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ON THE EDGE OF MAPS:
PRELIMINARY NOTES FOR A STUDY OF THE
PLURALITY OF THE ISLAND OF ALICUDI

Introduction. – When walking through the Map Gallery of the Vatican Museums, one of the most intriguing images of Italy and its regions is the map of Sicily, from the late 16th century, including its archipelagos: the Aegadian and Aeolian Islands, as well as Ustica in the southern Tyrrhenian Sea. The map is based on Giacomo Gastaldi's *Descrittione della Sicilia con le sue isole* (1545), and uses the same toponyms, although only a limited number of the places depicted are named explicitly (Gambi, 1997, p. 88). At the lower edge of the map, beneath the three views of Messina, Syracuse, and Palermo, the Aeolian Islands extend in a literally marginal position, with the westernmost island, *Alicur* (Alicudi) (fig. 1), positioned furthest to the right (all maps are oriented with the north at the top), on the very border of the map. Alicudi's placement within this archipelago has historically led to its representation as the most peripheral island of the group, often paired with the neighbouring Filicudi. In 1749, Count Giuseppe Giovanni Curtelli, in his poetic verses on the geography of Europe, described the two islands, formerly known respectively by their ancient Greek toponyms *Ericusa*,¹ and *Fenicusa*, as «the two remaining [...] further away towards the setting sun»² (Curtarelli, 1749, p. 192).

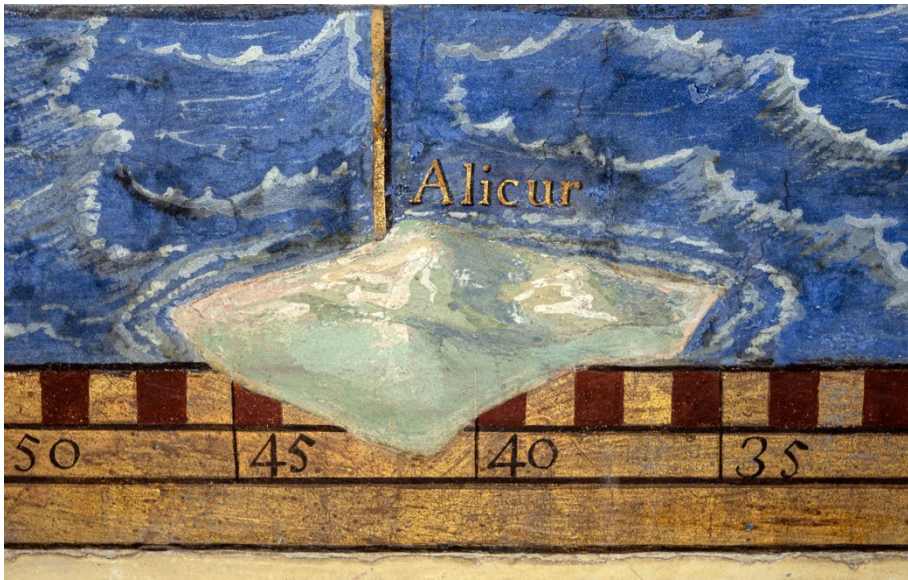
Today, Alicudi represents a compelling case of insularity, characterized by spatial and socio-cultural specificities that set it apart, both from the Aeolian archipelago and the more than sixty other minor Italian islands which are still inhabited today (Gallia, Malatesta, 2022, p. 161). Its position – both in cartographic representations and in physical geography – has likely contributed to a historical marginalization that also extends to

¹ The previous toponym for Alicudi originates from the abundant presence of heather (*Erica arborea*) there in ancient times.

² All quotations in languages other than English are translated by the author.

scholarly analysis. One might hastily suggest that Alicudi is simply one island among many islands; however, as this study hopes to demonstrate, it has developed a form of insularity that resists simplistic and anachronistic definitions. Even less does it conform to the prevailing dichotomy that often frames the island in opposition to the urban paradigm – as a remote, isolated, or perhaps unspoiled place (Malatesta, 2021, p. 41). Alicudi's insularity challenges traditional geographic determinism, which links isolation to the mere physical boundedness of the island form. Instead, it reveals a complex interplay of subjectivities, where internal representations confront and subvert external ones, thereby destabilizing definitions that would otherwise be historically inadequate (Gombaudo, 2007, pp. 267-268) and geographically reductive.

Fig. 1 – *Alicudi in the panel showing Sicily in the Vatican's Map Gallery (late 16th century)*



Source: © Governatorate of Vatican City State-Directorate of Museums, 2025

At present, no comprehensive or systematic studies are available that reconstruct the recent development of the island, nor are there any descriptions that examine Alicudi in isolation from the wider Aeolian archipelago so as to focus specifically on its unique characteristics – except as brief digressions within more general accounts of the Aeolians. As will be discussed, the main scientific literature currently available emphasizes

aspects related to the island's rich biodiversity and distinctive geological origin. However, what is still lacking is a robust corpus of qualitative and quantitative analyses addressing the relationship between the island and the outside world.

