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The rediscovery of characteristic rural landscapes. An opportunity to create new activities?

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

While the paper is the result of a joint work, Sections 1, 4 and Case study of Sicily are attributed to Donatella Privitera; Sections 2 and Case study of Apulia are attributed to Antonietta Ivona.

Introduction

- 1 The COVID-19 pandemic, which began at the start of the 2020s, has had a major impact on individuals and prompted them to reconsider their values, identity, and how they interact with society and consume. This has led some people to undergo transformative changes in their sense of self and their relationships with others. In particular, the pandemic and lockdowns have imposed tight limitations to mobility and have changed our habits, the time and space dimensions of our routine (Cheer, 2020). All this is creating employment opportunities and challenges to socio-economic systems, and particularly in disadvantaged areas such as rural areas. Specifically, in rural areas, farmers and businesses particularly affected by the pandemic need differentiated governance and policy responses. The obvious consequence has been the development of proximity tourism (as vacationing near home often involves domestic travel; Butler *et al.*, 2022) and renewed interest in rural and peripheral areas where the wide-open spaces and proximity to nature have proved to be an attraction for urban dwellers

(Romagosa, 2020). This new appreciation raises questions, especially regarding the extent to which rural communities can absorb and adapt to the growing demands for constrained provisions of services and amenities. In some countries, like Japan, the renewed interest in the rural periphery has boosted attempts to employ tourism as a vehicle for rural recovery (Cheer *et al.*, 2022), and there is now renewed interest and revitalization for such areas, rather than treating them only as comfort zones. McHenry (2009, p. 61) argues that “the social wellbeing of a community, directly through tourism, income generation and employment opportunities, and indirectly by enhancing participation and creativity in public decision-making, strengthening community capacity, and strengthening identity and sense of place”, are key imperatives. In this post-pandemic scenario, it is relevant (both theoretically and managerially) to ask whether and how the rural landscape with its characteristics of memory, historical value and beyond can exert the role of attribute and salient attractiveness and value in guiding the choices of tourists not only of proximity, as well as development of other activities to help local communities revitalize such areas, thus representing a key factor on which to base an effective differentiation and enhancement strategy.

- 2 Landscape appreciation is notable, and the concept of landscape includes not only the idea of territory but also of heritage. It is important to understand its value and where concepts of value and interests come from. Landscape has been used as a standard theoretical framework since the mid-2000s, and studies are extensive and involve theoretical and methodological, ecological, social and cultural and applied themes (Käyhkö *et al.*, 2004; Inoue *et al.*, 2022).
- 3 “The landscape is the complete work of the relationship man-territory, man-environment, or even of geographical, historical, architectural research” (Andreotti, 2005, p. 54). The landscape is, therefore, a spatial projection of the present and past society, in which man expresses himself and in which the success and failure of his action can be clearly interpreted, especially on the elements of nature. Depending on the observer, the way he observes and the conceptual, methodological and perceptual knowledge that drives his reading (Council of Europe, 2000; Sevenant, Antrop, 2009), the interpretation of the landscape changes as a result of the physical and human elements that are part of mutual connections and interdependencies (Erikstad, Uttakleiv, Halvorsen, 2015). Overall, landscape is the expression of the relationship between people and places, but it is the result of the degree to which the various components of the natural (e.g. air and climate, flora, landform, etc.) and cultural environment (e.g. historical aspect of land use, housing, etc.) interact and are perceived by those who inhabit and use them (memories, smells, sounds, etc.) (Swanwick, 2002, p. 2). They can all be regarded as “learned”, attributes but landscape also has social and community value, as part of people’s daily lives, as a way of seeing and interpreting landscapes. Landscape has the potential to contribute to a sense of identity, well-being, enjoyment and inspiration. Research on landscape values has demonstrated different approaches: how places are special or meaningful for each person, which can be described as an “individual-based” or a “place-based” approach for understanding the values as perceived collectively. These understandings can be gleaned from posted comments on social media or geographic and socio-demographic data of the area (Inoue *et al.*, 2022). Landscape also has economic value, and landscape management implies implementation of concrete land-use guidelines (Jones, 2007), which reflect

strategic and economic aspects, including elements of attraction and localization. At the same time, how value is created and transmitted is also relevant. Much depends on the representation of such landscapes – in literature, promotional materials, art, film and images on social media – and these representations are manipulated by key actors, which include institutional or private operators as well as tourists. For example, if certain traditional landscapes (e.g., rural) are to be re-evaluated and then conserved, much depends on the policies and practices to do so, as well as on those who are implementing such policies. Here, needs to include the landscape definition under legislative aspects. An example is the Mediterranean Landscape Charter of 1992, which exalts the role of communities that, in inhabiting their territories, produce values that are independent of environmental data. These values are the result of the continuous interaction of social processes with environmental ones, including the European Landscape Convention of 2000 (Council of Europe, 2000), where landscape is “as people perceive it”, and the people who live there, shape it and pass on the actions carried out on it, specifying that the protection and enhancement of the landscape preserve the identity values. Because our focus in the current case is on Italian landscapes, we note that the Constitution of the Italian Republic (art. 9) establishes the link between promoting cultural development and research and landscape preservation and historical and artistic heritage.

