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TITLE

The ‘lost and regained’ in inner areas: changing farming practices and
land use in the ‘organic’ upper Vara Valley

PhD Thesis in

Rural Geography

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Cycle

XXXVIII

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION / INTRODUÇION	4
CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW	8
1.1. From historical ecology to organic farming	8
<i>1.1.1. Historical ecology, historical geography, rural geography and landscape studies</i>	8
<i>1.1.2. Agri-food supply chains and organic farming</i>	9
1.2. Inner areas and SNAI in Italy	10
<i>1.2.1. Inner areas in the Italian debate</i>	10
<i>1.2.2. The National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI): mode of operation and critical analysis</i>	13
1.3. Inner areas, SNAI and organic farming in Liguria and Vara Valley	21
1.4. The upper Vara Valley	25
<i>1.4.1. The geographical context</i>	25
<i>1.4.2. Literature review</i>	29
1.5. Conclusions	31
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY	32
2.1. Research questions	32
2.2. Field research	33
<i>2.2.1. Interviews and Participatory Action Research (PAR)</i>	34
<i>2.2.2. The use of Genoese and Italian</i>	42
2.3. The use of visual and literary sources: re-photography and travel writing	46
<i>2.3.1. Rephotography</i>	46
<i>2.3.2. Travel sources</i>	47
2.4. The use of cartography	48
<i>2.4.1. The progressive map comparison</i>	48
<i>2.4.2. Cadastral maps</i>	49
CHAPTER 3: LAND USE AND SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE VARA VALLEY	50
3.1. Travel sources for the construction of a territorial biography of the Vara Valley	50
<i>3.1.1. The Ligurian Apennines and the Vara Valley in travel literature</i>	50
<i>3.1.2. “Da Zena verso Spèzza, passando in sciô pe-o Bracco”: crossing the middle and lower Vara Valley between the 17th and 19th centuries</i>	53
<i>3.1.3. Scientific trips as sources of travel literature: the upper Vara Valley through the descriptions of Domenico Viviani</i>	56
<i>3.1.4. “Bellissimi dintorni” and “splendide passeggiate”: Varese Ligure and the upper Vara Valley through early 20th-century postcards</i>	59

3.2. The diachronic analysis of land use in the upper Vara Valley through cartography	62
3.2.1. <i>The cartography used</i>	63
3.2.2. <i>The cartographic comparison</i>	66
3.2.3. <i>Map filtering results</i>	70
3.2.4. <i>Discussion</i>	74
3.3. “L’attuale uso del suolo è l’abbandono”: the upper Vara Valley through rephotography.....	76
3.3.1. <i>Cassego</i>	78
3.3.2. <i>Campore</i>	86
3.3.3. <i>Varese Ligure, Salino and Valletti</i>	87
3.3.4. <i>Lagorara Valley and the Casoni della Pietra</i>	96
3.4 Discussion.....	98
CHAPTER 4: REMEMBERING PAST LANDSCAPES	100
4.1. “Allora lo pulivano tutto o Verruga, di qua e di là come una patata!”: past agro-pastoral practices <i>de chî e de po à Verruga</i>	100
4.2. <i>À Casarsa tutti montagnin s’ea</i>: tranformations in coastal and rural towns.....	121
4.3. Surviving arts, knowledge and practices around <i>o caštagno e a faiña de caštagne</i>	135
4.4. Discussion.....	154
CHAPTER 5: CREATING NEW LANDSCAPES: CONTEMPORARY FARMING IN THE ‘ORGANIC VALLEY’	155
5.1. <i>Mi veuggio fâ o contadin</i>: the new generations of farmers and their connection to the land ..	156
5.2. <i>Anâ ancon a-i monti</i>: cattle farming in the organic milk and meat supply chains	158
5.3. Neo (non-)organic rurals: “adattare lo stile di vita e le colture” in the vegetable and fruit supply chain	166
5.4. “Most of the farms here are managed by women”: female agricultural entrepreneurship in inner areas	174
5.5. Discussion.....	178
CONCLUSIONS	181
BIBLIOGRAPHY	188

INTRODUCTION / INTRODUÇÃO

EN: This thesis is a municipal doctorate (*‘dottorato comunale’*) funded by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), a government initiative aimed at developing strategies to mitigate the socio-environmental vulnerability of Italian inner areas affected by depopulation and land abandonment. It seeks to overturn the welfarist approach of past policies by focusing on the needs of local communities.

The research explores a Ligurian valley that serves as a particularly significant case study, for three main reasons: the depopulation of the valley, which began at the end of nineteenth century and intensified after the Second World War; recent programmes carried out by national politics and local administrations to reverse this trend, attract tourists, and revitalise the territory; the extensive body of literature that has examined the valley over the past forty years from the perspective of historical ecology. The study area comprises the seven municipalities of the upper Vara Valley, in the province of La Spezia: Varese Ligure, Maissana, Carro, Carrodano, Sesta Godano, Zignago and Rocchetta di Vara. These municipalities are classified by the SNAI as peripheral (Maissana and Varese Ligure) and intermediate (Carro, Sesta Godano, Zignago, Rocchetta di Vara) inner areas or belt municipalities (Carrodano). By 2013, these municipalities have also been part of the Biodistretto Val di Vara ‘Valle del Biologico’ (the ‘Organic Valley’ Biodistrict), an organisation dedicated to promoting organic farming, continuing the ‘organic shift’ initiated by local administrations in the late 1990s by securing European Union funding.

The research aims to provide new insights within the critical literature by intertwining national and international debates on inner and peripheral areas, historical ecology, landscape transformation and agri-food supply chains. The thesis primarily aims to connect Italian debates on inner areas and the SNAI framework with the traditions of historical ecology and historical geography, reflecting the observation that contemporary policy approaches often fail to engage adequately with the long-term historical production of landscapes and local ecological knowledge. This multi-purpose study uses a methodology that combines different methods and sources, both quantitative and qualitative. These include progressive cartographic comparison to quantify land-use changes over time, analysis of statistical data on population trends, the use of cadastral maps to observe transformations of rural centres and to recover dialectal micro-toponymy. Furthermore, the use of visual sources and rephotography – using both old postcards and photographs taken in the last thirty years during University of Nottingham field courses –,

and of literary travel sources was essential for the historical analysis and contextualisation of social and landscape transformations. Finally, the core of the research adopted an ethnographic approach, crucial for obtaining a detailed picture of abandonment processes, changes in practices and to implement new initiatives by and for the people who decide to remain in this Apennine inner area. This was carried out using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology and a large number of semi-structured or unstructured interviews – in the form of oral histories – with 6 institutional actors, 87 farmers and residents – 27 investigated farms –, and 9 representatives of local cultural or trade associations. The interviews were conducted in Italian or in the local language, a Ligurian dialect.

The thesis is structured into three main research chapters. Chapter 3 examines land-use transformations and social changes in the Vara Valley encompassing: 17th- to 20th-century travel literature, including underexplored French travellers diaries and the 19th-century scientific journeys of Domenico Viviani; historical postcards – from the 1920s to the 1980s – and photographs analysed through rephotography to investigate site-scale transformations; and progressive cartographic comparison woodland and agricultural surfaces from 1936 to 2019.