The Aeolian Islands, as Vincenzo Cabianca noted, are marked by «a high degree of landscape and geographical typicality, geographic-structural [due to their formation within the same volcanic arc] and geographic-perceptual [as an archipelago]». The predominant focus on their volcanic origin is also explained by the spatial configuration this gives rise to, in which 'natural features appear significantly more evident than anthropic ones', thereby becoming both structuring and dominant elements (Costa, 2005, pp. 49-50). The uniqueness of the Aeolian Islands as representing a major stage in the earth's history led to the archipelago's being included on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2000³, for its significance as a site for volcanological studies.

Methodologically, this study⁴ adopts an integrated approach combining qualitative and quantitative perspectives. It draws on an analysis of historical and literary sources, the interpretation of demographic and cartographic data, and the examination of contemporary cultural contents – such as cinema, literature, and social media narratives. This mixed-method perspective allows for a reading of Alicudi that connects its material and symbolic dimensions, linking past representations to present forms of insularity and its current cultural plurality.

The first part will describe Alicudi from the point of view of its more recent geographical aspects, providing the initial data which the study will use as a starting point to decipher the particular type of insularity that the island represents today. The second part will survey the principal geographical sources from the past, especially from travellers, which are useful for reconstructing how representations of the island changed during the contemporary era. Finally, the initial findings from our research into the plurality of the island today will be presented, citing the new voices which

³ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/184/>.

⁴ Part of the information contained in this article was gathered during a series of visits to Alicudi by the author between 2024 and 2025. This research is part of a project on how islandness intersects with broader questions of urban imaginaries, which is currently underway within the framework of the PRIN project "Next cities for whom? Imaginaries, resources and inequalities in urban fragments" (P2022WMKRP).

are presently communicating the island to the outside world and above all, narrating it from within.

The contemporary insularity of Alicudi. – To explore the intertwining nature of the island of Alicudi, in an attempt to define its insularity,⁵ it is useful to provide an overview of the island and its territory in light of its physical, demographic, and economic characteristics. Alicudi (fig. 2) is the summit of a stratovolcano (Adorni, Carveni, 1994, p. 288), a cone-shaped island that rises 2,000 m from the sea floor and 675 m above sea level, at the top of Montagnole.

Fig. 2 – *Alicudi*



Source: Cartographic rendering by Saverio Autellitano, 2025

As such, Alicudi is one of the seven sub-aerial volcanoes composing the active volcanic arc of the Aeolian archipelago (together with the

⁵ For a definition of insularity, reference is made here to that given by Gallia and Malatesta (2022, p. 161): «the geographical, biogeographical, and socioeconomic condition determined by physical and biological criteria specific to the isolation of a territory, through which it is possible to classify and distinguish different islands from one another».

volcanic islands of Stromboli, Panarea, Vulcano, Lipari⁶, Salina, and Filicudi) rising on the western edge of the Calabro-Peloritano basement, and also including several seamounts around the Marsili basin. In particular, Alicudi is part of the western sector of the arc, according to a division that considers the composition of magmas and rocks (Peccerillo 2017, pp. 218-225; Carey et al., 2012, p. 32). Geologically speaking, the island is the youngest, and the second smallest in the archipelago in terms of area (5.1 km²). Characterized by steep slopes that caused the recent human settlements to be located mainly on its south-eastern side (fig. 3), it is divided into the areas of Porto, Tonna and Tonna Alta, Bazzina and Bazzina Alta, Vallone, San Bartolo,⁷ Pianicello, Sgurbio,⁸ Montagna, Fucile, Lisca, Bandidiera, Vaddunazzu, Serro Pagliaro, Passo Vigna, Supa u sierru, and To chi-anu; the north-western slope remains impassable due to the steep gradients and challenging terrain.

Fig. 3 – *Alicudi (south-eastern side)*



Source: Cartographic rendering by Saverio Autellitano, 2025

⁶ From an administrative point of view, Alicudi comes under the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Lipari, the largest island in the group.