- 4 Landscapes also promote the therapeutic potential of natural resources (sea, countryside, etc.), verified by multiple studies (Gesler, 1993; Finlay *et al.*, 2015) which have found that blue/green landscapes show a therapeutic component representative of holistic connections between nature, oneself, and the physical, social and mental well-being that can arise in relationships with the whole. Recently, the study of therapeutic landscapes has turned towards the categorization and analysis of landscapes based upon their colour, known as “palettes of place” (Brooke, Williams, 2020).
- 5 Rural landscapes are a widely representative category of landscapes and have been mainly considered by emphasizing their productive, agricultural function, but there are also comprehensive and integrated aspects such as heritage, regional variation, artistic-historic and environmental and socio-cultural ecosystem services to be considered (Janssen *et al.*, 2017; Renes, 2015). In particular, the rural landscape as heritage can be a driving force of local development if its cultural content is able to generate widespread awareness of local identity and distinctiveness, also based on the principles of sustainable resource use (Di Fazio, Modica, 2018; Scazzosi, 2018). It has become clear that, in order to improve the economy of rural areas, is also necessary to focus on the unique character of traditional landscapes and on their multifunctional role (Santoro, Venturi, Agnoletti, 2020). Characteristic rural landscapes are the subject of national and community protection and enhancement policies; hence they are a special interest in this study.
- 6 After a theoretical framework on the characteristics of rural landscapes, based on the literature review of previous studies, the current work aims to answer the following research question: could the rediscovery (or discovery) of rural landscapes be an opportunity to renew practices in the contemporary era after the COVID-19 pandemic? We will observe the rebirthing process of recovering the values of the past by trying to integrate them functionally in the present as resources for new productive economic activities. The sense of appreciation towards the characteristic and cultural values of

rural landscapes has been increasing after the pandemic. So, observing characteristic rural landscapes appears to be an opportunity for the recovery of the territory. In this context, for example, many travellers as well as residents have rediscovered open-air activities, accompanied by a rediscovery of small rural villages and locations outside of classic tourist routes. In this they have been searching for healthy, safe and less crowded places, supporting a new style of well-being, strengthening and consolidating the idea of appreciating nature and landscape together with rediscovered lifestyles, mainly because this reflects an expression of the agricultural tradition and the resilience of places and of cultivation and cultural traditions.

- 7 To address our research question, the regions of Apulia and Sicily, in southern Italy, were used as case studies (Yin, 2017), where the cultivation of citrus fruits is a popular example of characteristic and cultural rural landscapes, as well as being defined by national legislative measures (National Law 127/2017; Ministerial Decree 1904/2019). In the first analysis, desk research, a research methodology that relies on the search, selection and reprocessing of existing information, was used. We collected data through a document analysis (using policy documents, reports, websites). This approach has the advantages of being relatively inexpensive in terms of the use of financial resources and time. In addition, geographers have shown the role of ‘walking’ in highlighting how relationships between human actors and the surrounding environment can emerge intensely (Evans, Jones, 2011). In fact, walking tends to be longer and more spatially focused, and generates more place-specific data. This helped us with the interpretation of the perception of tangible and intangible, and rural landscape by the local community in the analysis of the case studies.

The rural landscape in Italy

- 8 At the international level, there is no univocal and shared definition of rural landscape which, on the other hand, would be desirable. The concept adopted by the 19th International Council on Monuments and Sites - ICOMOS General Assembly (2017) declares that “rural landscapes are multifunctional resources. At the same time, all rural areas have cultural meanings attributed to them by people and communities: all rural areas are landscapes. Rural landscapes are dynamic, living systems encompassing places produced and managed through traditional methods, techniques, accumulated knowledge, and cultural practices, as well as those places where traditional approaches to production have been changed.”
- 9 With reference to the Italian context, and specifically in the legal system, there are currently only two references to the general concept of rural landscape. The first is in the Code of Cultural Heritage, where Article 135 discusses landscapes “according to their compatibility with the various recognized and protected landscape values, with particular attention to the protection of rural landscapes”. The second reference is in the Ministerial Decree n. 17070/2012 establishing the National Observatory of Rural Landscape, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge. In particular, article 2 states that the traditional rural landscape of historical interest is identified “in the territories classified as rural and/or in linear or punctual elements, which while continuing their evolutionary process, retain evidence of their origin and their history”.

