

INTRODUCTION

The Art of *Mercatantia*: Medieval Commerce and Culture in Southwestern Italy

It is believed that the coast from Reggio to Gaeta is nearly the most delightful part of Italy. Fairly close to Salerno there is a coast that looks out over the sea, which the inhabitants call the Amalfi coast, that is full of small towns, gardens, and fountains, and men rich and proficient like no others in the act of *mercantantia*.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* (Gior. 2, Nov. 4)¹

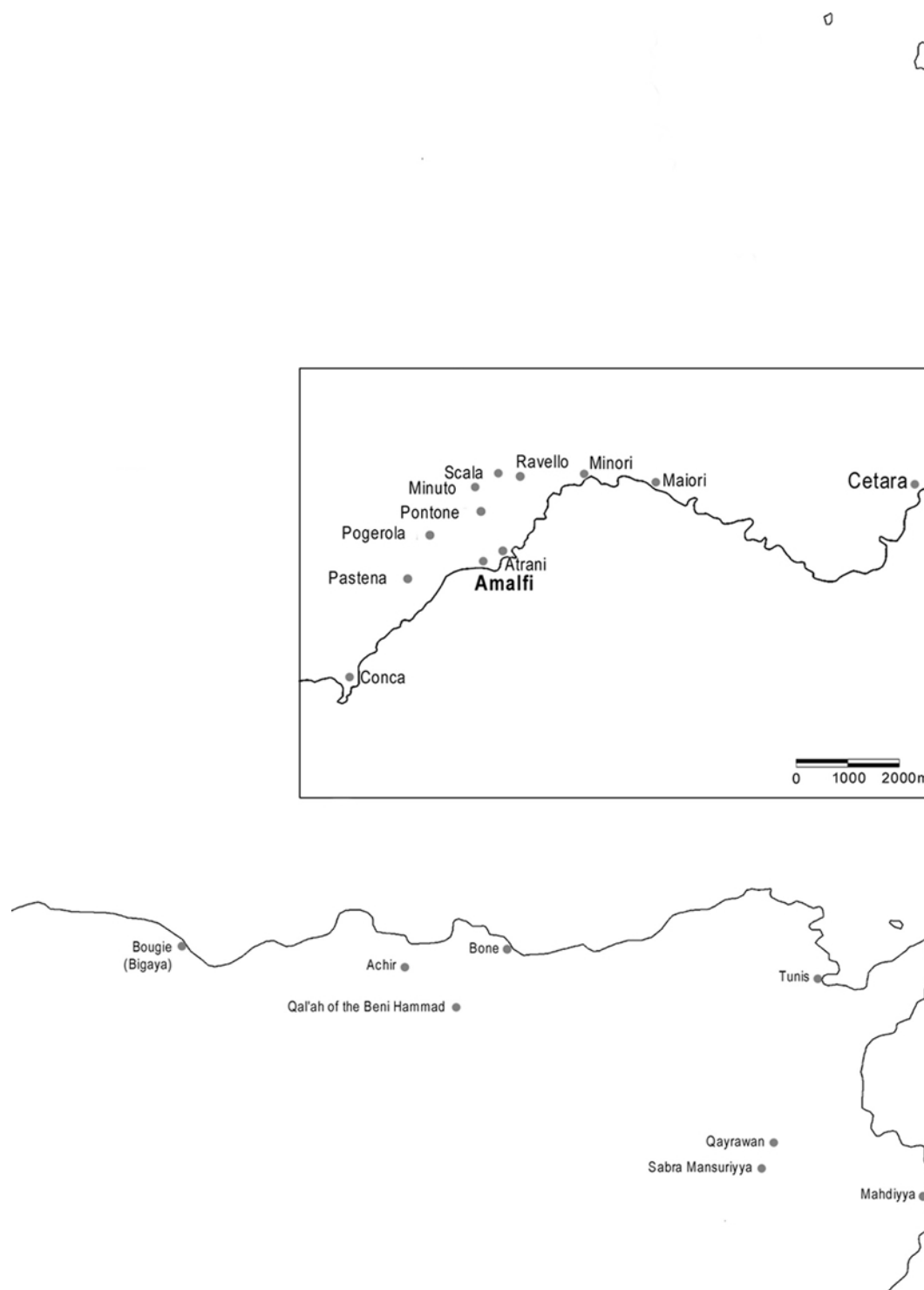
THE TOWN OF RAVELLO STRETCHES ALONG A NARROW PLATEAU, TOWERING three hundred meters above the valleys of the Sorrentine peninsula and the Tyrrhenian Sea (Figs. 1 and 2). It is a quiet place, now known primarily for its breathtaking views and cherished distance from the bustling metropolis of Naples. Yet in spite of its sleepy character, its numerous church doors and residential gates open perspectives onto a vibrant yet little-known medieval culture; they give way to spaces enlivened by soaring vaults, imposing liturgical furnishings, bold and sumptuous mosaics, delicate inlaid architectural ornament, and inscriptions identifying the families who commissioned the works of art. These monuments testify to the town's remarkable prosperity in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, and to the richness of the tradition of merchant patronage that Ravello, along with other settlements that comprised the former Duchy of Amalfi, sustained for several generations.

