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PASSENGERS SEAPORTS IN ITALY: SPECIALISATION AND EMERGING GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The paper focuses on recent developments in maritime passenger traffic. The analysis of the literature on the subject that has been carried out shows how the focus on passenger seaports has been relatively limited in recent decades. Consequently, the work intends to investigate the role of ports as strategic nodes for passenger flow handling. This in-depth study highlights the different configurations that port nodes can take depending on the types of flows handled. The aim is to investigate port classification and their passenger specialisation. The case study is the Italian peninsula, whose passenger port specialisation (in the period 2014-2023) is analysed, the resulting geography is outlined and some practical and managerial implications are highlighted.

Keywords: Maritime passengers, passenger seaports, cruise, port specialisation, port geography, Italian ports.

1. Introduction

Addressing the themes of maritime traffic and ports' role necessarily requires the analytical and interpretative support of geographical discipline and, in particular, of transport geography (Tadini, 2022).

According to Rodrigue *et al.* (2006), transport geography is a sub-discipline of geography interested in the movements of freight, people and information. It aims at linking spatial constraints and attributes with the origin, destination, extent, nature and purpose of movements. Transport geography analyses the cross interactions between "spaces" and "transports" from the local to the global level. It analyses how territory constraints transport and how transport affects the territories served or crossed (Dobruszkes, 2012). This means that transport geography examines the movement of people, goods and information within or across different regions. The analysis of flows between regions implies the use of the so-called network approach (Black, 2003). Therefore, it is possible to identify three core dimensions of transport geography: flows, nodes/locations and networks (Hesse and Rodrigue, 2004). Nevertheless, transport geography also studies the different modes of transportation such as road, rail, aviation and ships.

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This work focuses on ports as strategic nodes of passenger transfers.
The aim is to underline the role of ports in passenger handling and to identify the scenario of the main Italian passenger seaports.
To achieve these objectives, from a methodological point of view, the work will firstly be based on the specialisation of ports in passenger traffic inferable from the literature on topic (Ligteringen, 2017; Van Koningsveld *et al*., 2023). Subsequently, data on the passenger volumes handled in the last ten years (2014-2023) in the main Italian ports will be analysed, considering the different passenger categories.
The use of this approach will allow highlighting the geography of national seaport specialisation and suggesting some policy indications.

2. Maritime passenger transport

In maritime literature, ports are defined as transfer nodes for passengers and freight from one mode of transport to another (Wood *et al.*, 2002).
Traditionally, scholars from various disciplines have been interested in the role of ports concerning cargo traffic, devoting little attention to passenger transport (Asić, 2011; Stupalo *et al*., 2016).
This may be attributable to the changes that have affected passenger transport in recent decades.
From the mid-19th century, liner services offered long-distance passenger transportation between continents, particularly between Europe and North America (Rodrigue and Notteboom, 2013). It began as a core business for shipping companies operating luxury vessels, but its activity diminished by the mid-1960s. The competitiveness of aircraft led to the demise of some companies and to the diversification of cruise services (Tovar and Tichavska, 2019). The last liners became the first cruise ships as it took more than a decade to see the complete demise of liner services (Rodrigue and Notteboom, 2013).
For these reasons, the role of passengers has been underestimated for many years despite the importance of passengers as a part of ports' total traffic (Pantouvaquis, 2006; Vaggelas, 2007; Vaggelas and Pallis, 2010; Núñez-Sánchez *et al*., 2011).
Because of their minor weight in global trade, passenger ports have rarely been researched as demonstrated in the literature analysis of Pallis *et al*. (2010) which considered the period 1997-2008.
Thus, as Vaggelas underlined (2007), there is a small number of definitions of what constitute a passenger port. In most cases (i.e. those provided by Wiegmans *et al*, 2002; Chlomoudis *et al*, 2004), these definitions are limited because they pay attention only to passenger transportation as a main function and do not mention operations related to cargo handling that use passenger port terminals. A more comprehensive definition can be provided via the adaptation of the UNCTAD general definition on ports (provided in Trujillo and Nombela, 1999). With the aim to defining more comprehensively the operations of a passenger port, it is possible to describe the latter as the "*area where the interface between sea and land transport modes takes place, and as such being an intermodal transport node. Moreover, there are multi-functioning markets and industrial areas where the goods are transit, classified, processed and distributed and passengers are embarked and disembarked from the sea transport modes and then they forwarded to the hinterland with the use of intermodal transport modes*" (Vaggelas, 2007, p. 3).
In more recent decades there has been an increase in interest in maritime passenger

