

# Local administrative sources on population movements after the Messina earthquake of 1908

Giuseppe Restifo

*Dipartimento di Studi sulla Civiltà Moderna, Università di Messina, Italy*

## Abstract

Contrary to what one might expect, we have only a rough idea of the movements of the population of Messina after the 1908 earthquake. The exact figures regarding the number of dead are lacking; the fugitives were registered in difficult conditions; the numbers of immigrants can only be estimated. The two censuses of 1901 and 1911 are the only general source of comparison. To date nobody has examined the forms filled in by the families, from which it is possible to deduce the origins of the inhabitants of Messina. The analysis of local sources such as marriage registers and church records can provide information to fill this gap. An overall survey of the available documentation allows us to reconstruct the vertiginous movement of population caused by the earthquake.

**Key words** *historical seismology – population – Messina*

From 1909 to the present day the earthquake of 1908 has been studied from two different viewpoints, the scientific and the socio-historic, without ever having found common ground which would give a more complete picture of the scenario. Now an attempt can be made to find a link between the two approaches to the natural disaster and the social catastrophe, thanks also to recent developments in historical research into earthquakes.

At the risk of irregularity or provocation towards researchers in either field, it is possible to lean more towards that which Prigogine and Caracciolo (Caracciolo, 1988) saw as a reconciliation of the history of man, his society and his awareness, and the natural forces at work.

As Guidoboni (Guidoboni, 1985) rightly observed, an earthquake is not merely a series of tremors; it is a social factor which plays its part in the history of a people or area.

We must therefore deal with the effects of

the earthquake from a social point of view, with its consequences, whether intense and decisive or not, with the reaction on the part of society and its components, both groups and individuals, in order to show that the course of the city's history is interrupted. Otherwise we would be reduced to dealing with the crisis in terms of a mere death count.

Immediately following the earthquake, amongst the survivors there are those who remained and those who left, and of these those who were later to return (and it is interesting to measure the time spans) and those who never did. In any case a void was created, that, thanks to the spread of information, had the effect of absorbing immigrants from other localities. Although primary sources on population migration say little in any direct manner, we do get a general idea from chroniclers' and eyewitness accounts, but these do not meet the requirements of modern demographic criteria.

To some extent this lack of information can be justified by the period that is before the use of statistics and the lack of any relevant administrative records. The earthquakes recorded in

Messina from 5 February 1783 onward, resulted in relatively few deaths, 700 in a population of 37000 (Pardi, 1921), but at the same time forced large masses of people away from the city. How many remained within its walls and how, demographically, did they behave? How many of the fugitives returned and when? How did the flow of information propagating «opportunities» in a city left with a void caused by the earthquake get about? What was the immigration flow? Who were the new inhabitants of the town? Where did they come from and what did they come to do? How did they behave in their turn?

For a general evaluation we can refer to census data prior to and immediately following an earthquake: in Messina we have 40293 inhabitants in 1748 and 46063 in 1798 (Longhitano, 1988). A very modest population increase of 6000 over a period of 50 years, little more than 9000 if we take into consideration the 3651 inhabitants of the outlying villages of Galati, Gesso and Gazzi, previously calculated with the rest of the city. The figures however seem to indicate a fairly low level of migration and a moderate vitality of the inhabitants of the city.

In fact, immigration must have been rather more substantial, if we consider that a great many people had to take refuge elsewhere and were not able to return until much later, when their homes had been rebuilt. But in the meantime many of them had found work away from Messina and never came back, especially the artisans, so sought after in Palermo and Catania. It would seem reasonable to suppose that, as a result of the disaster, the city lost at least 2000 or 3000 people who would have increased the population figures by the same amount (Pardi, 1921).

Without a direct source with which to quantify the migration, we can identify the natural movements of the population in the parish registers of births, marriages and deaths. In the case of marriages it is often possible to identify the origins of the couple; the parish priests were scrupulous when it came to verifying the «unmarried state» of someone from another parish.

A similar procedure to that used for the

1783 earthquake can be adopted to calculate the population movements after 1908, comparing data from the two censuses taken in 1901 and 1911. In 1901 there were 147106 inhabitants in the city, in 1911 the number had fallen to 127398. According to other calculations from sources other than that of the State Administration the number of inhabitants on the 9 February 1901 was 152878, of which 57036 in the surrounding villages.

Immediately before the catastrophe in the entire commune 160000 inhabitants were counted; «one week later, with more than a third dead and the majority of the survivors scattered throughout the other towns in Sicily and the mainland the number had been reduced to a few tens of thousands» (Mortara, 1913).

