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ANCIENT ROADS IN SOUTHERN ITALY: AN HYPOTHESIS OF REQUALIFICATION FOR THE VALORIZATION OF THE RURAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract. *The rural heritage of a specific area represents the form that man has been able to give to its surrounding landscape. Over the centuries, in many European rural areas, roads have lost their traditional design motivation. Their requalification, in the framework of a sustainable development of rural areas, can be an important way for the protection of the landscape. Through the provision of new alternative activities, compatible with the particular nature of the environment, new opportunities for a sustainable preservation of the environment are possible.*

The “Francigena Way” is a combination of arterial roads dating back to the Roman era. The “Herculia Way” is part of the “Francigena Way” that was built in southern Italy. The aim of this research is to study a possible requalification of a part of the Herculia Way. Some ancient paths, known as “tratturi” (sheep-tracks) and small royal tratturi, in some measure still existing, have been identified and located on historical maps. One of these paths has been chosen for the present analysis; different surveys have allowed us to identify some rural buildings along its route, with a significant architectural, historical and landscape value. The hypothesis of a structural and functional recovery through their maintenance and restoration will help the sustainable protection and enhancement of the landscape.

Key words: *path valorization, Roman ways, rural landscape, agricultural buildings, sustainable development*

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of an area can be understood through a careful examination of the natural elements and architectural features which are found in it.

Extra-urban areas have always been environments where important forms of natural landscape can be found. These originate in the old coexistence of the natural environment with the presence of man. In many rural areas, across the centuries, roads and buildings have lost their original use due to major changes which occurred in the local countryside. In particular, during the second half of the last century, socio-economic changes have led, at a European level, to a progressive rural depopulation, promoting the centralization and industrialization of urban areas. The changes have also affected the rural landscape of southern Italy, where buildings and rural roads have always played a central role in the way of living mainly connected to the peasant and rural environment. At the local level, the population has inhabited these environments leading to the definition of specific cultural identity.

The combination of these factors, tangible and intangible, has helped these environments to obtain a characteristic of irreproducibility in other places: they identify the environment described in a unique way. The gradual state of deterioration of the landscape leads, over time, to the inexorable loss of valuable local and cultural identities linked to the nature of the territory. The neglected rural heritage is destined to disappear. The conservation of this precious natural resource aims to protect the local rural landscape. The area investigated is part of the broader Agri Valley, in the south of the Basilicata Region. It has several geological basins with tectonic - karsts springs, natural caves and sinkholes. The original landscape dates back to about 200 million years ago with the sedimentary formation of the first mountains. It is an area that, because of its particular orographic and soil fertility, presents beautiful natural landscapes. Its central geographical position in the region and the particular shape made of valleys and clear rounds between extremely pronounced mountain formations have made it, over time, a strategic internal junction for rapid road transport and a direct connection to the most important destinations near the sea.

The development of internal connections facilitated the defense of the territory by the local population and over the centuries, for various reasons, they have left important signs of their culture.

All this has led to the definition of special forms of rural architecture, archeology and religion in the area. These factors delineate rural landscape characteristics making its protection and preservation a priority. The buildings which are inserted in the rural countryside of the Basilicata Region demonstrate a harmonious blend of architecture and environment that has evolved across the centuries promoting the natural vocation of the local areas observed.

1.1. Valorization of the rural landscape

Among the rural buildings and the agricultural landscape there is a very delicate equilibrium. The role that rural buildings have historically played is closely connected with the surrounding environment [11]. Decision-making processes must ensure harmonious relations between environmental integrity and preservation of historic rural buildings, integrating what has been built in its landscape. In the last decade, throughout Europe, it was possible to observe some major changes in the relationship between

buildings and their rural landscapes [10]. The programming of the European landscape policy has special building codes to protect local cultural identity and promote the quality of the landscape [3].

