

## Identification and safeguarding of Central Sicily's forgotten vernacular heritage: elements of identity and memory

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### Abstract

*The coronavirus pandemic has created new challenges for rural areas already affected by chronic economic, social, and environmental problems such as depopulation, reduced service provision, ageing, the decline of agriculture income, inhibited accessibility. These problems are very serious in Central Sicily. Here, the absence of adequate infrastructure, the limited presence of organizations for the promotion and marketing of agricultural products, and the effects of climate change have strongly affected the rural landscape. Numerous small towns, farms and extraordinary underground structures are on the verge of extinction, threatened by the ravages of time, forgetfulness, and vandalism. Although often unknown, these eloquent examples of the vernacular heritage of the interior of the island are no longer an integral part of the life of the region. However, if properly identified, studied, protected, re-used, and reconnected to the territory, they could help to reinforce the local cultural identities, and bring positive changes in the socio-economic conditions of the concerned peoples. This paper aims at exploring all these aspects, focusing on the territory of Enna. It also intends to present a pilot project aimed at identifying the most important elements of local rural architecture to promote sustainable methods of preservation and restoration.*

**Keywords:** cultural and rural landscape; safeguarding; restoration; reuse; Sicily.

### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a consolidation of the collective interest in the safeguarding of the landscape and, even more specifically, of those legal categories of cultural and rural landscapes, still today in a process of continuous affirmation and deepening (Petrillo 2014). This may be due to both the mass of rules and regulations that have been promulgated over time in the field and the multiple meanings given to these notions. Concepts that are progressively moving away from an aesthetic and/or aestheticizing vision and from a static, sectorial, and local reading of existing reality, to be transformed into complex images, in constant evolution as resulting from dynamic interactions.

In Italy, landscape safeguarding is a primary duty of the Republic, as stated by the Constitution written in 1947. However, it is in article 131 of the Code of the Cultural and Landscape Heritage - the Legislative Decree 42/2004 with its 2006 and 2008 amendments - (Leone 2009), that the term is clearly defined as “an integral part of the territory whose characteristics are derived from nature, the history of humanity or from their reciprocal inter-relationships”, in compliance with the European Landscape Convention (ELC).

The landscape is considered a distinctive feature of a clearly demarcated territory. Its protection first requires the recognition and protection of the specific aspects that characterise it and distinguish it from the others. The ELC has affirmed

that landscape has strong cultural and economic value and, for the first time, highlighted the need for managing and planning it as a key element of individual and social well-being. Not limiting itself to expressing the need to safeguard areas that might be considered outstanding, it has also underlined the urgency to proceed with the recovery of everyday and degraded landscapes, and the peri-urban areas. He brought to the forefront the issue of the quality of their transformations. If this instrument undoubtedly represents a significant stage in a process aimed at the full awareness of the identity of the landscape, it is UNESCO that, many years earlier, introduced the category of 'cultural landscape' as a specific element to be saved (Jakob, 2009). Twenty years after its approval, the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) has become the first international legal instrument to identify and protect cultural landscapes. Following the revision of the *Operational Guidelines for its implementation* in 1992, cultural landscapes may be added to the World Heritage List. According to the document, they represent the "combined works of nature and man" and are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic, and cultural forces. Since then, the need to establish specific measures for the protection and enhancement of that specific category of cultural landscapes represented by the so-called 'rural landscapes' has been affirmed (Carmignani, 2009). In Italy, one of the main institutional steps was provided by the National Observatory for Rural Landscape, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge established in 2012 by the Ministry of Food, Agricultural and Forest Policies, following the results of a research project called National Catalogue of historical rural landscapes aimed at identifying and studying the most important rural landscapes (Agnoletti et al. 2019). The art. 2 of the National Observatory's founding decree gives a clear definition of the traditional rural landscape