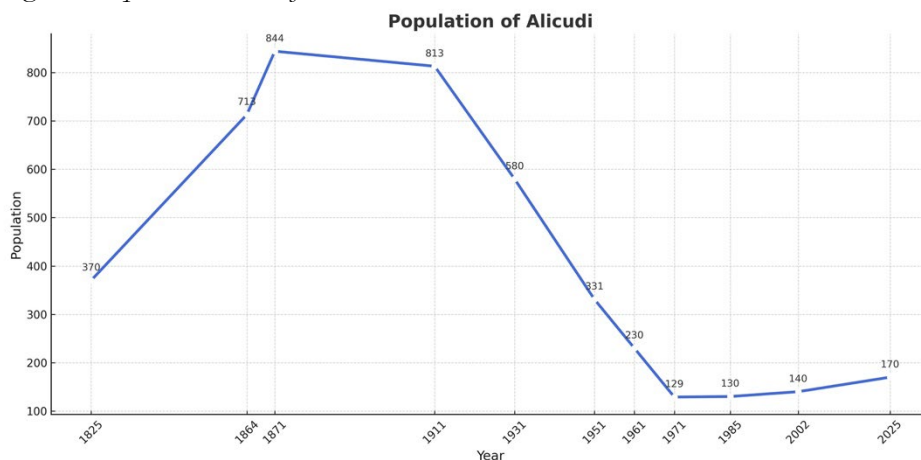
⁷ For a long time, it was the main settlement of the island and where, in 1821, one of the two churches still standing today was built. The earliest houses in the Porto area date back to the 1860s.

⁸ In this area, there is a cluster of houses that have been named after the human senses.

Large part of the territory is included in the Oriented Natural Reserve *Isola di Alicudi* and the Special Area of Conservation of the same name (ZSC ITA030023), as well as being part of the Special Protection Area *Arcipelago delle Eolie area marina e terrestre* (ZPS ITA030044) (Altadonna, 2023, p. 274).

In terms of settlement distribution, the island fits the typical configuration of many smaller islands, with a demographic concentration on the coastal area (*littoralisation*) (Gallia, Malatesta, 2022, p. 163) where the few commercial establishments (two grocery stores, a bar and a souvenir store) and specialized tourist facilities (a hotel, a travel agency, all still in operation, and another hotel, now closed) are located.

Fig. 4 – *Population trend of Alicudi 1825-2025*

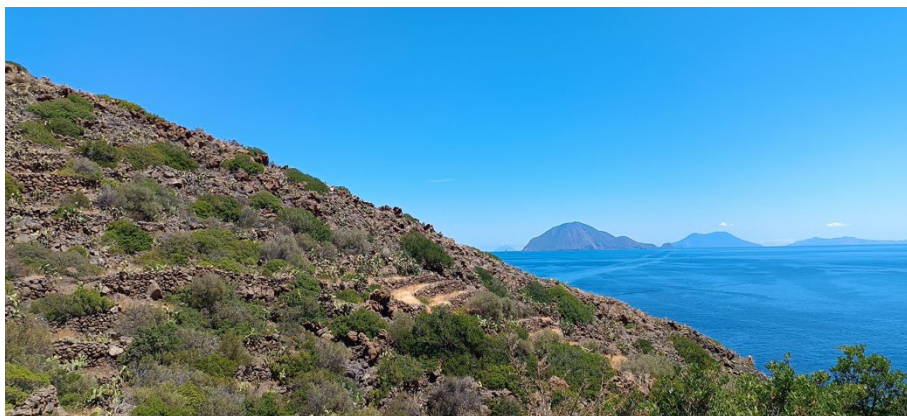


Source: data presented in Miyake 2002 (for years 1825, 1911, 2002), Ludwig Salvator (1864 and 1871), King (1931, 1951, 1961, 1971), Racheli (1985); Census of the Municipality of Lipari (2025, data as of January 1). Given the heterogeneity of the sources and the methods of data collection, the graph provides only an approximate representation of the population trend

Looking at population trends (fig. 4), it can be seen that there was an increase in population during the 19th century due to natural growth likely brought about by agricultural and pastoral self-sufficiency. The ancient micro-terraces are still visible today among the vegetation (fig. 5), bearing witness to the long period of landscape modification between the 19th and 20th centuries, when fishing was not widely practiced and intensive terrace

cultivation and sheep and goat farming prevailed,⁹ although these activities were subsequently almost completely abandoned (Miyake, 2002, p. 126). However, at the household level, vegetable and caper cultivation still continues today.

Fig. 5 – *Terraces in the lower Tonna area*



Source: photo by the author, 2025

In the 1990s, Toshio Miyake (2002) retraced the attempts to preserve fishing and gathering practices at the time. Starting from the island's past as an economy that was almost self-sufficient for a long time due to its micro-insularity, Miyake reconstructed how the population growth between the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, led to cultivate the land to the limit of its productivity, while keeping activities such as fishing on the sidelines, despite the island's geography, which is lacking in surface waterways and springs.