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Excerpt

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1. Map of southern Italy and Sicily, with part of North Africa (Danielle Lam-Kulczak).

Introduction: The Art of *Mercatantia*





2. View of the Amalfi coast from Ravello toward Salerno.

In the case of one artistically rich site, the Cathedral of Amalfi, works of pronounced material and stylistic variety range from the bronze doors made in Constantinople around 1061 to the crypt, transept, and bell tower that were embellished after the translation of the relics of St. Andrew in 1208² (Fig. 3; see also Fig. 7, Chapter 2). Other buildings in the region, including vaulted domestic halls and domed bathing chambers, employ architectural forms typical of Islamic, Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic idioms. Although all of them were products of artists or patrons in the region, such works seemingly have little in common, and their eclectic forms elude art history's traditional systems of classification. This book argues, however, that such monuments were products of a coherent yet shifting late medieval culture that was both specific to the region and indebted to various forces well beyond its boundaries.

Completed in 1353, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* provides an evocative and useful framework for considering the coastal region's medieval art and culture and its marked heterogeneity. In a meditation on the whims of *Fortuna*, Boccaccio astutely described the coast of Amalfi as "full... of men rich and proficient like

no others in the act of *mercantia*.³ *Mercatantia*, a term with many nuances of meaning and no exact equivalent in English, refers to trade and the principles guiding it, to merchandise, and to commercial transactions. It evokes the broad cultural framework of a commercial society and a variety of activities that take place within it.

This book introduces a concept related to Boccaccio's act of *mercantia*, the *art* of *mercantia*. It reconstructs, through analyses of works of art and architecture commissioned by people involved in commerce, sophisticated episodes of lay patronage around Amalfi in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴ Incorporating



3. Bronze doors of the Cathedral of Amalfi, ca. 1061.

old components with new, local with imported, and subtle with ostentatious, the art of *mercatantia* draws from varied artistic currents in the Mediterranean basin and relates to sites of Amalfitan mercantile endeavors.

The significance of these works extends beyond the implications of their eclectic forms; they delineate a web of material, economic, social, and political interaction. The art of *mercatantia* signifies monuments variously rooted in and responding to a culture shaped by the prevalence of commerce. Paid for with profits from and created with materials made available through the act of *mercatantia*; informed by experiences and works of art observed during the process of *mercatantia*; guided by concepts and ethics derived from the practice and discourse of *mercatantia*; embodying the tensions of this society in which *mercatantia* was prevalent – the art of *mercatantia* contains these and other possibilities.

Boccaccio's invocation of Amalfitan commercial prowess introduces a tale concerning one Landolfo Rufolo of Ravello. This Landolfo risks his vast fortune on a shipment of goods bound for Cyprus, suffers a series of tragic losses, and yet manages to return to Ravello a rich though humbled man. As is the case with so many of the *Decameron's* colorful characters, Landolfo is an embellishment of a historical figure, Lorenzo Rufolo.⁵ Lorenzo, like Landolfo, was from Ravello, was immersed in Amalfi's culture of commerce, and led a life of untold wealth and abject loss. Although both shared a love of lucre, they courted it in different ways. Lorenzo belonged to the third generation of the financially minded Rufolo family to serve in the administration of the Kingdom of Sicily. The positions that he and his father, uncles, and grandfather occupied as merchants, tax collectors, and inspectors of ships and ports not only brought them generous compensation, but also facilitated the family's patronage of daring works of art and architecture in the 1260s and 1270s. The fictional Landolfo was first a merchant, as Lorenzo's elders had been, and then a ruthless pirate following financial collapse in Cyprus – Boccaccio's creative critique of Lorenzo's line of work, to be sure. But while *Fortuna* guided Landolfo back to Ravello after his brushes with poverty and death, Lorenzo did not fare as well. He was accused of corruption in 1283, arrested, imprisoned, and executed by the royal authorities whom he was commissioned to serve.

