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Note

New observations about the ancient maritime topography of the coast at Catania (Sicily, Italy)

The notable changes of the coastline which have been witnessed in historic times following eruptions of Mount Etna, and the resulting flow of magma not only over the coastal plain but also over the seabed, cause difficulties in identifying the location of the ancient ports and roadsteads which made possible commercial movements along the east coast of Sicily in the area of Catania (Fig. 1).

At least three coastal sites are named in ancient sources: (1) Ognina, known also as Longona or Lognina (Diodorus Siculus xxiv. 61); (2) Portus Ulyxis (Pliny *N.H.* iii. 14); and (3) Catina (Katane), named in many sources from the 5th and the 1st century BC. The location of these ancient ports, roadsteads and loading-points has been obscured, not only by volcanic eruptions—especially that of 1669—but also by bradyseism, construction of modern moles, and sediments laid down by the rivers Amenano and Simeto. The modern harbour of Catania was built from new in 1792 with a mole separating the so-called Porto Vecchio and Porto Nuovo; no records were made of any archaeological finds. The coast between La Plaja and Ognina comprises at least five medieval and post-medieval lava flows, which reached the sea along a considerable front and made substantial changes to the seabed topography.

Ognina and Porto Ulisse

Some wells have been discovered under the lava flows of Rotolo and Ognina, at a level equivalent to that of the quarries (which have also now been covered) at San Giovanni Li Cuti (Sciuto-Patti, 1872: 47). This has suggested that at one time, before the two lava flows joined together and the wells and quarries were not yet covered, there was an inlet of the sea at the harbour of Ognina. Diving recently off Ognina, the author has been able to observe a distinction between the two lava flows, an 'interflow' visible to the naked eye as a kind of gully. This gully could be the submerged remains of the inmost part of a bay, partly indented from the ancient coast, which had the water supply essential for replenishing ships. It would be profitable to study any seabed material from the ancient wells, in order to obtain a date and also to find out about the methods used to extract the water.

Some place-names still in use along the coast near Ognina, such as *Acqua delle Capre* and *Punta del Palummo*, indicate fresh water; however, since no springs are to found on land, perhaps coastal changes have resulted in springs now occurring under the sea. A series of dives along this stretch of coast has enabled the difference in temperature and density to be observed due to there being an interface between fresh and salt water, showing that there are a number of freshwater springs there, which once broke forth on dry land.

These observations tend to confirm that here, in ancient times, was the roadstead of Portus Ulyssis, said by the Elder Pliny to lie between the *Scopuli tres Cyclopum* and *Colonia Catina*. The modern fishing harbour of Porto Ulisse, protected by a breakwater, seems to preserve the name and confirm this identification.

As for the harbour of Ognina (or Lognina), it seems likely that it is the same port, or at least the same roadstead, as Porto Ulisse, since the modern place of that name lies in the bay of Ognina. Important topographical information can be found in the drawing of Lognina, made before the 1669 eruption, by Spannocchi (1578): a rather deep, quatrefoil-shaped bay, sheltered from winds of the first quarter, is marked 'P. di Longina' (Fig. 2). This corresponds with the other evidence previously cited to show that there once was a sheltered, well-watered, spacious harbour on this part of the coast.

Catania

For the port of Catania sources do not provide a precise picture of its shape in antiquity; in

