

THERMALISM IN THE PROVINCE OF MESSINA: CULTURAL TRADITION AND NEW STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Thermalism in Sicily dates back to very ancient times. Since the 1970s the thermal industry began to be regulated by health and sanitation laws. Only starting from the end of the 1990s thermalism was redefined according to a new model which was based also on the principle of “wellness”. In Sicily this new situation has not determined the development of a thermal tourism so that the *balnea* have remained marginal tourist resources of the territory. This work presents the case studies of Ali Terme and Terme Vigliatore, in the province of Messina.

1. Introduction

Thermal baths represent an important element of the huge cultural wealth of Sicily. Their use dates back to very ancient times, and archaeology testifies to their spread all over the territory starting from the classical period. The *thermae Himerenses* rose on the northern coast, the *thermae Xifoniae*, which were fed by the Santa Venera springs, on the eastern coast, and the *thermae Seluntinae* on the southern coast, near Sciacca. Over the centuries, the historical events concerning the Sicilian thermal baths, on the whole, have not been different from those concerning the thermal sites in the other Italian regions (see Rocca, 2009).

In Sicily, thermalism, which already existed during the Greek domination, spread widely, because of its salutary quality, during the Roman period. Water, the symbol of purity, would guarantee “a healthy spirit and body”. This would occur through the practice and the ritual of drinking and immersion. Immersions were based on strict rules, established by very accurate health and sanitation practices

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which were grounded in the alternation of cold baths and hot baths (see Bonica, 2001). Sauna was a therapeutic practice highly popular for its decongestant action, also recommended for its ability to improve blood circulation.

During the Arab domination thermalism was given further impetus. Instead, with the return of the Christian religion, the thermal structures were dismissed, since they were regarded as “immoral places”, typical expressions of pagan culture (Battilani, 2001, pp. 61-65). In the eighteenth century scientific research newly promoted the importance of thermal baths thanks to their therapeutic value in the treatment of numerous diseases. This paved the way for a new phase of growth for thermalism, which led to the building of structures that became, above all in the nineteenth century, places where the local aristocracy would gather and engage in the so called “recreational thermalism”. In the *Guida descrittiva e medica alle acque minerali e ai bagni d’Italia* (see Schivardi, 1908) the thermal baths of Acireale, Sciacca, Termini Imerese, Termini-Castroreale and Lipari stand out as particularly active centres. By contrast, during the period between the two world wars, thermalism in Sicily would involve also the new emerging class: the bourgeoisie.

In Italy the normative regulation of the thermal industry started in 1919, with the Royal Decree nr. 1924, which concerns the opening of the thermal structures and the way to carry out the thermal operations. In 1927 the law on the use of waters was equated to that on the use of mines (Royal Decree nr. 1443 of 29 July 1927). Between the 1950s and the 1970s the so called “social thermalism” appeared and, at the same time, all the issues concerning the managing of the thermal baths as well as the institutional and healthcare aspects were regulated.

In 1950 the Sicilian government nationalized the thermal centres of Sciacca and Acireale, and renovated the equipment of the two structures.²⁸ Starting from the 1970s, following the law which established the NHS (National Healthcare System) and because of its therapeutic function, the thermal industry began to be regulated by health and sanitation laws. The therapeutic practice was extended to all citizens, and, thus, thermalism became a social issue, also thanks to the treatments being entirely paid for by the NHS and to the paid holidays assigned for this special type of cure.

Therefore “assisted thermalism” was born. A health and sanitation qualification was awarded to thermal baths. Then, the phenomenon acquired a more health-based character rather than one just aiming at recreation and wellbeing.