Drawing on a rich array of material and textual evidence,⁶ this study reconstructs a tradition of merchant patronage that spanned two hundred years and shaped both domestic and religious environments in the coastal region. It examines in detail the culmination of that tradition, the art and architecture associated

with two generations of the Rufolo family, headed by Nicola as paterfamilias (d. ca. 1287) and his son Matteo (d. ante 1294), Lorenzo's father. The most significant Rufolo works date from the 1260s and 1270s and include a pulpit and ciborium fashioned of marble and mosaic, both located in the Cathedral of Ravello, and a sprawling residential complex adjacent to it (see Figs. 10 and 54). Other essential works, namely, the tomb of Marinella Rufolo Coppola and altarpiece of the Assumption of the Virgin (both dated to the 1330s) for the crypt of the Cathedral of Scala, belong to the era of dispersal and decline following Lorenzo's death and the family's fall from grace in 1283 (see Figs. 89 and 91).

The Rufolo commissions, along with earlier and contemporary works of merchant patronage, demonstrate that Amalfitan taste was wide ranging and embraced varied artistic idioms. From ribbed vaults of nearly canonical Gothic form to patterns of inlaid ornament resembling Islamic ivories, the works testify to the eclectic taste of the region's inhabitants. The works are also indebted to the cultural and ethnic diversity of the South. During the later Middle Ages (ca. 1000–1300), southern Italy and Sicily included Latin, Greek, French, Jewish, and Muslim inhabitants. Communities of Muslims, for instance, are thought to have resided at various times in Cetara, Atrani, Pozzuoli, Naples, and near Capua.⁷ Along with the broad cultural horizons of the well-traveled merchants, mixed populations contributed to the unusually eclectic nature of the South's art. Because many merchant commissions were also animated by secular and political impulses, the works of art studied here illuminate laicization, eclecticism, and multiculturalism at the core of the region's visual culture in the Middle Ages.

The grand scale of Rufolo patronage belies the family's humble origins. By the year 1000, the Rufolos owned modest parcels of cultivated land around Minori, the seaside town below Ravello, and in Ravello proper. Upon entering into commerce, banking, and ecclesiastical affairs, the family prospered in the 1100s, and by the middle of the thirteenth century it had accumulated a vast fortune. During the 1260s and 70s, they commissioned several monuments, including the house and cathedral furnishings. The very activities and responsibilities that brought generous compensation and facilitated their artistic patronage, however, may also have spelled their demise.

Among the Rufolos' debtors was the king of Sicily, Charles I of Anjou. Facing the calamity of war with Aragon and ripples of social unrest in the wake of the Vespers rebellion in Sicily, the king's son, Charles of Salerno (the future Charles II), charged father and son Matteo and Lorenzo Rufolo with corruption

in 1283.⁸ Following a swift trial, only Matteo escaped execution. These events dealt a crippling blow from which the family never fully recovered. Boccaccio's creative take on the Rufolo story sealed the family's notoriety for centuries to come.

The outlines of these events, as well as Boccaccio's version of them, suggest that the Rufolos and the other Amalfitans involved in commerce faced considerable challenges and risks. Theirs was an era of shifting economic paradigms and related artistic, social, and political uncertainties. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the heyday of merchant patronage, Christian values of justice and austerity clashed with the financial practices of nascent capitalism.⁹ The results of these practices – newly available wealth and imported merchandise – brought forth new conceptions of luxury, display, and urban and domestic space. Furthermore, the South's diverse population and varied visual cultures faced suppression in the name of an expanding and unified *Christianitas*, a process fueled by the newly installed Angevin dynasty and its commitment to northern European ideals.¹⁰ This setting of social conflict and transformation is fundamental to the creation and interpretation of the art of *mercantantia* in its heyday, from the mid-eleventh through the late thirteenth century. Such conflict is especially critical to understanding the demise of that culture, which the story of the Rufolos helps to illuminate.

***Mercatantia* and Its Methodological Implications**

Boccaccio's moralizing tale both inspires and anchors this study. His unflattering depiction of Landolfo, who embodies the problematic status of wealth and merchants in an era that deemed greed a mortal sin, illustrates the social and economic tensions that underlie commerce and the practice and commissions of merchant patronage. Banking and commercial activities engendered harsh, even damning critiques from the spiritual authorities who shaped many of the West's laws and ethical codes, as explored subsequently. In the era of Lorenzo and, two generations later, of Landolfo, the new ways in which wealth was exchanged, accumulated, and even displayed elicited profound theological, social, and psychological discomfort, as was recently the case with the advent of dot-com investment. Such tensions are critical to this analysis of Amalfitan art.