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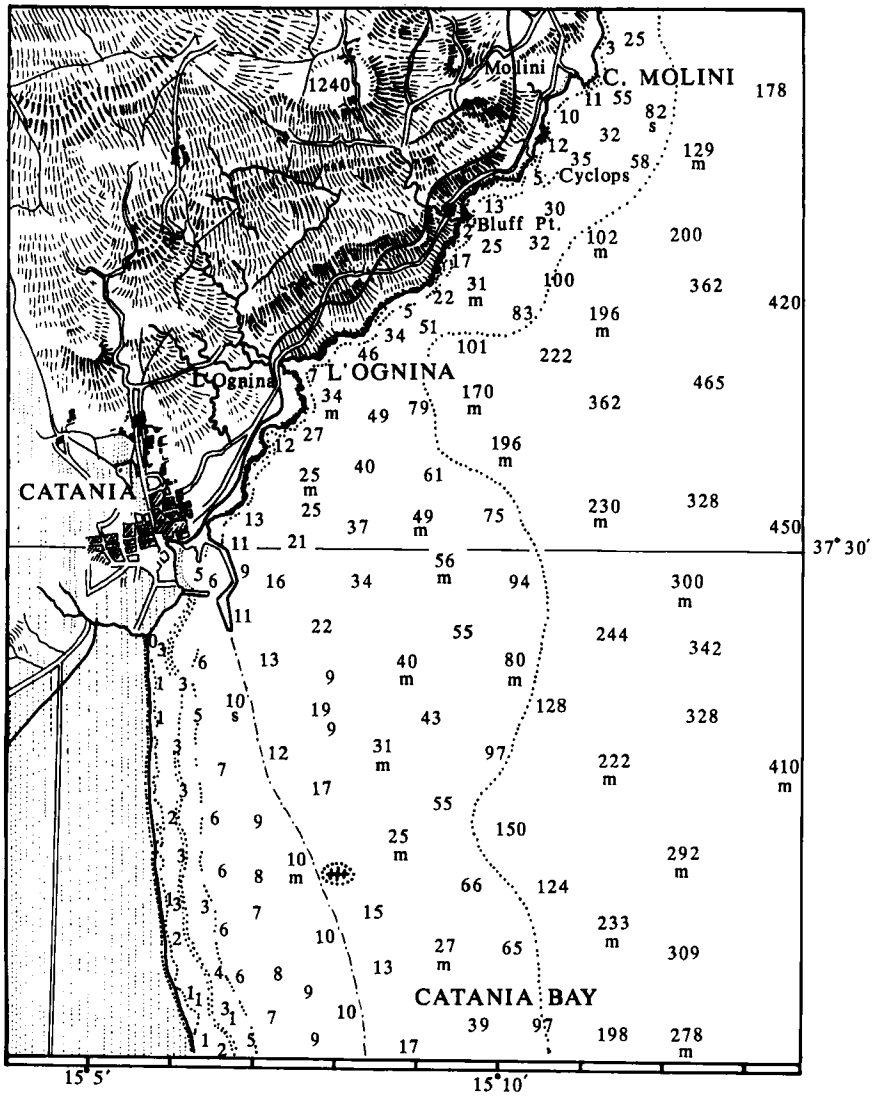

Figure 1. The central east coast of Sicily.

fact, they refer not to any kind of *epineion* but to the *aigialos tōn Kataniōn.* Thus, on two occasions during the Punic Wars, Himilco had to draw up his ships on the beach of Catania when a storm broke out while he was waiting for Magon's fleet to arrive (Diodorus xiv.59, 61). This image of Catania is echoed by two old pilots, cited by Columba (1906: 325), which describe it as a 'beach without shelter'. There is certainly no evidence for the harbour, sheltered by a sickle-shaped lava-flow, imagined by Asheri (1980: 110).

At Catania, as at Ognina, volcanic eruptions have made considerable changes to the Greek and Roman coastline. As can be seen from early drawings (listed in full by Dufour, 1992), the 1669 eruption caused a substantial advance of the shoreline from the open beach which is shown in the vicinity of the Castello Ursino (Fig. 3). A complete view of the catastrophe can be seen in the fresco painted by G. Platania in Catania Cathedral in 1679 entitled 'Catania durante l'eruzione del 1669'; one can see the violence with which the lava flowed into the