Although population numbers remained stable, the decline began in the half-century preceding World War I. Then, in the half-century following, there was an almost 85% decrease in population, mostly due to

⁹ The presence of wild goats and sheep has become a critical issue in protecting the island's biodiversity. As early as 2007, a UNESCO mission report identified feral sheep and goats as a threat to the native Mediterranean maquis, recommending a special animal control program to eliminate these animals from the island (WHC, 2007, p. 10). In the summer of 2024, many newspapers reported on the administration's plan to reduce the number of goats, which had now reached 600, mainly concentrated in the upper parts of the island (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/27/world/europe/alicudi-island-goats.html>).

emigration to Australia,¹⁰ United States and Argentina. While in the 1950s the traveling couple Eric and Barbara Whelpton (1957, p. 194) noted that there were still no guesthouses or hotels on the island, since the 1970s, Italian and foreign tourists – some of whom eventually settled and became residents – have played a key role in the partial repopulation of the area. In the subsequent decades, there has been a gradual but steady recovery and stabilization, thanks in part to new forms of residency, as well as infrastructure improvements with the island's connection to the electricity grid (between the 1980s and the 1990s).

In the mid-1980s, Gin Racheli, an expert on Italy's smaller islands, published an 'Invitation to visit' Filicudi and Alicudi (which at the time had 227 inhabitants) in *Airone* magazine, describing them in the title as «difficult islands» with «inaccessible landing places, little water in the wells, little or no electricity [...] the last islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea where people still live without progress». In her description, Racheli emphasized the precarious condition of the two islands as «the most distant, the most isolated, the least liveable for the ordinary tourist. Harsh and wild [...]». She then went on to list the hardships of the journey to reach them, the absence of hotels, bars, and sometimes even fresh bread in Alicudi, and the lack of a generator for evening lighting: «the time machine has stopped in the direction of the future». Alicudi and Filicudi were considered the 'most difficult' islands, partly because they offered no prospects for people who were not equipped for "a frontier life", ready to manage nature and hospitality 'as a life task' (Racheli, 1985).

Currently, however, the island has 170 residents, although the population varies depending on the time of year. While in winter, the number of residents falls as low as 50-60, in summer, the island undergoes significant repopulation thanks to the influx of tourists. An analysis of the population by nationality shows that 44 inhabitants (26% of the population) come from abroad (United Kingdom, Canada, France, Morocco, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, USA, Germany, Ukraine), with the largest community consisting of German citizens (14). Finally, 10 inhabitants are minors, while 64

¹⁰ According to King and Young (1979, p. 196), the significant number of islanders emigrating to Australia reflects an ancient connection whereby the inhabitants of the Aeolian Islands showed a predisposition for long sea voyages, unlike the traditional emigration from Sicily and southern Italy, where destinations such as France, Germany, and Switzerland prevailed.

are over 60, with the working-age population standing at 96 inhabitants¹¹. The current situation mirrors what was observed at the beginning of the 2000s (Miyake, 2002, p. 133), in terms of the composition of a population that now has a mixed identity, in which elements that trace back to Sicilian rural culture persist alongside constant contributions from outside.

With regard to mobility, there are no roads suitable for vehicles on Alicudi, only cobbled footpaths, some of which are very steep, connecting the different levels of the island. Mules are used to transport goods to the higher areas. The small port consists of a concrete patch where it is difficult to dock if conditions are not optimal. Hydrofoil connections with the other islands of the archipelago and with Sicily are frequent during the summer but reduced during the winter; a similar pattern can be observed for ferry services. The post office is only open a few days a week, and the only school on the island closed a few years ago due to a lack of pupils. In 2017, the *Tra cielo e mare* library was inaugurated with 7,000 volumes thanks to a private donation¹².

The economic fabric of recent decades has been predictably influenced by the predominance of tourism activities which, in replacing traditional activities, have also determined the dynamics of population settlement. In addition to tourism services, the main sources of income for residents are fishing and construction, as well as a few isolated business projects involving the trade of products derived from the island's plants.

Due to the island's conformation and strict building regulations, most of the houses in Alicudi are old buildings, renovations, and restorations of old houses in the typical vernacular architectural style of the Aeolian Islands, strongly influenced by 16th-century Campania architecture and Greek-Roman and Islamic traditions. The houses are always built facing the sea, creating an open relationship with the surrounding landscape. In particular, the layout of most of the settlements still gives an idea of the kind of integration with the environment that takes into account geomorphological characteristics, climatic factors, and availability of economic and material resources that have defined Aeolian architecture (Gallo, 2021, p. 60; Caponetto, Giuffrida, 2022; Mollica, 2022): structures with superimposed or combined cubic elements, walls of shapeless stones, the

¹¹ Data provided by the Registry Office of the Municipality of Lipari.

¹² <https://www.raiplay.it/programmi/tracieloemare>.

presence of a large terrace (*bagghiu*) with cylindrical pillars of white plaster, and more. This is despite the fact that even on this island, the effects of the changes that led to new and often unsuitable building materials being used in the 20th century are rather evident. However, on Alicudi, in particular, unlike on other islands in the group, there is no obvious evidence of the typical land consumption linked to the widespread urbanization related to tourism and significant landscape alterations (Gallia, Malatesta, 2022, p. 165). There too, tourism has been a stimulus for growth that has made it possible to address and manage the economic vulnerability and marginalization observed in similar situations in the 20th century (Cardillo et al., 2021, p. 4), but it has only had a slightly negative impact, for example, in terms of reduction of endemic biodiversity and overbuilding.