of historical interest, by identifying it in those parts of the territory classified as rural and/or [in] linear or punctual elements, which while continuing their evolutionary process, retain clear evidence of their origin and history. The rural landscape is so characterised by physical and material features: cultures, settlements, and historical and traditional artefacts. At the same time, it reflects the evolution over time of the relationship between the community and this area. It is evident how it results from the interrelation between the human and anthropic elements on the one hand and the environmental element on the other hand and how its cultural value derives from their combination. The landscape, in a physical sense, "is like the great architecture, consisting of natural and artificial elements. It has three dimensions, shapes and functions; it is the work of man and nature and in constant transformation" (Scazzosi, 2011). However, the landscape is fragile: an asset 'at risk' as exposed to processes of physiological alteration and degradation of its components, capable of obscuring or cancelling peculiar traits, differences, characteristics. It is, at the same time, a 'changing' or 'unstable' good due to anthropic action that very often compromise its natural equilibrium through aggressive transformation processes characterized by a high level of precariousness. A good subject, in the latest decades, to dramatic threats connected to economic and social processes (poverty, inequality, ageing, mass migration, etc.), and, more recently, to sanitary problems at the global level, which are causing extensive challenges towards rural areas and their communities.

## **2. The Sicilian agricultural landscape: current and future issues**

Resulted from both innumerable cultural contamination and stratifications and the millennial encounter with the most important agrarian civilizations and with their heritage of plants, animals, techniques, customs and social relationships, the Sicilian landscape today can show only pieces of that long history that, instead, characterizes it. The failure of the agrarian reform combined with



Fig. 1. The rural landscape of Enna, Sicily.

the start of industrial polarization policies has caused considerable imbalances in the structures of rural areas since the 1960s. Technological innovation in agriculture, the abandonment of polyculture in favour of intensive and specialized monocultures, the agricultural machinery and the intensive use of pesticides and herbicides, have caused a profound alteration of the agricultural, historical landscape as well as the erosion when not the destruction of many of its original features. A transformation that seems to have dissolved “that aromatic intrigue in which Phoenixes, Dorians and Ionians found it, when they landed in Sicily” referred to Tomasi di Lampedusa, so extinguishing “that seed of cultural expression that was the protagonist, for centuries, of human movements on the territory” (Barillaro, 2008). A landscape now largely lost, which seems to have become a real concern for European, national and, obviously, regional policies in the now widespread awareness that its protection and enhancement represent an opportunity to be seized for not only economic reasons but also for the social and cultural improvement of the community. This is the context in which the province of Enna

stands. An area that sees its peculiarity in its bar-centric position in the island (the Romans called it the *Umbilicus Siciliae*). Nevertheless, the historical events of the last century affected the relationship between the physical substrate and its settlement model and converted its geographical centrality into an element of marginality. Lacking infrastructures, terrestrial connection networks and skilled labour, penalized by the scarce presence of structures organized for the enhancement and marketing of agricultural products and a victim of climate change, Enna’s rural landscape, still suffers the consequences of a period of great unease in the sector that the development programs promoted by the EU have been trying for some time to fill through the implementation loans and recovery plans (Fig. 1).

The initiatives adopted for safeguarding and protecting natural and non-natural environments, albeit numerous, still struggle to show major results, certainly due to the complexity of the phenomena involved and/or, perhaps, because they were not yet sufficiently based on the necessary understanding of the culture of place, seen as spatial-temporal entities repositories of testimonies and relationships, from which every subsequent action should derive. Knowledge based on analyses of the signs impressed on the territory and their relations with their performers. That is, the result of a process of the signification of the landscape based on the analysis of its links with society since, according to the Charter of Cracovia 2000, “each community, through its collective memory and consciousness of its past, is responsible for the identification as well as the management of its heritage”.

The architectural heritage that characterises the countryside of Enna, the backbone of this system, is still little known to the community today. Having now lost its original function, it is globally affected by problems of neglect, degradation, poor accessibility. However, these are elements with a strong identity that show the existence of a local constructive logic that allows them to be traced back to the building typologies to which they belong (Fig. 2). Places and architectures which, if

recovered, could certainly be actively reintegrated into the life of the community, placing themselves as poles of development, based on local heritage, natural resources, creativity, and social inclusion as essential elements to regenerate rural areas and to rapidly support their transition towards sustainable future (De Luca et al., 2020).