- 10 Beyond the definitions, what is certain is that rural landscapes have been shaped over the millennia and represent significant parts of human history, ways of life and the shared heritage of human communities.
- 11 Until the Second World War, the rural landscape had remained substantially unchanged in its predominantly agricultural functions. Currently, only a small part of the population carries out agricultural activities, so that ancient agricultural or forest-pastoral centres have undergone diversified and de-naturalization processes; some have assumed more complex urban functions and characteristics, while others have become more marginal and depopulated, losing vitality or becoming completely abandoned, and still others have changed their agricultural purpose. From a landscape and social point of view, therefore, the limits between city and countryside and between styles of rural life and urban civilization have been blurring.
- 12 The Italian rural environmental picture is a composite one, with variable specificities even between neighbouring territories. Each human group that has permanently occupied those territories has shaped the landscape according to different conditions and vocations. The evolution of agricultural activity has, in some cases, determined an equal evolution of the landscape. Today, agriculture is associated with multiple functions that have always characterized its development; to the productive function, increasing importance has been given to the territorial supervision and environmental protection functions; moreover, some service functions have acquired considerable socio-cultural and economic importance, since the rural space has become the privileged seat of many activities characterized by various types of attraction in the agricultural landscape and aimed at enhancing the resources traditionally used by farmers (Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2000).
- 13 The emphasis on the aforementioned functions corresponds to a “compensatory tension” that contrasts the territorial imbalances and cultural eradication resulting from various factors, including the affirmation of industrial and intensive development models, which have also affected agriculture, and different forms of cultural homogenization, with the consequent cancellation of cultural identities and elements of diversity and figurativeness of places (Di Fazio, 2015; Di Fazio, Malaspina, Modica, 2005).
- 14 As a result, the protection of all that has survived these transformations or that could still be threatened in some way has been pursued. In this context, landscape policies and strategies have also changed. If in the past these were aimed above all at areas recognized as being of exceptional value for the scenic content and the prevalence of natural elements, today the attention shifts to characteristic landscapes: landscapes in a certain sense “ordinary”, but distinctive of a given geographic region, where the cultural element brought by the anthropic presence assumes equal importance with respect to the natural elements.
- 15 The agricultural landscape documents another important principle also sanctioned by the European Landscape Convention, namely its dynamic nature; it requires the protection of the values recognized as an embankment for the protection of the environmental balance and of the communities that have shaped a certain landscape and that today can still maintain it, change it and recreate it in a profitable way. This notion can be further specified on the basis of the idea of “coherence”, or rather of the permanence over time, through different processes of change, of elements and

relationships that define a specific and recognizable dynamic configuration of the place–community relationship in a given area (Antrop, 2005).

- 16 Currently, therefore, the landscape is increasingly assimilated to a cultural heritage with an identity character, primarily the result of the perception of the population. This results in an evolving and dynamic social product.
- 17 In Italy, particular attention has been paid to citrus grove landscapes as a significant part of the country’s cultural traditions. They are the subject, in particular, of two national legislative measures: Law 127/2017, “Provisions for the protection of characteristic citrus groves”, and Ministerial Decree 1904/2019, which identifies the territories in which the characteristic citrus groves are located, defines the criteria and the types of permissible interventions. These measures have been set up for the purpose of environmental protection, defence of the territory and the soil, and the identification and conservation of traditional landscapes for characteristic citrus groves.
- 18 Law 127/2017 considers “characteristic citrus groves” as those having particular varietal (traditional Italian cultivars), landscape (presence of distinctive elements such as terracing, dry stone walls), historical (historically present landscapes that evolve very slowly) and environmental (traditional varieties historically cultivated with sustainable methods and techniques) value, located in areas suitable for the cultivation of citrus species whose particular environmental and climatic conditions give the product specific characteristics (article 3).

Case studies: characteristic citrus groves in Apulia and Sicily

Apulia rural landscape: the case of “Oasi Agrumaria Garganica”

- 19 The natural area between the municipalities of Vico del Gargano, Ischitella and Rodi Garganico is called “Oasi Agrumaria Garganica” (Gargano Citrus Oasis), corresponding to the northern and sub-coastal stretch of the Gargano promontory, in Apulia (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Location of the “Oasi Agrumaria Garganica” in Apulia, Italy.



Source: Ivona's elaboration

- 20 The natural area covers about a thousand hectares, in which three types of citrus fruits have been produced for centuries: the *Duretta del Gargano* and *Bionda del Gargano* oranges and the *Femminello* lemon. This is the only example of citrus groves along the entire Adriatic strip.
- 21 In the 1800s this citrus crop was very prosperous, with a production of about 150,000 quintals annually. In the 1900s, market rules gradually marginalized this typical production, and the Gargano agricultural economy collapsed.
- 22 Until the mid-20th century, the citrus oasis landscape had preserved the integrity of its indispensable natural (climate, air, soil) and cultural-aesthetic (windbreaks, dry stone walls) components. Subsequently, the structural elements have been modified both by the abandonment of much of the land and by the slow change in cultivation techniques. The continued expansion of hotel and holiday-home construction together with the evolution of the agricultural market damaged the citrus cultivation in the Oasis so much that its continuation was in doubt.
- 23 After years of neglect, finally in 2001 the Gargano National Park Authority facilitated the establishment of a consortium of citrus oasis farmers. After six years of intense work, the new organization led to the recognition first of the Slow Food Presidium (Agrumi del Gargano) and then of the PGI¹ (Protected Geographical Indication) label attesting to the high quality of the product. The Agrumi del Gargano and the consortium with about 70 entrepreneurs in the sector have fostered a sustainable economy by quadrupling the wholesale price of oranges (from 0.20 to 0.80 euros/kg) without raising the price at the greengrocers. This operation created jobs and saved a historic agricultural landscape valuable for its many key components – natural, social,

cultural and economic. In 2021, citrus production, with its traditional varieties, was around 104,000 quintals.