Thermalism grew until the beginning of the 1990s when restrictive measures delayed the development of the thermal industry, and, only in 1996, after its therapeutic validity had been newly emphasised, did the thermal baths become an alternative to traditional treatments as well as hospitalization. At the end of the 1990s thermalism was redefined according to a new model which was based not only on the principle of the “treatment of the disease”, but also on that of the “desire to be well”. Thus, a new idea of the phenomenon emerged, in which the wellbeing of the individual – in broad terms – played a significant role. The thermal offer widened, also to include wellness. So, together with the therapeutic

²⁸ From 1954 until 2005 public thermalism in Sicily took place in Sciacca and Acireale, by means of the Autonomous Administrations of the Sicilian Government. Since 2006 the administrations have been sided by two public limited companies: “Terme di Sciacca SpA” and “Terme di Acireale SpA”.

aims, the regenerative qualities of the body and of the psyche were also favoured (Bagnoli, 2006, pp. 72-74). The frantic rhythms of contemporary life and post-modern anxieties demanded new cures newly adapted to the individual.

Moreover, thermalism was by then placed in a wider perspective, which inseparably connected it to its surroundings. This is a new geographical concept involving the idea of an active territory, which offers itself with its milieu and becomes a guarantor of the inseparable connection between health, environment and culture.

It is, indeed, these latter aspects, precisely, this new concept of wellbeing “grounded” in the territory, that this work explores, by presenting the case studies of Alì Terme and Terme Vigliatore, which respectively lie on the Ionian coast and on the Tyrrhenian coast of the province of Messina.

2. Alì Terme

Alì Terme is a centre lying at the foothills of the Peloritani mountains, along Messina’s stretch of the Ionian coast, in a barycentric position between Messina and Taormina. Its notoriety dates back to ancient times, thanks to the presence of hydro-mineral springs, characterised by strong therapeutic qualities. However, in this case, the lack of archaeological evidence does not make it possible to retrace how the baths were used in the remote past. The thermal springs are to be found, above all, in the northern part of the territory of the district. They are currently used by three thermal centres: Marino Thermal Centre, Granata Cassibile Thermal Centre and, from 2009, Acqua Grazia Thermal Centre.

In the seventeenth century the Granata family started the work for the conveyance of the waters into basins carved out of the rock. It was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that first the Granatas and then the Cassibiles designed and completed the establishment, thus making accessible those which were defined as “renowned iodo-hydrocarbon-sulphurous thermal baths” (Cavallaro, 1974, p. 38).

In the nineteenth century another thermal centre was built, that of the Marino family. They had the waters of the springs lying at the foothills of mount Malombrì channelled. Today the Marinos are still the holders of the concession and the owners of the hotel premises which form part of the establishment: the Marino Thermal Centre Hotel. It is still a family-run business, although the idea of creating a public limited company is being taken into consideration. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century the Marino Thermal Centre Hotel has launched a project of enhancement of the structure, by expanding its health, tourist and recreational offers.

The waters, rich in sulphur, chrome, iodine and magnesium, are used in the treatment of skin diseases and of the locomotor system diseases, and also in the treatment of the respiratory system through the use of the aerosol. Mud is made to macerate for 5/6 months, so that it acquires the therapeutic qualities of water. After this period of maceration it is ready to be heated and applied to the bodies of the patients. Besides guaranteeing the assistance of medical specialists, the Marino Thermal Centre Hotel offers its guests aesthetic medicine treatments and anti-stress programmes (Bonica, 2001, p. 76).

The centre is open from May to November. The patients are normally elderly people, mainly from the province of Messina. Over the last few years, however, demand from “younger” people, aged between 40 and 50, has increased. Following the shutdown of the thermal centre of Acireale, with which forms of collaboration had taken place in the past, the Marino Thermal Centre Hotel has experienced an increase in demand from clients from south-eastern Sicily. The thermal treatments – as in the other thermal centres taken into consideration by this study – entail treatment cycles of 12 days without interruption, below such a period of time it is not possible to benefit from the agreement with the NHS. In order to benefit from the agreement, a medical prescription with an indication of the diagnosis and of the cycles of treatments should be presented. It is possible to avail oneself of the agreement only once a year.