Guarantying the conservation of the rural heritage, which has been abandoned and destined to disappear through its conversion to new uses means protecting the local rural landscape with its tradition and its culture [8]. Reusing the elements of rural architecture abandoned to accommodate new alternative activities compatible with their characteristics represents an appropriate option for a long-term sustainable conservation as it provides a utility for owners ensures the proper maintenance of the properties and helps to protect the value of rural landscapes [4].

In the second half of the twentieth century, an increasing demand for goods and services in rural areas took place, such as recreation, consideration of the landscape, and diffusion of traditional and cultural tourism. The use and economic promotion of these resources offer a real opportunity for the diversification and improvement of local economies [15]. The promotion of the territories through tourism has long been considered a powerful tool for development able to stimulate the economic growth and increase investment and local employment [6]. The vernacular architecture of a given area is a symbol of identity, as well as rich ethnographic evidence on rural technologies and ways of life in rural areas [7]. It has been shown that, in some cases, tourism has resulted in greater protection and conservation of the environment [13]. Experts agree on integration and adequate environmental location, able to balance harmoniously rural buildings related to tourism within their landscape setting [14, 1]. The interventions carried out by humans often have heavily influenced the agricultural environment and the visual perception of the landscape [9, 12].

The Francigena Way is situated in southern Italy. It connects the center of Europe, with Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela. It is the most important pilgrimage route dating back to medieval times. Herculia Way is also included in this Way. It breaks away from the Traiana Way in the north and runs towards the south in the center of the Basilicata Region until it gets to the ancient Town of Grumento, and then continues in the east towards the sea.

The aim of this study is to hypothesize a possible environmental regeneration and function of a stretch of the route of the Herculia Way found in the Basilicata Region in order to protect the identity of the local landscape for the future.

1.2. The Herculia Way

The Herculia Way connects the north to the south of the Basilicata Region. It was built during the age of the Roman Emperors, Diocletian and Maximian Herculius, from which it takes its name. The aim was to link the Town of Grumento with the "Appia Way" in the north, the "Popilia Way" and the Ionian Coast to the east. At that time it became the main road used by pilgrims travelling from Rome to Jerusalem. It was also used by merchants in transit through the region.

In the Middle Ages, the main axes of the road network of the Basilicata Region reproduced the ancient Roman paths connecting, as far as possible, all the territory of the old Basilicata Region. These were the Appia Way, the Capua-Reggio Way and the Herculia Way. This last ancient Way represented the most active arterial road that crossed the territory of the Region. It facilitated the transit of goods and armies towards the Ionian coast and the displacement of the pilgrims to different dioceses.

1.3. The road axis "Grumentum - Potentia - Venusia": the most important part of the Herculia Way

The existence of the Herculia Way dates back to the early Middle Ages. In fact, during this time the presence of minor roads appeared. It is a simple road network with only a few extending from it.

This system of internal and side roads was perceived by "Procopio" as two types. The most important type was the "publicae" roads: managed by the public authority that controlled them. They were used by armies, merchants and pilgrims. The second type of road included harsh winding paths, similar to mule tracks, as well as winding paths located along the ridge or crest. Little maintenance had been done to these roads generally known only to the local inhabitants [5]. The articulation of this minor road network occurred because of economic reasons as well as the emergence of new settlements. In this way, the roman concept of linear road was abandoned and a new concept of roads was now understood as the medieval road network (*strata, via, iter, itinerarium*) [2].

This road network was more articulated and was intended to serve different purposes. The Herculia Way was built considering strategic military targets. Therefore, it is a set of macro paths, connected to micro paths, built and developed to meet the needs of local residents. From the town of Grumentum it continues towards the ancient greek city of Heraclea, crossing south of the Agri Valley and linking the towns of Spinoso, San Martino d'Agri, Roccanova, Sant'Arcangelo and Tursi. An intermediate station should probably fall in the area of Sant'Arcangelo. This road is the route of the Herculia Way [2].

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Targeted inspections were conducted with the aim of analysing the significant elements of local rural architecture, capable of interpreting the history of the landscape and, therefore, the characteristic elements of rural heritage.

