



# Sicilia Parra



Bi-annual Newsletter of Arba Sicula:  
An International Organization that Promotes the Language and Culture of Sicily

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## The Annual Tour of Sicily Was Postponed to September 2022

As you know, we have had to cancel three consecutive tours of Sicily in 2020, 2021 and 2022, interrupting a tradition that had lasted for 25 years. As I write this note in April 2022, our expectations are that the COVID 19 that has caused such disastrous consequences in the economy of the world and in the lives of ordinary people, appears to have waned and that the risks of infection have diminished considerably. While experts warn that it will stay with us for longer than we would like and that we may have to rely on booster shots to maintain our immunities to the virus, the risk of infection seems to be more manageable. In Italy the situation also appears to have improved. Restrictions have been relaxed in most places, although I personally wear a mask when I am

in the Post Office or when I go to the supermarket to buy the daily bread. You know that Sicilians cannot live without their bread! So I expect that being vaccinated and boosted as all our passengers will be expected to be, minimizes the chances of infection. Even if one is unlucky to catch the virus, its effects, according to the CDC may not cause serious dangers unless other conditions are present. Unfortunately the disastrous war in Ukraine is an event that could impact

Continues on p. 6



Giovanni Meli (1740-1815)

## The Arba Sicula Website Is Being Updated

It has been a long time since we looked at different ways to connect with our membership and with prospective members. I have been replacing the copies of our publications *Arba Sicula*, *Sicilia Parra* and the catalogue of books published by Legas, but we have not performed the more radical operation we are endeavoring to accomplish now. While the website was up to the standards prevalent when it was first made, many advances have been made in the technology and design of websites. In collaboration with one of my former students, Jacek Kaczocha, who has become an expert in the field of computer technology and with Wojciech Piekieniak, a designer colleague of his expert in web design, the preliminary work has already been done and we expect the new website to be released in early May. My idea was to create not only a more attractive site but one that would attract new viewers and potentially new subscribers. The look will not change dramatically. The site will contain the contents of our publications that will be updated more frequently, together with the catalogue of books that can be purchased online through our Paypal account. You will also be able to pay your dues using the same account. The site will have new features that

Continues on p. 3

## Table of Contents

The Annual Tour of Sicily Was Postponed to September 2022.....	1
President's Message.....	2
<i>In Memoriam</i> , Shurland Zapka.....	3
Miniature Masterpieces: The Art of Greek-Sicilian Coins, by B. Bertone.....	4
A Little Palermitan and a Little Messinese: Zorro Spoke Sicilian.....	7
The Olive Tree in Sicily.....	8
St. Joseph Altar: a Sicilian Tradition.....	10
A Poem on the Ugliness of War, by Trilussa.....	13
Puisia Siciliana/Sicilian Poetry.....	14
Easter Festivities in Sicily.....	16
Book Reviews: G. Meli, <i>Lirica II</i> , reviewed by Antonio Pagano.....	17
Tour 27, Sep. 3 to Sept 15, 2022 — Tentative Itinerary.....	20

## President's Message

Once again this year we had to cancel our tour of Sicily that was scheduled to take place in June. This is the third time. To say that I am disappointed would be an understatement and I am sure the few people who were brave enough to want to go on the tour were also disappointed. But I am a persistent person and I don't give up easily. Having conducted 25 consecutive annual tours, I don't want to end the series so abruptly. So, I am planning to reschedule it for September, hoping that the war in Ukraine does not pose any threat to our travelers. I am quite confident that the COVID virus will not be a serious threat to our passengers who will be vaccinated and boosted as I am. Please look at the proposed itinerary on p. 20. The fact that we will be going at an unusual but also very pleasant time for the year should open up possibilities for some who have not been able to join us.

The pandemic has caused us to stop in person events at St. John's University for two years. As you may know universities have been forced to cancel in person classes for their students and all public events like the one Arba Sicula holds have been put on hold. Slowly, things are beginning to open up and I am confident that by the start on the new academic year in September we will be able to hold events at St. John's. I am working to hold an event early in October with a group of singers coming from Sicily. I will announce the event once preparations have been finalized.

In the meantime, I keep working promoting the Sicilian language and the culture of Sicily. On April 27, 2022, I will make a presentation on Zoom to the members of the Italian Charities of America on the work that Arba Sicula does and on the advanced Sicilian grammar I published last year, *Learn Sicilian II*. Italian Charities is an organization in Queens, New York that offers courses on the Sicilian language. I have also devoted some time to developing lessons for our members who want to learn Sicilian. They are interactive Powerpoint presentation that include the audio. I have done three lessons so far that will be included in our updated website which will be unveiled sometime in May. So be sure to check out the new features of the site which will include videos of Sicily, theatrical performances and links to other organizations that share our interests. The site is [www.arbasicula.org](http://www.arbasicula.org)

I have done a number of presentations on Zoom and I did an interview with Josephine Maietta that aired on her radio program. I will do another Zoom presentation on *Learn Sicilian II* in collaboration with Italian Charities of America on April 27, 2022. Unfortunately this newsletter will not reach you in time.

I also want to mention that I published the second volume of a critical study of Giovanni Meli's lyrical poems. You may recall that I was asked by the Nuova Ipsa publishing house of Palermo to prepare three volumes of Meli's lyrical production. I am also working on the third volume and I am hoping to finish it by the end of 2022. See Antonio Pagano's review of *Lirica II* in this issue.



### Sicilia Parra

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continues from p 1

will be updated periodically. One feature that I am happy about is the Sicilian lessons that will be added periodically. So far I have done three such lessons to teach Sicilian to those of you who are eager to learn the language of your relatives and ancestors. The lessons are for beginners, but can be used by those who already have a basic knowledge of the language. They are done as interactive Powerpoint presentations that include audio as well. A second feature that I am sure you will enjoy will offer links to documentaries on Sicily by Alfred Zappalà and Eszter Vajda who have been doing wonderful work producing many such documentaries. Others who are involved in the promotion of Sicilian Culture have agreed to link with us. I mention Alessio Patti who is an actor, poet, novelist, and translator specializing in translating Classics of the world into Sicilian. He is a prolific performer and has produced numerous videos that lovers of the Sicilian language will appreciate. Another important link will be to Splendid Sicily run by Giovanni Vallone who promotes Sicilian culture. A feature that will be of help in our efforts to promote the Sicilian language is the Sicilian Translator that when completed, will also be part of the website. We will also make available a vocabulary of Sicilian. The idea of providing these links is to show that there are many people working who share our interests, each of whom can help to advance the goals of our association. Needless to say our hope is to make our website a place where people will go when they think of Sicily.



## *In Memoriam* Shurland Zapka

**H**aving travelled somewhat extensively in my lifetime (I am the daughter of an Alitalia travel agent) from my participation in two decades of Arba Sicula's tours and having guided numerous study abroad stays for students in Italy over my career, I must admit that group travel often occasions (me included) the complaints of the proverbial "ugly American" abroad". In the Covid era, this reality can only prove to be growing, as travelers grow grumpier, forced to succumb to the rigors of travel restrictions etc. However when I recall returning Arba Sicula traveler, Shurland Zapka, I cannot help but remember her pleasant, level, and understanding disposition that buttressed her sunny and loving smile. It was a constant on our Sicilian journey.

I recall Shurland's first trip with us. It was obvious that she had gone through brutal rounds of chemotherapy. Despite this, she never complained at breakfast or on the bus and her humour never waned. I recall this vividly as she was traveling with her dear friend Carmela. They both journeyed through Italy together extensively (doing six tours!), even arriving prior to the Arba Sicula tour, leaving their families behind to enjoy the unique, healing beauty that only Italy



Shurland Zapka (right) with Carmela Cesario on one of our tours.

can so simply and so exquisitely deliver.

The last time Shurland came on the tour was the year we had included the city of Ragusa in the AS itinerary. I found Shurland to be just as she had been years before—sunny, fun, warm and quite the trooper. I assumed that her health was back—there were no visible signs of the chemotherapy that had ravaged her years earlier.

One evening, I entered Ragusa's lovely cathedral for Mass and found Shurland praying with her friend Carmela Cesario. In discretion, her friend asked me to remember Shurland in prayer, as her cancer had fiercely returned. Though I never betrayed the trust of her friend, who confided in me in good faith, I must say that it was hard for me to keep a poker face, knowing the crude reality hidden under what was one of the most beautiful smiles.

Years later, when she had no choice, Shurland allowed Carmela to let me say goodbye to her, as she had only months to live. She never wanted the negative attention. I only found out years later that Shurland had been widowed 2 decades earlier—she was a single mom and grandma, a nurse and had been a caregiver to some of the elders in her family. She bore it all with grace. As the late world traveller Anthony Bourdain has wisely observed.

"Travel changes you. As you move through this life and this world you change things slightly, you leave marks behind, however small. And in return, life — and travel — leaves marks on you."

I am grateful for the beautiful marks Shurland has left on Sicily and on our tour.