- 24 The Garganica Agrumaria Oasis, therefore, is among “the Italian territories in which the characteristic citrus groves are located” (Ministerial Decree n. 1904/2019, article 3); it includes productions of particular landscape, historical, environmental and varietal value and located in an area historically and naturally suited to the cultivation of citrus species that cannot be found elsewhere (for example, in the Gargano Park there is an ancient citrus tree called *melangolo* more than 300 years old, with a circumference of almost two meters). The oasis is also the result of shrewd agronomic choices and precise agricultural practices; this fruit growing area has always symbolized the historical and cultural identity of this northern part of the Gargano (Biscotti, 2014). In it we find those perceived and aesthetic components of the landscape as well as on literature review, such as the memories of a peasant civilization, that have handed down its ability, resistance and resilience to adverse conditions for generations, but the components also include the unmistakable smells of citrus fruits, especially in spring, and colours that from yellow to orange represent a unique historical landscape (fig. 2). These characteristics explain the unique combination of elements and features that make the oasis citrus landscape distinctive.

Figure 2. The landscape of citrus groves of the Gargano.



Source: photo by Ivona, 2022

- 25 The joint action of private operators and public decision-makers has favoured a newfound recognition of the citrus production of the oasis, including new market spaces and the avoidance of extinction. The merits of these citrus fruits are certainly in their flavour nature and in their economic potential, being fruits that ripen throughout the year: the *Bionda* orange and the *Femminello* lemon are harvested from April to September, while the *Duretta* orange is harvested from December to March.
- 26 But what is the value of the historic rural landscape in the Gargano Citrus Oasis? In confirmation of Swanwick’s assertion (2002), the historical rural landscape is open to multiple readings; the rediscovery and new revitalization of citrus cultivation has

highlighted how the landscape component often not only has an aesthetic value but also makes land use profitable and viable.

- 27 Around the renewed citrus production, other related business activities have consolidated. Agricultural cosmetics is a prominent example; several companies with young partners and winners of youth and women's entrepreneurship awards have been operating there for a few years now. An interview with the founders of the company Ekosté (<https://ekoste.it>) revealed their constant focus on using mainly organic citrus fruits from Gargano to produce various cosmetics. Ekosté also won a first prize for the quality of raw materials used.
- 28 The newfound use and productive value of the Gargano Citrus Oasis has attracted other businesses that use citrus as raw materials, such as beverage, liqueur preserves and jam processing companies that have chosen Vico del Gargano, Ischitella and Rodi Garganico as ideal sites to lower the production costs of raw material procurement and its landscape as a pleasant place to live and produce (Ente Parco Nazionale del Gargano, 2016).
- 29 Through collaboration and involvement between local producers and public and private entities of the local agricultural sector, the citrus oasis is perceived again as a cultural, historical and at the same time highly productive heritage, if not in quantity at least in high quality. This newfound synergy is one of the most significant ways to enhance the economy of the Gargano area, create new employment and also maintain the high quality of production through a common focus on environmental sustainability.
- 30 The value of the historical and characteristic rural of Gargano citrus fruits has suggested new development paths with respect to the activities historically conducted in that area. The three municipalities of Ischitella, Rodi Garganico and Vico del Gargano are, in fact, among the founding municipalities of the GAL Gargano (a consortium-type rural development agency); through the GAL's operational actions, the Oasi Agrumaria is benefiting, directly and indirectly, from all the promotional initiatives involving the entire Gargano territory. In the field of tourism, the historic rural landscape is also slowly becoming a landscape background, with its unique natural features, for the construction of outdoor itineraries. Through funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the GAL has designed "Paths of Encounter" (<http://www.galgargano.com>), which aims to recover the network of realized and existing paths, (where existing means those whose ascertained existence is supported by historical-geographical references and topographical maps) and the construction of light structures for reception and information. These resources are intended for the preservation and enhancement of the ancient network of trails defined by historical routes, pilgrim routes, trade and traditional agro-pastoral activity that is still present. The intervention is aimed at municipalities that in this way can publicize their territory, which is rich in naturalistic, geological, cultural, archaeological and anthropological assets. The three municipalities of the oasis are crossed by two paths. One is "along the Path of Love - encounters among fragrances of citrus and ancient beech woods" (Vico del Gargano and Ischitella), which extends for 25 km, crossing citrus groves, olive groves and streams and touching on breathtaking viewpoints as well as springs and places that are part of the history of this territory. The creation of a system of trails in the territory of Vico del Gargano and Ischitella has allowed people to rediscover a land that is characterized by a strong historical and environmental value,

with notable fauna and flora presences that represent a strong identity character and on which the municipal administrations involved wanted to invest in a strategic way to encourage nature tourism and foster knowledge and respect for nature.