The districts of the territory organize a shuttle bus service for resident patients, above all for the oldest. The costs are at the expense of the Marino Thermal Centre. The structure collaborates with the Departments of Medicine and Pharmacy of the University of Messina which study the therapeutic proprieties of waters. Besides this, the research projects within the medical field, promoted by the Association Federterme, must also be mentioned. Over the last few years, the number of patients using the structure has increased, passing from 2,943 in 2001 to 3,816 in 2012.

However, following the cut in paid leave from work, which occurred at the beginning of the 1990s, the demand – in line with the negative national trend – experienced a huge contraction, thus suffering a loss of about four thousand patients. This made a redefinition of the offer necessary.

In the other historical thermal centre of Ali, the Granata Cassibile Thermal Centre, waters rich in iodine, which are especially effective in the treatment of rheumatic and gynaecologic diseases, are used. It is, also in this example, a NHS affiliated structure, which can be used from June to October, with mainly local clients. Until a few years ago, the company also ran a small hotel, which is now no longer in use. The impression is that the centre, the oldest in Ali, has lost its sheen over the last few years and that it is less dynamic than in the past.

Recently, in 2009, a third thermal structure was built, provided with state-of-the-art equipment and abreast of the times. It is the Acqua Grazia Thermal Centre Hotel, which offers its patients the opportunity of inhalatory therapies, tubotympanum insufflations and treatments for vasculopathies.

The structure, within which there is a wellness centre, appears dynamic, and it also offers a shuttle bus service with the same conditions as the Marino Thermal Centre. The guests, who, starting from 2012 can benefit from the agreement with the NHS, are increasing in number.

The three structures, that is, the “historical” Marino Thermal Centre, the Granata Cassibile Thermal Centre and the new Acqua Grazia Thermal Centre, which is provided with modern and state-of-the-art equipment and an excellent managerial organization, are all affiliated to Federterme, and represent a resource for the territory. In particular, the Acqua Grazia Thermal Centre and the Marino Thermal Centre have tried to diversify their offer, by directing it to wellness. The local government will have to be able to create a network in the next few years, by promoting the extra thermal resources existing in the territory and by connecting the *balnea* of Ali with the excellent tourist attractions of the area: Taormina, Giardini Naxos and the Alcantara.

3. Terme Vigliatore

In the town of Terme Vigliatore, which lies between the Tyrrhenian coast and the first elevations of the Nebrodi mountains, there is the thermal centre “Fonte di Venere”, whose waters are conveyed within the “Grand Hotel delle Terme” and are managed by the Parco Augusto company²⁹.

The main element characterising the waters is sulphur, which is used for many therapeutic purposes: as a constitutive element of the cell protoplasm, for its desensitizing effect recommended in the treatment of allergies, for its germicide and pesticide action, in the contractility of vessels, but, above all, in the antitoxic action of the liver. Available treatments range from mineral waters therapy to external applications or inhalation, which are especially suitable for respiratory system diseases. Mineral waters therapies, combined with mud therapy, are recommended for digestive and bile system problems.

Among the destructive acts carried out in this thermal area in the past, it is important to recall the example of the Ciappazzi spring, which was discovered in the nineteenth century, but disappeared because of overbuilding, a widespread phenomenon in this area as well as on most of the eastern Tyrrhenian coast of the province of Messina. Ciappazzi water was particularly recommended for its regulatory action of the digestive system, and it had diuretic as well as laxative qualities.

“Fonte di Venere” is a state-of-the-art facility, and is very well equipped. The company which runs it does not have any public financial support, but, here as well, an agreement with the NHS exists. For this reason, those patients who belong to the lower income brackets can benefit from state financial support. Among the four centres studied in this work, this is the one which has, on a yearly basis, the highest number of patients. Here as well, though, the guests are primarily locals, and the impact of foreign demand is weak.

The thermal centre is in operation all year long, but in the off season it is open only in the morning. The highest numbers of guests are concentrated, above all, between June and October. At the moment, neither Terme Vigliatore nor Alì Terme have a certification of thermal quality.

In order to increase demand, Parco Augusto has also started offering a shuttle bus service to the guests from the surrounding areas. The towns in the territory between Messina and Sant’Agata di Militello take care of the organization of this service.