Chapters 4 and 5 are based on the interviews and are organised according to the main themes explored. These topics are discussed through the narrative device of ‘stories’ – the telling of the history of a family, a farm, or a community. Chapter 4 focuses on past practices, pastoral life and place names in Mount Verruga – an important summit in the municipality of Maissana –, urban transformations of coastal and mountain centres during rural exodus, and knowledge and practices regarding chestnut trees. Chapter 5 explores the new landscapes that contemporary farming in the upper Vara Valley is creating: young and female agricultural entrepreneurship; organic dairy and meat supply chains, organised around two cooperatives; (non-)organic fruit and vegetable supply chain and its climate change adaptation; neo-ruralism and agritourism. Together, these two chapters illustrate different family trajectories of depopulation and repopulation. Finally, the conclusions summarise the results and discuss the implementation of new strategies to combat depopulation which emerged from the needs of the farmers and residents interviewed.

ZE: Sta texti a l'é l'exito de un dottorato comunale finançiou da Strategia Naçionale pe-e Äie Interne (SNAI), unn'iniçiativa do governo ch'a se propoñe de sviluppâ de opportunità pe mitigâ a vulnerabilitæ soçio-ambientale de äie interne italiañe corpie da spopolamento e

abbandon do territòio. A l'ammia ascì à scompassâ o scistema ascistensialista de politiche passæ, concènttrandose in scî beseugni de comunità locale.

A reçerca a l'esplôra unna valladda ligure ch'a l'é un caxo de studio assæ scignificativo, pe træ raxoin primmäie: a reduçion da popolaçion da valle, comensâ a-a fin de l'Euttoçento e cresciua dòppo a segunda guæra mondiale; i reçenti programmi stæti realizzæ da-a politica naçionale e da-e amministraçoin do pòsto pe invertî sto proçesso, reciammâ turisti e revitalizzâ o territòio; l'existensa d'unna vasta lettiatua ch'a l'à examinou a vallâ inti quarant'anni passæ da-a prospettiva de l'ecologia stòrica. A zöna de studio a corresponde a-i sette commun de l'erta Vallâ da Væa, inta provinsa de Spezza: Vaise, Maissaña, o Caro, Carreu, a Sesta, Zignægo e a Rocchetta. Sti commun en classificæ da-a SNAI comme äie interne periferiche (Maissaña e Vaise) e intermedie (o Caro, a Sesta, Zignægo, a Rocchetta) ò comme commun de çenta (Carreu). Da-o 2013, sti sette commun en parte ascì do Biodistreto *Val di Vara "Valle del Biologico"* ("Vallâ do Biològico"), unn'organizzaçion dedicâ a-a promoçion de l'agricoltua biològica in continuitæ co-e politiche commensæ da-e amministraçoin locale in sciâ fin di anni Neuvanta con l'interçettaçion di fondi europei.

A reçerca a se propoñe de portâ neuve conoscense inta lettiatua critica pe mezo de l'incroxo di dibattiti naçionali e internaçionali in scê äie interne e periferiche, in sce l'ecologia stòrica, in scê trasformaçoin do territòio e in scê cadeñe agroalimentari. A texti, ciù che tutto, a l'ammia à conligâ i dibattiti academichi italian in scê äie interne e in sciâ struttua da SNAI co-e tradiçoin de l'ecologia stòrica e da geografia stòrica, apreuvo à l'osservaçion che i scistemi de politiche d'ancheu de spesso no tegnan assæ conto da produçion di paisaggi e da conscensa ecològica locale e da seu dimenscion stòrica. Sto studdio da-e multiple finalitæ o l'addeuvia unna metodologia ch'a combiña metodi e vivagne despæge, tanto quantitative comme qualitative. Sti metodi comprendan o filtraggio cartografico progressivo pe quantificâ i cangiamenti inte utilizaçoin do seu into corso do tempo, e analixi di dæti statistichi in scê dispoziçoin da popolaçion, l'utilizzaçion de carte do cadastro pe ammiâ e trasformaçoin di çentri rurali e pe repiggiâ i microtopònimi dialettali. Pe de ciù, l'uso de vivagne visuale, da re-fotografia – à partî tanto da-e vegie cartoliñe comme da-e fotografie piggiæ inti urtimi trent'anni inti *field courses* de l'Universcitæ de Nòttingham – e de vivagne letteräie de viægio en stæte primmäie pe l'analixi stòrica e a contestualizzaçion di cangiamenti soçiali e do paisaggio. Dapeu, inta seu parte prinçipâ a reçerca a l'à addeuviou un metodo etnografico, fondamentale pe ottegnî unn'immagine detaggiâ di proçessi d'abbandon, di cangiamenti de pratiche e pe l'applicaçion de neuve iniçiative da e pe e persone ch'an deçiso d'arrestâ inte sta zöna de l'Appennin. Questo l'é stæto fæto pe mezo da metodologia da Reçerca Açion Parteçipativa (RAP) e un grande

numeo de interviste semi-struttuæ ò no struttuæ – inta forma de stöie orale – con 6 attoî istituzionali, 87 agricoltoî e abitanti – 27 açiende agricole vixitæ – e 9 representanti d’assoçiaçoin colturale locale ò de categoria. E interviste en stæte condute in italian ò inta lengua locale, un dialetto ligure.

A texi a l’è struttuâ inti trei cavi de reçerca prinçipæ. O Cavo 3 o l’examiña i cangiamenti inte l’uso do seu e soçiali inte l’erta vallâ da Væa, con drento: lettiatua de viægio da-o secolo dîsette a-o vinti, compreiso diâi de viægiatoî franseixi pöco studdiæ e e relaçoin di viægi scientifichi do secolo dixineuve do naturalista Domenico Viviani; cartoliñe stòriche – da-i anni Vinti a-i Ottanta – e fotografie analizzæ pe mezo da re-fotografia pe investigâ e trasformaçoin a-a scâ de scito; filtraggio cartografico progressivo, che o confronta i terren boschivi e agricoli da-o 1936 a-o 2019.

I Cavi 4 e 5 en basæ in scê interviste e en organizzæ secondo i prinçipæ argomenti stæti esploræ. Sti temi en affrontæ pe mezo de l’espiediente narrativo de “stöie” – de unna famiggia, unn’açienda agricola ò unna communitæ. O Cavo 4 o se conçentra in scê pratiche passæ, a vitta di pastoî e i topònimi do (Monte) Verruga – un bricco ben ben importante into comun de Maissaña –, e trasformaçoin urbañe di çentri inta còsta e de montagna inti tempi de l’esodo rurale e e conoscense e e pratiche in sciô maneggio di castagni. O Cavo 5 o l’esplöra i neuvi paisaggi che l’agricoltua d’ancheu a l’è apreuvo à creâ inta vallâ da Væa: l’imprenditoria agricola feminiña e di zoeni; e cadeñe agricole biològiche do læte e da carne, organizzæ d’in gio à doe cooperative; a cadeña agricola biològica (e no) da fruta e da verdua e o seu adattâse a-o cangiamento do climma; o neo-ruraliximo e i agrituriximi. Assemme, sti cavi mostran traiettöie de famiggia despægie de abandon e retorno. Pe finî, e concluxoin fan unna scintexi di exiti e raxoñan in sciâ realizzaçion de neuve strategie pe combatte a reduçion da popolaçion, vegnue feua da-i beseugni di agricoltoî e di abitanti intervistæ.

CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. From historical ecology to organic farming

1.1.1. Historical ecology, historical geography, rural geography and landscape studies

The scientific discourses within which this work took shape are diverse and intertwined. First and foremost is the broad field of historical ecology, which developed in England between the late 1960s and early 1970s, beginning with the work of Oliver Rackham (1971; 1976; 1980; 1986) and George Peterken (1969; 1974). It has influenced and engaged with various disciplines in both Anglo-Saxon and Italian contexts, such as geography (Quaini, 1972 [1973]; Moreno, 1990; Watkins, 1990; 2025; Grove, Rackham, 2001; Riley, 2003; Cevasco, 2007; 2014; Strati, 2011; Hearn, 2012; Gemignani, 2013; Piana, 2015; Quaini et al., 2016; Gabellieri, 2018; Cevasco et al., 2019a; Piana et al., 2021; Dossche, 2022), history (Grendi, 1977; 1993; Raggio, 1992; 2004; Torre, 2008; Balzaretto, 2012), archaeology (Mannoni, 1976; Maggi 1992; 2016; Moreno et al., 2005; Montanari, Stagno, 2015; Stagno, 2019; Pescini, 2018), giving rise to a methodology defined by some as “geographic-historical microanalysis” (Cevasco et al., 2019b, p. 143). It requires a combination of theories and methods from different disciplines, «to reach [the] aim of studying the interaction between humans and their environment over long-term periods of time, in order to gain a full understanding of [...] cumulative effects» (Dossche, 2022, p. 28). This approach favours the topographic scale with a view to a realistic interpretation of the sources (Grendi, 2000; Moreno, 1990), based on the idea that “the biodiversity of rural landscapes is revealed especially when their individual historical dimension is explored directly in the field” (Dossche, 2022, p. 31).

Over time, this debate has evolved into a range of diverse yet closely related topics, such as woodland conservation (Rackham, 1971; 1976; 1980; Peterken, 1974; Moreno et al., 1982; Watkins, 1990; 1993a; 1993b; 2025; Salbitano, 1993; Kirby, Watkins, 1998), the study of agro-silvo-pastoral systems (Moreno, 1990; Lagomarsini, 1994; 2017; Moreno et al., 1998; Cevasco, 2013), the reconstruction of vegetation cover, including palynological methods (Peterken, Game, 1984; Montanari, 1988b; Guido et al., 2013; Poggi, 1997; Cevasco, 2002; Cevasco, Moreno, 2014; Bruzzone, 2015), the study of rural landscapes (Balzaretto et al., 2004; Moneta, Parola, 2014), material culture and peasant knowledge (Moreno, Quaini, 1976; Plomteux, 1981; Lagomarsini, 1983; Museo Contadino di Cassego, 1983), historical cartography (Moreno, 1990; Moreno et al., 2005; Cevasco, 2007; Bruzzone et al., 2019; Gabellieri et al., 2015; Grava et al., 2020), photographic and travel sources (Gemignani, 2011; 2013; Strati, 2011; Piana et

al., 2025), and has given rise to thriving research groups, including the Laboratory of Environmental Archaeology and History (LASA; *Laboratorio di Archeologia e Storia Ambientale*) in Genoa (see: Cevasco et al., 2019b; Stagno, 2013; Tigrino, 2013) and the ones at the School of Geography and the Department of History at the University of Nottingham (see: Watkins, Balzaretto, 1998; Watkins et al., 2004; Balzaretto, Watkins, 2013), which I visited to help with the design and conduct of my research.

This large body of literature intersects with other perspectives – sometimes overlapping with it and at other times yielding different methodological and epistemological outcomes – in rural geography (Woods, 2002; Fish et al., 2003; 2016; Riley, 2008; Yarwood, 2023) and in the analysis of landscape transformations (Hoskins, 1955; Turri, 1974; Cosgrove, 1984; Cosgrove, Daniels, 1988; Matless, 1998; Cresswell, 2003; Delano Smith, 2004; Antrop, 2005; Agnoletti, 2010; 2013; 2022; Quaini, Gemignani, 2014; Agnoletti, Rotherham, 2015; Kolen et al., 2015).

1.1.2. Agri-food supply chains and organic farming

In addition to the previously cited literature on historical ecology, landscape and woodland management, it is necessary to address a key topic for the findings of this thesis: the relationships between the evolution of agricultural production practices and the emergence of the ‘Organic Valley’ (*Valle del Biologico*) concept. This concept originated in the upper Vara Valley in 1997 under the leadership of the Mayor of Varese Ligure, Maurizio Caranza, and was formalised with the creation of the Biodistrict Val di Vara ‘Valle del Biologico’ in 2013, which brings together farms from the seven municipalities of the upper valley.

The subject of agri-food supply chains have been extensively studied in the past decades, with a particular focus on the so-called ‘quality turn’ and the increasing consumer interest in food production quality (Murdoch et al., 2000; Goodman, 2003; Matthews et al., 2025), the ‘naturalness’ and sustainability of the products, as well as its reconnection with food supply chains (Winter, 2005; Feagan, 2007; Kneafsey, 2010; Barbera, Dagnes, 2017). Organic farming, in particular, has been at the core of much of the discussion regarding agricultural sustainability, naturalness and quality (Bell, Valentine, 1997; Ilbery, Kneafsey, 2000; Alkon, 2013; Guthman, 2004), often being associated with short supply chains and ‘local’ production (Hempel, Hamm, 2016). Some of the literature has also addressed the issues of organic production and food supply chains in inner Apennine or Alpine areas (Dansero et al., 2018; Morazzoni, Zavettieri, 2018; Storti et al., 2020; Pettenati, 2021), in some cases intersecting these with historical ecology (Cevasco et al., 2023).

Finally, in general, organic farming has long been identified as an investment capable of revitalising depopulating areas and serving as a basis for new local development (Tovey, 1997), partly due to the funding the European Union has invested in it. The emergence of Biodistricts in the early 2000s fits squarely within this vision. The Biodistrict is defined by the Italian Organic Agriculture Association (AIAB; *Associazione Italiana Agricoltura Biologica*) as “a geographical area naturally suited [sic] to organic farming in which the various local stakeholders [...] enter into an agreement for the sustainable management of resources, focusing on organic production that involves all links in the supply chain right through to consumption”; it is, therefore, seen as “a pact for the green development of the territory, signed by organic producers, local authorities and relevant sectors of civil society” (<https://aiab.it/biodistretti/>; translated by the Author). A thorough critique of this conception of organic farming, specifically focusing on the case of the upper Vara Valley, is provided by: Lagomarsini, 2000 [2001]. Detailed analyses of the history of food and production in this area can be found in: Moreno, 1988a; 1990; Lagomarsini, 2023.

1.2. Inner areas and SNAI in Italy

Another debate of primary importance underlying my research is the one concerning inner areas in Italy. One of the objectives of my thesis is to establish a convergence between this area of discussion and the methodologies of historical ecology outlined in the previous section. Although, in fact, the two perspectives almost always share the same subject of study – namely, rural areas – the approaches of historical geography and ecology rarely receive adequate attention in the Italian debate on inner areas.