The telluric movements led to 60000 dead or missing. Unfortunately the figure is not precise in terms of absolute numbers, an accurate calculation being difficult for several reasons. For example «in the worst hit zone are the via Porta Imperiale and the civic hospital» under the rubble of which lie an imprecise «large number of patients». Furthermore the transient population was numerous in the town for reasons of trade, industry, study and for professional reasons and it is quite possible that many of these avoided being counted among the dead persons. To these «missing» figures can be added the numbers of fleeing residents: «the survivors mad with fear in the first few days after the catastrophe had dispersed in search of a refuge and many of the injured, some seriously, were immediately taken away». In the end, after several months, it proved very difficult to collect and identify the bodies, especially since, after only a few days, they had decomposed in a strange way.

In December 1909 the bulletin of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce published a research article on the «Movement of the population in the kingdom in 1908» with a table showing the deaths in the earthquake of the 28 December. The total reached 60325, but of these 32477 were indicated as «presumed dead under the rubble» (Baratta, 1910). According to the «Movimento dello Stato Civile del Comune di Messina» for 1909 the official figure was 60283 dead, but for many authors

this is disputable (Mori, 1917). The imprecision can be seen in the differentialities for age and sex.

«Soon after the catastrophe, the dead were laid in the Acattolici cemetery in the S. Ranieri quarter, in that of Colerosi at Mare Grosso and in the monumental cemetery of Camposanto, which the earthquake had damaged considerably but had also respected. Subsequently other bodies, which had initially been buried temporarily in the various piazzas of the city, were brought there... Faced with such responsibility, the Hygiene Office was one of the first to set up again in a very primitive hut» (Trasselli, 1987).

The number of legally certified bodies, according to the 2203 identification records deposited at the Registry Office until 29 July 1909 amounts to about 8000. Another count can be taken from the declarations of presumed death following a royal decree (No. 23, 22.1.1909). The Prefect of Messina reported that on the same date (29.7.1909) 7047 declarations were made (Baratta, 1910). The total figures, even if approximate, due to the difficult working conditions facing the administrative offices indicate a mortality rate of catastrophic proportions. The loss of 40% of the population places the case of Messina way above «crisis» on the calamity scale (between 10 and 20% of the inhabitants) and among the «catastrophe» group (30-60%). A repetition of the earthquake under the same conditions would have brought the population to a rapid extinction (Le Bras, 1969).

Unlike an epidemic, that, though serious in impact affects different age groups to differing

degrees, a catastrophic earthquake affects the population equally taking no account of any privileged strata of the population pyramid. In any case we can compare the composition of the population according to age and sex in the 1901 census and the social pyramid of the survivors, accepting as irrelevant the changes up to 1908.

In the second census (1911) a greater decrease can be observed in the number of women than in men. The number of women decreased by 181 per thousand and the number of men by 129 (and males aged between 15 and 60 by 113). Table I has been drawn according to the age and sex of the population (Mortara, 1913).

The irregularities could be put down to possible fluctuations in the birth rate immediately following the earthquake, but could also be due to an influx of males in the same period.

A new equilibrium in the state of the population was reached after an initial phase of instability and not merely in the birth rate. The marriage rate, too, was profoundly upset by the variable socio-economic conditions; these disruptions are apparent in the disorganisation of the economy, in collective phobias and in the possible upsets in the marriage market due to the arbitrary nature of mortality (especially if one of the two sexes suffered more losses than the other). Socio-economic variability can lead to demographic variability. It is interesting therefore to examine not only the nature and extent of the fluctuations, but also the rapidity with which they disappear (Le Bras, 1969).

Likewise, only rough estimates can be made of the numbers of inhabitants who left the city.

**Table I.** Age and sex of population in the censuses of 1901 and 1911 and their per cent decrease.

Age	Males		Females		Males	Females
	1901	1911	1901	1911		
< 15	25695	21213	24939	20061	17	20
15-25	14136	13220	13056	11549	6	12
25-40	13989	12066	15744	12126	14	23
40-60	14110	12177	14931	11738	14	21
> 60	6501	6142	6677	6232	6	7

National sources concerning the migration of Italians to other countries became reliable and substantial at the beginning of the century; the figures for internal migration are rather less clear. In Messina the situation was complicated further not only as a direct result of the destruction caused by the earthquake, but also because of the burning of the Town Hall shortly afterwards and subsequently by the bombing of Messina in 1943.