The contemporary insularity of Alicudi, therefore, seems to offer several possible escape routes from the typical characteristics assigned to islands as geographical units listed by Malatesta and Cavallo (2019, p. 2893) and namely: spatial remoteness, cultural uniqueness, and environmental fragility, all with the added burden of subordination to the mainland in terms of resources and connections that these characteristics imply. Considering the aspects we have mentioned so far, and as we shall see in the next paragraphs, Alicudi seems to present itself as a ‘relational and reticular’ insularity (*ibidem*), in which the island is certainly a fragment of a larger whole consisting of all the islands in the group, but is also a crucial node in a network that extends well beyond the archipelago.

The external view of Alicudi in the past. – To properly place Alicudi in the imaginary about islands, it is useful to present the main historical representations that define how it entered contemporaneity. The sources from previous centuries devote little attention to the human element, focusing mainly on geological peculiarities.

At the end of the 18th century, the renowned biologist Spallanzani published a collection of five volumes containing his observations from a journey through southern Italy that he undertook in 1788. Spallanzani arrived in the Aeolian Islands following earlier studies by William Hamilton (1768) and Déodat de Dolomieu (1781), but he also explored Alicudi and Filicudi, islands described as «not examined by others» before him. Spallanzani’s voyage from Filicudi was quite eventful, and he risked being shipwreck in a storm before arriving on the island, where «bays or ports are unknown

names». Engaged in research on the volcanic evolution of the islands, the “vestiges of fire”, Spallanzani (1825, pp. 163-180) noted among the islanders the absence of toponyms related to the island’s localities, making it difficult for him to locate observation sites. Spallanzani also reported notable difficulties in exploration due to following the lines of “tortuous gorges” completely lacking in “paths or trails”, on an island of “inhospitable” places, “all steep”, with cliffs whose “horridness” made the slopes inaccessible.

With regard to the agricultural activity on the island, Spallanzani writes

it is incredible how industrious and patient the people of Alicudi are in not losing a single clod of earth without cultivating it. There is hardly a patch of fertile land, just a few perches wide, that is not interrupted by rocky outcrops, lava masses, crevices, or ravines.

Then, describing his experiences with the populations of Alicudi and Filicudi

Beneath those poorly built huts and amidst those humble meals, I discovered an enviable bliss – one I am not sure can be found even in the grandest palaces of the mighty or among the most lavish dishes of royal banquets. I mean a certain cheerfulness that lit up the faces of those small gatherings, and a deep sense of peace and contentment that filled their hearts and shone through from within (Spallanzani, 1825, pp. 426-429).

In 1824, the British astronomer and naval officer William Henry Smyth published a memoir of the observations he made during extended stays in Sicily. In the account of his visit to Alicudi, Smyth provides a concise and precise picture of life on the island:

The population consists of about two hundred and sixty sturdy peasants, so healthy that diseases are almost unknown amongst them; abstinence is their sovereign remedy for illness, and oil their chief nostrum in cases of accident. Visits to this secluded people are so rare that, on my landing, an aged farmer was anxious to know what could have induced me to visit their uninviting rock; and, in ascending from the beach to the priest’s house, near the church, about half way up the mountain, by a very steep and fatiguing path,

I received every assistance from nearly a hundred followers, who all took it for granted that none but themselves were inured to such violent exercise: the difficulty of this slippery ascent is the only protection these poor fellows have from corsairs (Smyth, 1824, p. 278).

Another difficult landing was that of Alexandre Dumas père, who departed from Naples aboard Captain Arena's *speronara* and arrived at the Aeolian Islands in September 1835. In the part of his account concerning Alicudi, Dumas makes some very striking comments, especially regarding the life of the local population:

It is difficult to imagine anything sadder, darker, or more desolate than this unfortunate island [...] It is a corner of the earth forgotten during Creation, left as it was in the time of chaos. No path leads to its summit or runs along its shore; only a few grooves carved by rainwater serve as passageways for feet bruised by the sharp edges of stones and the roughness of lava. On the entire island, not a single tree, not a patch of greenery to rest the eyes; only, in the depths of some rock fissures, in the cracks between the scorched stones, a few rare stems of heath, which is why Strabo sometimes called it *Ericusa* [...] And yet, on this patch of scorched lava, live – in miserable huts – one hundred and fifty or two hundred fishermen, who have tried to make use of the few plots of land spared from total destruction [...] We returned to our ship, our hearts heavy from witnessing such misery. Truly, when one lives in a certain world and in a certain way, there are lives that become incomprehensible (Dumas 1842, 93-94).