1.2.1. Inner areas in the Italian debate

My thesis follows the goals expected by the ‘municipal doctorates’ (*dottorati comunali*), research grants focused on “disciplinary fields and topics consistent with the ‘National Strategy for Inner Areas’, with the aim of ensuring the availability and full accessibility of essential services to residents, promoting the prosperity of the region and local communities, enhancing natural and cultural resources through the creation of new employment opportunities, and countering demographic and cultural depopulation” (DPC, n.d.[b]; translated by the Author). Indeed, this doctoral scholarship was funded originally by the Agency for Territorial Cohesion (*Agenzia per la coesione territoriale*), which has since been integrated into the Department for Cohesion Policies (*Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione*) under the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI; *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne*). The primary objective of the

SNAI is to reverse the depopulation of Italy's inner areas. Furthermore, the 'municipal doctorate' (*dottorato comunale*) entails close collaboration between the local administrations of inner areas and the university departments that were awarded the funding.

Interest in the country's inner, peripheral areas – consisting mainly of rural zones – began around the 1930s (Bevilacqua, 2018), with the National Institute of Agricultural Economics' survey on mountain depopulation in Italy (Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria, 1932). The long phase of depopulation had already begun in the second half of the 19th century, with emigration directed mainly toward major urban centres and, above all, the Americas. This exodus then slowed and, in part, reversed course during the twenty years of Fascist rule, only to resume inexorably after World War II, when the process of capitalist industrial development that had begun in the preceding decades reached full maturity. This landscape transformation led to a gradual decrease in land used for agro-silvo-pastoral purposes, an increase in secondary forest formations, and the consequent emergence of new ways of using and interpreting Italy's rural territories.

Recognition of the profound nature of the ongoing transformations, and their social and territorial consequences, has brought this issue to the forefront of both academic and governmental attention. This has led to a proliferation of studies on the Alps and, to a lesser extent, on the Apennines; the latter are often characterised by a narrative that defines them as marginal and fragile areas. Rossi-Doria's seminal study (1958), which focused on the delicate issue of the marginal areas of the southern Apennines, created the effective metaphor of the 'bone' (*osso*) and the 'flesh' (*polpa*) to distinguish the morphologically and productively disadvantaged areas – the former – from those with favourable environmental and economic conditions, subject to intensive agriculture – the latter. Initiatives such as the 1950 Agrarian Reform and the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno* (Fund for the South) – established in 1950 and active until 1984 – saw the light of day. The *Cassa del Mezzogiorno* was a large-scale funding initiative aimed at promoting modernization efforts in an area considered depressed and underdeveloped (Sabatini, 2024), underpinned by a conception of the territory primarily as "land and raw material to be worked" (Renzoni, 2018, p. 145). In contrast, the Research Group on Marginal Areas (GRAM; *Gruppo di Ricerca sulle Aree Marginali*) emerged in the 1980s; it analysed inner areas through the categories of marginality and revitalisation using demographic criteria and the zoning of the national territory based on these criteria, while simultaneously emphasising the distinctive features of rural economic and cultural models as an alternative to urban ones (Sabatini, 2024).

In recent years, this idea of marginality and fragility has been partly replaced in academic literature by a view that links these places to scenarios of increasing opportunity, reading them as reserves of biodiversity, productive variety, historical memory, widespread cultural assets, and primary energy sources (Calvaresi, 2015; Mantino e Lucatelli, 2016; Borghi, 2017; Carrosio, 2019; Cevasco et al., 2019a; Cersosimo, Donzelli, 2020; Tantillo, 2020; 2023; Pazzagli, 2021; Di Blasi et al., 2023; Cerreti, Oddi, 2024). This perspective also seeks to overcome the traditional, uncritical reliance on purely tourism-oriented solutions (Meini, 2018; Varotto, 2020; Barbera et al., 2022; Sabatini, 2023a; 2024; Casano, 2025) and the conventional division between rural and urban areas, following, for example, the concept of *metromontagna* (Dematteis, 2012; Barbera, De Rossi, 2021). Consequently, inner areas and, more generally, the “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) have begun to be seen as places of regeneration (De Rossi, Mascino, 2020) where it is still possible to live (De Rossi, 2018; Barbera, De Rossi, 2020; Perelli, 2020; Lucatelli et al., 2022). The interdisciplinary research group *Riabitare l’Italia*¹ (‘Re-inhabiting Italy’; cf.: De Rossi, 2018) represents the most significative example of this approach to Italian inner areas. The cited literature, along with other works (Barca, 2015; Calandra, 2017; 2018), has focused on the needs of the communities and territories studied, producing scientific reports (Cerutti et al., 2024; Cersosimo et al., 2025; Bimonte et al., 2025) and addressing topics such as *restanza* (Teti, 2017; 2022), that is, the choice to remain in one’s native place despite depopulation. The topic of inner areas thus entered the Italian scientific debate with such force that a programmatic manifesto, including an essential glossary, was drafted immediately (Cersosimo, Donzelli, 2020), and subsequently, an explicit vocabulary of inner areas was developed (Tomeo, 2024).

¹ See: <https://riabitarelitalia.net/RIABITARE_LITALIA/>.