### **3. The rural heritage of the area of Enna**

Surrounded by a rocky setting formed to the north by the Madonie and by the last slopes of the Nebrodi and largely occupied by the Erei mountains, the territory of Enna (the only Sicilian landlocked) is characterized by an extremely varied natural heritage, rich in rivers, streams, lakes, and hills that slowly descend towards the vast plains of the Catania's area. This territory, which shares many characteristic features with the rest of the Sicilian hinterland, has very strong geographic and cultural dissimilarities with coastal Sicily, better known and, historically, more visited. The spontaneous vegetation, in the past very dense and heterogeneous, is today significantly impoverished due to the deforestation and the harvesting of tree crops already carried out by the feudal system since the 1600s, with serious damage to livestock breeding and the silvopastoral economy. The large estate, with its system of intensive land exploitation, has transformed the landscape, giving it the chromatic traits and the still pre-eminent characteristics of the extensive monoculture of wheat and a consequent uniformity that only changes with the seasons. Because of both its central position in the island and the geomorphological characteristics, Enna has played a strategic role in ancient times. Inhabited since the pre-Greek era, as evidenced by some stable settlements presumably dating back to a period between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, it was subject to a broad process of Hellenization starting from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The shape of the rocks, with an abundant presence of limestone and sandstone subject to severe erosion by atmospheric agents, favoured the formation of underground housing structures, as evidenced by the number of necropolises found in the area with the typical *grotticella*

tombs (VI-V century BC, fig. 2a). A territory, therefore, in which the settlement by agro-pastoral communities was favoured by the presence of caves, cavities, underground complexes along the mountain slopes and the torrential valleys that surround Enna and the close cities of Assoro, Gagliano, Leonforte, Nicosia, as well as Calascibetta and Sperlinga where rupestrian dwellings arranged on superimposed terraces are still visible. The whole rural landscape is marked - especially in the northern area of the province, but also on the Enna urban territory, albeit residually - by numerous rock structures, very often used without solution of continuity up to the present day, first in the natural state to then become stable abodes for shepherds and shelter for the flocks. Their dimensions are variable according to the consistency of the rock and their intended use: generally, small for shelters or very large when used as a sheepfold, closed on the outside by a fence of stones and weeds (Gambino & Ursino, 1973). Limited, compared to the other rural areas of the island, is the scattered settlement, that is, the spread of housing and the distribution of the population along with the land and cultivated fields. This characteristic is closely linked to the socio-economic structure of the *latifondi* (large estates), whose forms of settlement are fundamentally articulated in the system of farms, rural constructions widely present in the territory of Enna, and which at the same time gave rise to the poorest forms of rural architecture: the *pagghiaro* (the straw hat) and the single-celled houses.

The *pagghiaro* was once the home of the peasants who worked in the big fiefdoms. The simpler type made of plant material has now completely disappeared, while there are still a few examples of a second type built according to a system composed of reeds resting on dry stone walls, along the road that connects Enna to the nearby town of Leonforte (Fig. 2b). The masonry base usually does not climb more than half the total height of the haystack (2.50 m). The entrance, surmounted by a rudimentary wooden architrave, is closed by a single-leaf wooden door or by bunches of twigs. The more advanced form compared to the haystack is

given in its simplest geometry by the *casedda*: a quadrangular construction with a single compartment, with a single rain pitch roof with tiles. Small stones bonded with mortar are the most used building materials. The inside, never plastered, sheltered a modest bed and heavier agricultural tools; leaning against a wall was the trough for the mule and the donkey. Beside this shelter-house, there were also permanent residences of rectangular plan divided into three sections: in the centre of the house, at its ends the stable and the warehouse.