- 31 The second trail is “The Circular Green along Water Trails and Citrus Gardens”, which runs through the territory of Ischitella and Rodi Garganico. The trails were chosen so as to upgrade existing paths that resulted in nine routes of varying length and difficulty and that added together create a route of about 40 km. The trails partly coincide with forest tracks, partly with paths and partly with existing roads, and they cover a considerable importance both from an environmental and naturalistic point of view and from a historical-cultural point of view, thus representing an attraction for trekkers and mountain bikers.
- 32 These initiatives seem, therefore, to demonstrate that the process of extending the concept of heritage over the 20th century has shifted attention from a single object, considered of exceptional value but isolated from its context, to the study of less precious and more common heritage. In short, as Scazzosi states (2018, p. 40) “the landscape is the result of centuries of small daily actions of construction and transformation carried out by agricultural workers, punctuated by single greater events – drainage works and works by large land-holders– and the construction of new urban settlements”.
- 33 In the Italian national context and beyond, then, the development of the rural landscape is increasingly moving towards the issues of landscape quality and the importance of territorial branding as a driver for increasing the touristic attractiveness of more peripheral territories. Vico del Gargano is one example; the Gargano municipality has boosted tourist flows by creating a major popular event that combines spirituality, religion and rural traditions on the day of St. Valentine, patron saint of the town and of citrus fruits. The event lasts for a week, February 12-17, in which the entire ancient village of Vico is garlanded with oranges, starting with the “Vicolo del Bacio”, a very narrow, picturesque street that is one of the symbols of Valentine’s Day (February 14) in Apulia. On the same days, “Terrarancia” (Orangeearth) takes place, with the exhibition and sale of typical citrus fruits and food products, as well as workshops, cooking master classes, exhibitions and music. Valentinian Week is full of small and large initiatives, concerts, markets and guided tours, aimed at increasing Vico’s tourist appeal (<https://www.viaggiareinpuglia.it>).

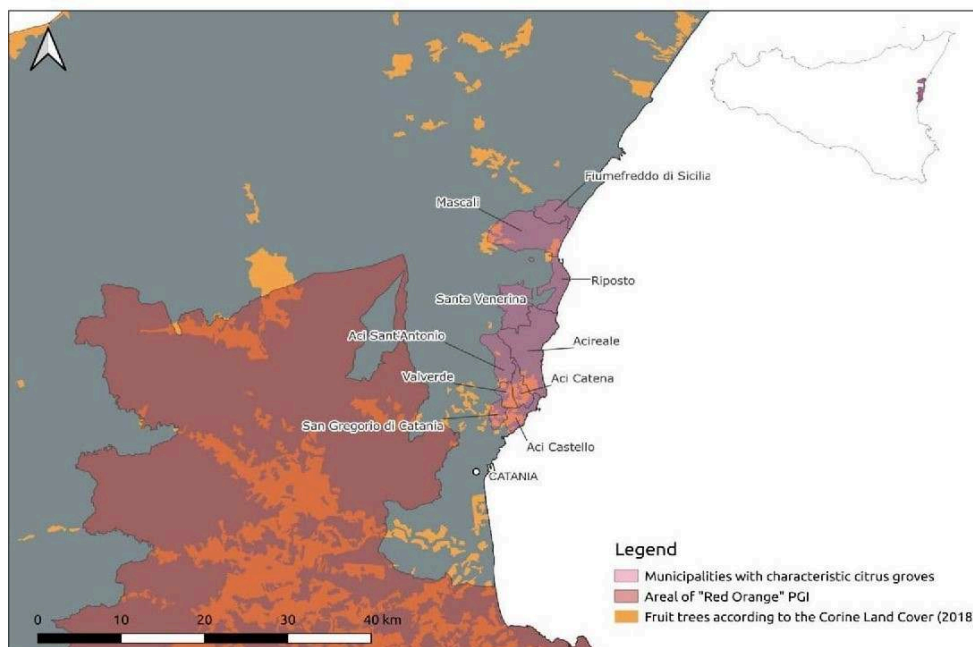
Sicily rural landscape: the case of “Areale Ionico Nord della provincia di Catania”

- 34 Sicily, which has always been a region with a strong agricultural tradition, welcomes in its territory all the varieties of Italian agricultural systems with a prevalence of micro-farms. Like other regions in Italy, it is characterized by a marked differentiation between agricultural areas with high rates of development in particular in the coastal areas, and other inland areas related to the classic conditions of marginality. These inland areas are more subject to abandonment and to climatic conditions, geomorphological and chemical-physical characters of the soil, and limited availability of water resources on which rests the agricultural economy of the island. Since remote times Sicily has generated an extraordinary landscape, typical of the Mediterranean islands. The form of land use is of agrarian woody crops, such as olives, vines, citrus

and other fruits, and crops smaller in number but not for recognition of quality and market (e.g. pistachio, almond, hazelnut). Woody crops are present in the region, with about 30% of the total agricultural area. 80% of companies, with a prevalence of fruit trees and citrus fruits are plus of the 21% of the total area of the island (Napoli, Petino, 2017). Despite this, there are high value-added productions, in particular those with recognized designation and indication of quality, with 35 recognitions between PDO and PGI (excluding wines), making it the first among the Southern regions (Register of protected designations, Ministry of Agricultural Food and Forestry Policies, 2021).