Florence Russo



## *Miniature Masterpieces: The Art of Greek-Sicilian Coins*

*By Bernard Bertone*

*(This article continues from the previous issue)*

Another very interesting coin (below) is from the small town of Entella in western Sicily which was one of the towns in legend founded by Trojans after the Trojan War. (Eryx or Erice and Egesta/Segesta were the main Elymian cities.) However, this coin has obvious Greek as well as Punic influence. Nike above the horse and the grain of barley recall many earlier Sicilian coins and the palm is indicative of Panormos and Carthage.



This is a gold coin of Tarentum showing Heracles in obverse and Poseidon in chariot in the reverse about 315 BCE. The attitude of the horses by now was a commonplace.

Source: NGC; Google images



Cities as diverse as Clazomenae, Rhodes, and Cyrene had facing heads or chariots copying the Sicilian type. Hellenistic coins, those that followed Alexander's conquests, for the most part initiated the practice of heads that stood for real people, the kings and queens of the Hellenistic kingdoms of the East. But Rome was to an extent influenced by Sicilian coins too. Here is an example of Republican coinage where it became fashionable to imitate the head of a god and especially the quadriga very much in the same attitude of fifth century Sicilian coins: galloping horses in three-quarter view driven by a charioteer or rider on horseback.

A Roman coin of about 132 BCE uses the quadriga in the same attitude as much earlier Sicilians coins: Source: Forumancientcoins.com; Google images



Ian Carradice sums up the debt that almost all people around the Mediterranean owed to Greek art in general, and these coins in particular: “Romans were prepared to admit that they were themselves conquered by Greek culture, a fact of which the coinage of the Roman empire provides clear proof. Some imperial coins have reverse designs clearly copying Greek prototypes from the fifth and fourth centuries BC...” (Carradice 100) (See Carradice’s *Greek Coins* for many more examples of Greek influence.)

Greek coins were so influential that beyond the far reaches of the Roman empire, and even during the middle ages, in less orthodox Islamic dynasties, “a distant



Source: USAcoinbook.com; Google images

echo of Classical Greek design (the facing head of Arethusa from Syracuse) can be seen in a twelfth-century bronze coin issued by Zengid rulers in Iraq.” (Ibid. 99)



Source:Limitedvintage.com; Google images

To conclude this study of Greek-Sicilian coinage, I have shown a small sampling of influences that the magnificent coinage of Sicily has had on near and far peoples in ancient times. But as Harlan Berk and many others have stated that these influences have extended to our own times. It is a well-known fact that President Theodore Roosevelt loved the artistic nature of ancient coinage and when he regarded American coins of the Nineteenth Century, he wrote to his Secretary of the Treasury, observing, “I think the state of our coinage is artistically of atrocious hideousness.” (Bailey, 2)

“Late in 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt, one of the most numismatic friendly presidents, decided U.S. coinage needed a facelift. He was on a mission to bolster America’s image worldwide...Roosevelt was an admirer of ancient Greek

coins, especially those of high-relief designs (where the features of the coin project far outward from the field) and saw an opportunity to further his cause.” (Ibid,2)

As we have seen, Greek coins, especially Sicilian-Greek works, were in the forefront of high relief designs, where foreshortening and three-quarter views abounded. Roosevelt pegged a personal friend, sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, to redesign American coinage. High relief was difficult and tricky, for it took several strikes to achieve. The technique, of course, differed drastically from ancient die cutters who used a punch with the “reverse” set into it and the “obverse” set into the anvil. A single strike of a hammer on a heated and softened metal “blank” would usually suffice to produce a coin. The production of modern coins is done with machines. Perhaps the most beautiful coin of the modern era resulted. This is a copy of the original Saint Gaudens design: an ultra-high relief, twenty-four carat gold \$20 piece, certainly worth more than that!

The above coin by Saint-Gaudens coin serves to show actual similarity with Kimon and Euainetos. Liberty facing left has much resemblance to Arethusa some twenty-three hundred years before.

In conclusion, there is something magical and transcendent about Greek-Sicilian coins which no other peoples, including mainland Greeks, have matched in variety and brilliance of design. This is true certainly because of Greek civilization itself, but it is also about the Sicilian soil which brought forth and nurtured these imaginative die engravers or celators, as some have called them. There is no doubt they were men of genius without equal. One numismatist, Charles Seltman, has stated that many of these artists were driven from Athens by the plague of 430, and that may be true, but we have no solid evidence of that, only conjecture. And if that was true, why did they come to Sicily and nowhere else? Still, that does not account for the artists responsible for the Demareteion and the coins of the Aetna Master and other very talented artists who cut dies long before

430. The reason, as many have stated, was that Sicily was the “America” of the ancient world in the fifth century. It was a time of considerable prosperity and relative peace. It drew the likes of poets and philosophers Aeschylus, Pindar, Simonides, Sappho, Bacchylides, Xenophanes, and even Plato. These coin engravers, whether they were born on Sicilian soil or not, never had worked on the mainland, as far as is known. All we have is their names which they boldly inscribed on their works. They deserve to be better known and acknowledged as some of the world’s greatest artists.

### Endnotes:

1. Harlan J. Beck, a numismatist, sees a problem “with this delightful story. The Carthaginians probably sent the crown to Demarete around 480 B.C., but art historians and numismatists maintain that the decadrachms were struck about a decade later, around 470. Moreover, the iconography of the coin does not refer to Demarete in any clear fashion, but appears to celebrate the chariot victories...” (*100 Greatest Ancient Coins*, Pelham, AL: 2019)

2. Marksman, Sidney David, *The Horse in Greek Art*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1943.

3. See *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, (online) “Greek Vase Painters and Potters”

## A Proud Sicilian!

**Lorenzo Romano** who lives in Whitestone, New York, is a proud Sicilian who wrote to tell me that *America: Oggi*, the only Italian language daily newspaper in the country had stopped publishing. This is indeed a sad news. Mr. Romano, whose letters to the editor were frequently printed in the paper, wrote that it was a devastating loss for him and for the readers of the paper. Mr. Romano said he had learned about Arba Sicula through the paper. We share Lorenzo’s sense of loss. But Lorenzo takes pride in his heritage and wants to let the world know it. He put up a Sicilian flag up in front of his house on the Fourth of July and has decided to let it stay there permanently. Bravo Lorenzo!

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### Continues from p. 1

the tour if the conflict grows wider. Having considered the likely scenarios, I have decided to try one more time to conduct a tour of Sicily, by postponing our departure to the early part of September, which would be a most pleasant time there. The weather will still be quite pleasant—in the seventies-eighties range—and Sicilians will be eager to welcome us after a disastrous two years when tourism basically stopped.

I have already contacted our local travel agent for the flights, which probably will be the same as those we had to cancel. And I have written to our Sicilian travel agent to begin the process of making arrangements for the land portion of the tour. As is our custom, the itinerary that you can see on p. 20 of this newsletter, is always tentative. We always add or cancel events depending on our contacts within Sicily. We expect to leave from New York on September 3rd, 2022 and return to New York on September 15. If you who wish to extend your stay a little longer you will need to let me know so I can make the arrangements.

Those of you who have been eager to join the tour may write to me about your plans. I expect we will have a lot of people interested in going on the tour, though I am hoping not to go over 30 people. If you are interested you can send the \$200 deposit per person when you receive the newsletter. The deposit is traditionally not refundable, but as you know, I have refunded all deposits for the previous two tours because we had to cancel them. I am hoping that in September I will not have to refund your deposits.



## *A Little Palermitan and a Little Messinese, Zorro Spoke . . . Sicilian*

*By Editoreusa*

We thank Tiziano Dossena for allowing us to reprint this article that appeared in *Lidea Magazine*. We are pleased to discover that so many Sicilians have made and continue to make a contribution to the world of culture in this country, even though their Sicelitude often does not show. In one of the previous issues of *Sicilia Parra* we featured an article on the crying Indian who turned out to be Sicilian who was well known to American audiences for shedding a tear for the way the Americans were littering the environment and now it's the turn of Guy Williams who became well known as the actor who played the part of Zorro, (in Spanish it

means fox) the Mexican hero who was a defender of the poor against corrupt titled nobilities and other villains. Who knows how many other people of Sicilian descent are part of our consciousness without our realizing their true identities. I should not be surprised to learn that people who have earned a right to fame by using a name other than the one they received at birth. After all, Sicilians account for a large percentage of the Italian-American population in this country. Still, the fact that they had to change their name leaves a little unpleasant taste in my mouth because it suggests that they probably would not have achieved their goals had they retained their original Sicilian name. (The Editor)

“The identification of the true Sicilian origins of Guy Williams, pseudonym of Armando Joseph Catalano (1924-1989), the Italian-American actor who entered the history of cinema as the unforgettable protagonist of the Zorro television series, has been achieved thanks to the young historian Domenico Mazza.

