

# The Val di Noto

## PART I

BY JIM SANO



**T**he Val di Noto is situated in the province of Syracuse, in the lesser-known southeast corner of Sicily. On January 9, 1693, a significant earthquake occurred in this region. Ten thousand people died, and cities and towns were (partly) destroyed. After this catastrophe, large-scale public projects were initiated to rebuild the affected towns in the fashionable architectural style of the period, Baroque. The 8 places included as 'Val di Noto' are Caltagirone, Catania, Militello, Modica, Noto, Palazzolo, Ragusa, and Scicli. As a result, these eight towns in Sicily represent a collection of architectural and artistic achievements from the late 17th century. Entire cities and towns were not simply rebuilt but reborn, and none were more beautiful than Noto, the undisputed jewel in the Val di Noto crown.

The history of Noto begins with the old town Noto Antica (AKA—"Netium"), founded by the Sikels. Scholars have dated the earliest ruins to circa 800 BC. Following the Greek colonization of Syracuse, Netium came into contact with Hellenic customs and rites and was assimilated into them. Noto then passed under Roman rule as a federated city. In the imperial era, it was declared a Latin municipium, a unique status that granted the town considerable privileges, including the right to self-government. Noto was then conquered

by the Arabs, who made it a highly armed stronghold; it took its present name and was the capital of one of the three valleys into which they subdivided Sicily. Finally, in 1090, after two centuries of Muslim rule, Noto negotiated a surrender with Roger I.

Old Noto and 45 other towns in eastern Sicily were destroyed in 1693 by an extremely violent earthquake. What remains of the ancient city is located some 13 kilometers from the present town of Noto. This great tragedy provided a blank canvas upon which master architects rebuilt Noto from scratch and created this lasting legacy of grand Sicilian Baroque architecture. This cluster of towns, rebuilt in Baroque style, all have central piazzas anchored by stone churches with tiers of Corinthian columns. Noto is a city full of Baroque architectural gems that exude a spirit of playfulness and culture. The beautiful decorations adorning the buildings, with stucco and carvings complemented by intricate wrought-ironwork, lend elegance to the overall scheme. Every edifice and construction showcases Baroque curves and embellishments, including fountains, arches, churches, palaces, and staircases. However, the defining feature of this Baroque style is the intricately designed palace balconies, each one distinct with its own carved griffins, gargoyles, floral designs, and figures of animals or humans.

Noto is so gorgeous it could be mistaken for a film set. The Spanish Viceroy's right-hand man, the Duke of Camastra, oversaw the creation of the new town in Noto. Three architects, Rosario Gagliardi, Vincenzo Sinatra, and Paolo Labisi, were tasked with building a city based on Baroque ideals, incorporating elements of the Renaissance and neoclassical pseudo-Spanish styles. The result was a perfectly proportioned urban center with parallel lines that offered breathtaking views.

The town was divided into three parts by three roads running east-west, designed to maximize exposure to the sun's rays. Noto was constructed from local tufa stone, a soft, sandy-hued limestone that absorbs sunlight and glows at sunset. The red-gold buildings radiate a soft inner light and are captivating at night when the streetlamps and floodlights highlight the warm-colored stone. Thus, Noto earned its nickname, "The Pearl of Sicily."

The main street in Noto, the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, is a magnificent walkway lined with stunning architecture and bustling with life. This elegant avenue begins at the Porta Reale and is a true reflection of the city's beauty.

**The Porta Reale** is a magnificent triumphal arch located in the eastern part of Noto. It was constructed in 1838 and serves as the city's main entrance and gateway. The arch was built at the expense of the Marquis of Cannicarao. It was initially named "Porta Reale" or "Ferdinandea" in honor of King Ferdinand II of Bourbon, who visited Noto at the time of its completion. The Porta Reale features two coats of arms, one belonging to the city of Noto and the other to the Cannicarao family. In addition, the arch is adorned with three symbolic sculptures. The tower represents the city's strength and endurance over the centuries, the greyhound symbolizes friendship, and the pelican signifies fertility. These sculptures and the arch make the Porta Reale a masterpiece of Italian architecture.