- 35 Specifically considering the object of the case study as an example of characteristic citrus landscapes, as well as defined from national legislative measures (Law 127/2017), the *Areale Ionico Nord della provincia di Catania* (Northern Ionic area of the province of Catania) is one of many rural landscapes of Sicily². It is a large area that runs along the coastline of the city of Catania, between the municipalities of Acicastello and Fiumefreddo, also involving the municipalities of Acireale, Riposto, Mascali and others (San Gregorio, Valverde, Acicatena, Aci S. Antonio, Santa Venerina), located close to the coastal area. The area is dedicated in particular to the cultivation of lemon but also of blood orange (fig. 3). As one of the most ancient areas for the cultivation of citrus fruits, it bears the Protection Geographical Indication for the *limone dell'Etna* (PGI lemon of Etna) and the *arancia rossa di Sicilia* (PGI red orange of Sicily), coming from the varieties *tarocco*, *sanguinello* and *moro*. According to the website of the Arancia rossa di Sicilia PGI consortium (www.tutelaaranciarossa.it), there are 500 producers that aim to protect, promote and enhance the blood orange varieties set forth in the production specification: “all the quality of an area on the slopes of Etna”. This claim is more than an opinion by the operators about the product, and farmers are also involved with other activities linked to hospitality and territorial beauty.

Figure 3. Location of the “Areale ionico Nord della provincia di Catania” in Sicily, Italy.



Source: Gianni Petino's elaboration based on data by CRA, 2015

- 36 The creation of labels such Geographical Indications adds economic value to traditional food products which, through distinct production and visual characteristics, are differentiated from similar products in the market. The predominance of the area covered with natural vegetation makes this local landscape an area of high naturalistic interest, but mainly the areas that have been attributed high landscape value correspond to the coastal strip (Timpa of Acireale) and the streams and valleys (Piano paesaggistico, 2018). The local landscape includes the part of the coastal strip located almost entirely to the east of the neighbouring highway and characterized by the cultivated areas of citrus groves (especially orange and lemon groves) interspersed with important coastal towns. Producer associations for specific traditional products demonstrate the importance of productions together with the value of the landscape. The territory emerges as a strategic production component, as a result of the advantages gained by local farms through the process of knowledge and skill accumulation.
- 37 The dominance of the agricultural landscape is unquestionably that of the citrus grove, although other orchards and vineyards hint at the large expanses that characterize the territory further north. The critical points of this characteristic local landscape are related to the changes in environmental quality, land use and the pressure of human settlements, although there are protected natural areas and Natura 2000 sites.
- 38 This area features the cultivation of lemon, which has represented a considerable source of prosperity for the area; its productivity has begun to suffer a significant decline, both because of the presence of dry rot, a dreadful disease of fungal origin, which has greatly reduced the production potential of the crop, and because of the competition from other countries. References can also be found in historical novels; Federico De Roberto in 1894 in "I Vicerè" wrote about the reclamation and water search works by digging the centuries-old Mongibello lavas to plant oranges and lemons, characterizing a unique landscape³. The lemon has always been a prominent ornamental plant here, dating back to the Byzantine-Arabic period. At present the area has a non-flourishing lemon cultivation at risk of a gradual abandonment, for the reasons stated above and also because of competition from summer lemon production (*verdelli*) in the Southern hemisphere (Argentina, Chile, South Africa, etc.). This kind of production, by which re-flowering is induced by programmed interventions of suspension of irrigation, has become an excellent solution to increase income. Furthermore, the area has been progressively reduced because of urbanization (Guarrera, 2018). Recently, the route of the *limone dell'Etna* (a PGI quality product recognized in 2020) allows us to explore the local territory among nature, art, culture and typical local food. Gastronomic trails are a growing phenomenon in the context of gastronomic tourism and are typically themed around different types of food or beverages. Research on gastronomic routes has focused on three main directions: a strategic approach, as a tool for local tourism development; a managerial approach, for understanding the networks of suppliers involved; and an approach in terms of consumer opinion, in terms of the gastronomic tourist (Macleod, 2016).
- 39 From the above and from the photo documentation it can be deduced that, compared to about 7,000 hectares, there are about 2,500-3,000 hectares in an area between Acicastello and Fiumefreddo, including the Timpa area (200 hectares), in which the considerable ruggedness of the land, the presence of dry lava stone walls, the difficulty in implementing modern irrigation systems, the high landscape value and the risk of

environment degradation are among the most relevant aspects (fig. 4). These are valuable elements of the landscape that characterize the area, namely abrupt elevations along the coastline and in areas close to it, as well as the terraced arrangement supported by dry lava stone walls, built in the 19th century for viticulture and later replaced by limoniculture (i.e., escarpments called Timpa).