The rural buildings, identified along the road stretch investigated, were the subject of a photographic survey and a survey of their geographical coordinates in order to be able to assign the exact geographic position on georeferenced cartographic material. It has thus been possible to identify the traits of sheep tracks (Fig.1).

For the structures identified were compiled technical cards in situ. They were collected data and information on the buildings, about on their typology, historical use and form of possession, size, construction materials and current state of conservation of the buildings.

Interviews were carried out with the locals in order to get more information.

The purpose of this study was to analyse the rural buildings encountered along the route investigated. The most representative were identified in the present research. The prevalence of structures of different sizes and of a religious nature in the rural territory indicates a strong religious culture in the past. The presence of rural farms was not as frequent.

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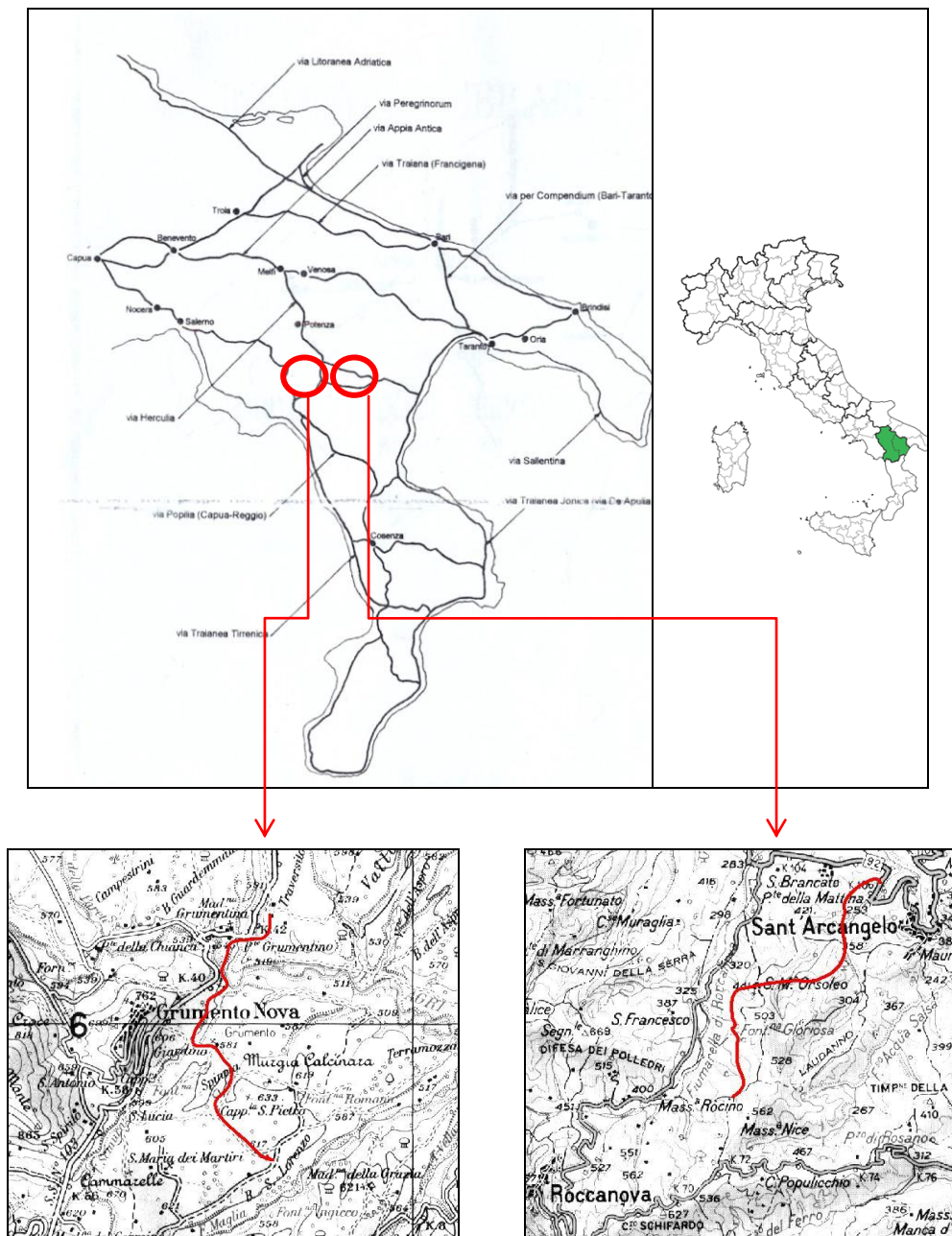