«In the Provincial Registry Office, all judiciary, notarial and civil records for the whole province had been kept since 1819... Following the disaster, which reduced the Palazzo Provinciale to a pile of rubble, it would certainly have been impossible to salvage anything but a few manuscripts and other important things deposited there» (Trasselli, 1987). Even the initial conservation was of a transitory nature: «a large hut was built in Piazza del Duomo in which the salvaged documents were placed» (Nigro and Alibrandi, 1968).

From existing literature we learn that after the earthquake «the mass of citizens emigrated mostly towards the nearby towns, especially Catania and Palermo. In Catania the influx of refugees was more substantial; the population in that decade increased by 60000 over and above any natural increase. This would have been impossible in ordinary circumstances» (Bruno, 1957).

One interesting characteristic of the history of immigration in Catania is the marked prevalence of the arrival of entire family units – an attraction perhaps for the surviving families of Messina after the catastrophe of 1908. It would be interesting, although we cannot deal with it here, to investigate the demographic modifications that immigration must have determined in Catania; from 1861 the number of people aged between 20 and 60 increased disproportionately (Pecora, 1962).

In Catania in 1909 a census was, in fact, carried out on refugees from Messina sheltering in the town or passing through on the way to other localities: the total figure amounted to 21805. Of these 8075 appear on a list «taken from the census forms» and published by the Central Relief Committee; a further 8300 were refugees leaving Catania between 1 January

and 9 February 1909 with tickets presented by the authorities. 5345 «failed to present the census forms issued by the Central Committee» and finally, about 85 Messinese are calculated to have died between 31 December 1908 and 31 January 1909 with another 44 unidentified (Comune di Catania, 1909).

There must have been 10345 Messinese taking refuge in Palermo according to data from the General Registry Office there (Municipio di Palermo, 1909). In all 44247 Messinese reached other provinces in Italy, according to the Prefects at the Ministry for Internal Affairs and data from the Central Relief Committee for the victims of the earthquake in Sicily and Calabria. The names recorded in five lists kept until 18 January 1909 amount to 16183. To these can be added a further 28064 from four subsequent lists (Comitato Centrale di Soccorso, 1909).

Such extensive migration can also account for the population increase in Messina revealed by the census in 1911: 127000 inhabitants within three years of the catastrophe which had «felled» 40% of the population in a single night, certainly not due, simply, to a natural increase among the survivors who had remained. It is true that it was a «revelation by the official statistics of the vitality of our people which surprised whoever thought that, with the houses destroyed and with administrative, economic and scientific life at a virtual standstill, Messina would surely have perished» (Trasselli, 1987).

It is more likely, however, that immediately following the exodus from the scene of the disaster, a counter-exodus of immigrants began. «The love for one's native land and economic necessity overcame the reluctance of the survivors to return to the place where everything brought back memories of sorrow and ruin» (Mortara, 1913).

The census data which reflect, however, a decrease of only 20000 inhabitants call for further investigation of the primary sources closer to the local community, despite the lack of direct data on migration. At this point it is important to examine more closely the documentation of the census. From 1911 on the place of birth was registered. By calculating the cases

of immigration that emerge from the census and comparing them to the number of residents we can assess the so-called migration quotient (Migliorini, 1962).

A comparison can be made with the previous census to reveal the forces of attraction exerted by the city before and after the catastrophe. Another interesting comparison can be made between the figure obtained by calculating the natural increase in the resident population from 1909 on and the total figure of the population recorded in the census of 1911, thereby showing the so-called social increase.

Indeed, for the thirty year period, 1872-1901, of the larger towns in Italy, only Messina revealed a greater difference between the birth and death rates than the total population increase – a natural increase of 45000 against an increase of 38000 recorded between the first and last years in question. The immigration figure thus calculated is 7000, but negative 7000 as compared to Palermo (+19000), Catania (+32000) and Naples (+75000) (Migliorini, 1962).

A simple hypothetical calculation could be made by subtracting from the population in 1901 of 147106 the 60000 or so who died in 1908. 87000 people would have been left in Messina and the surrounding villages, to which should be added the 5571 difference in the birth-death rates between 1909 and 1911, (964 in 1909, 2586 in 1910 and 2021 in 1911) (Trasselli, 1987; Pardi, 1921). The birthrate would be 29‰ in 1907, 42.2‰ in 1910, 37.1‰ in 1911; the death rate 21.7‰ in 1907, 20.3‰ in 1910 and 21.25‰ in 1911; the excess of births 7.3‰ in 1907, 21.9‰ in 1910 and 16‰ in 1911 (Mortara, 1913).