flows, particularly considering the strong growth in cruise shipping.
As the recent analysis by Pallis *et al.* (2023) (covering the period 2009-2020) shows, minimal attention has been paid to passenger ports other than cruise ports. Only a few regional studies have explored issues related to passenger ports. The cruise sector nevertheless has gained particular momentum over the period considered (Brida *et al*., 2012; Lee and Ramdeen, 2013; Penco, 2013; Rodrigue and Notteboom, 2013; Amato, 2015; Pallis, 2015; D'Aponte, 2018; Sabato, 2018; Mazzarino and Battino, 2019).
Nevertheless, it is important to highlight how passenger ports (not only the cruise ones) and related services represent an interesting segment of maritime transport to explore. Consequently, this article aims to investigate the characteristics of passenger ports, highlighting their peculiarities and discovering their role as intermodal nodes.
Despite the fast and huge growth of cruising in the last decades, the other passenger services have maintained a competitive sector over time. Thus, passenger traffic by sea must distinguish passenger services oriented to a recreational segment (cruise) and short-sea transportation services offered to carry passengers and sometimes vehicles and cargo across bodies of water (ferry) (Tovar and Tichavska, 2019).
A ferry is defined by Interferry as a vessel used to transport passengers and/or vehicles across a body of water on a regular, frequent basis. Ferries are distinguished from Ro-Ro ships carrying only freight vehicles and from cruise ships that operate on routes greater than 24 hours in duration and whose main purpose is not the transport of passengers/vehicles from point A to point B.
Ferry services supply transportation needs across channels, straits and archipelagos through regular services. The typology of ferries varies according to accommodation facilities, size or navigation speed. The need to reduce transit time (to remain competitive with other modes of transport) led to the development of high-speed ferries. The routes by ferries and fast ferries are offered with or without capacity for vehicles. The latter access and leave the ship through ramps at port. They are generally ships engaged in national cabotage services or short-distance connections (Ligteringen, 2017; Tovar and Tichavska, 2019).
Finally, it is worth emphasising how ferries can perform several functions: move local commuters and tourists from one location to the other, sometimes along with goods.

3. Passenger seaports: characteristics, types of terminals and relative facilities

The seaport may only perform functions for the combined transport of goods, or it may also serve ships with mixed functions, carrying people with cars and goods. This is a typical function of ports serving mainland-island routes, or routes between islands. In the past, port functions for passengers consisted of services for liner ships (the great transatlantic liners of the first half of the 20th century are famous). Nowadays, liner shipping has contracted, supplanted by air transport; on the other hand, cruise shipping has developed, also entrusted to large ships. In addition, the people movement takes place on the traditional ferry and the Ro-Ro ship, in the "freight/passenger" (in which freight transport also takes place) version, also called Ro-Pax (Vallega, 1994).
The seaport activity is considered a sub-sector of the maritime industry, with its main role being restricted to the provision of services to ships and their cargoes and the facilitation of the movement of goods and passengers between land and sea. A seaport is therefore seen as a nodal point between land and sea, or as a modal interface between

shipping or sea transportation system on the one side, and the land transport network on the other side (UNCTAD, 2004).
In this paper, the attention is focused on the passenger seaport category.
This port category includes all the services provided to passenger vessels, passengers and vehicles (cars and trucks) in a port that serves any type of passenger-ship.
As Roa Pereira *et al*. (2013) remembered, to describe ports as completely as possible, the attention has to be focused also on facility types.
A terminal is a man-made structure that facilitates the transfer of passengers or one or more specific types of cargo from one mode of transport to another (Van Konisgsweld *et al*., 2023).
Ports are mainly multifunctional entities and this characteristic is often the result of the combined activities of various specialized terminals. A port combines terminal facilities, each developed to fulfil a specific function (Notteboom *et al*., 2022).
As stated by Van Konisgsweld *et al*. (2023), generally in a modern seaport we can distinguish four types of terminals involved in passenger transport:

- Ferry terminals;
- Ro-Ro terminals;
- Cruise terminals;
- Marinas.

Historically, passengers were handled at multipurpose facilities as liner ships also carried freight. Nevertheless, it's important to underline that ferry terminals are a specialized component in many ports that are part of a domestic ferry network, such as Greece and Italy. Ferry terminal is a relatively small segment of port terminals and consists mainly of roll-on/roll-off facilities with direct connectivity to the road system, large parking areas, and simple equipment such as mooring areas and ramps (Notteboom *et al*., 2022).
Ferry terminals can be implemented relatively quickly with limited investments in onshore infrastructure, since the main elements are an adjustable ramp (using the Ro-Ro loading and unloading method) and a berth for vessels. These requirements are much simpler compared to a cargo terminal, which needs a variety of handling equipment (Krile *et al*., 2021).
Ferry terminals that handle large numbers of passengers require, in addition to the facilities described above, a terminal building like a station, with ticket counters, waiting lounges, rest rooms, shops and restaurants. Between this building and the berthed vessel, the passengers must be able to embark and disembark smoothly and safely. For ferries this is normally achieved by bridges with sufficient capacity to minimise the time spent at the berth (Ligteringen, 2017).
The sea ferry lines are characterized by relatively fast vessels and high frequency of movement, and short turnaround time in the port, which ensures the dynamism of the entire system of cargo and passenger transportation. Besides, considering the reliable schedule due to the planning of passenger transport, the handling process in the port is very fast and efficient. In most cases, a full exchange of cargo and passengers at the seaport takes only one or two hours (Krile *et al*., 2021).
Many ferry terminals also handle Ro-Ro freight.
The passenger ferry terminal is focused on the quick and safe movement of passengers (commuters and tourists), while the Ro-Ro terminal is primarily built for cargo transport. It will be clear that there is an overlap between the two, where both cargo and passengers are transported by the same ship (Ligteringen, 2017).