Boccaccio's language is also central to this study because it conveys conceptual keys to the world of southwestern Italy in the later Middle Ages. His characterization of the denizens of the Amalfi coast as "proficient like no others in the act

of *mercantia*” is both astute and surprising. His claim of Amalfitan commercial superiority is somewhat unexpected; it challenges the economic preeminence of Tuscany as understood in his own time and as reiterated in decades of modern scholarship.¹¹ It also evokes similar tensions and imbalances in modern art historical practice, which for generations has enshrined Tuscan and particularly Florentine art of the later Middle Ages as emphatically modern, and that of the South as conservative if not retardataire, separate, and above all marginal to the discipline’s priorities.

Although perhaps controversial even in its time, Boccaccio’s view of medieval economics is sound, particularly in reference to the centuries that preceded his own. Amalfi’s commercial prowess was established centuries before the rise of central Italian economic powerhouses such as Florence and Pisa. Often mythologized, this early success is supported by compelling documentary evidence.¹² The Lombard prince of Benevento Sicard conceded an unusual freedom to travel to the Amalfitans (*de Amalfitanus qualiter peragantur*) in his *Pactum* of 836.¹³ And travel they did. Chronicles and medieval privileges reveal that Amalfitan merchants traded in Cairo, Constantinople, Antioch, and even Cordova as early as the tenth century, and that they had sizable communities in Jerusalem by the second half of the eleventh.¹⁴ The Amalfitans quickly established a profitable circuit, trading grain, oil, and lumber for silks and spices in Byzantium, Syria, and Egypt; they then returned to Italy via Aghlabid North Africa and Sicily, where they sold some of their wares for gold, a rare commodity in the West at that time. The fact that Fatimid and Byzantine currencies were used in local transactions in the tenth and eleventh centuries also demonstrates the early impact of long-distance trade on the region.¹⁵ No wonder, then, that the twelfth-century chronicler William of Apulia wrote that Amalfitan merchants “traverse many seas” and are “well known around the world,” familiar to “Arabs, Libyans, Sicilians, and Africans.”¹⁶

The activities of Amalfitans throughout the Mediterranean basin brought distinction to their *patria*. Around 977, the Baghdadi merchant Ibn Hawqal described Amalfi as “one of the most prosperous and beautiful of the cities that enjoy the best conditions and are distinguished by their wealth and opulence.” He even deemed the ancient and nearby city of Naples “inferior to Amalfi for many reasons.”¹⁷ Outside the region, the cachet of Amalfi lingered well after its heyday. The inhabitants of distant Capua, for instance, endowed annual prayers for the dead with Amalfitan *tari* more than a century after that currency ceased to be minted.¹⁸ In matters as critical as salvation, the Capuans apparently did not take chances with the newfangled florin or *reale*.



Surrounding hilltop and seaside settlements prospered as well. Inhabitants of the many towns of the former Duchy of Amalfi, including Ravello, Scala, and Atrani, also worked in many aspects of long-distance trade.¹⁹ Relative to the centers that fueled the West's so-called Commercial Revolution, such as Marseilles, Bruges, and Lübeck, these coastal towns were precocious; their economies peaked a century before cities to the north came to dominate European and eastern Mediterranean markets.

Boccaccio's observations regarding the structures of Amalfitan trade are similarly sound. The "act of *mercantantia*," the key phrase in this passage from the *Decameron*, signifies the activity of engaging in trade, commerce, or exchange; it does not specify or limit the nature of participation.²⁰ Boccaccio's use of the term is thus apt because most Amalfitans were engaged in some form of commercial activity.²¹ Those active in trade were not limited to a particular legal, social, or economic class, as one sees in often-studied settings such as fifteenth-century Florence or Bruges. Another indication of the widespread nature of mercantile activity is the fact that members of most social and professional groups around Amalfi, and all the faith communities in the South (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim), participated in commercial ventures.

Some of these merchants amassed immense wealth, while others maintained modest incomes. Those who attained social, economic, and patronal distinction tended to be active in overseas trade and to possess significant agricultural and naval resources. Despite their achievements and power, however, the Rufolos and their contemporaries were rarely referred to as merchants in their day. Little wonder that Boccaccio, born of a merchant family himself, used the accommodating *mercantantia* to describe Amalfitan proclivities, because the word evokes varied activities practiced by a range of people and is therefore far more accommodating than the specific, limited, and limiting noun "merchant."²²

Throughout the *Decameron*, and in other early vernacular texts, *mercantantia* also yields an abstract sense of the principles guiding commerce. In still other cases, it refers to merchandise, whether goods on a ship or in a shop, or to financial transactions, whether cash loans, exchanges of goods, or even prostitution. Enlivened by its active, abstract, and material associations, *mercantantia* has many synonyms in English, but no single word embodies all its meanings.²³ Given the applicability of the term to a range of skills, economic activities, cultural structures, and material goods, *mercantantia* eloquently encapsulates the dominant characteristic of Amalfitan culture and the individuals who helped shape it.²⁴