In his *Geographie Universelle*, Élisée Reclus included a long section on the Aeolian Islands in his description of southern Italy. Alicudi is described as «a peak of perfect regularity, which from afar resembles a tent placed at the edge of the horizon» (Reclus, 1875, p. 570).

A more detailed and in-depth portrait was provided some years later by Archduke Ludwig Salvator of Austria, who did extensive research on the islands of the Mediterranean, and on the Aeolian Islands in particular, publishing in Prague between 1893 and 1896 the eight volumes of *Liparischen Inseln*, accompanied by nearly two hundred engravings of maps and views documenting the landscape of the time. The sixth volume concerns Alicudi, and after illustrating the island's botanical richness (especially its

capers and olive trees), it describes its main paths and the settlements that they lead to. The account given by Ludwig Salvator is accompanied by a very rich toponymy and consists of three chapters in which the author guides the reader step by step along the ascent to the summit of the island and the subsequent descent to the coast.

Almost contemporary to that of Ludwig Salvator is the disheartened testimony of the German mineralogist and volcanologist Alfred Bergeat, who compiled geological observations on the Aeolians, spending several weeks there between 1894 and 1898

The stay on the very seldom-visited and most difficult-to-reach island, to which I devoted three days, was tolerable in itself, for I also found a well-meaning welcome here. But even though many people might gladly seek isolation from the world, here it soon becomes a burden [...] Only from the summit can one view a larger portion of the island – but it is the western side, a wild escarpment cut through by desolate ravines and composed entirely of agglomerate and lava beds, which is neither picturesque enough nor of such great geological interest as to occupy one's thoughts for long amid all the solitude. Soon, the vast surrounding sea, the gracefully curved lines of the Sicilian coastal mountains veiled in blue haze, and Mount Etna, towering above all and gleaming with eternal snow, awaken a sense of longing – and I must confess that I did not leave the rocky island with much regret (Bergeat, 1899, pp. 216-217).

From the brief overview provided here, it emerges that the portrait of Alicudi in the main sources of the 18th and 19th centuries is based exclusively on the gaze of outsiders. As emphasized by Malatesta (2021, p. 38) this gaze often also encourages a simplistic distinction between the anthropic and the natural, whereby the anthropic is seen in the actions of those who explore the island, while the natural corresponds to the island «as a site imagined even before it is directly experienced». Moreover, the documentary matrix often intertwines with the paradigm of the island as an isolated place: almost no room is given for the voices of insiders, except indirectly, in rare accounts of brief conversations with a few inhabitants, which are in any case functional to the needs of exploration. However, the picture that begins to emerge from the 20th century onwards, and which continues to the present day, is a very different one.

Alicudi Today: A Convergence of New Voices. – In the survey of contemporary voices that narrate the island, the first part of the 20th century saw the emergence of studies dedicated to the history of the Aeolian Islands by local authors, such as that of Leopoldo Zagami¹³. However, in the second half of the century, there was a consolidation of the intertwining between stories belonging to the Aeolian oral heritage and theories attempting to explain their origin through reconstructions that would later gain significant media attention. As emphasised by Uhl (2005, p. 19), in the Aeolian Islands, «mythology and geography have never had a clear boundary». In particular, the stories told by Alicudi inhabitants about the majare/mahare – female figures who at night would change into animals, fly to other islands, and organize banquets – became especially popular. The story of the majare has taken paths that have transformed it into a distinctive myth of Alicudi.

As reconstructed by Ragonese (2024), it is through the theories of Elio Zagami – featured in several documentaries from the 1990s¹⁴ that the mythical-magical beliefs of Alicudi became linked to an ergot rye epidemic recorded in 1903. This rye is believed to be the same grain from which Albert Hofmann would later extract LSD a few decades later. The use of this rye in food preparation is said to have caused a prolonged period of collective hallucination among the island's inhabitants. Regardless of the validity of this theory – which has been heavily criticized – the collective hallucination hypothesis has gained widespread traction, with reports appearing on CNN¹⁵ and BBC¹⁶, as well as in numerous Italian media outlets and travel literature¹⁷.

While Ragonese has contextualized this legacy of tales about flying women within a broader framework of ancient Eurasian cultural traditions, Maffei (2008) analyzed their anthropological content in light of the social dynamics that characterized the island's population in the past. The most significant aspect here, however, lies in the continued association of the island with a mythical-magical 'female' tradition – what Cavallo has

¹³ *Le isole Eolie nella storia e nella leggenda* (1939).

¹⁴ *Quando le donne volavano* ("When women used to fly"), 1991, and *L'isola analogica* ("The Analogue Island"), 2007.

¹⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/alicudi-italy-lsd-island>.

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/reel/playlist/myths-and-legends?vpid=p09hgdgp>.