Ro-Ro terminals are designed to handle wheeled cargo that is driven on and off the ship on their wheels (i.e. cars, trucks, semi-trailer trucks, trailers) or using a platform vehicle (i.e. a self-propelled modular transporter). The Ro-Ro terminals need facilities to accommodate the (un)loading ramps of the vessels and generally large amounts of parking space (Van Konisgsweld *et al*., 2023).
Recently, the growth of the cruise industry has led to the emergence of specialized cruise terminals. From a maritime viewpoint, cruise terminals need to fulfil minimum requirements for draft, berthing lines and navigation channels for cruise ships. Inside the cruise terminal, there are provisions for various spaces, including the apron area, terminal building and ground transportation (Notteboom *et al*., 2022).
The deployment of cruise itineraries presupposes a differentiated role of ports according to the function performed and from which derive different needs for structural and infrastructural endowments (Tadini, 2023).
As regards cruise passenger traffic handled in ports, it is possible to distinguish between home port, port of call and hybrid port.
According to the literature on theme (Lekakou *et al*., 2009; Pallis, 2015; Cusano *et al*., 2017; Notteboom *et al*., 2022), home ports (or hub ports) are the ports where passengers start or end their cruises. These ports handle significant volumes of passengers during embarkation/disembarkation operations (which are more significant than transit operations) and are characterised by certain indispensable endowments such as the infrastructure connection system, land and air accessibility and dedicated terminal facilities (customs, luggage loading and unloading, waiting rooms, bar, *etc*.).
For the ports of call (also known as ports of transit) instead, transit flows are prevalent and, in addition to the endowment of piers equipped to receive ships, the presence of tourist attractions is necessary to justify the cruise operator's choice of the port as a destination. For these reasons, ports of call are generally located in or connected to particularly attractive tourist areas.
Hybrid ports merge the two previous categories: they are the point of departure and arrival for some cruise itineraries, but also act as an intermediate point for other cruise itineraries.
Finally, there is a special category of terminal where passengers own or hire the vessels: the so-called marinas. A marina typically caters to yachts and small boats. The access to and tourist attractiveness of the region around the marina can be a factor of development. Nevertheless, on-site facilities like parking spaces, toilets, showers, electricity, running water, small shops and restaurants are also needed. The expected client will have a great influence on the service levels that need to be provided (Van Konisgsweld *et al*., 2023).

4. Passenger seaports: classification

Ports manage a variety of traffics for which they are specialised (Roa Pereira *et al*., 2013). To understand the diversity of seaports, it is fundamental to highlight their typology classification.
A well-defined classification framework generates a clearly outlined port context. This one can be utilized in benchmarking comparing port systems (Othman *et al*., 2019) and can help to support future port development by guiding port operations towards their functional roles (Dwarakish and Salim, 2015).

A valid port taxonomy has to consider the complexity and variety of the port business at more than one level, in particular physical and spatial differences (location, access, connectivity, available capacity) and operational differences (types of cargo handled, ships serviced, terminals operated) (Bichou and Gray, 2005).
Traditionally, ports can be categorised considering four dimensions, as follows (Notteboom *et al*., 2022):

- Geographical attributes: refers to the main characteristics of the port site and situation; coastal and inland geography conditions create variety in the locational setting of port sites.
- Scale: refers to an assessment of port size in terms of its area, annual cargo/passenger traffic, the size of its hinterland and the number of shipping services it is connected to.
- Port functions: refers to the range of services offered by the port, such as cargo/passenger handling and maritime services.
- Specialisation: refers to the type of traffic moved.

Ports can be distinguished according to the object of handling. However, as Van Koningsveld *et al*. (2023) stated, since most larger ports typically deal with multiple types of traffic, a useful distinction is the following: single-use ports (such as passenger ports, cruise ports, *etc.*), multi-use ports (handling a variety of traffic types).