The *masseria* (toponym of agricultural structure with functions of the fund management centre) is, on the other hand, the most eloquent expression of the feudal system, located mainly in the middle and lower hills. It constitutes the collection outpost of the agropastoral production of the large estates, entrusted by the baron (usually resident in large urban centres) to a tenant (*gabellotto*) in charge of managing on his behalf the most extensive and distant land and living, for this purpose, in the farm. This was established to prevent workers from still stay on the land and thus owning their flocks and tools, as was the case, precisely, in sharecropping and dispersed rural crops (Fig. 2c). They thus continued to reside in the villages perched on the hills, moving seasonally to offer work to the *massari*. Its layout is characterized by a massive quadrangle that revolves around a large central paved courtyard. The access to the courtyard, always unique and consisting of a two-leaf door surmounted by a round arch in which the owner's initials are engraved, seems to want to exclude any possible contact with the outside. Together with the bare surfaces, in which there are rare and small slits and grated windows, it highlights the defensive nature of the building. On it lies the mansion (inhabited only at certain times of the year, i.e. at the time of harvest), accessible via an interior staircase. Inside the building, large surfaces were intended to host warehouses for storing products and stalls, multiple and differentiated according to their destination. Special care and finishing characterized the stables for horses, of which this type of farm always had an important endowment. A little less cared for were

those of cattle, generally rectangular in plan, divided into two lanes, with a drain in the middle for waste. Next to the warehouses, there were the rooms used as storage for agricultural tools, the dormitory - where, on the straw beds, the adventitious manpower (*jurnatari*) that flowed to the farm during the harvest period was once housed -, and the *ribatteria* used for bread-making, the consumption of meals, characterized by a wood stove and an oven. In addition, the mill and the millstone were present, based on the company's production orientation. In the area of Enna, there are also forms of scattered settlement built by the State starting from the 1940s as part of the redevelopment program of the rural areas of the island and later by the Region. They were created to both combat the landowner type which was seen as the main cause of the backwardness of the island and spread the permanence of the peasant on the land with a consequent restructuring of the cultivation systems. Just as the issue of social housing for the urban worker, that of the agricultural worker began to be addressed, so extending "the concept of the city (as a human residence equipped for work, leisure, and rest) [...] to broader conglomeration territories, even what we commonly call rural building" (Caracciolo, 1949).

The first series of farmhouses was built at the initiative of the fascist Entity of Colonization of Sicilian Latifundia (*Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano*, ECLS) but these, too distant from each other and completely devoid of civil services, did not favour colonization and the stable settlement of farmers in rural areas. The legacy of the ECLS was collected, starting from the 1950s, by the newly established Regional Government through the Institute for the Agrarian Reform in Sicily (*Ente per la Riforma Agraria in Sicilia*, ERAS, renamed ESA in 1965), which expropriated more than 12,000 hectares assigned to nearly 3,000 farmers and built more than 500 rural houses. Furthermore, to meet the needs of the agricultural community, traditionally reluctant to isolation, two villages were built with the services necessary for collective life: Borgo Antonino Cascino, near



Enna, designed by the architect Giuseppe Marletta and Borgo Baccarato, not far from Aidone (Fig. 2d), by the engineer Francesco S. Siragusa. The first has benefited from a partial recovery program thanks to a specific measure of EU structural funds (Rural Development program - 2007/2013) and today hosts almost 50 persons; the second is, today, a ghost town, despite having been identified by ESA as one of the villages to be recovered to allocate it to the promotion of typical food products. Due to the small size of the assigned parcels (from three to six hectares) and the often-mediocre quality of the divested land, unsuitable for crop conversion, the budget for the operation was found to be in deficit; consequently, the numerous rural houses built by ERAS in the countryside, most of them lacking in light and with insufficient water availability, were soon abandoned. Among the various types of rural houses introduced in the area under consideration by the agrarian reform, the most frequent has a covered porch in which the entrance and the house consisting of two rooms and the kitchen-living room open, as well as the warehouse and access to the stable; on the back, are the pigsty and the chicken coop. Finally, numerous watermills (Fig. 2e), fountains, washhouses, drinking-troughs dot the territory widely, placing themselves as milestones of a widespread and extensive water network, but built with total respect of the man/environment relationships. Goods that are characterized by an architectural and stylistic refinement that testifies to the feeling of deep attachment to a natural element so important for traditional society.

