Year after year the number of spinning mills increased, as did the workers involved in the production of silk, which is why this art achieved a certain level of industrialization. In the meantime, in the rest of Calabria the silk production maintained the old character, more or less according to the various places, following the ancient cottage production system, engaging whole families and forming economic bounds between the country and the cities.

Silk was almost certainly introduced in Calabria by the Byzantines. Under the Saracens the production of silk was greatly increased, and in the second half of the XIII century with the decline of silk manufacturing in Sicily due to the emigration of the Muslims, Calabria achieved supremacy in this art over all Italy, and owed great part of its commercial importance to this art (2). Many writers of medieval times noted that in Catanzaro there was such an abundance of silk, that almost everybody, poor or rich, could have gone dressed in silk (3). Especially in Catanzaro the ubiquity of silk clothing had arrived to a point by the second half of the XV century that the

Count of Catanzaro Antonio Centelles ordered that no man or woman could dress in the future in silk clothes nor wear golden ornaments because such luxury caused the economic ruin of many families (4).

According to a local tradition, some people from Catanzaro imported silk making in France. In 1399, at the time of the war between the House of Anjou and House of Durazzo for the succession to the Kingdom of Naples, in Catanzaro, that was for king Ladislao of Durazzo, the Count Nicola Ruffo inspired by some emissaries of Tomassino de Cumis of Catanzaro, tried to get back from France a special kind of silk making system, by seizing the mills that surrounded Catanzaro and in this way starve this city. But the attempt did not work out and the French faction won out. Many people from Catanzaro had taken part to this plot, almost all of whom were weavers, dyers and twisters of silk. Fearing capture and death, they followed the Anjoine soldiers to Provence and became the first masters of silk art in France (5).

The privileges that were given to the silk art in Catanzaro warranted its expansion. Under King Ferdinand I, Naples and Catanzaro were exempted from the prohibition of manufacturing silk. The merchants from Catanzaro were free from all taxes, including of course those which concerned silk. Catanzaro achieved its greatest importance when the consulate for the silk industry was established in this town. This was the first provincial consulate of the silk art in the Kingdom of Naples (after the one in Naples itself, permitted in 1465 by King Ferdinand I) and it was formed by three consuls of the noble silk art. The consuls were elected every year on the first day of May at the presence of the magnificent mayors and captain of the town, and by the votes of all those who were regularly registered silk artisans. The consuls were three in number, one representing the merchants and the other two the masters. No one could be elected consul if he did not belong to a silk family. With the consuls, a counsellor was also elected for the disputes that arose regarding the silk making. The consuls were charged with judging the administration of their immediate predecessors and hearing and acting on the complaints that had been raised (6).

To guarantee the privileges of the art and the exemptions, it was decided that nobody, no matter who he was, citizen or foreigner, could produce silk cloth if he was not listed in the book or matricola of silk artisans. No person, no matter what his social status or con-

dition was, could open a shop in a public square if he was not first listed in the silk matricula. It was especially difficult for foreigners and their families to be enlisted, because first they had to go through a long and severe apprenticeship before being accepted (7).

The relations that held the people enlisted in the matricula together had not only a commercial importance, but also a social one since in this way they formed a powerful order, one of the nobilities of the city.

At that time the silk merchants were, for the most part, nobles from the same city, because in Calabria, as opposed to northern Italy, it was the nobility that held in its hands the economic and commercial power of the region. In this century, and also in the following one, Calabria was the gathering place of Venetian, Florentine and Genoese merchants, who helped to finance the economic revival of this region. Until the middle of the XV century the kings of Naples encouraged the foreign merchants, especially the Venetians, but this encouragement ceased when they interfered in the political affairs of the kingdom helping in the rebellion against the king (the same Count of Catanzaro Centelles) in the years 1444-1445 (8).

Also in the other two main cities of Calabria, Reggio and Cosenza, silk trade was the principle industry. In Reggio, silk achieved a great importance when the colour indigo was introduced. It seems it was imported by the Jews when they had been expelled from Sicily at the time of the Vice-roy Cordova. Almost every village in the district of Reggio had its calendars for silk manufacturing. In a place called Sambatello in Reggio can be noted the calendars that were used where the silk was treated with a special water that spouted out of a rock. Its effect was that the silk did not lose its colour, unlike the silks produced elsewhere, and was the brightest of all produced in the region. This particular type of silk kept the name Sambatello from the place it was born. In the district of Reggio, another place where silk production was great was Seminara. Today this place is just a village, but in the XVI century it was even more populous than Reggio itself, and competed with this town to be the silk manufacturing center of the district (9).