Besides, the most common approach to categorizing ports is to use metrics based on the annual volume of goods/passengers. However, as Kiranoudi and Polemi (2023) stated, it is important to consider the type of service that ports operate.
As explained in the previous paragraph, the attention of this paper is focused on the category of passenger seaport.
The latter is defined as a transit area, a place of contact between the land and maritime space, a node where sea and inland transport systems interact and a place of convergence for different transportation modes. Since maritime and inland transportation modes have different capacities, the seaport assumes the role of a node where passengers/cruisers can be transferred (Notteboom *et al*., 2022).
Vaggelas and Pallis (2010), considering the geographical attributes and the different functions and services, underlined that passenger ports can be classified in:

- Coastal passenger ports, which serve (national and international) coastal shipping;
- Cruise ports, which serve cruise shipping;
- Hybrid passenger ports, which serve both coastal and cruise shipping and are commonly observed.

The passenger port is a specific sub-type of port or sub-system of the port complex, in which embarkation and disembarkation of passengers and loading and unloading of luggage and cars are carried out at specialised terminals (Jugović *et al*., 2006).
Due to the specific character of the traffic carried on in a port (ferries, i.e. liner ships, and cruise tours ships), structures and terminals are designed to meet the requirements of the specific type of transportation (Asić, 2011).
The presence of a single terminal dedicated to passengers/cruisers handling or the prevalence of the handling of one passenger terminal (compared to others present in the port) are the factors that determine port specialisation.
A port complex may contain various cargo-specific terminals and include facilities for passenger handling: this configuration refers to multi-use ports and it is a frequently occurring case.

5. The Italian passenger seaports: specialisation and emerging geography

The Italian Law 84/94 (Reorganization of port legislation) suggests the classification criteria that constitute the reference parameters. In particular, they regard the size of global traffic and its respective components, the operational capacity of the ports deriving from the functional characteristics (considering the equipment for passenger embarkation and disembarkation as well as equipment and services suitable for the supply, maintenance, repair and assistance of ships), the level and efficiency of services connecting with the hinterland (Monceri, 2019).

Consequentially, a classification on a dimensional basis is proposed, as suggested at European scale and in compliance with the indications of national legislation. The classification of ports can be identified on the annual average value of passengers traffic in the period considered. In the light of this methodological choice, threshold values and relative size classes of ports should be defined.

The original Trans-European Networks Transport (TEN-T) guidelines (as amended in 2001) divide passenger seaports into three categories:

- of international importance: minimum total annual transport volume of 200.000 passengers;
- of EU importance: minimum total annual transport volume of 100.000 passengers;
- of local importance: provide access to insular, regional or particularly remote areas.

This classification is mainly based on “dimensional aspects” of port traffic, but also introduces geographical and localisation variables. This necessarily leads us to contemplate qualitative aspects of port activity as relevant.

Considering the geographical position of ports and the directions of passenger flows, the following types of ports can be identified: coastal, insular, coastal serving insular regions.

Passenger flows can take place in ports where they coexist with cargo traffic or in ports specialised in passenger handling only.

Besides, considering in detail the passenger traffic, the following types of specialisations can be identified:

– Passengers (ferry and/or Ro-Pax) ports;
– Cruising ports;
– Mixed passenger ports.

In light of this, from a methodological point of view, data from 50 national ports were found, processed and analysed, considering, for the decade 2014-2023, the values of total port handling and those disaggregated by type of passengers: ferry and Ro-Pax on the one hand and cruisers on the other.

Before proceeding to outline the scenario of Italian passenger seaports, it is necessary to illustrate the recent trend of national maritime traffic, divided by type of passenger flows (Fig. 1).