Based on the genealogical research carried out by Mazza – Ph.D. student of the University of Peloritani, a scholar of Sicilian emigration to the USA, who explored Craxi's Messina origins and the family roots of Biden's wife – Catalano was born in Fort George, New York by Attilio Catalano and Clara Arcara, who emigrated from Sicily. By intertwining the documents of Ellis Island (Museum of Emigration of New York) and of the civil status of New York, it is certified that Attilio Catalano is a native of the town of Lercara Friddi, in the province of Palermo (also the place of origin of Lucky Luciano and of Nino Sinatra, father of the legendary Frank). This news – writes the *Gazzetta del Sud* – denies the Messina origins of Williams' father, as revealed by the biographical sheet on Wikipedia. Of Messina origin would be her mother, Clara Arcara, who left the city of the Strait with her mother Maria Zumbo and her brother Oscar. The “Sicilian face of Zorro”, as the journalist Salvo Toscano defines it, therefore had a double island origin, Palermo-Messina.”



## *The Olive Tree in Sicily*

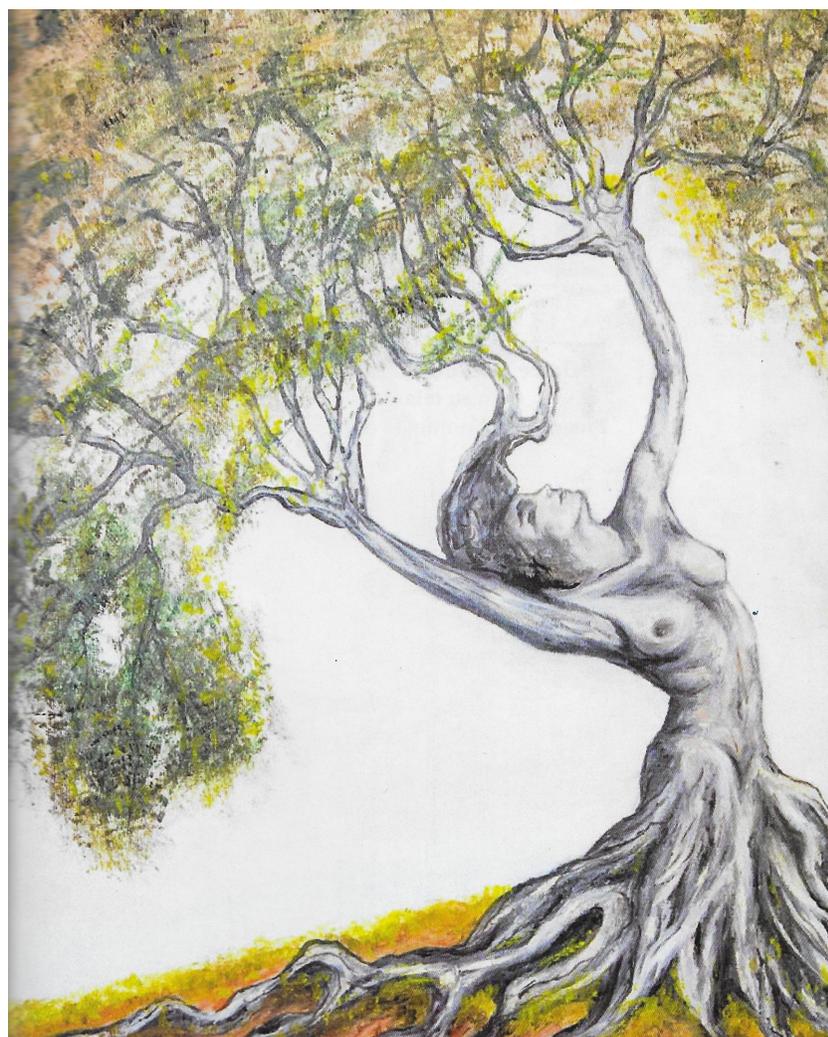
We received a charming book edited by our friend Alberto Criscenti, a poet who frequently shares the volumes produced by the *JO Associazione di Lettere, Arti e Sport* of Buseto Palizzolo. The book was entitled *Lulivo: tra poesie siciliane e raffigurazioni pittoriche* and it was devoted entirely to the many aspects of the olive tree and its importance in the life of Sicilians. The book contains poems about the olive tree, lyrics and musical scores of songs, proverbs paintings and photos involved in the production and harvesting of olives. In addition, the book contains photos and descriptions of the numerous varieties of olives grown on the island. We are glad to share part of the introduction written prof. Vincenzo Vitale who points out the connection of the olive to the three crucial periods in the island's history: the Greeks who introduced its cultivation, the Romans who first appreciated its use in gastronomy and the Arabs who in their over two hundred years of permanence planted their "ulivi sataceni" in almost all hilly areas of the island.

"This volume, which deals with the



### **The Cerasuola Olive**

It is certainly one of the most widespread varieties in Sicily and in fact it can be found in many areas. It produces oils with a medium or high intensity green olive that is fruity with hints of grass, thistle and tomato, when they are produced from less ripe fruits. Cerasuola olives are not consumed at the table but are pressed to produce and sell Sicilian extra virgin olive oil.



An oil painting entitled "Rimembranza" by Yleina Criscenti from the Pinacoteca Comunale di Buseto Palizzolo.

many important products the olive tree has provided to man for millennia, is indeed very interesting, I would even say precious.

While accompanying the wide-ranging progress of mankind, the olive tree has always kept its characteristic features (its longevity, its resistance, the silvery color of its hardy leaves) and has made various forms of use available to man: as wood (for burning; for construction; for carving); as fruits for the table (dried olives; crushed olives, variously seasoned; olives in brine; baked olives; etc. ..); as oil (for gastronomy; for lighting; for cosmetics; and for religious uses); providing shade and tranquility; crowns, for glory. Furthermore, over the centuries, it has taken on strong symbolic meanings, especially in Catholic culture: peace, patience, humility, simplicity, tenacity.

This is not surprising, if you consider that the ancient

Greeks associated the origin of the olive tree to a gift made to humanity by the goddess Athena Parthénos, who as we know was a great symbol of knowledge and wisdom!



### **The Nocellara del Belice Olive**

It is a native olive that is very popular for the pulp of the fruit that can be eaten at the table as well as for its excellent extra virgin oil with very low acidity. Its taste has a hint of thistle and artichoke. It is very common in the areas of Trapani, Palermo and Agrigento.



**The Biancolilla Olive**

This is a native olive that is used exclusively to produce extra virgin oil. It is a light oil with a slightly bitter and spicy taste and low acidity. It grows in the western parts of Sicily and in the central-eastern areas.

Reading this volume you get the impression of listening to a polyphonic choir, made up of various tones, produced by different elements, such as: poems, songs, proverbs, scientific explanations, paintings, real-life photographs; all elements, linked to the theme of the olive tree and the fruit it produces.

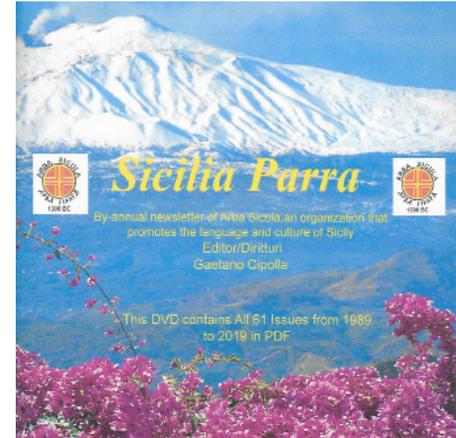
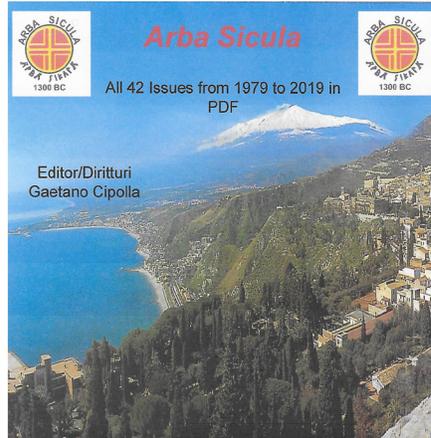
The present topic — the olive tree in the culture of our territory — on the surface does not seem to present anything that has not always been commonly known. But the moment you examine the various sections of the book, you realize that the knowledge presented here is not commonly known. In fact, it is original, profound, specific, and personal.

The poems, the songs, the paintings, the photographs present us with meaning, and emotions of individuals evoked by the olive tree and by olives; and they also lead us to understand the general and symbolic meanings that, over the centuries, have been connected to the olive tree, highlighting at the same time its ethical and social value. Olives, like wheat, played an important role in the development of the Mediterranean economy and civilization.

We mention only three of the most common of the 35 varieties of olives on the island. The production of olive oil and of wine have grown in importance for Sicily. Both have won international awards for their excellence.

# Attention Members

Issue 40 marked the fortieth year of uninterrupted publication of *Arba Sicula*. As you may know, we produced a CD that contained the first 31 issues of the journal published from 1979 to 2010. We have now updated that CD by adding the remaining issues produced from 2011 to 2019. The CD has a linked General Index for all issues, organized by recurring sections (poetry, narrative, art, etc.), that makes it easy to navigate from one issue to another with a click of the mouse.



**The Arba Sicula 40th Anniversary CD (1979-2019), 42 Issues is now available for \$30.00**

— a real bargain. You should buy it and leave it to your children as a legacy of your love for Sicily. You can also buy

**The Sicilia Parra 30th Anniversary DVD (1989-2019), 61 issues is also available for \$30.00**

Thus, for \$60.00 plus \$4.00 for shipping, you can have the two disks that will give you immediate access to the history of our organization and its fight to promote the language and the culture of Sicily.

