

AGROECONOMICS

Citrus boom led to mafia

J. Econ. Hist. <http://doi.org/gcps7p> (2017)



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Despite a century of research on the role and scope of the Sicilian Mafia, the conditions that led to its creation have remained clouded. Economic analysis of lemon exports and mafia activity in the 1800s now suggests that the *mafioso* arose to protect and even act as intermediaries on behalf of citrus producers in the wake of an unprecedented economic boom for lemons.

Arcangelo Dimico, at Queen's University Belfast, and colleagues utilized primary data from a comprehensive 1886 inquiry into the economic and social forces in Sicilian towns and districts. Citrus fruits such as

lemons had been grown on the island of Sicily for centuries, but without significant export activity until British naval officer James Lind confirmed that citrus fruits could prevent and cure scurvy. The resulting and overwhelming demand for lemons, with barrel exports increasing from 1,300 to over 20,000 in just a 25-year period, created an exogenous shock in market prices that transformed citrus production in Sicily.

Citrus trees, however, were far more prone to predation and theft than other Sicilian crops such as wheat or grapes, and profits from lemons could be almost 35 times greater than those for olives. These conditions, on top of historical factors such as weak central government and law enforcement in the region, are linked to the emergence of mafia activity in the late 1800s. A regression analysis of the 1886 inquiry data, verified with data from other key studies, found that citrus fruit production, alone among the major export products of Sicily, was statistically significant for the rise of the mafia in towns and regions across the island.

Ryan Scarrow

Published online: 22 January 2018
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41477-018-0107-z>