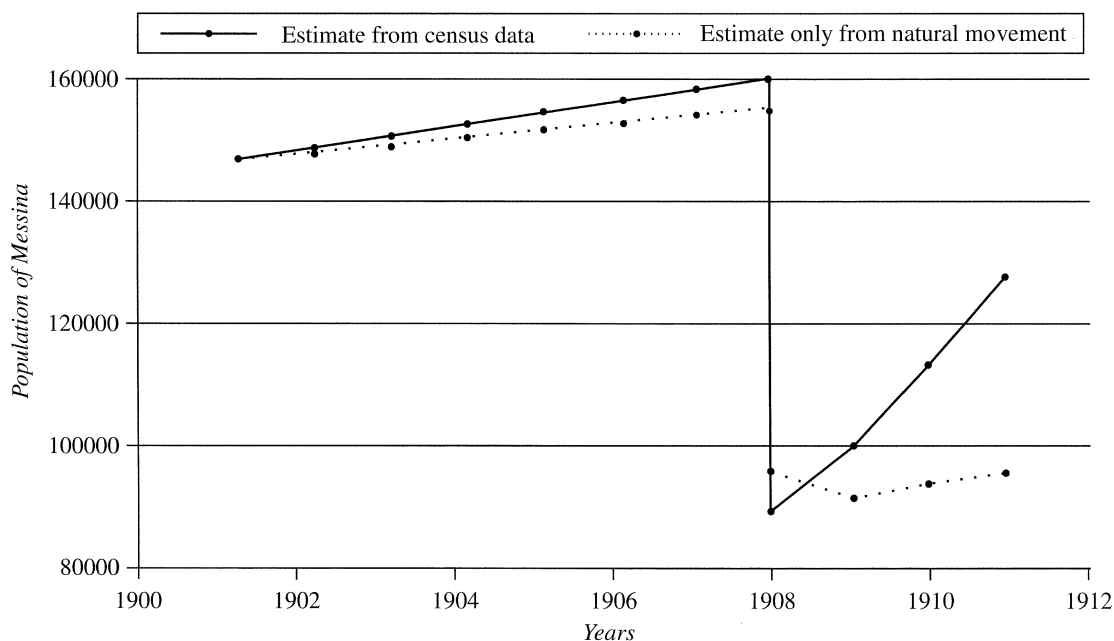
There was, therefore, a population of 92677: 34721 immigrants between 1908 and 1911 would have brought the number to the 127398 inhabitants recorded in the 1911 census. But in Messina and the surrounding villages from the 87000 survivors, 68000 should be subtracted, having left and been subsequently recorded in Palermo, Catania and elsewhere in Italy. Therefore, at least until the first phase of return, there must have been about 19000 of which only 2000 living in the old city centre (Trasselli, 1987; Pardi, 1921).

The difference between the total figures of the censuses in 1901 and 1911 is minimal: the legal population diminished by 13% (from 147106 to 127398) and the actual population by 16% (from 149778 to 126557) (fig. 1).

The population of the urban centre appears to have suffered greater losses, falling from 93672 to 68138 (Pardi, 1921); the losses suffered were more serious and many families moved to suburban zones. The population of the outlying villages of Messina increased between 1901 and 1911 from 56106 to 58419: not all the villages, in fact, suffered the effects of the earthquake to the same extent. A case in point is that of the hill village of Massa San Giorgio (Arena, 1979). Data taken from the parish registers show only an alteration in the births from 24 in 1907 to 56 in 1910, while the deaths (34 in 1907, 18 in 1908, 32 in 1909) are on the average for the period- between a minimum of 13 in 1898 and a maximum of 41 in 1911.

According to some calculations (Mortara, 1913) 100000 inhabitants must have survived the earthquake, the large majority of whom would have left their ordinary residence. The increase due to immigration must have reached at least 20000 considering that the natural increase was little more than 5000. «I say *at least* because this estimate presupposes that the 100000 survivors had all returned home before 11 June; whereas it is known that many came back after that date and some not at all» (Mortara, 1913). This reasoning led Mortara to estimate a total of 30000 immigrants in the two and a half years following the earthquake of the 28 December 1908: «the majority of immigrants, probably not less than three quarters, came from nearby Sicilian and Calabrian localities».