¹⁷ E.g. *Una voce dal Profondo* (2023), by Paolo Rumiz.

described as «a true archetype of the island of women»¹⁸, a cultural tòpos in which female figures are transfigured into ‘perverse creatures’ in order to transcend the sociocultural characterization, already present in the classical world, of femininity as tied to reproduction. Cavallo also hypothesized that at the root of this association lies a geo-cultural rationale: with the rise of the modern state, islands – already separated from the oecumene in cultural, political, and economic terms – became peripheries of continental entities, crystallizing insular identity in isolation and ultimately obscuring the ‘reticular’ interpretation of islands, in parallel with the marginalization of women in society (Cavallo, 2019).

However, in reconnecting with the networked nature of Alicudi and reconstructing the web of voices that currently represent it, it is interesting to observe how the primary means of communication has become social media – particularly Instagram. In the current research, an ongoing survey is being conducted on the pages that primarily focus on narrating the island. Beyond considerations related to the varying degrees of explicit tourism promotion adopted by different pages, one notable element is the role played by women authors, often not originally from the island. For example, some of the most popular pages are those written by women who work in tourism hospitality, such as @alicudi_gildsream, where the author, a German woman, describes herself as a «beauty pro-moter, Alicudi Ambassador, islander by choice». On this page, posts promoting tourism are interwoven with accounts of the Aeolian islands’ most significant events, travel-related information, brief reflections accompanied by striking panoramic photographs, and even a serialized narrative presenting “the inhabitants of Alicudi”. The interactive dimension is further enhanced by videos that invite followers to identify and comment on the island’s “characters”, thus fostering a sense of shared familiarity and belonging.¹⁹

¹⁸ To give just one example of how this type of definition is also used to describe Alicudi in contemporary publications, see Hecker H., “Die Insel der Frauen. Emanzipation und Entschleunigung im Mittelmeer”, *Deine Korrespondentin*, 10/2/2021, <https://www.deine-korrespondentin.de/die-insel-der-frauen/>.

¹⁹ On other pages, Alicudi serves as the setting for narrative and poetic exploration (such as @chiara_kalikasemidiluce, whose author, originally from the Bologna Apennines, uses the bio claim ‘poetry everywhere’); still others are written by women for whom the ritual visit to Alicudi in summer is an especially intense and meaningful experience (such as @marina_la_rosa, whose author is a TV personality and actress of Sicilian origin).

Another element common to this kind of messaging is the emergence of a narrative in which the stereotypical aspects of portraying islands as remote paradises, with the related iconemes (dell’Agnese, 2018, p. 28) – connected, in this case, to the Mediterranean islands – secluded from the rest of the world, are replaced by much more intimate forms of communication in which Alicudi is portrayed as a spectrum of impressions, memories, personal experiences, and artistic interpretations as well as moments connected to the island’s daily life.

In recent years, this link between women authors and Alicudi has also been emphasized in literature, with several writers choosing Alicudi as the setting for their works or placing it relation to a female figure, either the author herself or a character in the narrated events. Other works have put Alicudi in the background of their stories, but with the island’s characteristics playing a significant role. Examples of this literature include *Una lunga estate crudele* (2015) by Alessia Gazzola, *La terrazza delle promesse* (2020) by Renata Blasi, *Amuri* (2021) by Catena Fiorello, *L’isola che mi amava* (2024) by Stefania Aphel Barzini, the short story *Alicudi* (2012) by Claire Arnot, while Mara Lamalfa is the author of a novel (*L’isola dove volano le femmine*, 2024) revolving around the story of the flying women and horned rye.

However, the island has also been and continues to be the subject of significant representations from the perspective of visual media. During a crucial period in the history of Italian cinema, the Aeolian Islands were at the center of the so-called “war of the volcanoes”, when *Stromboli: Terra di Dio* (1950) by Roberto Rossellini was countered by *Vulcano* (1950) by William Dieterle. A few years later, *Alicudi* (1961) by Marcello Spaccini was produced, narrating emigration while highlighting the nature of Alicudi and thus fitting into a cycle of representations that presented interesting insights within ecocritical reading (Past, 2024, pp. 155-156).

In the 1990s, aside from the already mentioned television documentaries, Alicudi’s representation gained new popularity in the film *Caro Diario* (1993) by Nanni Moretti, in which the protagonist describes the silence enveloping the island with the phrase “terrible calm”²⁰. A documentary

²⁰ The extreme silence of the island, due to the environmental conditions described in the second paragraph of this work, is one of the recurring features in the collected descriptions and appears not to be merely the impression of the authors. At the end of the 1970s, some researchers from the University of Messina documented how the inhabitants of Alicudi could be considered a population of ‘white ears’ or of ‘pure presbycusis’ due to the very low

from 2014, *L'ultimo giorno* by Alberto Bougleux, recounts the final phase of the island's school, while *Alicudi nel vento* (2015) by Aurelio Grimaldi tells of another experience still connected to the school. Numerous other documentaries have been produced in recent years, such as *Alicudi* (2021), curated by Massimo Luconi, Mascia Musy, and Teresa Maria Perre and *Finis Terrae* (2025), directed by Marzia Rumi.