#### **4. Development policies and strategies for enhancing the rural heritage of Enna**

Today, this immense heritage, often considered almost useless, is suffering the consequences of a widespread state of abandonment or under-use, while preserving its identity. Placed in a state of suspension and relegated to the role of a picturesque element of the landscape, it awaits new

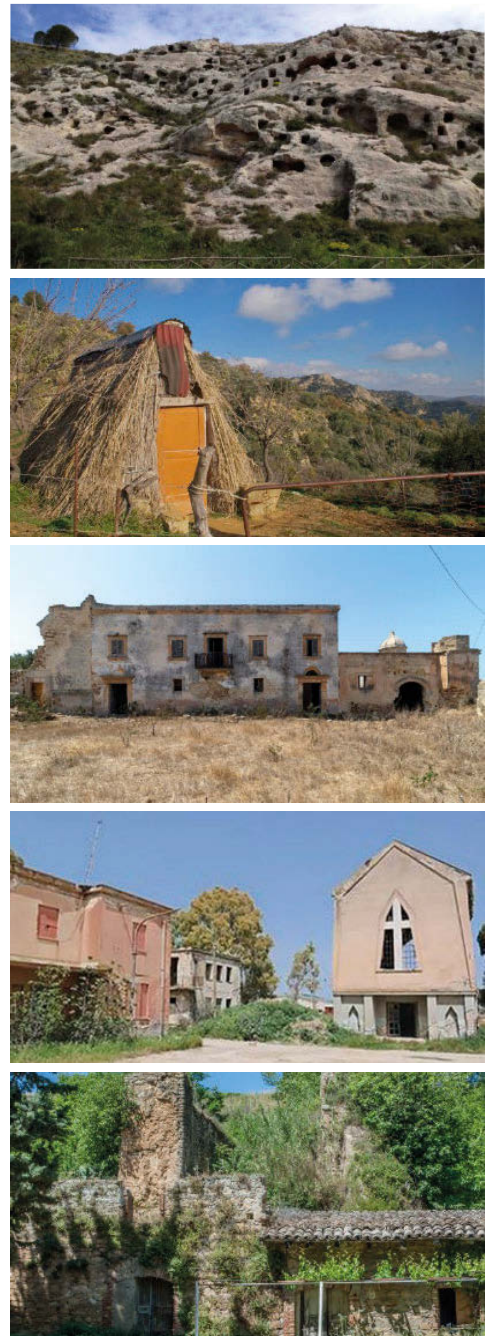


Fig. 2. Examples of vernacular heritage in the area of Enna: the Necropolis of Realmese with its *grotticella* tombs (a), a *pagghiaro* in Leonforte (b), a typical *masseria* today abandoned (c), the rural village of Borgo Baccarato in Aidone (d) and the Rasalgone watermill in Piazza Armerina (e).

functions while falling more and more into ruin, as exposed to degradation and decay phenomena. Yet, if subjected to appropriate actions of knowledge, recovery, and revitalization, it could prove to be a strategic development tool for a region with great patrimonial wealth (among the others the close Villa del Casale at Piazza Armerina, Unesco World Heritage Site since 1997, or the archaeological area of Morgantina). An area which still does not have sufficient tourist attractiveness and competitiveness, because of the low level of efficiency of transport infrastructures and accommodation structures.