In the territory of the town of Furnari a new thermal spring has recently been discovered: the San Filippo spring, certified by the Ministry of Health as medicinal water. However, it is not yet accessible.

Within the Plan for the Tourist Development of the “Thyrrenium Tyndaris – Parco dei Miti” District, a consortium which comprises twenty-eight municipalities³⁰, the thermal centres seem to represent one of the strengths of the

²⁹ The Parco Augusto ltd, which took over a previous organization in 2007, is a private company that, besides the thermal centre “Fonte di Venere” runs the “Grand Hotel delle Terme” (4 stars), the “Terme Park Hotel” (3 stars) and the “Centro Benessere Maurice Messegue”, which was built in 2008.

³⁰ Barcellona P.G., Basicò, Condò, Falcone, Gualtieri Sicaminò, Librizzi, Mazzarrà Sant’Andrea, Merì, Messina, Milazzo, Monforte San Giorgio, Montagnareale, Montalbano Elicona, Oliveri, Pace

territory. The sea, the thermal baths, the environment as well as the local culture characterise a unique landscape which takes in Capo d'Orlando, Gioiosa Marea, Tindari and Capo Milazzo. Nevertheless, to this day the thermal tourism industry appears marginal throughout the province and it should really be promoted in a more substantial manner³¹.

Finally, it is necessary to underline that Terme Vigliatore combines the modern thermalism of Parco Augusto with the archaeological ruins of the ancient baths (where it is possible to visit the *tepidarium*, the *calidarium* and the fine mosaics), seaside tourism, and the offer of typical products of the food and wine tourism industry. Within the context of the tourism initiatives, popular festivals and events such as "Notte Terme", with musical, theatrical and entertainment shows, attract visitors from the surrounding centres. The construction of an amphitheatre has made possible the creation of the "agosto termense": a series of events including shows in Sicilian dialect, which aim to rediscover and preserve old local traditions.

4. Final remarks on Sicilian thermalism

Despite its vast heritage, thermal demand in Sicily is about 2.2% of the national demand. There is no doubt that nowadays the thermal industry is marginal: the two major regional establishments, Sciacca and Acireale, both managed by the public administration, have shut down their structures, with few activities still running. All of this requires an accurate analysis of the industry and a new approach to thermalism, which should be seen not only as "cure", but, by interpreting it in modern terms, as a tourist and re-creational activity. This means that it should be able to give the opportunity to combine the use of thermal waters with recreational activities connected with the concept of wellbeing and with all the other cultural, landscape and tourist resources the territory can offer.

To this end, in 2003, eleven Sicilian towns³² carried out a feasibility study for the creation of a "network of thermal baths", which only exists so far, however, on paper. The aim was to make the territory develop through negotiated planning, to be carried out by means of a confrontation between the local administrations and private citizens, in order to promote effective and innovative actions to give fresh impetus to thermal areas. This project was based on the idea that territorial integration could be carried out only through a synergy between managerial culture and environmental and urban planning policies, devised by both institutional and private representatives (see Regione Siciliana, 2005).

The observations on the tourism of the two thermal centres in the province of Messina, which are analysed in this study, might be applied to all of the Sicilian thermal sector. The whole industry is currently experiencing a phase of complex restructuring, characterised by considerable changes and by the evolution of the

del Mela, Patti, Castoreale, Rodi Milici, Rometta, San Piero Patti, San Pier Niceto, Santa Lucia del Mela, Saponara, Spadafora, Terme Vigliatore, Tripi, Valdina, Venetico.

³¹ With the purpose of promoting the thermal baths, the Parco Augusto company takes part in the annual "Thermalia" expo in Rimini. In 2011, precisely in order to support the balnea of Terme Vigliatore and Ali Terme, the Province of Messina also took part in the Rimini fair. The initiative, however, did not have a significant positive impact on the thermal industry.