Figura 4. The landscape of citrus groves of the "Areale ionico nord della provincia di Catania".



Source: photo by Sandro Privitera, 2022

- 40 Post-pandemic, there has been an emergence of new ways of thinking, new patterns of behaviour, new start-ups, new creativity and new forms of solidarity (Haywood, 2020). There are many farms that have recently shifted their production focus towards the recovery of typical local agriculture and the adoption of organic agronomic practices. Inside this micro-area, it is worth mentioning the natural reserve of Timpa di Acireale, where, due to the abandonment of many citrus plantations, there is an increasing invasion of weeds which changed the landscape profile of these areas. It is known for its stunning landscape, which includes a mix of rocky cliffs, lush vegetation, and clear blue waters. The area is popular for its hiking trails, and fishing opportunities, and have a particularly relevant touristic value to the point of using and modernizing rural houses in agritourism. In addition to the natural beauty of the Timpa of Acireale, the area is also home to a number of cultural and historical landmarks, such as the Baroque-style Church of the Holy Spirit and the Acireale Cathedral, which dates back to the 15th century. Overall, the Timpa of Acireale is a beautiful and culturally rich destination. In addition, the characteristic rural landscapes of this area correlated with quality productions assume extreme importance in terms of the product's market image. The landscape is a tool for communicating the identity of the product itself and as an attraction for touristic, recreational and cultural activities related to the knowledge and tasting of local products (thematic itineraries, food and wine tourism, etc.). In other historic rural landscapes, such as terraced landscapes, forms of agriculture that are in some ways heroic and inevitably destined for obsolescence now find new reasons for permanence; this is especially by virtue of the environmental ecosystem services they are able to offer, and which the community is willing to support, recognizing their contribution in ensuring the maintenance of the territory

and the reduction of hydrogeological risk, especially on the steepest slopes upstream of population centres (Di Fazio, 2015).

Discussion and conclusion

- 41 The rural landscapes within which the study areas are located are no longer just a testimony to an economically productive past but are now transformed into an endogenous resource to be enhanced as a result of changed post-pandemic consumer behaviour. In any case, even if landscape protection has not been able to defend current levels of production and employment, it has at least kept a substantial part of the current agricultural area under cultivation, especially with typical quality and/or traditional products.
- 42 This is true in both studied cases. Environmental problems common to much of Italian agriculture are related, on the one hand, to the progressive concentration and specialization of rural production systems and, on the other, to the marginalization of areas less suitable for agricultural use. The rural landscape alternates areas of high productive intensity with vast agricultural and forest areas on the verge of abandonment (Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2000). The possibility of rebalancing a system that is considered not always environmentally sustainable is also linked to the possibility of making agricultural production in marginal areas more economically viable (Vodenska, 2020).
- 43 Moreover, the commercial visibility of a quality agricultural product, as in the case of Gargano citrus fruits, can also generate other economies with significant social spillovers. It is the same in Sicily, where in addition to being a form of garrison and a tool for the protection of the territory, in particular citrus cultivation, with its historical characteristics, agricultural production has the potential to arouse emotions and stimulate the senses through the observation and contemplation of the landscape and the fruition of tourist products. Citrus growing thus becomes a main instrument of institutional protection along with the local communities that recognize it as a common heritage, together with all the attributes that enhance the value of the agriculture landscape, such as preservation of rural lifestyle in open air, biodiversity, etc. The conservation of the citrus heritage in Italy, particularly in the southern areas, is an issue perceived by a significant part of the community that looks at the environmental and characteristic cultural aspects of this cultivation.
- 44 Many traditionally urban activities can be exported to the rural space: recreational, sports, commercial, tourist reception and catering activities. All of this is manifest in the study cases of the southern citrus groves: the countryside is a privileged space for certain types of social services for which the farm itself is partly responsible, such as educational services (educational farms, environmental education centres) and social welfare services (rehabilitation centres, shelters for the elderly, social farms.) These characteristics actually enclose all the stratifications of the past that, if read only in a historicist key, allow a partial and reductive interpretative cognition.
- 45 Identity, landscape and the territorial framework participate together in the dialectic of local culture in which they contribute to renew and strengthen individuality and originality. The local heritage, from this point of view, participates in the new paths of development, preserving the identity values but repurposing them according to new

canons. In a scenario changed by the COVID-19 pandemic, rural and gastronomic tourism appears as an activity that offers appropriate features and fits very well with the “new normal” (Garibaldi, 2021).