In the whole province of Cosenza, and specially in the villages that had a natural way out in the Valley of the Crati River, the cultivation of the silk worms was the main resource for the poor people. Important centers of this production were Montalto, Rende

Bisignano, Acri, S. Marco, Altomonte, Castrovillari, Morano. The cultivation of the silk worms was at that time one of the very few economic activities of Cosenza, and especially in the villages that surrounded this city. The silk worm was the only friend the poor people had, and the only riches amid so much poverty. The people of Cosenza always considered San Giobbe as protector of silk industry, in memory of the worms that consumed his body. Simple people say that those worms were the first relatives of the silk worms. In 1464 Cosenza obtained permission to export silk which was reconfirmed in 1486. However, in 1555 when the city demanded to have a consulate for the silk industry, this was refused by the vice-roy of Naples. It seems the reason was that the vice-roy wanted to take revenge on the people of Cosenza, who in the same request had asked for the suppression of a silk tax from which the vice-roy gained a great amount of money (10).

At the time of Emperor Charles V, that is in the first half of the XVI century, there was a considerable increase in the silk trade, mainly due to the increased number of registred artisans in the kingdom of Naples.

The silk yarn was particularly popular in foreign countries. The correspondance of the Genoese merchants found in « Consuls and Orators » in Naples contains fascinating accounts detailing how the silk trade flourished. In 1517 the market in Cosenza was favored while at other times it shared the honor with the rest of Calabria. The Genoese merchants used to send their ships to Paola to take on the silk to be sold in the markets of northern Italy. Some particulars from the correspondance include: in 1551 Vincenzo di Marino Rivole, Nicolao Gentile di Canale, and Giovanni Agostino di Grimaldo, all Genoese merchants, went to Reggio to buy silk for which they paid the considerable sum of 3700 golden scudi. Florentine merchants were also interested in trading in Calabria. Angelo Biffoli bought 4 bales of silk in Cosenza and surroundings through Giovan Matteo Bruno, who would give them to Francesco Vecchietti, who in turn would give them to Giovanni de Ricasoli (11).

But such riches in the kingdom of Naples could not continue without being taxed sooner or later. The original tax that had been put on silk was tollerable to merchants and masters of this art. And things changed after the reign of Emperor Charles V, and specially so under the rule of the Spanish vice-roys. In 1555 the tax on silk

was increased to 22 grana per libbra, for the construction of defense castles on the coast against the attack by the Saracens (12).

In 1563 the government sold patronage jobs (such as silk tax collector) to the highest bidder, and this became the ruin of silk trade in Calabria, as well as for the whole kingdom. The man who offered the government the highest amount of money was given the office of tax collector. He in turn exacted enormous taxes from the silk producers, driving down their profits. The way these taxes were levied soon brought a complete ruin in this trade by making any profit impossible. By the following century the silk trade was in decay and could no longer stand the competition of foreign silk. It was the end of an industry that had enriched Calabria for over two centuries (13).

AMEDEO MICELI

RIASSUNTO. — La seta in Calabria fu la principale e più importante risorsa agricola ed economica nei sec. XV e XVI. L'intensità della sua produzione era legata alle condizioni favorevoli che vennero accordate al suo commercio. Quando questa produzione venne ristretta dalle tasse imposte dal governo spagnolo e prevalse nella qualità la produzione delle sete straniere, la produzione calabrese decadde e perse quella caratteristica agricola che aveva avuto in questi due secoli.

(1) E. PONTIERI, *La Calabria a metà del secolo XV e le rivolte di Antonio Centelles*, Napoli, 1963, pp. 100-101; G. CARANO DONVITO, *Per una storia dei tessuti nell'antica economia calabrese*, in « Archivio storico per la Calabria e Lucania », VIII (1938), pp. 37 segg.; L. MONTALTO, *La corte di Alfonso I d'Aragona. Vesti e gale*, Napoli, 1922, pp. 107 and 113.

(2) O. DITO, *La storia calabrese*, Cosenza, 1967, p. 287.

(3) G. MARAFIOTTI, *Croniche ed antichità di Calabria*, Padova, 1601, p. 30.

(4) V. D'AMATO, *Memorie storiche di Catanzaro*, Napoli, 1670, p. 109.

(5) O. DITO, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 291.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 291.

- (8) E. PONTIERI, *op. cit.*, pp. 192 and 198.  
(9) O. DITO, *op. cit.*, p. 296; SPANÒ BOLANI, *Storia di Reggio*, vol. II, Napoli, 1857, p. 3; DE SALVO, *Ricerche e studi storici intorno a Palmi, Seminara e Gioia Tauro*, Palmi, 1899, pp. 133 and 187.  
(10) O. DITO, *op. cit.*, p. 299.  
(11) G. CONIGLIO, *Il Regno di Napoli al tempo di Carlo V*, Napoli, 1951, p. 140.  
(12) O. DITO, *op. cit.*, p. 301.  
(13) F. MARINCOLA DI S. FLORO, *Storia e statuti dell'arte della seta in Catanzaro*, pp. 32-33.