The Val di Noto
PART II

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RAGUSA

Following the devastating 1893 earthquake, Ragusa was divided into two sections. The upper part of the city was occupied by those who desired to rebuild on higher ground, while the rest of the population aimed to restore the damaged old town, now known as Ragusa Ibla. This is where the most popular attractions are located today. The city was centered around the Duomo di San Giorgio, which sits atop more than 200 steps and is a masterpiece of the renowned Sicilian architect Rosario Gagliardi.

At the base of the Duomo is the Piazza Duomo, which features impressive terracotta-hued homes, palaces, and numerous churches, including filming locations for the popular TV series "Inspector Montalbano." Ragusa's most well-known Baroque structures include the Church of San Giovanni Battista and Palazzo Cosentini.

The Cathedral of San Giovanni Battista is the main Catholic church in Ragusa and is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. After the 1693 earthquake, the church of Saint John the Baptist was reconstructed. In 1718, construction began on a larger church, which was later enhanced with a dome in 1783. The floor was renovated in 1848, with stone slabs inlaid with geometric limestone. Restoration work was carried out between 1992 and 1995. The grand facade boasts three portals, with the central one adorned with columns and statues depicting the Immaculate, Saint John the Baptist, and Saint John the Evangelist. The church also features a substantial elevated courtyard surrounded by stone balustrades, and a bell tower on the left that rises approximately 50 meters above ground. The interior is arranged in a Latin cross plan, with gilded columns, and the aisles and presbytery vaults are adorned with golden rococo-style stucco. Since 2002, the Cathedral of San Giovanni Battista has been included on UNESCO's World Heritage List as part of the Val di Noto's Late Baroque Towns.

Palazzo Cosentini in Ragusa is a former noble palace completed in 1779, renowned for its elaborately adorned balconies. The balconies of Palazzo Cosentini in Ragusa showcase the distinctive Baroque style with their elaborate sculptures of masks (mascheroni) on doorways, balconies, festoons, and shells. The intricate carvings feature grotesque figures, animals, and symbols of abundance, enhancing the building's beauty. The upper balconies are particularly eye-catching, with their ornately carved door frames and elegant wrought-iron railings.

The Cathedral of San Giovanni Battista

MODICA

Modica is a city steeped in history and commerce, renowned for its rich collection of architectural landmarks. Located in the heart of Sicily, Modica is nestled between two hills that form a picturesque valley, with houses built up the slopes of the mountains. The city has two stunning churches, the Duomo di San Giorgio and the magnificent Duomo di San Pietro. The latter, dedicated to Saint Peter, is a beautiful Baroque church, originally built in 1301 and rebuilt several times over the centuries due to earthquakes and age-related deterioration.

The entrance to the **Church of Saint Peter** features a grand staircase with statues of the twelve apostles. The facade is divided into two sections and adorned with figures depicting Saint Cataldo, Saint Rosalia, Saint Peter, and the Madonna. The upper section is topped with a high-relief sculpture of Jesus Christ in triumph.

The Cathedral of San Giorgio
(Duomo di San Giorgio)

The church's interior boasts three naves, fourteen columns with Corinthian capitals, and a beautiful floor inlaid with white, black, and polychrome marble. The vault is adorned with frescoes depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments. Within the church are several notable works of art, including the Madonna of Trapani, sculpted by Francesco Laurana around 1470, and a statuary group depicting Saint Peter and a paralyzed person, created by Benedetto Civiletti from Palermo in 1893. The central chandelier hanging over the main altar is made of Murano glassware. The church also houses a monumental organ, inaugurated in 1924, with 3,200 reeds, 32 registers, and two keyboards.

The Cathedral of San Giorgio (Duomo di San Giorgio) is a prominent example of Sicilian Baroque architecture dedicated to Saint George and is listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It was constructed by Roger I of Sicily following the Norman conquest of Sicily in 1090. The current structure is the result of a 17th-century rebuilding following devastating earthquakes that damaged the church in 1542, 1613, and 1693. The reconstruction of the church began in 1702. It was completed in 1738, with the addition of the second and third sections of the facade designed by Francesco Paolo Labisi from Noto in 1760. The project was finally completed in 1842 with the construction of a spire for the iron cross by architect Carmelo Cultraro. The church's interior features a Latin cross plan with five naves, 22 columns with Corinthian capitals, and three apses. It houses numerous works of art, including a grand organ with four keyboards, built by Casimiro Allieri; a painting of the Assumption by Filippo Paladini; a depiction of the Nativity by Carlo Cane; and many others. On the altar of one of the two aisles rests the Holy Ark, a 14th-century silver work from Venice given to the church by the Chiaramonte family.

Modica is also known for its chocolate, which is sought after worldwide. The city was introduced to chocolate in the 15th century when it was under Spanish control, and it still uses the ancient Aztec recipe to make granular, clean-tasting bars flavored with cinnamon, orange, or vanilla.