Fig. 1: Roman roads in the Middle Ages in the Basilicata Region and sheep tracks identified.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The buildings identified along the way have a strong historical value. In fact, it was possible to notice the presence of buildings of special architectural and landscape value (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Historic rural landscape located in the "Agri Valley" in the Basilicata Region.

The analysis of the buildings observed shows the presence of different typologies of rural structures in the territory located in the natural landscape. It concerns small and medium size buildings having had little maintenance or having been completely abandoned. However, in some cases, medium and large constructions have been well preserved. They are of a religious nature, such as churches and rural sanctuaries, which testify to the great importance that religious pilgrimages have had in the past (Fig. 3).

The second typology of buildings observed, in a smaller number of cases, concerned buildings of smaller size. These are small refuges, allocated in the area of the inner roads, once used by local farmers as auxiliary to the local agricultural activity carried out in the fields or as refuges for the animals raised for family consumption.

In some cases, fountains used in the past for local agricultural use or for the needs of travellers, traders and soldiers can be found near these structures.



Fig. 3: Rural religious building, located in the Agri Valley, in the Basilicata Region.

In all cases, the observed structures are made of poor materials, locally available, such as stones, clays and wood.

Rural buildings for agricultural purposes of a larger size have been observed only in a few cases. The presence of useful structures, used for the conservation or processing of agricultural products, such as small mills, was also important. A link between the identified structures and privately owned sheep-tracks has been observed in the natural landscape. The construction works and sheep tracks observed were analyzed by taking photographs and GPS coordinates. A concentration of buildings along rural roads that are related to roads of higher relevance was observed using the positioning of these pictures and the georeferenced cartographic material.

In this way, it was possible to identify the bundle of sheep tracks that converge to the Herculia Way, proving, within a small margin of error, its role in the Middle Ages as one of the most important road connections in southern Italy.

Currently, a growing interest in rediscovering places of cultural and natural interest is occurring. Therefore, the possibility of a recovery of the old rural routes linked to local cultural traditions is essential, in order, to raise the awareness of landscape resources which are poorly understood.

The hypothesis of a structural restoration of the observed paths can be useful for new forms of alternative economic activities compatible with the nature of the place, with paths accessible on foot or on horseback.



Fig. 4: Tratturi (sheep-tracks) along the Herculia Way.

These activities could use the old abandoned rural structures that were used by pilgrims and horses. Similarly, the presence of fountains along the roads could be useful. In this way, the natural equilibrium of the environment would remain unchanged and, especially, the natural resources would be preserved and respected. The preservation of the landscape and the sense of place in the long term could be achieved by increasing the competitiveness and environmental sustainability in accordance with the international lines of economic and environmental development.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The stretch of the Herculia Way that was analyzed provides many examples of rural architecture in the countryside which appears as unique within the natural environmental context of the area. These factors constitute the rural landscape, rich in traditions and cultures, belonging to the history of the place. The analysis of the elements observed along the stretch of the campaign investigated, showed the existence of a rural heritage worthy of enhancement and of architectural and international interest. To do this, it is necessary to continue the analysis of the elements of the rural landscape and, above all the examination of existing buildings is important. The protection and enhancement of these resources is necessary to preserve them, making them accessible to younger generations, along with the agricultural landscape in which they are inserted and in which they are an integral and essential part.

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