Alicudi is also a favored subject for photographers and painters, as demonstrated, for example, by the 1:1 photographic representation of the island created by Paola Pivi in 2001²¹; the photo collection of Fernando Zanetti²²; the visual puzzle in the publication *Thinking like an Island* (2024) by Gabriele Chiapparini and Camilla Marrese; and the glass artworks by Roberto di Alicudi, who composes using the colors of the island in his works and often pairs Alicudi with Capri, the island of his childhood.

In sum, the current narrative landscape of Alicudi reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporaneity. Historical myths and cultural identities, not to mention the landscape, are continuously reinterpreted through diverse media and voices, and in particular, those of women authors and creators. This evolving island discourse challenges stereotypical portrayals, revealing Alicudi as a complex cultural space shaped by personal experience, artistic expression, and social connectivity, thus reaffirming its significance both within the Aeolian archipelago and in the world beyond.

Conclusion and Research Perspectives. – Alicudi represents a privileged setting for investigating contemporary forms of insularity within a theoretical research framework that goes beyond deterministic approaches and simplistic dichotomies. The historical analysis of the island's representations – from Spallanzani's accounts (1793) to the descriptions by Smyth (1824) and Dumas (1861) – highlights how the island's imagery has long been shaped by external viewpoints, oscillating between a certain fascination with the harshness of the landscape and perceptions of extreme marginality. However, the demographic, economic, and cultural developments occurring in recent decades testify to a more dynamic condition that cannot be reduced to the opposition between island and mainland but is expressed through

incidence of civil noise in the impairment of hearing acuity (Germanò *et al.*, 1981).

²¹ https://www.perrotin.com/artists/Paola_Pivi/10/allicudi/6516.

²² *Alicudi: the magic of light beyond time* (2022).

networks of relationships and connections: an insularity made up of plurality, paradigmatic of many contemporary minor islands.

From this perspective, the notion of «reticular insularity» (Malatesta, Cavallo 2019, p. 2893) is of great use to describe Alicudi's current condition: namely, that of an island which, despite maintaining a clear local specificity, is an integral part of a system of cultural and material exchanges with the rest of the archipelago, the Mediterranean, and beyond. Recent repopulation processes – which have seen the arrival of new residents, including foreigners, and the central role of tourism – are helping to redefine the island's social and cultural identity.

On a symbolic and narrative level, the island, especially in recent years, continues to be a remarkable site for imaginary construction. Stories about the flying women demonstrate how local narratives can be renegotiated and reused as tools of self-representation.

New voices – particularly those of women – emerging through literature, cinema, and social media, seem to overturn the idea of the island as a remote place, instead favoring intimate perspectives and everyday experiences, thereby reshaping the female archetype of the island in cultural and creative terms.

By adequately exploring these aspects, we should also be able to decode the new link between the imagery connected to Alicudi and the influences it exerts on tourism. Moreover, a necessary step, especially for minor Italian islands, is to consider the insular landscape as identity but also to remodel it within the relationships of use, which become relationships «as the reverse of isolation, which is structural and historicized knowledge [...] a compatible use that can be physical, visual, cognitive, virtual, economic, etc.» (Costa, 2005, p. 56).

The continuation of the study aims to explore these points further by combining historical sources, demographic analyses, and new narrative forms, in an attempt to capture the complexity of a place that, from a cartographic margin, configures itself today as a dynamic space of interpretation and cultural production and as such, as a new margin between representations and reality.

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Ai margini delle mappe: appunti preliminari per uno studio sulla pluralità dell'isola di Alicudi. – L'articolo analizza l'insularità contemporanea di Alicudi, l'isola più occidentale dell'arcipelago eoliano, integrando prospettive geografiche, storiche e culturali. Viene evidenziato come le rappresentazioni esterne – in particolare quelle presenti nei resoconti di viaggio del XVIII e XIX secolo – abbiano contribuito a plasmarne l'immagine, spesso sovrapponendo le voci locali. Oggi l'identità di Alicudi si configura in un equilibrio tra tradizione e cambiamento, influenzata da trasformazioni demografiche, dal turismo e da nuove narrazioni culturali, soprattutto quelle promosse da autrici contemporanee. Nel tentativo di descrivere l'"insularità reticolare" di Alicudi, lo studio ne definisce il ruolo di spazio al tempo stesso periferico e connesso, non solo all'interno dell'arcipelago, ma anche in un repertorio di immaginari si estende ben oltre i suoi confini geografici.

Keywords. – Alicudi, Insularità reticolare, Rappresentazioni culturali

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