Per the regulatory guidelines of the regional landscape plan, the Free Municipal Consortium of Enna (the body which, following changes in regional legislation in the years 2014-2015, replaced the Province of Enna) approved in 2018 the provincial-territorial plan which assumes the strategic and operational infrastructural contents, indicating and prescribing a series of mainly active interventions for the transformation of the territory, calibrated in a spirit of sustainability and environmental compatibility. As part of the plan, an inventory has been carried out on the vast cultural heritage of the area, which shows the wealth of its rural assets: a formidable articulation of landscapes, sites, vernacular architecture that are not fully exploited, but which could prove to be of great value in terms of development of organic agricultural policies, but also as accommodation facilities for the rural tourism.

Among the European Union initiatives to support rural development projects, the LEADER II (Links between actions for the development of the rural economy) program financed through the Local Action Group Rocca di Cerere, several activities aimed at the conservation and recovery of rural heritage: sites of high naturalistic and landscape value (ponds, crossroads, hedges, monumental trees, etc.) and other cultural elements of the traditional agricultural landscape (vernacular architecture, dry stone walls, terraces, drinking troughs and artefacts that bear witness to agricultural work and collective rural life).

As mentioned, if as part of the Rural Development program 2007/2013, the Sicily Region had drawn up a pilot project for the enhancement of the rural villages of the ESA called ‘the road of the villages’ unfortunately only little implemented, a harbinger of preparatory studies and research have been established and then implemented the knowledge of the construction techniques and morphotypological characteristics used (Cardaci & Versaci, 2017).

All these initiatives, certainly not listed in an exhaustive manner, represent important elements of an already highly advanced process of recognition of the rural landscape as a cultural asset also in terms of memory and collective identity of which it is a direct expression (Del Mastro, 2005), representing that “form that man, in the course and for his agricultural production activities, consciously and systematically imprints on the natural landscape” (Sereni, 1982). From this point of view, a fundamental role in the processes of conservation, improvement and development of the rural landscape is represented by the architectural patrimony that characterizes it. However, these actions lack worldwide coordination that should start from a thorough and detailed analysis of this heritage in its material, morphological and technological components, still not available.

In many situations, traditional rural architecture, generally characterized by its compact mass, has lost part of its recognisability, engulfed by larger farms, in which sheds and/or greenhouses prevail, or by impressive accommodation facilities that gradually erode the original building components. Only in-depth knowledge of rural architecture in its various declinations can lead to respectful restoration projects and, even in the combination of the new, to original interpretations deprived of mimesis or nostalgic approach. With this in mind, the research project initiated by the authors of this paper on the territory of Enna - starting from some of the most interesting subsystems, the mills of the Gela river valley and the rural villages built during the Fascist era - proposes the cataloguing and analyses of rural building morphotypes, the definition of the cultural matrix on which the local

construction technique was based, the evaluation of the characteristics and potential of the artefacts and their availability thanks to the application of the semantic web technologies and building information model. These elements are necessary for the definition of useful design guidelines for restoration and recovery planning consistent with the original and sustainable constructive lexicon. The aim is to provide guidance for the valorisation of Enna's rural architecture and landscape. A tool to support citizens and local communities, aimed at providing greater awareness in the formulation of the projects that, following the pandemic, Italy's recovery and resilience plan has expressly foreseen in the field (PNRR).

## 5. Conclusions

The rural landscape of Enna's area, if properly studied and enhanced, can be a key element for both the recovery of local identity and the activation of a new global attractiveness, which have been claimed by many as the indispensable conditions for generative and non-deceptive development (Carta, 2015). In this sense, it seems crucial to return to an in-depth dialogue with nature, respectfully 'recycling' the existing, the abandoned and the underutilized, so fighting oblivion and building degradation through the retrieval of ancient construction skills.

The ongoing health crisis, the incessant environmental and climatic decay, the increasingly pressing economic challenges have highlighted the fragility of our life contexts, putting the territory and inland areas, no longer considered, at the centre of the debate. They are backwards, but resilient, less contaminated places where to start a new, more sustainable life. That of going back to the land, to the vernacular tradition, to the use of local resources, to the rediscovery of old techniques is an opportunity to seize not as in an old-fogey vision but as a cornerstone of our future.

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