***If you buy both the CD & the DVD you will also receive our 40th Anniversary Lapel Pin for free, (a \$10 value)***

## Order form:

Please send me

\_\_\_\_\_ copy of the *Arba Sicula* CD at \$30.00 each. Total \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ copy of the *Sicilia Parra* DVD at \$30.00 each. Total \_\_\_\_\_

Please add \$4.00 for shipping and handling \$ 4.00

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## St. Joseph Altar, a Sicilian Tradition

Every year the Sicilian communities in the United States celebrate St. Joseph's Day by enacting an event that symbolizes the need to share the bounties of the earth among the people who have and those who have not. In Sicily it was known as an act of kindness for the *vicineddi*, the poor neighbors who were invited to partake of food prepared for them on the day of St. Joseph, March 19<sup>th</sup>. In the United States the festivity takes place annually in cities where people of Sicilian origin have a presence, and as we know, Sicilians are present everywhere in this country. They are particularly numerous in Louisiana and the New Orleans Diocese prepares St. Joseph Altars in its many parishes. The festivity includes a big parade as well as other activities. Organizes such as preparing the typical food associated with the feast like the Zeppole di San Giuseppe and the traditional *Pasta cu li sardi*. We include a photo of the giant 500-pound bowl of *Pasta cu li sardi* prepared for this year's festivity. The following is the description of the event as written on the site of the Diocese of New Orleans, which yearly organizes the festivity in all its parishes.

The St. Joseph Altar or St. Joseph Table is an old tradition from Sicily. The island was suffering from a horrific drought and the people prayed for the intercession of St. Joseph for relief. At last the rain came and the people rejoiced. Sometime later, to show their gratitude, they prepared a table with a special assortment of foods they had harvested. After paying honor to St. Joseph, they distributed the food to the less fortunate.

The act of making an altar fulfills a promise made to St. Joseph for an answered prayer. The traditional St. Joseph Altar is usually constructed in a tripartite fashion, which represents the Trinity as well as the shape of the cross, with three levels honoring the Holy Trinity. A statue or picture of Joseph, often seen holding

the baby Jesus stands at the center of the highest tier with flowers surrounding him. Most often the colors of red, white and green (the colors of the Italian flag) are displayed. Most altars have a basket where visitors can place written petitions. Each food on the altar has some traditional significance.

Breads are baked in the shapes of ladders, saws and hammers, the carpenter tools, and so forth.



Joseph Sciamè presenting the event and singer Antonio Guarna who entertained the guests.

Photo by Joseph M. Calisi

Hard-boiled eggs are embedded in baked bread to symbolize the rebirth of spring and the coming of Easter.



Mons. S. Agugia, Prof. F. Russo, Damiana Testa and a guest

The breadcrumbs represent the sawdust of the carpenter.

There are wreaths and a crown of thorns, palms branches, wheat, sacred heart, crosses, Joseph's staff and the Monstrance.

The whole baked fish represents the Miracle of the Multiplication of Loaves.

Wine recalls the wedding feast at Cana.

The fava bean, which was the only crop that survived the drought, is called

the lucky bean.

This year, after a two-year hiatus, caused by the COVID 19 virus, the traditional festivity was resumed at St. John's University under the auspices of the Italian Cultural Center headed by Joseph Sciamè. Florence Russo who has been preparing the St. Joseph Altar for many years prepared an attractive display of the table containing the items listed above. The event, which was attended by many members of Arba Sicula, was presented by Joseph Sciamè and included a mass by Monsignor Agugia, who blessed the table, and remarks by Florence Russo who is the coordinator of the Italian program at St. John's and a member of the Board of the Center. Professor Russo focused on the significance of the Tavola: "The table, as always, highlights the underlying theme of poverty where it outreaches to the impoverished neighbors in little towns in Southern Italy struck by famine and drought. Here the 'tavola' symbolizes charity to the poor. The tradition was to invite neighbors usually with a symbolic number of three main protagonists formed by neighbors to symbolize the Holy Family. The bread crumbs, present in the "pasta cu li sardi, pasta with sardines, used in the dinner represent the sawdust from St. Joseph's craft as a carpenter also highlight the meal's humble origins, as the poor could not use grated cheese on pasta, but used a breadcrumb topping instead. The carpentry of St. Joseph is also underscored by the presence of a hammer and nails on the table for decoration."

The event included entertainment by singer Antonio Guarna. Arba Sicula is pleased to see events such as these. We see life slowly returning to normal and we look forward to resuming our events on the campus.

## My Favorite Meal

by James Abruzzo

The challenge confounds. How can anyone, particularly someone who is now firmly ensconced, or is it lightly drifting, in his eighth decade, write about a favorite anything? My essay on a favorite piece of clothing brought me back to my youth, to the folly of high school, to my haute-fashioned days of international travel, referenced an early 17th century Italian keyboard composer and a twentieth century film icon. With the question at hand, my favorite meal, the response will be equally circuitous but, I promise, not circumspect.

The clothing begins with the natural material, the fabric, the process, the history, the design, the fit, etc. Meals require food. And, as importantly, locations, and many other ritual accoutrements: tastes, smells, conversations, staging, composition, the matching beverage, the company, surprises, delights, adventures, disappointments. The best meals are great cultural experiences like the exhibition, concert, play, or dance performance that transforms us. For me also, a great meal can be like the sublime cultural experience of finally understanding and playing a piano sonata by Beethoven, or Scarlatti. And yes, a meal can be equally transformative.

My earliest memories of a favorite meal occurred in the basement kitchen of Uncle Joe Mulè, the husband of my father's oldest sister Lillie. Like many Italian Americans with some meager means, the Mule's owned a modest two-story house with a first-floor kitchen, dining room and front living room, bedrooms upstairs and a basement with another full-functioning kitchen and dining area where the family spent most of its time. In the back of the house, there was a garden, which plays an important part in the story. The basement kitchen cabinets were stacked with large glass jugs, sealed with red metal screw caps; inside floated hundreds of green olives being cured with vinegar, garlic and likely, a bay leaf. A white scum floated on the top of the

liquid, (at the time, quite disgusting to me), which, I now understand, every now and then Uncle Joe skimmed off; he was carrying on a tradition of curing olives, learned from his homeland, a town less than twenty miles south from Aunt Lillie's father's hometown of Sambuca. The immigrants from that part of Sicily, like those from my mother's side, seemed to find each other in Brooklyn and intermarry. That part of Sicily, the Agrigento and Trapani provinces had a strong Arab influence (see the story of my mother's fig cookies). And one of the distinct foods was made from a particular almost translucent shelled land snail which in the dialect of the area was called *babbaluci*.

Sicilian is a fully formed language, distinct from Italian, and while there are many Sicilian dialects depending on the part of Sicily and what culture originally inhabited it; the language however, itself is distinct with its own literature. Depending on where you are from near Palermo, the famous fig cookies may be called *cucciddati* or *cuddureddi* or *buc-cellati*. When I was traveling with my father Sam in Sicily in 1996 (Sam spoke two dialects of Sicilian, plus Italian, Spanish, and French) the marionette maker we were visiting asked Sam, because of his accent, if he came from a particular town about 10 miles from Palermo. The word for "boy" in Sicilian is *picciriddu*, or *figghiolu*, or *carusu* depending on where on the island (the Greeks settled in eastern Sicily, and not coincidentally the Greek work for the statues of young males is *kouras*). The passage of time has modified the Sicilian American's pronunciations of many Sicilian words. Ricotta, pronounced with the c sounding almost like a hard g, has been transmogrified to *riguaght* or, from the more refined but no less informed, *reekottah*. *Fagioli* ("fa, joe, li" like Angelina Jolie), the word for bean, is now *fazool*, as in *pasta fazool*.

Which is a long way of saying that *babbaluci* sounded more like *babbaloo=ge-ah* (like the luge in the winter Olympics) when I first heard it.

Relatives of the French *escargot*, this Sicilian snail is found only in the Agrigento and Trapani regions of Sicily (where all four of my grandparents were born), perhaps originally imported from North Africa by the Arabs. These snails are voracious eaters and may be found in the hundreds attached to and eating wild fennel plants and anything else in the countryside. They also reproduce prolifically and are parthenogenic, they can reproduce without a mate. To me they are more refined tasting than the French *escargot*. They are usually cooked in a light and spicy tomato sauce and served with crusty bread (for a Sicilian, a meal without bread is worse than a meal without wine) and a toothpick (and here I must tell you about the Italian word for toothpick, just because it is so delightful to say: "stuzzicadenti" which literally means poking the teeth). The toothpick spears the meat from the shell, which is removed in one piece, coated in sauce, and in one motion placed in the mouth.