**The Corso Vittorio Emanuele** is a beautiful street that extends west and features three magnificent piazzas, each with a church. These three roads were carefully oriented from east to west to maximize solar exposure. The city's urban design was organized around three main social classes, with the Corso reserved for the clergy, the upper part designated for the nobility, and the lower part intended for the commoners. That is why many churches are along the way to the Corso

Vittorio Emanuele. In addition, visitors can enjoy public gardens along the road, the elegant Monastero del Santissimo Salvatore with its graceful tower, the inspiring Palazzo Ducezio, the magnificent Cathedral, the charming Church of San Francesco, the impressive Jesuit Church and College, and the beautiful Palazzo Nicolaci di Villadorata. These superb structures along the Corso Vittorio Emanuele make Noto a gem of Italian architecture and design.

### **The Church of Santa Chiara**

is a stunning religious structure in Noto, adjacent to the historic Benedictine monastery of the Holy Crucifix. Over the years, it has undergone several modifications, but its 18th-century style has remained steadfast. Construction of the Church of Santa Chiara began in 1730 and was completed in 1758. Despite its relatively small size, it is widely recognized for its breathtaking interior design and artwork. The Church of Santa Chiara is a masterful expression of the Baroque style and features some of the most stunning frescoes in Sicily. Its interior is adorned with works of art, including the St. Benedict and St. Scholastica altarpiece by Salvatore Lo Forte and the Madonna and Child statue by the renowned Palermo sculptor Antonello Gagini. The church has a single nave with 12 columns, each topped by a statue of an apostle. The columns are separated by exquisite frescoes and magnificent decorations, with intricate stucco details adding an extra layer of beauty. Visitors to the Church of Santa Chiara will be enchanted by its timeless elegance and rich artistic heritage.



**The Palazzo Ducezio** is a landmark Noto building known for its stylish portico. The building, now the Noto Town Hall, was constructed in the mid-18th century, with the ground floor designed by the Sicilian architect Vincenzo Sinatra. The upper level, added in the 1950s, was created to complement the original structure. The Palazzo Ducezio's oval hall underwent



a lavish renovation at the end of the 19th century, evoking the Palace of Versailles. The Hall of Mirrors, as it's called, is adorned with luxurious details, including Louis XV-style furniture, gilded decor, ornate stuccos, and the mirrors that give the room its name, making it a beautiful and opulent space.



**The Church of San Francesco d'Assisi all'Immacolata** is a beautiful religious building constructed in the 18th century by the architect Rosario Gagliardi and his student, Vincenzo Sinatra. The church's facade features a wide staircase leading up to the entrance, with Baroque columns and marble statues. The interior of the 18th-century church features a single nave, in keeping with Franciscan tradition, and walls adorned with white rococo-style stucco. The church also houses a Franciscan monastery.



**The Nicolaci Palace of Villadorata** is a prestigious 18th-century palace in the heart of Noto, known for its baroque-style balconies. It was once inhabited by the wealthy and influential Nicolaci di Villadorata noble family, who increased their wealth by owning tuna-fishing companies on the eastern coast of Sicily and by purchasing large tracts of land. The palace was constructed in the early 1700s and was completed in 1765. In the 19th century, the Nicolaci di Villadorata

family ceded part of the palace to the municipality of Noto, establishing the Municipal Library's headquarters there. The Nicolaci Palace is a masterpiece of architecture, with approximately 90 rooms, beautifully decorated with intricate details and frescoes on the walls and ceilings. The balconies feature sculptures of mythical creatures, including mermaids, lions, hippocriffs, winged horses, and others. Today, several rooms in the palace are open to the public, showcasing period furniture and the grandeur of the Baroque style.



Palazzo Nicolaci Balcony of  
Valladorata Palace

**The Noto Cathedral**, also known as the Cathedral of San Nicolò, is a revered religious building constructed between 1694 and 1703. It houses the remains of the city's patron saint in a 16th-century silver ark. The dome of the Cathedral was added in the 19th century. Despite multiple renovations in the 20th century, the structure eventually collapsed in 1996 due to poor workmanship. Rebuilding efforts began in 2000, aiming to recreate the original 18th-century Baroque design using modern techniques to preserve the salvaged elements. The rebuilding project was completed in 2007. The Cathedral's facade features a double-tower structure of limestone and a grand staircase leading to three entrance portals, with the central portal entirely of bronze. The inside of the Cathedral boasts a traditional Latin cross layout with three aisles. It is decorated with artistic masterpieces, including the 1783 painting "Adoration of the Shepherds" by Giovanni Bonomo and the 1827 piece "Delivery of the Keys to St. Peter" by Giuseppe Patania.