- 46 The agricultural landscapes analysed are no longer exclusively a testimony of an economically productive past but are now transformed into an endogenous resource to be strengthened. However, even if landscape preservation alone cannot support today’s levels of production and employment, it can keep a substantial part of today’s agricultural area under cultivation, especially with typical products like PGI or POD. The appreciation of rural landscapes and architecture of the past does not exempt us from having to imagine new ways of organizing physical space, consistent with the expression of contemporary rurality. For this to be expressed, in fact, it will be necessary to determine a new system of sustainable connections and infrastructures, for example, by implementing a network of infrastructures serving green mobility, encouraging initiatives for the production and distribution of energy in local networks, facilitating the access of rural space to digital networks, etc.
- 47 Undoubtedly, this analysis argues for supporting the conservation of citrus farming rather than succumbing to the irreversible disappearance of the region’s characteristic landscape. Climatic aspects do not help conservation, and it could be convenient to convert citrus groves to agricultural activities carried out in protected environments considering that new generations may show different preferences compared to the past. There must be an understanding of the degree to which a conservation policy represents a cost for the community; therefore, it would be appropriate to maximize the positive externalities and minimize the societal cost.
- 48 Policies of protection must not harm farmers, because they are the custodians of one of the most ancient characteristic, landscape and cultural heritages of Mediterranean agriculture. Farmers must become aware of the importance of agricultural practice in relation to the landscape and biodiversity, which are a collective heritage and therefore to be safeguarded but also valued. Today we are witnessing the rediscovery of characteristic landscapes that are experiencing a new life. In addition to being beautiful and visually appealing, they also help the economy with the production of sustainable and healthy foods such as organic products.

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NOTES

1. Slow Food is an international non-profit association committed to restoring the right value to food, respecting those who produce it, in harmony with the environment and ecosystems, thanks to the knowledge of which local territories and traditions are custodians. In particular, the presidia are Slow Food communities that work every day to save varieties of vegetables and fruit, breads, cheeses, cured meats and traditional sweets from extinction. They are committed to handing down production techniques and crafts. They enhance landscapes, territories, and local cultures. PGI is a trademark that is attributed by the European Union to those products (agricultural or food) for which a particular quality, reputation or other characteristic depends on the geographical origin, and whose production, processing and/or processing takes place in a specific territory.
2. The identification of territories suited to the cultivation of citrus species is specified and supplemented every two years by the Ministry of Agriculture in consultation with the Minister for Cultural Heritage and Activities and the Minister for the Environment and Protection of Land and Sea. In Sicily, there are 10 areas designated as characteristic landscapes including the *Areale Ionico Nord della provincia di Catania* (Ministerial Decree 1904/2019 art. 3).
3. *I Viceré* is Federico De Roberto's most famous novel, set against the backdrop of the events of the Southern Risorgimento, here told through the story of a noble family of Catania, that of the Uzeda di Francalanza, descendants of former Spanish Viceroy of Sicily in the time of Charles V.

ABSTRACTS

For some years now, researchers in many geographical and other disciplinary fields have believed that historical rural landscapes contain an educational value for the landscapes of the future, in terms of analysis as well as protection in general and geo-economic aspects in particular, as an identity expression of the territory and as a preponderant element for the recovery of the same. In fact, in landscape studies the idea is widespread that historical and characteristic rural landscapes are not only the elements of a cultural heritage capable of preserving the memory of the past but also the bearers of a rational perspective for the future of European agriculture. The COVID-19 pandemic caused social and economic changes; critical issues highlight the need for a more integrated approach, taking into account the rediscovery of rural landscapes to practice open-air activities. Through a review of the international literature

and the analysis of case studies, the paper aims to highlight the renewal processes of some cultural practices abandoned over the years but which today are an integral part of the local economy. In particular, the paper analyses the cases of two characteristic citrus groves in Apulia and Sicily, in the south of Italy. They demonstrate how the renewal of ancient practices such as the cultivation of citrus fruits together with the value of landscapes can represent an opportunity for an economic development of territories.

Depuis quelques années, de nombreuses études géographiques et dans d'autres champs disciplinaires considèrent que les paysages ruraux historiques contiennent une valeur éducative pour les paysages du futur, tant en termes d'analyse que de protection en général et d'aspects géo-économiques en particulier, en tant qu'expression de l'identité du territoire et comme élément prépondérant pour la récupération de celui-ci. En effet, l'idée est répandue dans les études paysagères que les paysages ruraux historiques ne sont pas seulement des éléments d'un patrimoine culturel capables de conserver la mémoire du passé, mais aussi porteurs d'une perspective rationnelle d'avenir pour l'agriculture européenne. Grâce à une revue de la littérature internationale et à l'analyse d'études de cas, l'article vise à mettre en évidence les processus de renouvellement de certaines pratiques culturelles abandonnées au fil des ans et qui, aujourd'hui, font pourtant partie intégrante de l'économie locale. En particulier, l'article observera les cas d'anciennes plantations d'agrumes. Les deux paysages historiques analysés, en Pouilles et en Sicile, montrent comment le renouveau de pratiques anciennes comme la culture des agrumes peut représenter une opportunité de développement pour les territoires méditerranéens.

INDEX

Keywords: Italian agriculture, heritage, landscape restoration, citrus groves, sustainability

Mots-clés: agriculture italienne, patrimoine, restauration paysagère, vergers d'agrumes, durabilité

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