SYRACUSE

The Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the Cathedral of Syracuse, located in Piazza Duomo, in the city's historical center. The Cathedral incorporates parts of a Greek *Doric* temple dedicated to Athena, which was converted into a church with the advent of Christianity. During the 5th century BC, the first tyrant of Syracuse, Gelon, built an imposing Doric temple dedicated to Athena, the ancient Greek goddess associated with wisdom and warfare. With the advent of Christianity, the temple became the first Christian church in Western Europe in the 7th century AD. The Byzantines made significant changes to the Christian structure, and later, the Muslims, after their conquest of Syracuse, transformed it into the central

The Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Cathedral of Sant'Agata

place of Islamic worship in the area. The church was converted into a mosque, undergoing the required changes of the Islamic faith. With the Normans, the city rediscovered Christianity and, therefore, the building resumed its prominent role as a Catholic church. The Normans rebuilt the church and gave it a majestic but austere façade. During the terrible earthquake of 1693 that leveled several cities in eastern Sicily, including most of Syracuse, the Norman facade of the church was destroyed. Yet, its internal structure, including the columns of the Greek temple, remained standing. The church was rebuilt in the 18th century, with a new facade designed by the architect Andrea Palma. The facade was built in two phases: work began in 1728 and was halted in 1731, during which most of the modifications were executed in the Baroque style. Then, between 1751 and 1753, the church was completed, with decorations in the Rococo style.

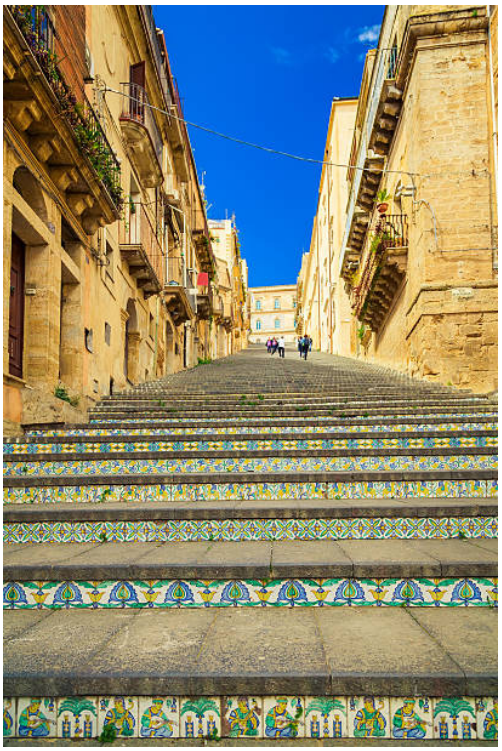
CATANIA

The Cathedral of Sant'Agata is the Cathedral of Catania, located in the city's main square, Piazza del Duomo. The church had a tumultuous history, being repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt after earthquakes occurred in the area. The first church was built around 1086 on the ruins of the Achilliane Baths, dating back to Roman times. On February 4, 1169, an earthquake destroyed the church's ceiling, killing many people gathered in the Cathedral. In 1194, under the reign of Henry VI, a fire caused considerable damage to the structure. In 1693, the severe earthquake in the Val di Noto destroyed the Cathedral almost completely, leaving only the apse and the façade. The bell tower was also demolished. The church was reconstructed in the 18th century.

The current building is the work of the architect Girolamo Palazzotto, who is responsible for the interior, while Giovanni Battista Vaccarini designed the facade, which was built between 1734 and 1761. In 1857, the bell tower was completed, and the current layout of the churchyard was built in the 19th century. The facade of the Cathedral, built in the Baroque style, is composed of three Corinthian-style sections. The first section consists of six granite columns of ancient origin, surmounted by the coat of arms of the noble Galletti family. The second section also has six columns and two smaller ones on each side of the large central window. The areas are adorned with marble statues of Saint Agatha at the center above the main door, Saint Euplius on the right, and Saint Birillus on the left. The main wooden door consists of thirty-two finely carved panels illustrating various portraits and scenes. The marble statues of Saint Peter and Saint Paul flank the main entrance. The church's dome dates to 1802 and was built under the supervision of Carmelo Battaglia. The columns support the dome and feature large windows that illuminate the interior. Between 1867 and 1869, the architect Carmelo Sciuto Patti built the current bell tower and the dome lantern. The church has a Latin cross plan, with a nave and two aisles. The apse dates back to its original construction in the 12th century.

CALTAGIRONE

The Santa Maria del Monte staircase is likely the most representative monument in Caltagirone. Its purpose was to create a path connecting the city to the ancient inhabited center, forming a unified larger town. The staircase comprises 142 steps, extending 130 meters, and is adorned with Sicilian majolica ceramics, each step featuring a unique motif. The staircase was divided into steps depicting various architectural styles, including the Arabic, Baroque, and Norman styles. For example, the Santa Maria del Monte staircase is a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of the people of Caltagirone. The staircase, completed in the 19th century, is a highlight during celebrations honoring San Giacomo, the patron saint of Caltagirone, as it is lit with candles, creating a stunning display. At the top of the staircase, one can find the Church of Santa Maria del Monte,



which, although dating to the Byzantine period, was rebuilt in the 18th century after the same earthquake. The Santa Maria del Monte staircase and the Church of Santa Maria del Monte serve as a reminder of the beauty that can arise from even the most catastrophic events.

The Sicilian Majolica Ceramics

SCICLI

Scicli is a small, understated town compared with its better-known counterparts, Ragusa and Noto. Despite its size, Scicli exudes sophistication, as evidenced by the sleek design of its storefront signs and impeccably maintained streets. The town's historical center is a testament to the creativity of the late Baroque period, reconstructed in the 18th century after the catastrophic 1693 earthquake that leveled the entire city. Elio Vittorini, a renowned writer, once proclaimed in his book "The Cities of the World" that Scicli may be the most beautiful city in the world. The main street is a distinctive sight, lined with elegant 18th-century noble palaces and elaborate Baroque religious structures, including the Church of San Giovanni Evangelista, the Church of San Michele, and the Church of Santa Teresa, all constructed from the town's signature white stone. The Beneventano Palace, known for its intricate Moorish head masks, was declared by English art historian Anthony Blunt as the most beautiful Baroque palace in Sicily. ❑