1.2.2. The National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI): mode of operation and critical analysis

Mappa delle Aree SNAI 2021-2027

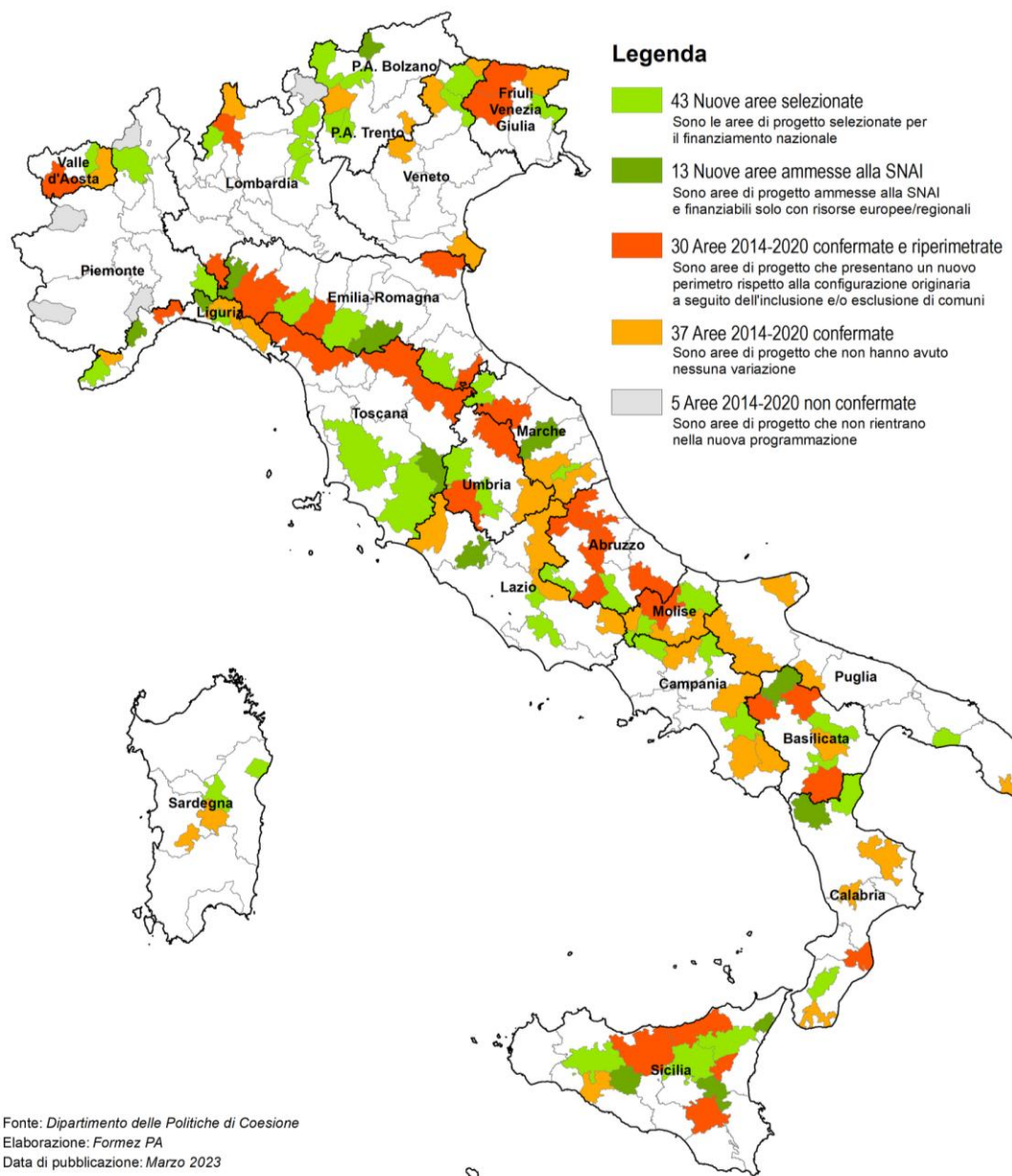


Fig. 1.2.1. New mapping of inner areas for 2021-2027, showing: 1) the 43 newly selected areas for national funding, in light green; 2) the 13 new SNAI project areas funded exclusively by regional and European resources, in dark green; 3) the 30 confirmed 2014-2020 areas whose boundaries have been redefined, in red; 4) the 37 confirmed 2014-2020 areas without changes, in orange; 5) the 2014-2020 areas that have not been confirmed, in grey.

Source: DPC, n.d.(c).

As I have mentioned, the process of abandonment has affected much of Italy's agricultural land under non-intensive use, which has led in recent years to the design and funding of programmes aimed at mitigating this socio-environmental vulnerability. The most important of these programmes is the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI; *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne*), which is an action directed at those portions of the Italian territory significantly distant from the centres of supply of essential services – namely health, education and mobility (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, n.d.[b]). It supports “sustainable territorial competitiveness in order to counteract, in the medium term, the demographic decline that characterises the country's inner areas. The aim is [also] to create new income opportunities [...] as well as to improve the maintenance of the territory itself” (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, n.d.[c]; translated by the Author). The SNAI project is precisely based on this idea of overturning the previous welfarist policies mentioned above, attempting to stem the demographic crisis in the Apennines by starting from bottom-up regeneration practices centred on the development of fundamental services and the needs of local communities (cf.: Barca *et al.*, 2014; Lucatelli, Monaco, 2019).

Established in 2013, the SNAI obtained initial funding for seven years (2014-2020) for 72 pilot areas, comprising 1,077 municipalities with 2,072,718 residents in 2016 (De Vincenti, 2018). These areas were subdivided into ultra-peripheral, peripheral, and intermediate, with respect to urban poles and urban belts (see below). A second round of funding has been confirmed for a further seven years (2021-2027), with the establishment of 56 new inner areas and the removal of 5 previous accepted areas², for a total of 123 inner areas (Fig. 1.2.1). The Special Project for Minor Islands has been added to these, bringing the total to 124 funded areas. These consist of 1,904 municipalities – of which 1,869 are part of the inner areas and 35 parts of the small islands – populated by a total of 4,570,731 residents in 2020 (DPC, n.d.[d]).

The first step of the Strategy was to identify the so-called eligible inner areas, that is, to carry out a mapping of the country which, starting from the identification of service hubs (urban poles), classifies the remaining municipalities into four categories: belt areas, intermediate areas, peripheral areas, and ultra-peripheral areas. Inner areas are identified as the set of municipalities belonging to these last three categories – intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral. Going into the details of the process, this mapping is based on functional criteria

² Five of the previously funded inner areas were excluded from the 2021-2027 funding. Four of these areas are in Piedmont (Val Bormida, Val di Lanzo, Val d'Ossola and Valli Grana e Maira): the Piedmont Region decided to allow them to use the previous 2014-2020 funding and to propose two new areas (Terre del Giare and Valsesia). Meanwhile, Alta Valtellina, in Lombardy, has not been re-funded because it is receiving funding for the organisation of the 2026 Winter Olympics Games 'Milano-Cortina d'Ampezzo'.

(ATC, n.d.[e]). The Italian territory is interpreted in a polycentric sense, that is, it is conceived as composed of a network of municipalities/clusters of municipalities that provide services, around which gravitate areas characterized by varying degrees of spatial peripherality. In this conception, the level of peripherality of the areas relative to the network of urban centres influences citizens' quality of life and level of social inclusion. In particular, service hubs are identified in those municipalities – or clusters of neighbouring municipalities – capable of simultaneously offering a full range of secondary schools, hospitals with Level I emergency departments³, and Platinum, Gold, or Silver-class railway stations⁴.

The central assumption is therefore that inner areas can essentially be identified on the basis of their distance from essential services, without further assessment of their degree of 'vulnerability'. The classification of municipalities not identified as hubs is therefore divided into four categories based on their distance from urban poles, with distances measured in terms of transport journey times: belt (peri-urban) areas are those more than 20 minutes away; intermediate areas are situated between 20 and 40 minutes away; peripheral areas are situated at a distance of between 40 and 75 minutes; finally, ultra-peripheral areas are more than 75 minutes away from urban poles. In essence, the final mapping is influenced by two main factors: the criteria used to select service provision centres and the choice of distance thresholds for calculating the degree of peripherality. This initial mapping, carried out for the first 2014-2020 round, as mentioned, had identified 72 pilot areas. A pilot area comprises a group of municipalities – predominantly intermediate, peripheral or ultra-peripheral – sharing the same historical, economic or cultural identity⁵. With the new round of funding, there are now 124 project areas, of which: 37 confirmed 2014-2020 SNAI areas (549 municipalities); 30 redefined SNAI 2014-2020 areas (556 municipalities); 56 new inner areas (764 municipalities); and the Special Project for Minor Islands (35 municipalities).

Following the mapping exercise, the actual process of selecting and funding inner areas began. This stage varied slightly between the first and second rounds of funding. In the 2014-2020 period, the public consultation process was managed by the central government bodies

³ Which are called 'DEA', standing for Department of Emergency and Admissions (*Dipartimento di Emergenza e Accettazione*), which houses the A&E unit and provides observation, short-term hospitalisation, anaesthesia and resuscitation with intensive care, diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, and laboratory services.

⁴ That is to say, the three main categories in the classification of Italian stations: 'platinum' refers to large stations – with an average of over 6,000 passengers per day and a high average number of trains per day, including a high proportion of premium services –, 'gold' refers to medium-to-large stations, and 'silver' refers to small-to-medium stations.