³² Acireale, Ali Terme, Calatafimi Segesta, Castellammare del Golfo, Geraci Siculo, Montevago, Lipari, Sciacca (leader in the field), Sclafani Bagni, Terme Vigliatore, Termini Imerese.

concept of thermalism itself, which should be more and more seen as something between healthcare and tourism. There is also the fact that clients find it confusing to understand precisely the sense of spas and beauty farms. What is sure is that wellbeing, today, is not only a physical matter, but also a psychic and mental one. Thermal treatments – from this point of view – no longer concern only the individuals suffering from special pathologies, but they are aimed at a much wider group of users. Thus, while traditional thermalism seems to be doomed to marginality, the demand for wellbeing in broader terms is destined to grow in the near future.

A modern thermal offer must, then, take into account the new internal business strategies aiming at wellbeing in its broadest sense, with packages which include aesthetic treatments, fitness and alternative therapies, as well as wider territorial strategies, aiming to link the thermal baths to the typical resources of the places. Thus, on the one hand, there are cosmetics, fitness and massages; on the other hand, there are food and wine tourism, culture, rural tourism and recreational places, in order to attract younger clients from beyond the local territory (see Regione Siciliana, 2012). To this day, the efforts of the private professionals operating in this sector do not seem to be supported by an effective territorial policy – on the part of the institutions – capable of creating networks. The Acqua Grazia Thermal Centre, the Marino Thermal Centre and Parco Augusto, above all, stand out in the Sicilian context because they have been able to seize the opportunities offered by telecommunications and modern technologies, by creating Internet websites accompanied by images and information. These latter are essential today for any effective marketing policy. Nevertheless, thermal baths remain detached from the major tourist networks: Taormina and the Aeolian Islands.

The thermal centres of the province of Messina could be integrated into the all-inclusive tourist networks of the territory. The chemical analysis carried out by the University of Messina has confirmed, among other things, the retention, over time, of the therapeutic quality of the waters. The thermal sites could, thus, give their small contribution to the “creation” of the territory and to the solution of those many geographical “fractures” that this region still presents: between coastal stretches and the hinterland; between urban zones and rural spaces; between flat lands and mountain areas.

In conclusion, we have to say that the structures of Ali Terme and Terme Vigliatore cannot be compared, in terms of tourist attraction, with the baths of centres with great thermal vocation and tradition such as Salsomaggiore, Montecatini (in Italy) or Baden Baden, Karlovy Vary (abroad), situated in strong regions. In the province of Messina, up to now, thermalism has never represented a main factor of tourist attraction.

At present it is not conceivable a leading role of the two thermal centres of Terme Vigliatore and Ali Terme for the tourist development of the province of Messina. The former seems to be, in terms of accessibility, too far from the Aeolian archipelago, which, although it is a pre-eminent tourist system, appears separated from the Tyrrhenian coast and Milazzo, the only harbour of the district permanently connected to the islands (see Taviano, 1999). The possible tourist development of Terme Vigliatore is evidently related with the tourist expansion of the whole territory (comprising towns as Tindari, Capo d’Orlando, Gioiosa Marea,

Portorosa, San Marco d'Alunzio and, of course, Milazzo), which nowadays does not take the shape of a reticular structure.

Also Ali Terme, in the Ionian coast, although it is not far from Taormina, main tourist pole of the province of Messina and of Sicily as well, and from towns of particular cultural interest such as Giardini Naxos, Savoca, Fiumedinisi, because of the configuration of the territory, shows a weak interaction with the principal tourist attractions of the area. For this reason, at present, it is absolutely inconceivable that the thermal baths could represent the main component of local tourism. At the moment – and in the near future – the thermal industry could only function as a support of the principal tourist system of Taormina-Alcantara Valley (see Valle, 2012).

Although both, Ali Terme and Terme Vigliatore, are trying to emulate in their own smaller scale the good practices of advanced centres, combining treatments with wellness and leisure, the present economic recession does not allow those investments which could cause the growth of the Sicilian thermal structures and promote significantly the economic development of the territory.

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