The figures themselves however do not reveal enough; a comparison between the two censuses of 1901 and 1911 reveals, at first glance, a marked alteration in the social make-up of the town. The number of workers in the building and the metal-working and mechanical sectors increased considerably in number in this period: the first by 9%, the second by 1.7%. On the other hand, there was a marked decrease (of around 3.3%) in workers involved



**Fig. 1.** Population trend in the city of Messina from 1901 to 1991.

in agriculture, cattle farming and fishing. The number of traders and freelance professionals decreased by 4%. It is these considerable alterations in the socio-professional composition of the city that give an indication as to the quantitative movements of the population, caused by the catastrophe (De Meo, 1989).

Another valuable source of information supplying data to help evaluate the phenomena of migration are the parish registers. One of the disadvantages of this source is the distribution throughout the area; every parish recorded arrivals from elsewhere, but an overall picture for the whole city and surrounding area is lacking. These data can be produced by comparing the figures of the individual parishes. This operation is complicated by the movement of the offices themselves which after the reconstruction of the city often operated in different quarters from those originally established following the Council of Trent.

In any case, since the aim is not to evaluate the population movements within the city and

surrounding area, the registers of the «*stati delle anime*» (which give information on the make up of the parish, of baptisms, of funerals and above all marriages) can indicate cases of the movement of individuals from parishes outside Messina.

The limitation, in any case, consists in the impossibility of making an overall evaluation of the nature and extent of the migratory flows since not all those who migrate marry, have children or die during or immediately following the period of immigration. The advantage is that it becomes possible to delineate the directions of the migratory flows and in particular the localities from where immigration originated: parish priests were certainly very careful in noting the origins of future spouses, especially where members of other parishes were concerned.

One method of research could be followed synchronically to evaluate the numbers of immigrants in the same period in all the parishes of the city, and then diachronically to analyse

the evolution of the phenomena in the subsequent years. It is also important to bear in mind the consequences of the tradition of celebrating marriages for the most part in the bride's parish: a check on names in the baptism registers for the children of these couples and the funeral registers for one or both partners can dissolve any doubt as to the residence of the family.

Registry Office sources cover the entire populated area thus offering information for a more complete analysis (De Meo, 1989). But at this point in the research, in order to evaluate the emigration from Messina they can be used for periods more recent than that following the 1908 earthquake. Some registers were found in the archives of the «comune» dating from 1910-1911 with records of marriages of Messinese who left as a result of the earthquake and married elsewhere in Italy. However, doubts still remain as to the nature and extent of the phenomena, which could be an interesting indication of the emigration without return caused by the earthquake.

Marriage registers dating back to 1870 and concerning the resident population were found in the archives of the «comune». An evaluation of immigration in the city subsequent to the earthquake is therefore possible for the period 1900-1920.

Gaps exist in the registers for 1905, 1908 and 1909, the original registers, having been destroyed in the disaster or not completed due to the difficulties involved in reorganizing the General Registry Offices, were added to later according to royal decrees. These were issued following declarations and requests from those concerned; the records for 1905 are kept in a register drawn up in 1916, those of 1908 and 1909 in another register drawn up only a few years later in 1911. It is likely that the number of records for the «reintegrated» years does not correspond to the original number, even so they are a useful source of information for the analysis of the population movement.

An assessment of all the data recorded between 1900 and 1920 reveals an abnormal change in the number of marriages and can indicate the relationship between the effects of the earthquake and the marriage market. Fi-

nally, the direction of the immigration flows can be deduced from the records of the spouses' origins.

Of little relative importance, but nevertheless worthy of note, regarding the new members of the population which filled the gap left by the earthquake and its side-effects is another source: the statistics dealing with the temporary movements for reasons of work, published from 1905 on. It seems likely that a temporary workforce arrived in the city from other towns, some of whom chose to settle permanently when conditions became favourable.

Earthquakes, therefore, appear to be a determining factor in population turnover: more so than other types of natural catastrophe. Only 2000 citizens never left Messina, of the survivors some returned gradually from 1909 on and some not at all. The more recent flooding of the Po delta, on the other hand, caused «only temporary migration» (Migliorini, 1962). An earthquake brings with it a kind of social vortex, in which large numbers of the pre-existing population – some of whom are sucked down to the very bottom – are swept to the sides and replaced in a short space of time by elements from nearby and more distant demographic areas.