Each spring Uncle Joe would go to the market and buy live *babbaluci* to cook for his family. The event where I was present has an interesting backstory. Joe was born in Agrigento at the turn of century, like many Sicilians he was compact, with a leathery pallor and tight wove hair, It seems that Uncle Joe returned from the market one evening and left the snails in a bucket outside the back door entrance to the basement kitchen. A dinner plate topped the bucket to protect the precious contents from birds or cats. The next morning, the plate was on the ground and the bucket empty – the *babbaluci* had climbed the side of the bucket, unseated the plate, and escaped into Aunt Lillie's flower garden. Fast forward to that fall, and the *babbaluci*, following their biological mandates, had multiplied prolifically. With literally hundreds gathered, the entire Abruzzo side of the family was invited over for a feast. While waiting for dinner, my cousin Ken (who is my age) and my late cousin Bob, a few years older, and I were in the kitchen. We found a few of the snails, still alive awaiting their spicy bath.

I remember so clearly, we named them and raced them. The table, maybe large enough to seat four comfortably, was

covered with plastic (as was almost all the furniture in the upstairs living room and anything else that, comfort aside, protected the newly bought furniture of an Italian American household from direct human contact). It takes patience, and a supremely carefree life for we three, pre-two-digit aged boys to watch, cajole, and cheer on these snails, each no larger than thimble, making their way over the table for fifteen minutes to the finish line. Nor did we three naïvetés make the connection between these named sprinters and our dinner which followed. At that time, and for me today, naming it doesn't mean we can't eat it.

One more side note before I get to the denouement. One reason why I entered so easily and was embraced so readily, into my wife Lorraine's family, was over food; and one of the connections was the *babbalucci*. Uncle Tony brought back a bunch from the Brooklyn market and cooked them in a very spicy tomato sauce – it was sometime in the 80s and may be the last time I myself had this delicacy. (Had Lorraine married that motorcycle gang local he would likely not have passed the *babbalucci* test). And I shall soon remedy this absence of *babbalucci* because I have found the only purveyor of live brown snails in America, located on the North Shore of Long Island. For a mere \$40 I can get a hundred of these live, “molto adagio” *escargot*, to go.

But onward to the somewhat confining, but understandable question of “the best” meal. Sure I could talk about the hundreds of meals around the home table with our ever expanding family, the pizzas prepared by the grandchildren or my students or colleagues who have each visited the house in the Berkshires; or the incredible meals with Lorraine in locations like the fish restaurant reached by vaporetto on the northern shore of the Cannaregio area of Venice, or in the restaurant converted from a 15th century sculptor's studio in La Vucciria of Palermo, or on the outdoor parapet of a 16th century castle in Croatia. Then there are the simple briny oysters at Florian in Hamburg, or the dinner party for 16 thrown for me by dear friend Svenja

in her apartment in Berlin; all the Germans spoke English to be polite, and we festively all wore masks of famous people, celebrating while unknowingly the first strains of Covid appeared in Europe and everyone would wear different masks for safety for the next two years. There were the five consecutive dinners in London's Mayflower Hotel dining room where the risotto was covered in real gold leaf and where the *maitre'd*, learning on our final night in London that it was my birthday (my 40th) and that I really wanted *nocciolo* ice-cream, telephoned his wife and asked her to buy some and deliver it to the restaurant for me. There was the wedding dinner in Hong Kong, arranged by Christine where she, and Lorraine and I, and James and Iris celebrated in a private dining room with our own chef and sommelier. You see, favorite is tough.

And just as a favorite piece of clothing isn't always the fanciest or most expensive, the most notable or even remarkable, my favorite meal is emblematic of and mostly aligned with my values. When you hear of it, my reader, you will know more about me.

Lorraine and I were driving easterly along the northern coast of Sicily, either just east or west of Palermo, sometime in the 80s or 90s, I don't remember. It was a local road, not the Autostrada, and we were passing through small towns. At one town, as we were getting hungry, I stopped in front of a bank. At that time, the Mafia and other unsavory groups were in full force, and bank robberies were commonplace. To help prevent the bank from being overrun by a few men with guns, each bank entry had a bullet proof revolving door that only allowed one person at a time to enter and could only be opened from the inside by one the bank employees. I was allowed entry, approached a teller, and asked for the manager. After some consternation – this was quite irregular – the manager appeared. I asked him, “tell me, signore, where do you eat lunch?” Surprised but not nonplussed he instructed me to drive about two or three hundred yards further on the road where there would be a turn taking me up the mountain. In twenty

minutes, I would come upon a restaurant.

I can't remember the town's name, nor the restaurant. Fortunately, I remember everything else about that experience.

The road was deserted, each side of the road thickly forested and as we climbed the temperature dropped. The restaurant was a simple ranch-type affair, with an indoor area and a large outdoor dining area covered with wooden trellises and vines for a ceiling. The scene was dominated by an outdoor wood-burning oven. The wine was local, the salad fresh, but it was the main course that is my *madeleine*. A *polpette* is a meatball, this one of ground veal and simple herbs, local ground hard cheese, breadcrumbs, and garlic and parsley held together with egg. But the *polpette* was sandwiched between two lemon leaves, the size of my palm, and then grilled over the wood burning fire. The oils from the leaves were released into the veal, the leaves were blackened, and the veal cooked to perfection.

Suddenly, the sky darkened, a clap of thunder introduced torrential rain and the string of overhead lights went out. The vines protected us somewhat but there were drops of water on the table and on the floor. For some twenty minutes, the area was dark, and quiet, the only light from the wood burning oven. As the storm passed an eerie glow enveloped the room and magically I began to recognize my relatives, seated there in the restaurant. At one table was Uncle Benny (Sebastiano), who was born nearby in Alcamo before he emigrated to Canarsie and married Aunt Katie, whose parents were also from Alcamo. There, on the other side of the room, remarkably not arguing with each other, were Uncle Nick and Aunt Vera, and further across I thought I could make out the features of my father's older brother Nino with his distinctive nose. Could this be? Perhaps the strange light or the electrical ions in the air were transforming the features of the other patrons, whose genetic makeup were the same as my relatives in Uncle Joe's basement. And for a moment, I was there again, a five-year-old racing the *babbaluci* across the plastic topped table.

## *A Poem on the Ugliness of War*

by *Trilussa*

We all have been watching in horror the daily destruction of lives and property in Ukraine. While looking for something else I saw the poem by Trilussa, a well known poet who wrote in the Romanesque dialect. The poem was accompanied by an English translation that was obviously done by someone who probably used the Google Translator which is usually good at translating Italian, but not so good at translating the Romanesque dialect. As the poem was a powerful rebuke of war as a way of settling disputes, I decided first to translate it into English and now into Sicilian. The poem was written about the catastrophic First World War in 1917, but it is a timely condemnation applicable to today. Trilussa was the pseudonym used by Carlo Alberto Camillo Mariano Salustri (Rome, 26 October 1871 – 21 December 1950), a Roman poet, writer and journalist, particularly known for his works in the Romanesco dialect.

### Attenzioni:

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## *A Ninna Nanna di la guerra*

di Trilussa

Translated by Gaetano Cipolla

Ninna nanna, ninna nanna,  
u pupiddu voli a minna  
dormi, dormi, coccu beddu,  
sinnò chiamu a Farfareddu  
Farfareddu e Gugghiermuni  
chi si metti a picuruni,  
Gugghiermuni e Ciccupeppi  
ca si reggi cu li zeppi,  
cu li zeppi d'un imperu  
menzu giarnu e menzu niuru.

Ninna nanna, pigghia sonnu  
Ca si dormi nun li vidi  
Tanti infamii e tanti guai  
Ca succedunu ntò munnu  
Fra li spati e li fucili  
Di li populi civili.

Ninna nanna. Tu nun senti  
li sospiri e li lamenti  
di la genti ca si scanna  
pir un pazzu ca cumanna:  
ca si scanna e ca s'ammazza  
a vantaggiu di la razza  
o a vantaggiu di na fidi  
pir un Diu ca nun si vidi,  
ma chi servi di riparu  
ò sovranu maciddaru.

Ca ddu covu d'assassini  
ca nsangunia la terra  
sapi beni chi la guerra  
è un gran giru di quattrini  
chi prepara le risorsi  
pir li ladri di li Bursi.

Fa la ninna, coccu beddu,  
mentri dura stu maceddu  
fa la ninna, ca dumani  
rividemu a li sovrani  
ca si scancianu la stima  
boni amici comu prima.

Sù cucini e ntra parenti  
nun si fannu cumprimenti:  
poi ritornanu chiù cordiali  
li rapporti pirsunali.

E nzemmula ntra d'iddi  
senza l'ombra d'un rimorsu,  
fanno poi un gran discursu  
supra a Paci e u Travagghiu  
pir ddu populu cugghiuni  
risparmiatu d'ù cannoni!

## *A War Lullaby*

by Trilussa

Translated by Gaetano Cipolla

Beddy bye, close your eyes.  
The sweet infant wants the breast.  
Go to sleep, my little angel,  
or I'll summon Farfarel,  
Farfarel and Awesome Willy  
who will lie down like a goat,  
Awesome Will and Frankie-Joe\*  
who supports himself with patches,  
with the patches of a realm  
that's half yellow and half black.

Beddy bye, close your eyes,  
for in sleep you will not see  
all the woes and infamies  
that occur in this our world  
with those daggers and long guns  
among civilized societies.