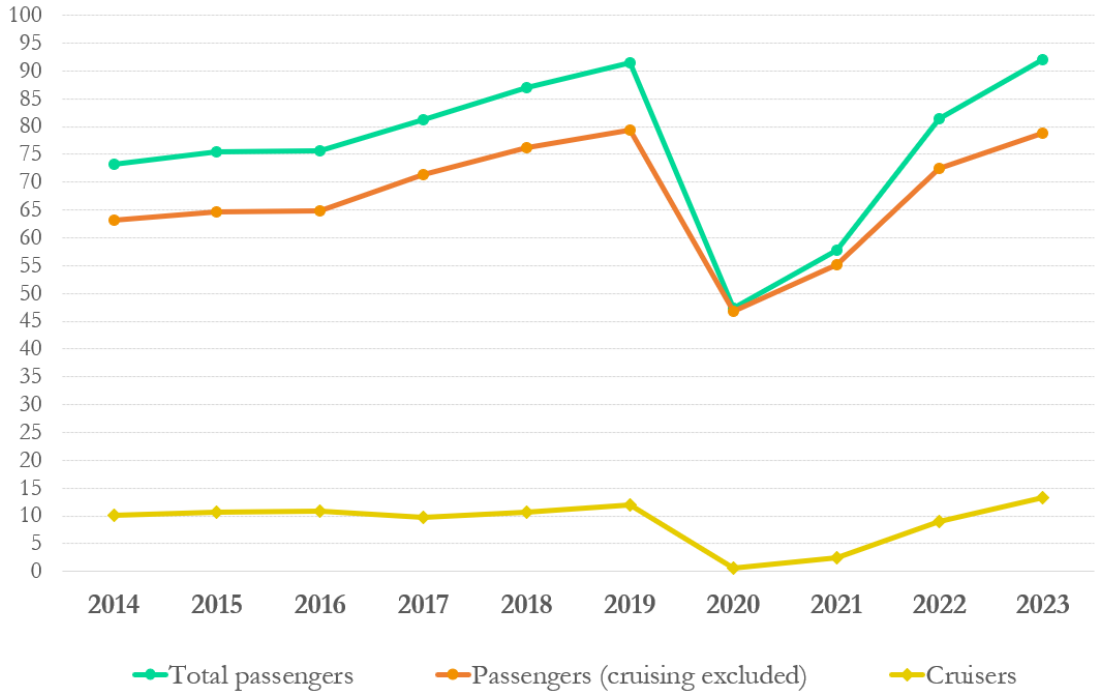

Figure 1: Maritime passenger traffic in Italy (data in millions).

Source: own elaboration on Assoporti, ISTAT, Port System Authorities data.

In the period 2014-2023, the Italian port system handled an average of 76 million of passengers per year. About 67 million travels by ferry (or similar) and are commuters or tourists. There was an upward trend until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, then a gradual recovery until 2023, when the figures were similar to those of 2019.
In addition to the analysis of maritime passenger traffic as a whole, it is also useful to look at data by individual seaport.
The disaggregated passenger data highlights the significant role of some ports. In particular, the top three national seaports also occupy prominent positions on the continental scale. Messina and Villa San Giovanni/Reggio Calabria are placed first and second respectively and Naples fourth in the EU maritime passenger ranking (2023 data).
The data collected and analysed allow us to outline the Italian port scenario of passenger flows over the last decade (2014-2023).
Table 1 shows the main national passenger seaports[1]. In detail, considering the localisation and the geographical attributes, it emerges that the passenger traffic takes place in coastal ports (51,8%), in many cases serving insular regions, followed by island ports (48,2%).
As shown in figure 2, the main seaports by passenger movement are concentrated in central-southern Italy, near island areas, in the Tyrrhenian Sea and where there are historically short-medium range connections to the western Mediterranean basin. The Adriatic ports are characterised by lower passenger traffic despite cabotage relations and international connections (with Croatia, Montenegro, Albania and Greece).

[1] The following table and maps show ports with an average traffic of more than 100.000 passengers/year and/or at least 50.000 cruisers/year. Thus, 43 ports are considered.

Port	Total passengers (2014-2023 average)	Passengers (no cruise) (2014-2023 average)	Cruisers (2014-2023 average)	% cruise
Messina	8.997.568	8.668.357	329.211	3,7
V.S.G. - Reggio Calabria	8.076.687	8.076.687	0	0,0
Napoli	7.015.902	6.005.778	1.010.124	14,4
Capri	4.194.600	4.193.400	1.200	0,0
Ischia	3.658.300	3.658.300	0	0,0
Civitavecchia	3.580.211	1.553.764	2.026.447	56,6
Piombino	3.082.041	3.073.539	8.503	0,3
Olbia	2.962.643	2.857.550	105.093	3,5
Livorno	2.950.309	2.390.554	559.755	19,0
Portoferraio	2.926.963	2.903.208	23.756	0,8
Genova	2.904.819	1.974.506	930.313	32,0
Palermo	1.805.803	1.325.741	480.063	26,6
Sorrento	1.774.500	1.769.800	4.700	0,3
Pozzuoli	1.565.309	1.565.309	0	0,0
Palau	1.534.800	1.534.700	100	0,0
La Maddalena	1.459.400	1.459.400	0	0,0
Bari	1.433.215	1.031.371	401.844	28,0
Egadi	1.309.850	1.309.850	0	0,0
Venezia	1.191.870	154.408	1.037.462	87,0
Trapani	1.102.603	1.095.455	7.149	0,6
Procida	1.056.300	1.056.300	0	0,0
Savona	1.023.458	335.016	688.442	67,3
Ancona	952.455	897.477	54.978	5,8
Porto Torres	919.314	907.327	11.988	1,3
Eolie	909.831	909.831	0	0,0
Salerno	762.679	677.731	84.948	11,1
Milazzo	739.676	739.676	0	0,0
Portovesme	596.255	595.518	737	0,1
Golfo Aranci	564.932	564.000	932	0,2
La Spezia	558.733	96.543	462.190	82,7
Brindisi	520.847	455.397	65.450	12,6
Cagliari	476.698	250.204	226.494	47,5
Ponza	450.300	449.200	1.100	0,2
Porto Santo Stefano	425.100	424.700	400	0,1
Positano	401.700	401.400	300	0,1
Amalfi	376.700	374.200	2.500	0,7
Formia	285.642	285.642	0	0,0
Pozzallo	276.695	276.663	32	0,0
Tremiti	225.583	225.583	0	0,0
Santa Teresa di Gallura	219.920	219.920	0	0,0
Trieste	200.265	30.011	170.254	85,0
Termoli	196.658	196.658	0	0,0
Catania	190.804	84.343	106.461	55,8
Ravenna	76.852	2.853	73.999	96,3
Italia (total of 50 ports)	76.224.502	67.274.799	8.949.703	11,7

Table 1: The main Italian passenger seaports, with traffic details.