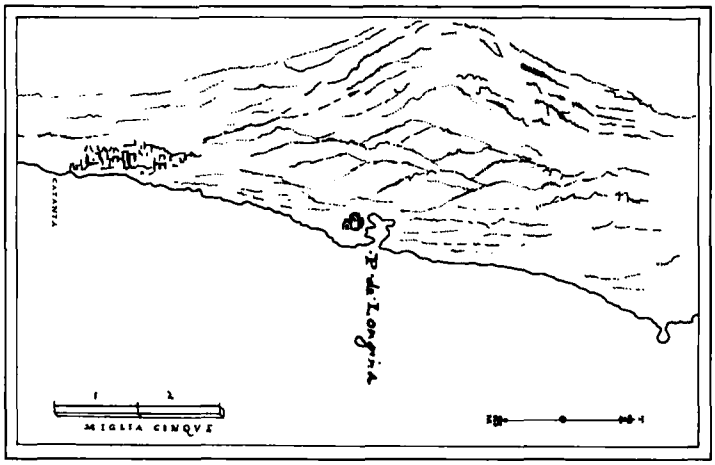

Figure 2. The coast north of Catania, after Spannocchi (1578).

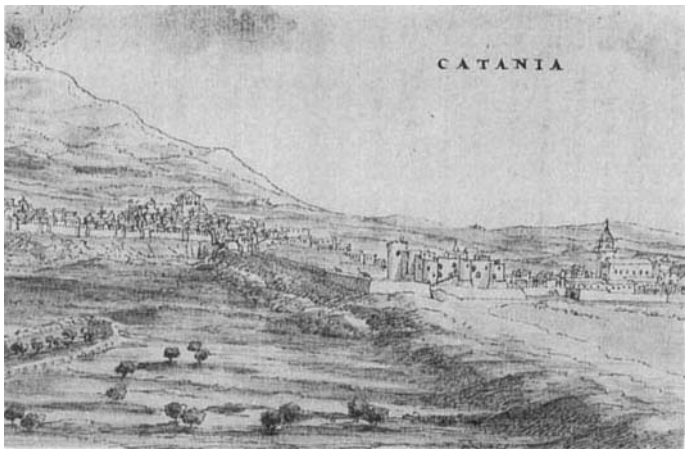

Figure 3. The Castello Ursino, Catania, seen in the 16th century drawing of Spannocchi (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid).

harbour, completely changing its original shape (Fig. 4). There would be little point, therefore, in trying to survey the topography of the harbour of Catania, but it would be useful to look for ancient dumps or anchorage points used by ships at anchor. Local divers continue to bring up from the sea off the modern port, La Scogliera and Ognina, amphoras and other archaeological finds of every kind, without respect to context and merely fuelling the black market, very active in Catania.

The importance of the ancient port is indicated by references to the exportation of grain, wine and timber from the hinterland by Livy (xxvii. 8. 19) and Cicero (*Verrine* II. iii. 83). In 1927, during dredging operations, divers found a Classical marble group of Heracles and Antaeus (Libertini, 1929); it lay near the mouth of the old port, at 9·5 m depth, in a preservative layer of silt brought down by the nearby rivers, but had already been damaged by harbour dredging. The rear of the sculptural group had been only roughed out, suggesting that it was lost in transit (like the sculpture in the wreck at Punta Scifo: Gianfrotta & Pomey, 1981: 215: Pensabene, 1978). Some 60 m to the North, two 15th century breech-loading bombards were found; these were thought to be associated with the sculpture as ballast in a Late Medieval ship, but a thorough investigation of the seabed would be necessary to justify such an interpretation. In fact, the marble sculptures could have

Figure 4. Part of the fresco by G. Platania showing the eruption of 1669.

formed part of the decoration of the ancient Gymnasium; according to the 16th century maps, this stood close to the west shore of the harbour, and 17th and 18th century authors refer to the discovery there of worked marble and statuary (Carrera, 1639: 92; Statella, n.d.: Tav. III: 232). Such finds, together with the amphoras and other material still being raised by divers, emphasize the need for a properly conducted intervention and the compilation of a record of the underwater archaeological sites.

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