Close your eyes. You will not hear  
the laments and heavy sighs  
of men slaughtering each other  
for a madman in command,  
who are murdering each other  
to advantage their own race  
or advantage their own faith  
in a God who can't be seen  
but is utilized as shield  
by the king who is a butcher.

For that den of murderers  
that is bloodying the world  
know quite well that war's way  
to produce a swirl of bucks  
that arrays all the resources  
for the thieves at the Exchange.

Close your eyes, my sweet angel  
till the slaughtering is over.  
Close your eyes, because tomorrow  
we will see the kings recover  
and exchange words of esteem  
as good friends just like before.

They are cousins and with relatives  
one can only go so far.  
Their relations will return  
much more cordial than before.

And then gathered all together,  
with no shadow of remorse  
they will utter in due course  
a fine speech on Peace and Work  
for the poor, misguided fools  
whom the cannons failed to kill!

\*A reference to Wilhelm of Germany &  
Franz Joseph of Austria

## Puisia Siciliana

### Caffellatti

di Virna Chessari

Tavulu longu e strittu  
a nostra famigghia numerusa.  
A vucciria ri dda cucina  
u me ricordiu cchiù linnu.  
M'arricordu  
una ri ddi rare occasioni  
assittati tutti 'nnsemula.  
Latti cavuru fumanti nna pignata,  
un vecchju coppinu n'to' mienzu,  
tazzi trabuccanti  
rinanzi a nuavutri.

N'anticchia cchiù luntanu  
me matri  
a dritta comu sempri.  
"Sì troppu nica p'u caffè!  
N'hai ancuora tiempu  
pi crisciri".

D'allura a duoppu  
Haju sempri addisiato vivirni uno.  
Un c'è matina c'accuminciu  
sienza ddo bonu sapuri r'amaru nna vacca

### Taliannu a la fotu di me patri

di Lorenzo Maltese

Ricivennu la littra di la matri  
Nintra la vostra fotu ci truvai  
Quantu piaciri ca pruvai...  
Taliarivi fu un granni priu.

Panticchia taliavi e pui  
Vistu lu scrittu che davanti trasparia  
La vutavi e lessi li paroli  
Scritti cu priu e c'alligria.

Mi misi a pinsari p'arrispunniri a vui  
Ma pinsannu pinsannu  
Nnanzi mi vinni la spaventu  
Chi ddu priu era surdu turmentu.

Don Petru Patri miu  
È comu diti vui,  
vui taliati a mmia  
e jeu talu a vui.

Nni taliamu tutti dui  
Ni sintemu tucati ncori  
Forsi l'occhi ni chiancinu  
Mustrannu a nnui l'amuri.

Cinc'anni su passati  
Cinc'anni ca nun viu a vui,

la matri, li me soru,  
li zii e li niputi.

### I Frati

di Nino De Vita

"Sugnu tuttu nne robbi trapanatu.  
'U cavuru chi sentu".  
"Assèttati, arripòsati.  
Di unni stai vinennu?"  
"Ri Birgi, ra vasciura  
ri Burgiuranu. Prima  
avia allungatu a vacca  
ciumi".  
"E socch'è chi viristi?"  
"L'acqua chi curri a mmari...  
Ma 'u ciumi ora è quasi  
siccu".  
"E doppu chi virristi?"  
"Aceddi. L'arvulazza  
eranu tuttu chini".  
"E ncuntrasti a quarcunu  
ò ciumi?"  
"Un picuraru, unu  
chi cu 'a vardia ammuttava  
p'i casi r'Albania.  
E bbonu ora, Ninu"  
"Un m'a rittu socch'è  
chi stannu ò ciumi tu pinzavi".  
"Picchè l'ha diri a ttia  
socch'èni chi pinzavu?"  
"Picchè viremme eu  
azzunnicchiu mi nn'jia  
ò ciumi".  
"E socch'è chi pinzavi?"  
"I cosi chi pinzasti  
tu, stamatina, Cola".  
"Chissu 'unn'è veru.  
A ttia 'un t'a mortu mai un frati".  
"A mmia mi morsi un frati. Era cchiù  
nnicu  
ri mia, nna panza ancora  
ri me matri.  
S'avissi, si nascia, chiamatu Vitu".  
"Ma me frati cci avia quattordici anni".  
"E soccu cancia, Cola?"  
"Cancia. A me frati eu 'u canuscì".  
"E puru eu a iddu,  
a stu me frati, quann'è ch'av' a ssiri  
'u canuscì".  
"U canuscì, 'u canuscì...  
Tu sì unu ri chiddi  
chi crìrinu a sti cosi".

### Mammaluccu

di Tony Di Pietro

Scappunu cu a prescia  
i staciuni  
e primma ca t'arrimini  
si ammicchiutu e stancu,

che capiddi ianchi  
lamintanniti

di l'opportunità c'ha persu  
e de battaglia vinciuati.  
Quanti cala e chiana  
e quantu sauti mortali!  
Macari u mali a schina  
acchiu' è di casa;  
Na cosa giornaliera,  
nautru tema di discussioni  
fra i menzi scimuniti  
ca a societa' parrunu e  
o stissu tempu ci cala u sonnu.  
Certu tra nuiautri  
c'è sempri nu Garibaldi,  
incredibili i cosi soi;  
i sa vincitini, ma,  
nenti statui.  
Oggi i statui  
nun sunu di moda!  
Assittatu nno bancu mi  
mettu a pinsari  
e tempi passati, e e piaciri passati,  
tra na pinnicchedda e nautra.  
E nno frattempu  
commu nu mammaluccu  
aspettu,  
senza sapiri quannu  
e commu;  
arriva u turnu miu.

### Sonetto in lodi di un nasu

di l'Abbate Melchiorre

Si forsi spunta di na cantunera  
un nasu grossu, longu e aquilinu,  
comu fussi un timuni di galera,  
chissu è lu nasu di un certu parrinu,  
nasu chi all'occhi fa di scalunera,  
ed a la vacca fa di baldacchinu,  
e pò serviri, o sia di piditera  
o pi suppostu a qualchi cularinu.

### Li Cani

di Giovanni Meli

Si fannu stu dialogu dui cani:  
"Tu 'ncatinatu! E pri quali delittu?"  
"Nun è castigu, sù carigni umani;  
lu patruni di mia nn'avì profittu:  
mi à vistu cacciari pri li chiani,  
mi apprezza, e timi chi ci vegna dittu:  
Lu rubbàru, o si persi; perciò un pani  
mi duna, ed ossa, è ccà mi teni strittu..."  
"Fratannu in premiu di l'abilitati  
lu bon patruni to riconoscenti  
ti à fattu privu di la libirtati?  
Si a stu modu li meriti e talenti  
sù da l'omini in terra premiati,  
è gran fortuna nun avirni nenti".

## Sicilian Poetry

### Latte

by Virna Chessari

At a long narrow table  
our big family.  
that noisy kitchen  
my most vivid memory.  
I remember  
one of the rare moments  
sitting all together.  
Piping hot milk in a pot,  
an old ladle in the middle,  
brimming bowls  
in front of us.

A little further my mother  
standing up as always.

"Too young for coffee!  
You've got plenty of time  
to grow up."

And since then  
I really wanted to have one.  
There's not a morning I begin  
without that good bitter taste in my mouth.

### Looking at the Photo of My Father

by Lorenzo Maltese

Having received the letter from my mother  
I found inside a picture of you.  
How I rejoiced at seeing it,  
what a great joy it was to look at it.

I looked at it for a little while  
Then seeing there was writing on the back  
I turned it and began to read the words,  
written with great joy and cheerfulness.

I started thinking of how I would reply,  
but as I slowly pondered how  
I was overwhelmed and realized  
that all my joy had turned to heartache.

Don Petro, my dear father,  
it is exactly as you say.  
You look at me  
and I look back at you.

We look at each other,  
we feel our hearts have joined  
perhaps our eyes shed tears  
that manifest our love.

Five years have now gone by,  
five long years since I saw you,

my mother, and my sisters,  
all the uncles and the nephews.

### The Brothers

by Nino De Vita

I'm drenched with sweat inside my clothes.  
I feel so hot"  
"Sit down here a bit and rest.  
Where are you coming from?"  
"From Birgi, from the plain  
of Burgiuranu. I went as far  
as the mouth of the river"  
"And what did you see?"  
"The water that flows into the sea...  
but the river has almost  
dried up."  
"And after that, what did you see?"  
"The birds, The big trees  
were teeming with them."  
And did you meet anyone near the river?"  
"A shepherd who was herding his sheep  
towards the houses of the Albania section.  
That is enough now, Nino"  
"You still have not told me  
what you were thinking of  
while at the river."  
"Why should I tell you  
what I was thinking then?"  
"Because I too, when I was young,  
would go to the river."  
"And what did you think about?"  
"The same thing you thought  
this morning, Cola."  
"That can't be true!  
You did not have a brother dying on you."  
"I did have a brother who died. He was  
younger than me  
and he was still inside my mother's womb.  
If he had lived he'd have been named Vito"  
"But my brother was fourteen years old."  
"That does not matter, Cola."  
"It matters. I knew my brother well."  
"And I too will know  
this brother of mine, one day."  
"You will know him, you will...  
You are a person  
who believes these things."