⁵ For a discussion on this, see below.

within the Technical Committee for Inner Areas (*Comitato Tecnico Aree Interne*)⁶ and by the relevant Region, which drew up the Area Strategy (*Strategia d'Area*), a document setting out the current situation and the objectives set for each individual inner area; subsequently, they drew up a Framework Programme Agreement (*Accordo di Programma Quadro*), the instrument for inter-institutional cooperation through which commitments were made to implement these objectives with the territories⁷. The Ministry for the South and Territorial Cohesion, under whose remit the SNAI was managed, made use of the Agency for Territorial Cohesion.

As regards the 2021-2027 cycle, this was based on continuity and expansion of existing interventions through, as noted, the identification of new inner areas. In addition to this, however, from a governance perspective, the Area Strategy – previously a fundamental tool for the designation of an inner area – was abandoned. For the new selection process, however, the task of compiling an application dossier – setting out the geographical scope and the reasons for the application for each candidate area – was delegated directly to the individual regions. On the basis of this dossier, the Department for Cohesion Policies (DPC) – under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM) – verified the compliance of the applications through a preliminary assessment, based on the following criteria: a) the consistency of the applications for the proposed new areas with the new mapping of inner areas carried out by the SNAI for the period 2021-2027; b) the existence of a defined and recognisable identity and geomorphological system for the identified area; c) the area's difficulties in terms of demographics and the organisation of essential services; d) the willingness and aptitude of local authorities to pursue a goal of association; e) the size of the area. Municipalities classified as peripheral and ultra-peripheral must predominate within the area, whilst the presence of belt municipalities is exceptionally permitted if they account for a low percentage of the area's total population and if they play a significant role in terms of inter-municipal cooperation, the organisation of services, or the socio-economic stability of the area. The individual inner area is then explicitly regarded as a unified and compact system, not only because it comprises contiguous municipalities, but because it possesses an objective compactness of its own, which serves to facilitate the strategy's common objectives. As we have seen, this compactness can be represented by a physical-geomorphological unity – for example, a valley – and/or a

⁶ This included the government departments responsible for essential public services – the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health – as well as any other relevant government departments.

⁷ The contents of the Framework Programme Agreement are as follows: activities and measures to be carried out; implementation timelines and procedures; responsible parties and their respective commitments; resources and financial coverage; mechanisms for economic reprogramming; procedures for the transfer of resources; and the management, control and monitoring system.

historical-social identity unity that has become established over time (PCM, 2025). There are various problems associated with the idea of ‘defined and recognisable identity’ which are very relevant to the study area examined in this thesis.

Throughout this process, the new management of the SNAI has been entrusted to a steering committee (*Cabina di regia*) established within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, chaired by the Minister for European Affairs, the South, Cohesion Policies and the PNRR, whose task is to adopt the new National Strategic Plan for Inner Areas (PSNAI; *Piano Strategico Nazionale delle Aree Interne*), a document published in April 2025 that identifies the areas of intervention and strategic priorities for the coming years, taking into account the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR; *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*)⁸ and European cohesion policies. The publication of the new PSNAI has sparked a wide-ranging national debate and drawn considerable criticism from various quarters, particularly regarding the new vision for inner areas set out in the first version of the PSNAI – which was subsequently removed in its July 2025 update (PCM, 2025) – and derived from the attached demographic study. This document (Rosina, 2024, p. 8) mentions the idea of “assisting in a process of irreversible depopulation” those inner areas deemed to be compromised from a demographic, economic and employment point of view, without, however, identifying them precisely and from a perspective which, in truth, appears to follow primarily that of a general cut in state spending⁹.

Finally, it is necessary to analyse the framework of resources mobilised to support these areas, which is rather complex and diverse. The SNAI is, in fact, part of the broader planning of European and national cohesion policies (DPCS, 2024) for the implementation of projects in key sectors aimed at combating socio-economic marginalisation, such as employment opportunities, poverty and social exclusion linked to distance from essential services and more developed urban centres, as well as the environmental sector. This model of intervention therefore requires resources to be allocated according to the specific needs of each territory, through rules that facilitate the implementation of projects and the participation of the widest possible number of territories.

So, the SNAI is currently supported by national resources – primarily allocated to measures relating to essential services – and by European funds for the financing of local development

⁸ A major funding package introduced in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic to revive the Italian economy.

⁹ Among the various organisations that took part in the debate was the National Union of Mountain Municipalities, Communities and Authorities (UNCem; *Unione Nazionale dei Comuni Comunità Enti Montani*), as in: <<https://uncem.it/piano-aree-interne-e-lo-spopolamento-irreversibile-da-accompagnare-uncem-si-investa-nel-modo-giusto-con-la-nuova-programmazione-europea-28-34/>>.

projects, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF). During the first implementation period of the strategy (2014-2020), the SNAI – based on the 2023 monitoring report presented to the Senate (Senato della Repubblica, 2023) – funded 1,788 projects across various sectors, prioritising transport and mobility (27%), culture and tourism (18%) and social inclusion and health (15%), totalling €444.8 million. Incidentally, of these projects, only a small proportion has been completed, whilst a significant percentage has yet to begin (cf.: <https://opencoesione.gov.it/it/dati/strategie/AI/>). This breakdown of expenditure differs, at least in part, from the overall distribution of cohesion policy at the aggregate Italian level, demonstrating a different approach on the part of the SNAI. However, there is no lack of shortcomings associated with this instrument (Prezioso, 2020; Carrosio, Zabatino, 2022; Fusco, 2023; Sabatini, 2024; Cerutti et al., 2024; Casano, 2025), including in terms of the sectoral allocation of funding when considering the percentage of resources allocated to culture and tourism, which is 14% higher than the allocation under Cohesion Policy as a whole. This highlights the SNAI's focus on promoting local heritage for tourism purposes, contrary to the initial intentions; this is confirmed by the shares allocated by the SNAI to the 'employment and labour' and 'competitiveness' sectors, which are significantly lower – by 8% and 7% respectively – compared to Cohesion Policy as a whole (Casano, Priarone, 2026).

A further critical issue regarding the implementation of the Strategy concerns the persistent underfunding of administrative capacity relative to actual local needs (Prezioso, 2020; Fusco, 2023; DPCS, 2023). Analyses relating to the 2014-2020 cycle (Prezioso, 2020) highlight structural obstacles to territorial development, such as a reduced capacity for efficient spending, difficulties in identifying actual needs, limited citizen involvement, and inadequate expenditure monitoring and evaluation systems that are ill-suited to local contexts. Even in the subsequent round established by the 2021-2027 Partnership Agreement (*Accordo di Partenariato*; DPCS, 2022), it was not entirely possible to respond coherently – even at the stage of defining the strategy's guidelines – to the chronic lack of administrative capacity, with a preference for operating in those territorial contexts that were already performing well, rather than in others that were more problematic, thereby widening the existing gaps. In the guidelines, in fact, the reduction of marginalisation is addressed according to a reward-based approach and according to the principles of the 'real and effective capacity' of the area in question to implement projects within the set timeframe and the 'feasibility' of the project, which are at odds with the limited capacities of local authorities and conflict with the context-specific approach that the SNAI

should adopt (Fusco, 2023; Casano, 2025; Sabatini, 2024). Furthermore, these guidelines introduce the principle of continuity with the previous funding cycle, thereby prioritising a long-term approach for areas that have already received funding and continuing to exclude certain eligible municipalities. The objective that has driven the legislator appears to be the efficient allocation of resources rather than consideration of the potential territorial inequalities arising from this policy choice (Casano, 2025), leaving the structural need for peripheral and ultra-peripheral municipalities to have guaranteed access to essential goods and services almost in the background.