Source: own elaboration on Assoporti, ISTAT, Port System Authorities data.

More in detail, it is possible to highlight a breakdown of passenger seaports based on seven macro-regions: Central-Southern Tyrrhenian area characterised by the highest flows (28%), followed by Messina Strait (22,5%), Northern Tyrrhenian (13,6%), Sardinia (11,5%), Ligurian Sea (9,8%), Sicily (9,8%) and Adriatic (6,2%).
At the national level, the cruise traffic represents the 11,7% of the total passenger handling. Comparing the port geography that emerges from figure 2 and figure 3 (passenger excluding cruisers) respectively, it is possible to highlight the ports where cruise traffic is most significant.

As Table 1 suggests, there are eighteen relevant ports. Civitavecchia is the first national port for cruise flows, ahead of Venice and Naples. It is followed by three Ligurian Sea ports: Genoa, Savona and Livorno.

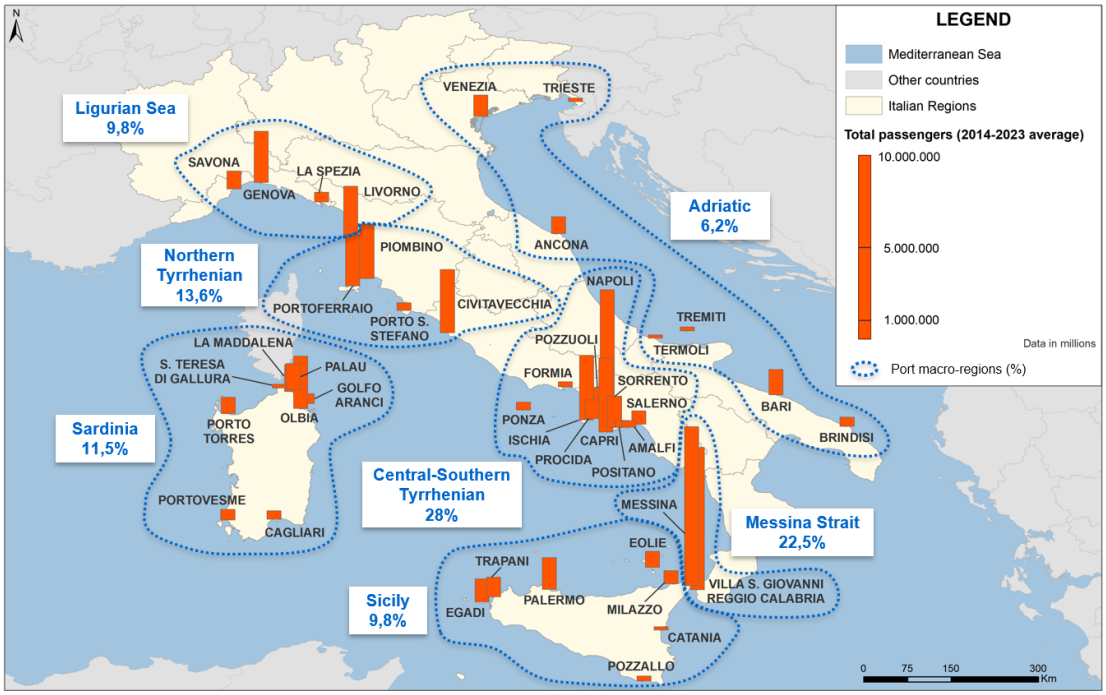

Figure 2: Passenger traffic in main Italian seaports and macro-regions.

Source: own elaboration on Assoporti, ISTAT, Port System Authorities data.