**The Church of San Carlo**, also known as the Church of San Carlo al Corso, the Church of San Carlo Borromeo, and sometimes referred to as the Collegiate Church due to its proximity to a Jesuit monastery, is renowned for its breathtaking views from the balcony atop its tower. These views are considered among the most striking in Noto. The church's facade is distinctive for its concave design, yet it retains traditional Baroque elements, including columns, pilasters, and balustrades. The facade is divided into three levels and features decorative windows, arches, and columns.



The Noto Cathedral



**Palazzo Castelluccio** is one of the six grand palaces in Noto and is open for guided tours most days. It was constructed in 1782 and remained closed after the death of its last Marchese owner in the 1980s. In 2011, an anonymous Frenchman, inspired by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel "The Leopard," about a Sicilian nobleman, purchased the property and began adding period-style decorations, such as golden candelabras, acanthus-leaf-carved urns, and a striking leopard-print tiled floor. The palace also features portraits of various Sicilian royalty and a Canaletto-style landscape painting.



**Palazzo Landolina** was commissioned by the nobleman Francesco Landolina in the 18th century. From 1838 to 1844, it served as a residence for King Ferdinand II of Bourbon and Queen Maria Theresa of Austria, who stayed there three times. The palace features a triumphal staircase with marble adornment, a main hall with golden walls, and paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries. Palazzo Landolina has remained in possession of the Norman-origin Landolina family, who arrived in Noto in 1091 during the reign of King Roger.



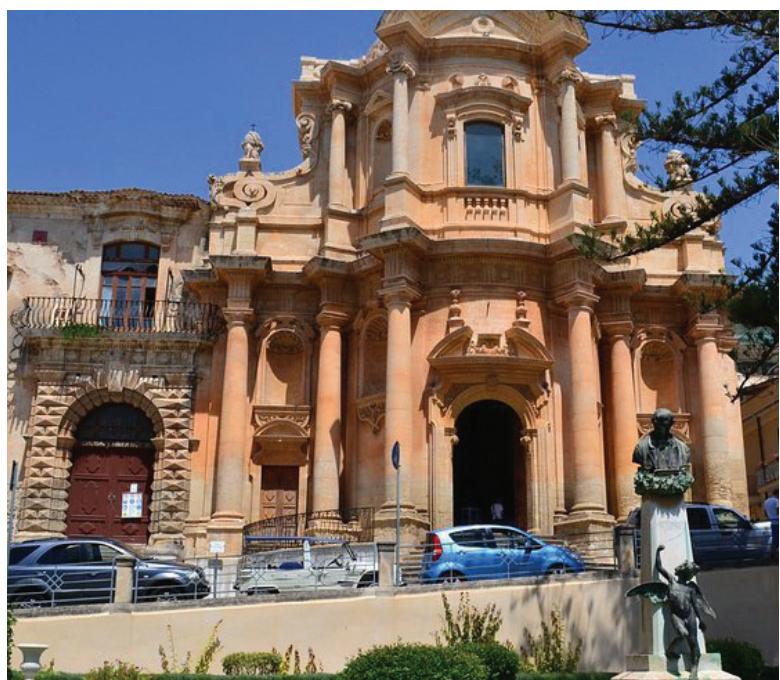
Palazzo Landolina



**The Church of Santissimo Salvatore (Most Holy Saviour)** is located between the Cathedral of San Nicolò and the Church of San Francesco d'Assisi all'Immacolata and forms part of a larger complex that includes the Monastery of SS: Salvatore and the Episcopal Seminary. The church was constructed in 1767 under the supervision of architect priest Andrea Gigante to replace an earlier church from the early 18th century. After Gigante's death, the project was altered by D. Antonio Mazza, and the church was finally completed and consecrated in 1802. The church's interior features an 18th-century pipe organ, a silver urn containing the relics of Saint Restituto, transferred from Rome in 1662, and a valuable wooden sculpture of the Madonna and Child on an altar. The Civic Museum is located on the first floor of the Holy Savior Convent. It showcases prehistoric artifacts, ancient Greek pottery, and figurines from a Greek temple dedicated to the deities Kore and Demeter.

At the end of the Corso, you will reach the Piazza XVI Maggio, Noto's final large square. This piazza is home to the **Church of San Domenico**, known for its elegant curved facade, built in 1727 by architect Gagliardi. The piazza also features the Villetta di Ercole, a small villa with a fountain and a statue of

Hercules, which is purportedly a Greek work salvaged from the ruins of ancient Noto. However, this remains a subject of debate among scholars. The elegant Vittorio Emmanuele Theater, dating back to 1842, is located in this square.



Church of San Domenico