This logic is, in part, also reflected in a funding initiative outside the SNAI and part of the monumental PNRR established in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the many projects funded by the PNRR, the *Attrattività dei Borghi* ('Villages Attractiveness') call for funding provided for a total budget of €1.02 billion, divided across four lines of action¹⁰ for the cultural regeneration and tourism revival of small Italian towns. Among the municipalities of the upper Vara Valley, Carro was the winner of line "B – Proposals for the cultural and social regeneration of small historic villages", with the project *Il Borgo di Paganini - Via Paganini - Rigenerazione, valorizzazione culturale e sociale del borgo storico di Carro* ('The Village of Paganini – Via Paganini – Regeneration, cultural and social enhancement of the historic village of Carro'), funded to the tune of €1.6 million.

In summary, the SNAI and subsequent measures, such as those arising from the PNRR, have highlighted a number of shortcomings in terms of ensuring the principle of territorial solidarity and providing genuine support to local areas in developing their technical and administrative capacities; instead, they have favoured a reward-based strategy grounded in the actual and effective capabilities of the areas concerned and the feasibility of the projects.

¹⁰ a) Line A, which saw €20 million allocated for a single pilot project in each Italian region – €418,421,075 actually awarded to 21 municipalities –; b) Line B, with €380 million for proposals for cultural and social regeneration in at least 229 historic villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, submitted by individual municipalities – €370,257,498.67 actually allocated to 294 municipalities –; c) an aid scheme of €200 million for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises located in the villages covered by Line B; d) 'roots tourism' (*turismo delle radici*), amounting to €20 million (<<https://pnrr.cultura.gov.it/misura-2-rigenerazione-di-piccoli-siti-culturali-patrimonio-culturale-religioso-e-rurale/2-1-attrattivita-dei-borghi/>>).

SNAI's intentions	SNAI's criticalities
Ensuring territorial solidarity and access to essential services for the most isolated citizens, moving beyond previous welfarist policies.	'Reward-based' and efficiency logic: preference given to operating in territorial contexts that were already performing well (principle of 'real and effective capacity') and on the 'feasibility' of the project, leaving territorial equity in the background.
Focusing on essential needs of the communities (health, mobility, education).	Forced tourism promotion: funding for culture and tourism exceeded initial intentions, reducing the structural impact on vital everyday services.
Active involvement of the territory through public consultation processes (bottom-up approach) and the co-design of Area Strategies for 2014-2020 (context-specific approach).	Bureaucratisation and centralisation: in the 2021-2027 cycle, the Area Strategy was abandoned, delegating applications directly to the Regions and reducing citizen involvement.
Inter-municipal cooperation based on the association of municipalities.	Local structural obstacles: persistent underfunding of administrative capacity; difficulties for small municipalities in identifying needs, monitoring expenditure, and managing complex calls for funding; principle of the aptitude of local authorities to pursue a goal of association.
Long-term approach: for 2021-2027, principle of continuity with the previous funding cycle.	Exclusion of some eligible areas: for 2021-2027, the principle of continuity with the previous funding cycle causes persistence of territorial inequalities.
Detailed analysis and mapping of peripherality in Italy.	Mapping based on specific criteria to select service provision centres and on distance thresholds chosen to calculate inner areas' degree of peripherality; individual inner area is seen as a compact system in terms of historical, economic or cultural identity.
Multi-fund financial integration: ability to mobilise both national resources for essential services and European funds (ERDF, ESF+, EAFRD, EMFAF).	Poor spending capacity and implementation: only a small proportion of the 2014-2020 cycle projects has been completed; many have yet to begin.
Countering demographic decline and the abandonment of agricultural land in inner areas in the medium-long term.	Risk of resignation: the debate on the 2025 PSNAI revealed a logic of "assisting irreversible depopulation" to primarily achieve general cuts in state spending [partly removed].

Tab. 1.2.1. A summary of SNAI's original positive intentions alongside its structural problems or those that arose during its implementation, as outlined in this section.

1.3. Inner areas, SNAI and organic farming in Liguria and Vara Valley

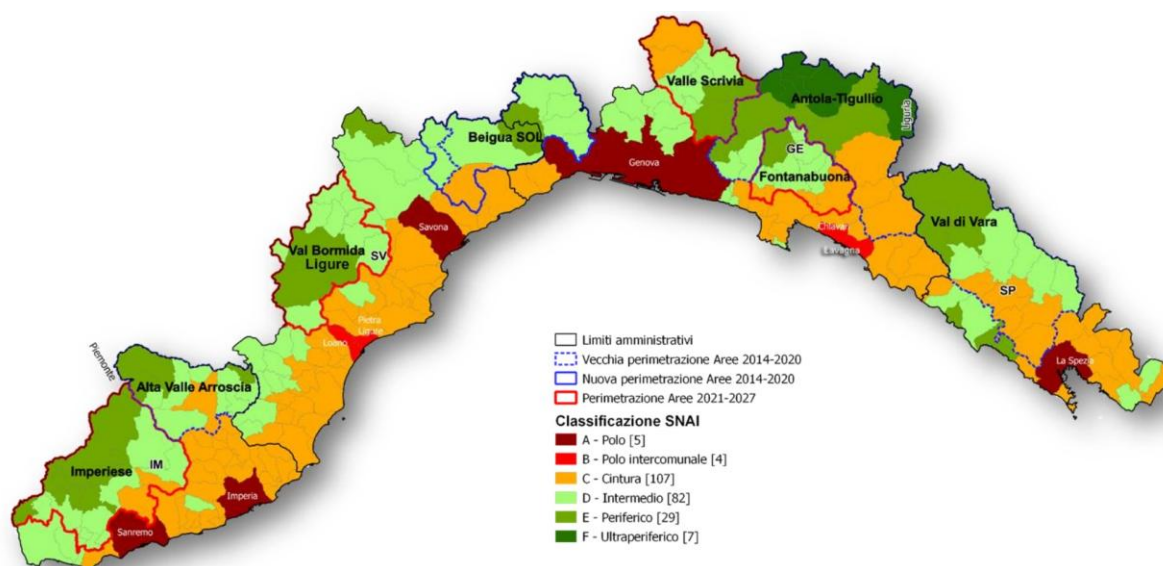


Fig. 1.3.1. Liguria's inner areas according to the new 2021-2027 mapping: Imperiese (new), Alta Valle Arroscia (confirmed), Val Bormida Ligure (new), Beigua SOL (redrawn), Valle Scrivia (new), Antola-Tigullio (confirmed), Fontanabuona (new) and Val di Vara (confirmed), to which is added the La Spezia Archipelago (Palmaria, Tino and Tinetto; municipality of Portovenere) within the Special Project for Minor Islands.

Source: Comitato Nazionale Aree Interne, 2022, p. 3.