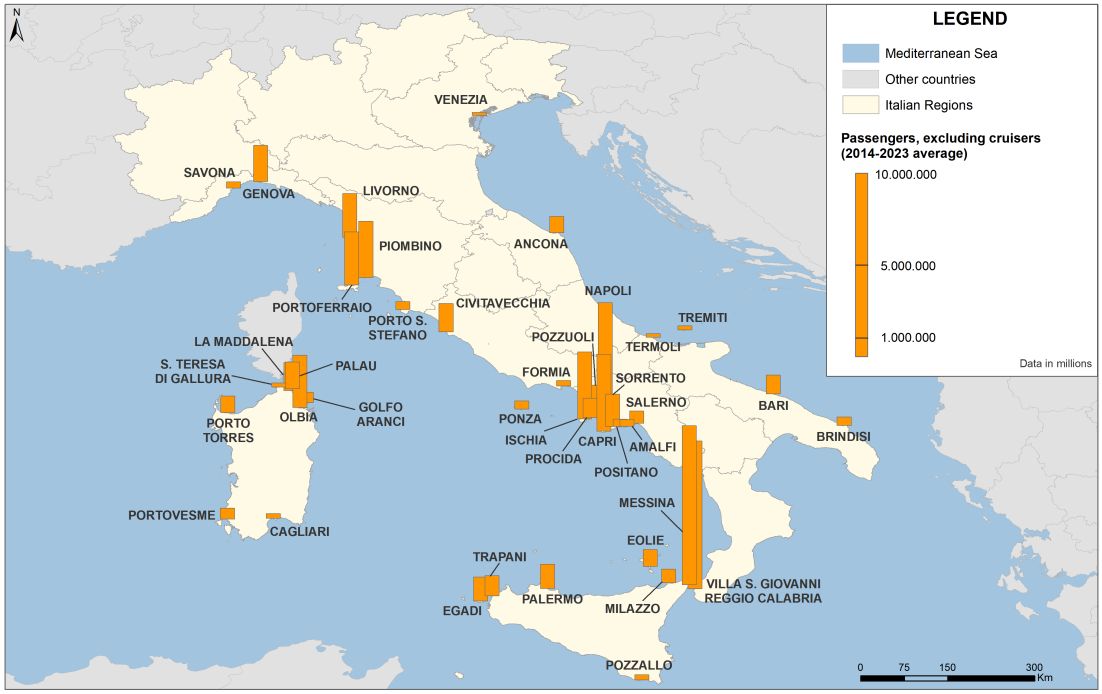

Figure 3: Passenger traffic (cruisers excluded) in main Italian seaports.

Source: own elaboration on Assoporti, ISTAT, Port System Authorities data.

Within the scenario outlined, it is interesting to highlight which ports specialise in handling cruise flows (Fig. 4).
In particular these are the ports of Venice (87%), La Spezia (82,7%), Savona (67,3%) and Civitavecchia (56,6%).
Other ports, despite handling a significant number of cruise passengers, are however more generally specialised in the management of passenger traffic. The ports of Naples, Genoa, Livorno and Bari as well as island ports of Palermo, Messina and Cagliari constitute significant examples.
Significant shares of cruise passengers out of the total number of passengers are also recorded in the ports of Ravenna (96.3%) and Trieste (85%), but the consistency of flows is smaller than in the above-mentioned cases.
Regarding the distribution of handling at a national level, it is possible to highlight a breakdown of cruise ports based on six port macro-regions: Ligurian Sea (30%), Northern Tyrrhenian (23%), Adriatic (20,5%), Central-Southern Tyrrhenian (12,4%), Sicily (10,4%) and Sardinia (3,8%).

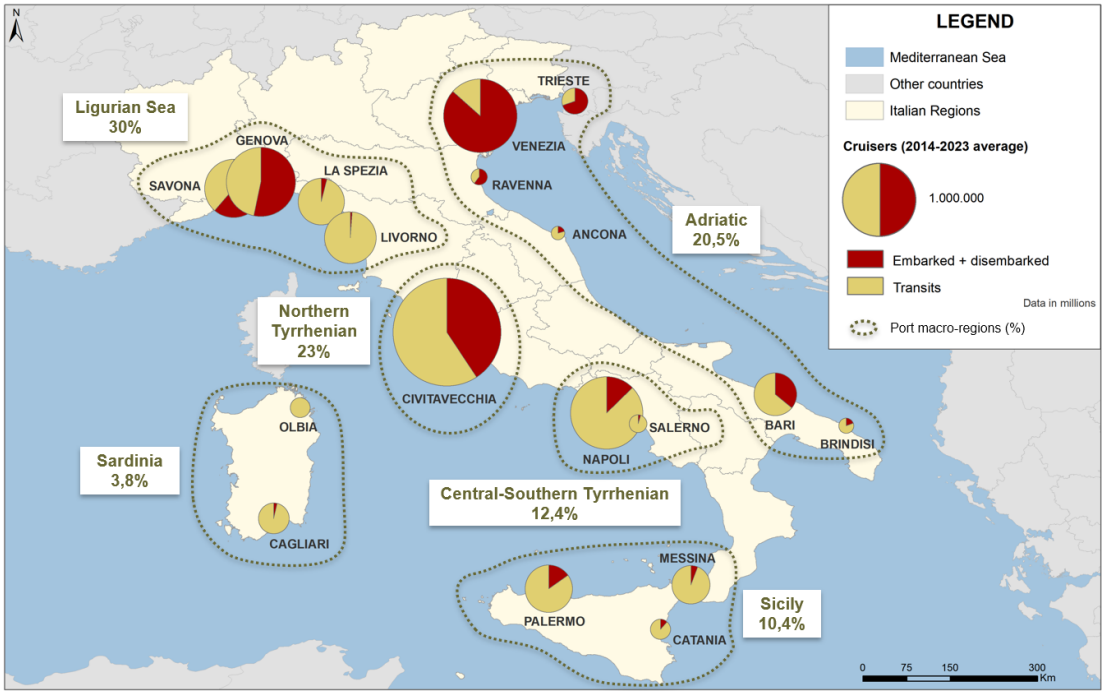

Figure 4: Cruisers in the main Italian seaports (types share and macro-regions).

