The Mezzogiorno in Exile: Bourbon Officials and Neapolitan Emigres in the United States, 1800-1861

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Abstract

Comprising the vast domains of mainland Italy south of Rome as well as the island of Sicily, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, with its capital at Naples, captured the imaginations of foreign visitors throughout late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe. Across the Atlantic Ocean many citizens of the rising American Republic, from Thomas Jefferson to Herman Melville, shared an interest in Naples and the Italian South. In turn, Neapolitan and Sicilian subjects took stock of the newly independent United States in their published and unpublished writings prior to Garibaldi’s invasion and the fall of the Bourbon monarchy in 1860. My paper, “The Mezzogiorno in Exile: Bourbon Officials and Neapolitan Émigrés in the United States, 1800-1861”, contributes to the conference goal of examining “the processes that produce and reconfigure the old world in the new” by identifying how Southern Italians of various backgrounds understood and responded to the United States prior to 1861—decades before massive waves of immigration that brought nearly four million Italians to the United States between 1880 and 1920. To do so, my paper examines the lives of a half dozen Bourbon diplomats stationed in the US, as well as a colorful pageant of political exiles: Achille Murat (180-1847), son of the former Neapolitan King, Joachim Murat, Joseph Bonaparte (1768-1844), Napoleon’s brother and former King of Naples and Spain in New Jersey, the dissident poet Pietro D’Alessandro (d. 1855), exiled composer Filippo Trajetta (1777-1854) in Boston and former Bourbon court painter Michele Felice Corne (1752-1845) in Salem, Massachusetts. My comparisons of the views from within the United States and from abroad contribute to our understanding of the transnational worlds Americans and Italians traversed in the nineteenth-century and hence helps us chart our way to a new history of Italians and Americans in a wider world.