

Survival of Byzantine Heritage in Gerace, Calabria

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Abstract : Gerace survives as one of the best examples of unspoiled Byzantine heritage in Calabria and the world due to its strategic location. As the last western province of the Byzantine Empire, Calabria was not subject to the destruction or conversion of sites which took place by the Ottomans in the east or the Arabs in Sicily and North Africa. Situated ten kilometers inland atop a 500m high table mountain, Gerace overlooks the Ionian coast and is a gateway to the rugged and wild mountain interior of the Calabrian peninsula. It is only connected to the outside world by a single windy and crumbling road and, unfortunately, faces serious economic and demographic decline. Largely due to its isolation, Gerace has remained understudied and under-recognized in a country that boasts the most UNESCO sites in the world despite its wealth and high density of Byzantine monuments. In 1995, the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox church, Bartholomew I, visited Gerace. He re-opened and blessed the ancient Byzantine church San Giovanni Crisostomo, reviving Gerace's cultural origins and links to Byzantium. This paper examines how these links have persisted over a millennium, starting from the community's humble origins as a refuge for ascetic monks to becoming the "city of one-hundred churches." While little is documented or written about Gerace's early history, this paper employs archaeological findings as well as hagiography to present valuable insight into this area which became known as the "land of the saints." By characterizing Gerace's early Byzantine society and helping to understand its strong spiritual roots, this paper creates the basis necessary to understand the endurance of its Byzantine legacy and appreciate its important cultural contributions to the Italian Renaissance as a hub of Greek literacy which attracted great humanists from the fourteenth to fifteenth century such as Barlaam of Seminara, Simone Autumano, Bessarion, and Athanasio Chalkeolopus. In bringing together these characters, this paper propels Gerace onto the world stage as an important cultural center in medieval Mediterranean history which facilitated cross cultural interactions between Byzantine Greeks, Sicilian Arabs, Jews, and Normans. From this intersection developed a syncretism which led to modern-day Calabrian identity culture and society and is perhaps most visible in some of Gerace's last surviving monuments from this time. While emphasizing this unassuming town's cultural importance and unique Byzantine heritage, this paper also highlights the criteria which Gerace fulfills for being included in the World Heritage List.

Keywords : byzantine rite, greek rite, italo-greek, latinization

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