Unfortunately we still know very little about the vitality of the population after 1908: the hypothesis of a sudden increase in marriages and births still has to be verified. There is a precedent in the distant history of Messina: the boom in the formation of couples and family ménages following the plague of 1743. A historical demographical investigation based on ecclesiastical sources into the different social classes and their parishes, showed clearly that the initial impetus began among the lower classes, despite opposition from the authorities and rules regarding legitimate relationships.

By the same method we can examine the demographic behaviour in the period following the catastrophe of 1908 in order to calculate any quantitative increases or decreases, also due to the arrival of new blood from nearby areas. The Registry Office on 31st December 1916 gives the number of inhabitants as 152109: the urban centre superseding its vil-

lages by nearly 20000, from 68138 in 1911 to 85268 in 1916 (Pardi, 1921).

The only common concern for the survivors who had remained in Messina was that the city be rebuilt exactly where it had been. This was because of a centuries old tradition which promised never to move the city from its geographical position. It took the inhabitants of Messina only a few days to emerge from their daze; for the first time in the collective memory of the city the pain seemed unjustified, the initial silence of faith and reason complete. Messina, before other communities, entered a new dimension of contemporary history now well-known to us.

#### REFERENCES

- ARENA, G.A. (1979): Notizie e considerazioni sul movimento della popolazione del villaggio messinese di Massa San Giorgio (1660-1961), *Archivio Storico Messinese*, **30**, 153-159.
- BARATTA, M. (1910): *La Catastrofe Sismica Calabro Messinese (28 Dicembre 1908)* (Società Geografica Italiana, Roma) (ristampa 1985, Società di Geofisica Applicata, Bologna).
- BRUNO, P. (1957): *Storia Demografica di Messina dal 1860 ad Oggi* (Stem, Messina).
- CARACCILO, A. (1988): *L'Ambiente Come Storia* (Il Mulino, Bologna).
- COMITATO CENTRALE DI SOCCORSO PEI DANNEGGIATI DAL TERREMOTO DELLA CALABRIA E DELLA SICILIA (1909): *Elenco Nominativo dei Profughi dai Luoghi Colpiti dal Terremoto Arrivati in Altre Province del Regno Secondo le Notizie Comunicate dai Prefetti al Ministero dell'Interno* (Tipografia Nazionale, Roma), 2 vols.
- COMUNE DI CATANIA (Editor) (1909): *Censimento Ufficiale dei Profughi del Terremoto del 28 Dicembre 1908 Ricoverati in Catania* (Comune, Catania).
- DE MEO, L. (1989): Le fonti del trend demografico a Messina, in *Lo Scenario Sismico: Messina 1908-1945, Convegno Internazionale di Studio*, Messina (unpublished paper).
- GUIDOBONI, E. (1985): Premessa a terremoti e storia, *Quaderni Storici*, **60**, 653-664.
- LE BRAS, H. (1969): Retour d'une population à l'état stable après une «catastrophe», *Population*, **24** (5), 861-896.
- LONGHITANO, G. (1988): *Studi di Storia della Popolazione Siciliana. I. Riveli, Numerazioni, Censimenti (1589-1861)* (Cuecm, Catania).
- MIGLIORINI, E. (1962): Migrazioni interne e spostamenti territoriali della popolazione italiana, in *Atti del XVIII Congresso Geografico Italiano* (Istituto di Geografia dell'Università, Trieste), 365-409.
- MORI, A. (1917): La ricostituzione della città di Messina, *Rivista Geografica Italiana*, **24**, 257-269.
- MORTARA, G. (1913): *Messina Come Vive* (Athenaeum, Roma).
- MUNICIPIO DI PALERMO - UFFICIO DI STATISTICA ED ANAGRAFE (1909): *Elenco dei Profughi e dei Feriti Ricoverati in Palermo Dopo il Terremoto del 28 Dicembre 1908* (Municipio, Palermo).
- NIGRO, G. and M. ALIBRANDI (1968): *L'Archivio di Stato di Messina e i Documenti che Custodisce (1184-1955)* (D'Amico, Messina).
- PARDI, G. (1921): Storia demografica di Messina, *Nuova Rivista Storica*, **5** (4), 434-461.
- PECORA, A. (1962): Aspetti del movimento migratorio a Catania, in *Atti del XVIII Congresso Geografico Italiano* (Istituto di Geografia dell'Università, Trieste), 455-460.
- TRASSELLI, C. (Editor) (1987): *Messina Prima e Dopo il Disastro* (Intilla, Messina – ristampa prima edizione 1914, Principato, Messina).