### Mameluks

by Tony Di Pietro

The seasons  
fade away in a hurry  
and before you turn around  
you have grown old and tired,  
with white hair,  
complaining,  
about lost opportunities  
and battles won.  
How many highs and lows,

How many somersaults!  
Even a painful back  
is a familiar thing;  
a daily occurrence,  
another conversation topic  
among the half senile  
who chatter endlessly  
and then just fall asleep.  
Naturally there's always  
a Garibaldi type  
whose deeds and victories  
are way beyond belief, but  
with no statues.  
Today statues  
are not in fashion!  
Sitting at my desk  
I start to think  
of times and pleasures past,  
between momentary naps.  
And in the meantime  
like a Mameluke  
I wait.  
Without knowing when  
and how  
my turn will come.

### In Praise of a Nose

by the Abbot Melchior

If turning from a corner there appears  
a nose that's big and long and eaglelike  
that looks just like the rudder of a ship,  
that nose belongs to a good priest I know:  
a nose that seems a staircase to the eyes,  
forming a baldaquin above the mouth  
and can be used both to let out some gas  
or as suppository in an ass.

### The Dogs

by Giovanni Meli

These views and attitudes two dogs were  
sharing:  
"You...here, in chains? And for what kind  
of crimes?"  
"It is not punishment. It's human caring.  
My master profits from my skills, sometimes.  
He saw me hunting in the open plain,  
and values me, but he's afraid to hear  
'They stole him,' or 'he's lost!' That's why  
the chain!  
He feeds me bread and bones, but keeps me  
here!"  
"So as reward for your ability,  
your master with exquisite gratitude  
has turned your freedom into slavery.  
If worth and talent are by man thus viewed  
down here on earth, far better it would be  
neither to hear, to smell, nor even see."

## *Easter Festivities in Sicily*

**E**aster is a very important religious festivity in Sicily, marked with extraordinary celebrations of the passion of Christ. Practically every town on the island celebrates the event in one form or another. Some create very elaborate and expensive pageants that involve the entire population, others who have less means at their disposal make do with much more simple events but felt with equal fervor and religious conviction. The festivities start on Palm Sunday and each day of the week preceding Easter is dedicated to recollecting a scene from Christ's passion.

We published an article many years ago in *Arba Sicula* focusing on the Good Friday as it was celebrated in my hometown of Francavilla di Sicilia. The event is still celebrated in a grand manner. In fact, you can see documentaries about it on the town's website. The passion of Christ is celebrated in many different ways on the island. Here are some of the most famous celebrations that you can see by searching the Internet: the Procession of the Mysteries in Trapani, the Dance of the Devils in Prizzi, the Byzantine Easter in Piana degli Albanesi, the Procession of the Hooded Men in Enna, the Feast of the Jews in San Fratello and the Madonna vasa-vasa in Modica which recalls The kiss of the Madonna on meeting the Resurrected Christ.

This is the article published in 1988, in one of the first issue of *Arba Sicula* I edited.

**T**hree days before Easter, every two years, Francavilla di Sicilia celebrates the Sacred Representation of Holy Friday. It is a folkloristic religious manifestation that sinks its roots in the soul of the inhabitants and goes back to remote times, almost two hundred years. It all began with Father Silvestro, a good priest of the town. He had the idea to organize a procession of children in which they would represent Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Priests and Jews. Then



in 1865 another priest, Father Gaetano Calabrese, enriched the manifestation, that is, he made the procession more theatrical, and the one performed today is more or less the same as Father

Calabrese's. The only thing is that we no longer attend a mini-show, but a real mass representation. At the beginning, the Sacred Representation was performed every seven years. Then every four years. And each time the participation in the procession has always been a source of honor and privilege. No one has ever refused to take part, not even to perform the role of Judas.

The principal actors number about fifty, but those who have a minor role, adults, young people and children, are more than four hundred. The Holy Friday ceremony did not take place in the period of the Second World War. People, we know, did not have much free time to dedicate to these things. Then almost twenty years ago, it was begun again and in more recent times it was performed in 1985 and again in 1987.

The event is really something original and enjoyable at the same time. The whole town becomes a stage. The sidewalks and the balconies are full of people who look on with great interest as floats and characters parade before them. The floats and the characters get a great deal of attention. The armor worn by characters is rented from firms that equip movie companies in Rome's Cinecittà who specialize in historic films. The horses used to come from San Fratello,



A photo of children taking part in a modern enactment of Good Friday in Francavilla di Sicilia.

a little town in the province of Messina, where perhaps the last remaining vestiges of a Gallo-Italic dialect is still spoken today. The horses and the knights who ride them are recruited now from the nearby towns because they are fewer in numbers and, to tell the truth, less impressive than they once were.

The carts and the characters parade before the eyes of the people who look with rapt, almost mystical attention. In this town they have always considered the Good Friday a popular feast, but it was above all a religious feast. The older folk allow themselves to make comments such as "How Beautiful the Virgin Mary is!" Or "God bless him, look how lifelike the Lord is!" And when Judas is passing by, hanging from the fig tree, some people make believe that they are spitting on him; others whisper foul epithets. Not every scene is "moving," that is, the characters, except for those who are walking, remain immobile as if in a plastic pose. The religious scenes, naturally, present a large fresco composed of various moments from the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem. The vignettes, - little scenes with improvised actors, all from the town and all performing without receiving a cent - are separated from each other by groups of knights. The characters in the sacred representation often are duplicated, that is, you can see Jesus seated at the table of the Last Supper and again on the Cross, because these characters embody different moments in their own lives.

The procession is composed of the fol-

lowing scenes: Agnus Dei, Jesus Enters Triumphant into Jerusalem, The Agony in the Garden of Getsemani, The Last Supper, Jesus Arrested, Jesus Before the Synedrion, Peter's Denials, Jesus Before Pilate, Jesus Faces Barabbas, The Flagellation, Ecce homo, Pilate's Sentence, Jesus on the Road to Calvary, Mary and the Pious Women, The Crucifixion, Jesus Dead Preceded by Angels, and The Lady of Sorrows. The whole procession is accompanied by the musical band of the town, playing J.J. Bach's "Passion," and by a chorus of boys and girls singing mystical tunes.

Those who attend the procession walk away with the impression of having seen a unique and even grandiose spectacle, a bit like the spectacles "a la Cecil B. De Mille". For more than four hours the whole town becomes a stage and its inhabitants, whether participating in the show or not, players in a popular and religious ceremony. The past becomes the present and if only for a brief afternoon, man returns naively to being once again an inviolate son of his civilization.



## Book Reviews

Giovanni Meli, *La Lirica II*, a cura di Gaetano Cipolla, Palermo: Nuova Ipsa Editore, 2022. 220 pp. \$25.00.

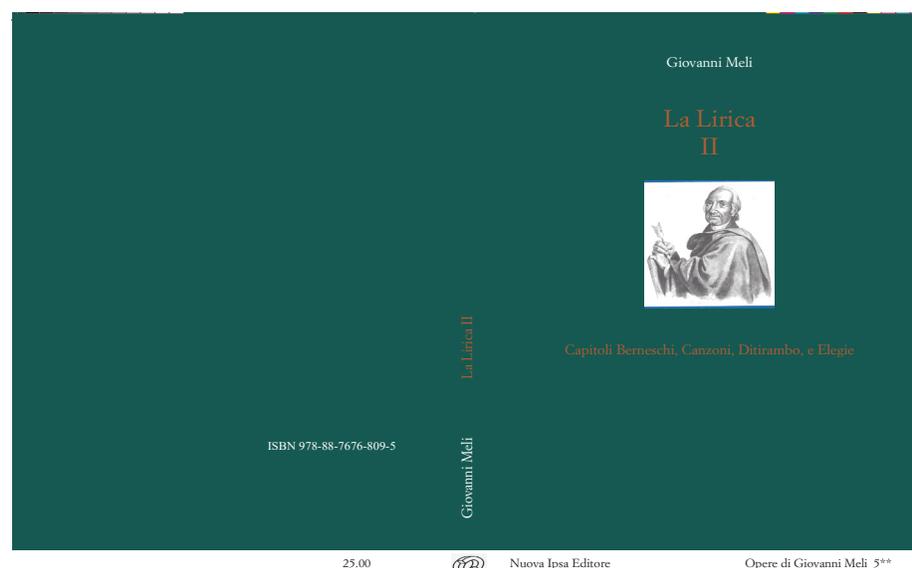
### Review by Antonio Pagano

The readers of *Sicilia Parra* know that Gaetano Cipolla has devoted much of his career to promoting Sicilian poetry and especially the poetry of Giovanni Meli, the most important poet who produced an impressive array of works in Sicilian. Cipolla has lent his American voice to many other Sicilian poets, including Nino Martoglio, Antonio Veneziano, Vincenzo Ancona, Nino Provenzano, Salvatore Di Marco, Nino De Vita, Senzio Mazza, Piero Carbone, Maria Zagarella and many others, but he seems to have a special attachment to the poetry of Giovanni Meli. In the introduction to his translation of Meli's *Don Chisciotti and Sanciu Panza*, Cipolla said that Meli embodied for him the essence of Sicily. He quoted Dryden who said that "translating poetry is an act of sympathy" and then he added "In my own case, I feel like an advocate, pleading a special case: Giovanni Meli's poetry as the embodiment of an aspect of the Sicilian soul." We know, of course, that as President of Arba Sicula, he has worked for many years to build a connection between Sicilian culture and the Sicilian communities living in the United States, becoming something of a bridge between the two cultures. This new book, however, is written in Italian and has a different objective. It represents a scholarly attempt to reevaluate the figure of Giovanni Meli in light of a better understanding of the period in which he lived and of the poetry that he produced.