Source: own elaboration on Assoporti, ISTAT, Port System Authorities data

In light of the above-mentioned functional distinction of cruise ports (paragraph 3), it is possible to point out (Figure 4) how numerous are those belonging to the transit typology and how they are all located near destinations of undoubted tourist attraction (La Spezia, Livorno, Olbia, Cagliari, Naples, Salerno, Palermo, Messina, Catania); on the other hand, a tendency emerges towards the concentration of ports of departure/arrival or hybrid (Savona, Genoa, Venice and Trieste in northern Italy, Civitavecchia and Bari in central-southern Italy) for which the characterising and

common element is the proximity to the demand markets served and the good system of infrastructural connections with them (Tadini, 2023).
Due to their specific location, the ports of Savona and Genoa (with their respective cruise operators, Costa Crociere and MSC, which have established their headquarters in the ports) play a decisive role for the embarkation/disembarkation activities of cruise passengers coming from Northern Italy and central-northern Europe (Germany and Great Britain *in primis*) and directed towards western Mediterranean itineraries, configuring themselves as a reference node for a continental catchment area (Tadini, 2023).
Similarly, Venice acts as a reference for the market of Northern Italy and Central Europe directed towards Eastern Mediterranean itineraries, while Trieste serves the demand of Eastern Europe directed towards Eastern Mediterranean itineraries.
The ports of Civitavecchia and Bari (in which, however, the transit function is more relevant) are configured respectively as a reference for the Central and Southern Italian markets.

6. Conclusions

The starting point of the paper is the realisation that the literature on the subject of passenger ports (excluding cruisers) has been somewhat limited in recent decades.
Consequently, this work was intended to investigate the role of ports as strategic nodes for passenger flows handling.
In particular, after conducting a literature review on the topic, the analysis was carried out using the case of the Italian peninsula. Its morphology, characterised by multiple island contexts and its central position in the Mediterranean basin, suggest *a priori* a relevant role for passenger traffic.
The analysis performed has revealed a significant role of seaports in supporting the consistent passenger flows.
In Italy, the ferry service provides connections with the two largest islands (Sicily and Sardinia) and the smaller ones (Campania archipelago, Tuscany archipelago, La Maddalena, Egadi, Aeolian, Ponza, and Tremiti).
A large proportion (more than 50% in recent years) of these island connections concern journeys of less than 20 miles (defined by ESPO as “local passengers”).
The cabotage maritime connections are carried out both by publicly-owned companies and by private shipping companies. The latter have considerably increased their activities in recent years, especially in the summer period, to serve Italian and foreign tourists (Ministero delle Infrastrutture e dei Trasporti, 2024).
The data analysed imply significant flows in insular connections and cabotage (ferries). Nevertheless, international passenger traffic in the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic basins is also relevant, given Italy’s strategic geographical position.
The localisation in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea allows the development of cruise itineraries to both the western and eastern portions of the basin. Italy is an important source market for cruise passengers, but it is also close to other major markets such as Germany and France and easily accessible by all means of transport (Pallis, 2015).
Therefore, the pivotal role of Italy in the global and European cruise industry is clear, both from the point of view of the catchment area and of the tourism attractiveness of national destinations.

In addition, the geographical interpretation of recent cruise flows makes it possible to highlight the relevance assumed by cruise terminals in Italian ports. In particular, the role of some ports that mainly perform embarkation/disembarkation functions and, in general, the importance of the ports that host cruise ships for the development of tourism activity and the territorial context connected to them (Tadini, 2023, Risposte Turismo, 2024).
The chosen methodology made it possible to highlight the specialisation of national ports in passenger handling, distinguishing between ferry and cruise ship traffic.
In particular, a clear Adriatic specialisation in cruise traffic emerged, as did the Tyrrhenian and Ligurian specialisation in both ferry and cruise passenger flows.
The analysis performed allowed us to outline the geography of passenger seaports in Italy, highlighting the main port regions dedicated to this type of service.
In conclusion, it is possible to highlight some policy indications, considering the port specialisations and specific services offered.
In the case of ferry passenger transport, the development of maritime connections and their frequency appears strategic as well as the relevance of investment options to improve the existing terminal facilities.
In the case of cruise, it is relevant to upgrade and enlarge specialised terminals, where port space is available, but also to invest in functional coordination between ports and their hinterlands (interested by significant cruisers flows), considering the potential for joint development (Mazzarino and Borruso, 2021).

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