The work I have in front of me is the fifth volume of a large project that was begun by Professor Salvo Zarcone of the University of Palermo, working with Claudio Mazza, the editor of Nuova Ipsa, that aimed to publish everything Meli produced in his life, including the

scientific papers he produced (Meli was a practicing medical doctor). Gaetano Cipolla was asked to prepare a critical edition of the three volumes projected for Meli's lyrical poems. The first volume, a massive book of nearly 500 pages (*Lirica I*) was published in 2018. And contained the Odes, the Sonnets and the Canzunetti, in the original Sicilian, the Italian translation, extensive annotations, the notes that Meli added to his 1814 edition, a list of variants between the manuscripts kept in the Palermo public library and the edition published by Meli, as well as a chronology of his life, and a complete bibliography. The publication of *Lirica II* follows the same structure as *Lirica I*, containing a comprehensive introduction, the original Sicilian of two Capitoli berneschi ("In lodi di lu purci" and "In lodi di la musca") three Elegies, seven Canzoni and the famous "Dirirammu Sarudda," the Italian translation, extensive annotations, the variants, the original Meli notes, a chronology of Meli's life and an updated bibliography.

The poems in this volume were written at the beginning of the poet's long career. "In lodi di lu purci," (In Praise of the Flea) was written when he was twenty years old and earned him a place in one of the literary academies of Palermo; together with "In lodi di la musca," these poems are known as "cicalate," poems on bizarre subjects that were in vogue at the time. Cipolla analyzes the *Capitoli*, written in terza rima in the manner of Francesco Berni, and points out how Meli, in spite of the ludicrous nature of the subject, (I am using ludicrous in its etymological meaning as playful), makes good use of it to introduce themes that will accompany him throughout his career. In reality, in these early works the human and poetic personality of the poet is already fully expressed. What emerges from Cipolla's analysis is the picture of a man who struggles to find a *modus vivendi* that is suitable to his personality. Cipolla described him as an empiricist who believes only what he can touch with his own hands. But he has also idealistic tendencies, a realist with



a penchant for dreaming, a skeptical man who harbors optimistic views, a man who relied on facts but tended to be governed by principles. The works present in this volume testify to these divergent feelings. The three Elegies included in this volume are desperate attempts to find answers to the meaning of life, only to realize that God has given man a brain that is sufficient only to understand how puny it is before the vastness of the universe. The long poem "Ditirammu Sarudda" which has been considered a joyous hymn on the marvelous powers of Sicilian wines, which people used to recite at weddings. Cipolla's reading, however, does not see it as a joyous poem, and regards as more in line with his pessimistic view of life. This poem, which bore the title of "Sarudda's Testament," ends after a drunken orgy, with Sarudda collapsing on the floor in a drunken stupor. The speech he gives before collapsing is, in fact, his testament. He tells his companions how to behave when he will "burst" from drinking too much wine. His companions, drunker than he is, pick him up and take him away. Most readers assume that he has simply lost consciousness temporarily. Cipolla gives a different interpretation of the event. He suggests that Sarudda may have actually died, which changes the whole understanding of the poem. No longer is wine a way to make people forget the woes of life, a way to cope with life's difficulties. Cipolla argues that

Meli in the end realized that resorting to wine could offer only temporary relief to woes. Sarudda's choice resulted in a state of non-being, a loss of consciousness, basically to death. Meli leaves the matter hanging in ambiguity. He simply says that his companions carry Sarudda off on crossed arms. Cipolla's conclusion, supported by numerous textual references to death in the poem, likens it to the contents of the negative Elegies. Rather than a joyous celebration of the powers of wine, the poem is an acknowledgement that wine as a *modus vivendi* is not congenial to the poet's personality. Sarudda's choice was contrary to what Meli praised throughout his life: following the Aristotelian Golden Mean.

His ideal was to live life following the dictates of nature and the natural instincts, using reason and common sense, staying away from the excesses that ambition, avarice and pride inevitably generate in man. He always sought to curb his desires so that they did not exceed his powers to obtain them.

This second book, like the first one on Meli's lyrical poem, is a serious and scholarly work that illuminates the work of an important man who has been called "The Perfect Sicilian Poet."

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***Tentative Itinerary for Tour 27: September 3 to September 15, 2022***

I am proposing a tentative itinerary that is almost the same as the tour that was cancelled in 2019. The COVID situation seems to be less dangerous. Hopefully the war in Ukraine will not affect the tour. The price will be \$3,600 per person and includes airfare, airport taxes and fuel surcharge, four-star hotels, Deluxe transportation, and all meals, except lunches. The single supplement is \$450.00. You can write to Prof. Cipolla at gcipolla@optonline.net to reserve. The deposit is \$200 per person. I know there are many people eager to go on the tour. Keep your fingers crossed! **Flights and hotels may change.**

Sept. 3- Saturday DAY 1 - Departure from J. F. Kennedy Airport, New York on ITA 609, 4:25 P.M. Arrive Rome 6:50 A.M.

Sept. 4- Sunday DAY 2 - Connect with ITA1785 departing at 8:30 A.M. which arrives in Palermo at 9:35 A.M. Transfer to our hotel, the Principe di Villafranca in the center. Afternoon free to rest. Welcome dinner at La Casa del Brodo Restaurant.

Sept. 5- Monday DAY 3 - Morning guided tour of Palermo that includes the Cathedral, the Norman Palace, and other important sights. In the afternoon, we will visit Monreale. We will travel to Bagheria and have dinner at the Museo delle acciughe with our local members of Arba Sicula.

Sept. 6- Tuesday DAY 4 - Before driving to Cefalù in the morning we will visit the Royal Palace a Mareolce where local students will explain the recent restoration of the museum. We will then visit Cefalù, leisure time for lunch then the beautiful cathedral, the Museo Mandralisca. We will return to Palermo and we will have dinner at our hotel.

Sept. 7- Wednesday DAY 5 - Palermo to Marsala. We will stop for *cassatelle* in Castellammare del Golfo and then proceed to Erice. You will be free to have lunch on your own in this charming medieval city. Then we will visit Naval Archeological Museum before going to our hotel, the Villa Favorita. We will have wine tasting at the hotel and some local guests will join us for dinner.

Sept. 8- Thursday DAY 6 - Marsala to Agrigento via Naro where we will have lunch after visiting the town. We will proceed to Agrigento's Valley of the Temples. Before dinner we will be entertained by the Vald'Akragas group. Hotel Chaos.

Sept. 9- Friday DAY 7- After breakfast we will drive to Morgantina, one of the most important historical centers in Sicily. After the visit, we will stop for lunch in San Cono and then drive to Siracusa, check in to our Hotel Villa Politi. We will go to the Theater to see a Greek tragedy and will have a late dinner in the hotel.

Sept. 10- Saturday DAY 8 - After breakfast we will visit the Archeological sites and then drive down to Ortygia to visit the cathedral and other sights. You will have free time to have lunch in a local restaurant and we will meet again to return to the hotel. After dinner we will be entertained by Salvo Bottaro and his friends.

Sept. 11- Sunday DAY 9 - Morning drive to Catania. Visit the Cathedral, the Via Etnea, and other sights. Lunch on your own. In the afternoon we will drive along the coast via Acireale where we will stop for their famous gelato and then proceed to our hotel in Giardini Naxos, the Caesar Palace which will be our hotel for the last four nights. Buffet dinner at the hotel.

June 12- Monday DAY 10 - A short morning drive to Taormina to visit the Greek-Roman theatre. After a brief reception by the Mayor of Taormina, Mario Bolognari, we will have free time for shopping and lunch. We then return to our hotel for relaxation at the pool or the beach. Dinner in our hotel.

Sept. 13- Tuesday Day 11- After breakfast we will go to Mt. Etna. We will return to our hotel early in the afternoon to relax by the pool or do some shopping. Dinner in our hotel.

Sept. 14- Wednesday DAY 12 - In the afternoon we will drive to Francavilla di Sicilia to visit the new Archeological Museum and then to the Paradise Restaurant for the farewell dinner.

Sept. 15- Thursday DAY 13 - Transfer to Catania. The return flight is on Alitalia ITA1724, at 11:40 a.m., arriving in Rome at 1:05 P.M., connecting with ITA 610 to New York at 2:50 P.M. It will arrive in New York's J. F. Kennedy Airport at 6:35 P.M. of the same day.