In the context analysed so far, the Ligurian Apennine valleys have followed this exact dynamic, having been subject to a significant process of rural abandonment since the end of the 19th century and even more so since the Second World War (Cevasco et al., 2019a), which has continued almost without interruption until today. For this reason, the region is heavily involved in the SNAI project, with no fewer than eight inner areas receiving funding in the 2021-2027 round, four of which were already pilot areas in the 2014-2020 period – Alta Valle Arroscia, Antola-Tigullio, Val di Vara –, one of which has been redefined – Beigua SOL, to which the municipalities of Mioglia and Pontinvrea have been added –, and four are new areas – Imperiese, Val Bormida Ligure, Valle Scrivia, Fontanabuona –, to which is added the La Spezia Archipelago (Palmaria, Tino and Tinetto, in the municipality of Portovenere) within the Special Project for Minor Islands (Fig. 1.3.1). In addition to the new funded areas, the new mapping for the 2021-2027 period has also introduced some changes to the classification of municipalities. One example stands out: within the Antola-Tigullio inner area, whereas previously the only ultra-peripheral municipality was Santo Stefano d'Aveto, the municipalities of Fascia, Fontanigorda, Gorreto, Propata, Rondanina and Rovegno – in the upper Trebbia valley – are now also classified as such.

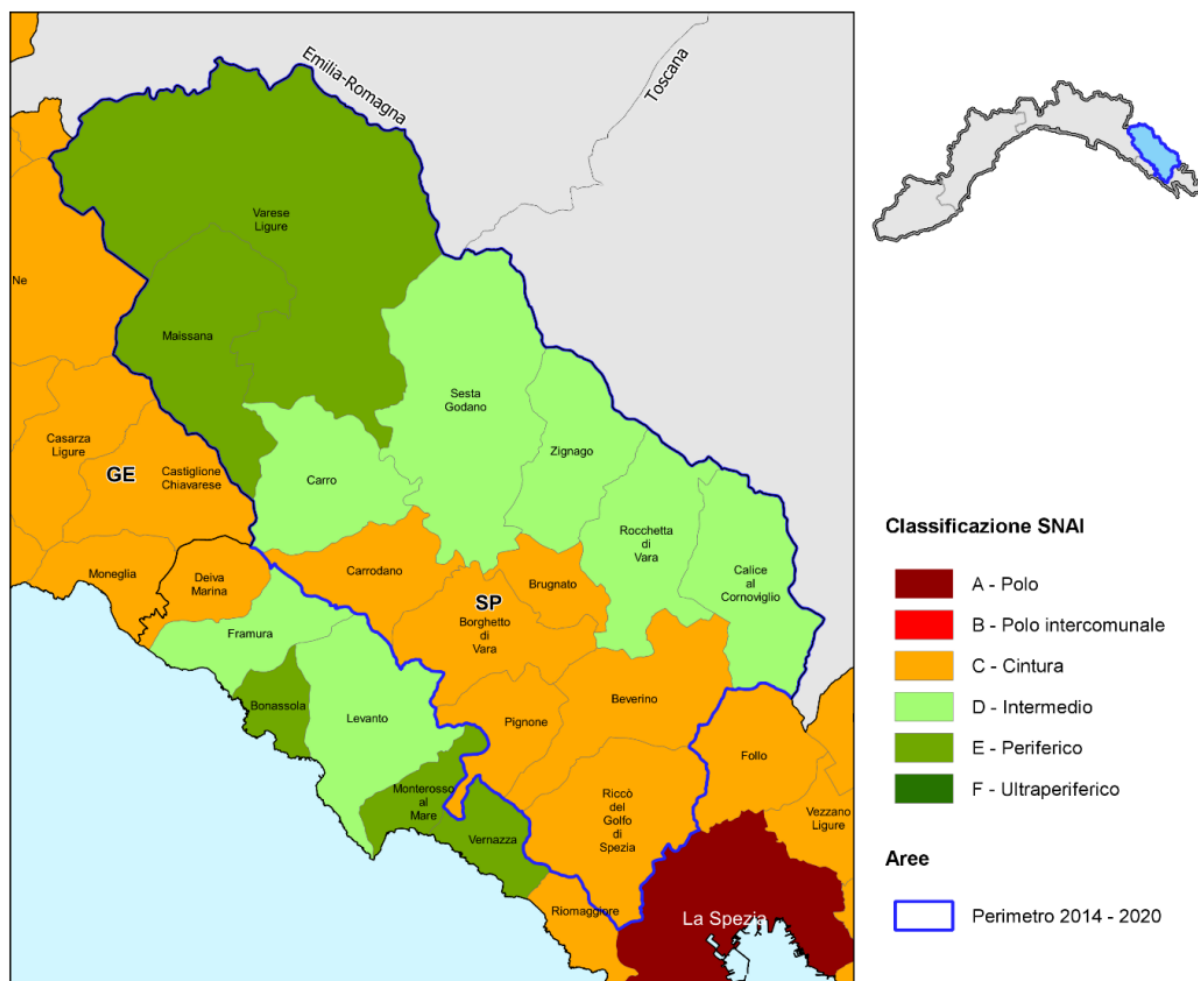


Fig. 1.3.2. The inner area of Val di Vara, outlined in blue and divided into peripheral municipalities (Varese Ligure and Maissana; ‘E’, in green), intermediate municipalities (Carro, Sesta Godano, Zignago, Rocchetta di Vara and Calice al Cornoviglio; ‘D’, in light green) and belt municipalities (Carrodano, Brugnato, Borghetto di Vara, Pignone, Beverino and Riccò del Golfo di Spezia; ‘C’, in orange). At the bottom right is the urban pole of La Spezia (‘A’, in dark red), which mainly attracts the middle and lower valley, whilst the main hub of the upper valley, Chiavari, lies outside the image to the west. The perimeter remains the same as in the previous 2014-2020 mapping, but some municipalities have changed category: Rocchetta di Vara and Calice al Cornoviglio have moved from ‘belt’ to ‘intermediate’ – and have therefore been downgraded –, whilst Pignone has moved from ‘intermediate’ to ‘belt’.

Source: Formez PA, 2022, p. 21.

In this respect, the study area chosen for the research project is a clear example of this trend. The upper Vara Valley is part of the inner area of Val di Vara (Fig. 1.3.2; see also next section). Among the seven municipalities of the upper Vara Valley – which until 2009 were part of the ‘Alta Val di Vara’ mountain community (*comunità montana*) –, five of the them (Carro, Maissana, Rocchetta di Vara, Sesta Godano and Varese Ligure) have recorded a marked demographic decline between 1991 and 2011, while only Carrodano and Zignago have shown a limited increase (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, s.d.[a]). This limited increase has now inverted the trend also for these two municipalities, as shown in Fig. 1.3.3, where we can see a

depopulation in the upper valley between 2011 and 2020 ranging from the -6.87% of Zignago to the -13.76% of Rocchetta di Vara. This process of abandonment is even more striking when compared to the strong increase in population and the consequent enlargement of land for agrosylvo-pastoral use that had affected the Ligurian mountains – and specifically the upper Vara Valley – in the mid-19th century (Hearn *et al.*, 2014; Moreno, Raggio, 1990), as showed in Tab. 1.4.1 in the next section: the valley's population peaked in 1871, with 21,766 inhabitants, whereas today (2024) the population stands at 5,676 (ISTAT data). The strong depopulation of the last seventy years has brought with it the abandonment of land used for sylvo-pastoral activities and for different types of crops (maize, potatoes, chestnuts, etc.) often organised on terraces, resulting on a profound change in the landscape and social practices of the upper Vara Valley.

The entire Vara Valley corresponds administratively to the territory of fifteen Ligurian municipalities in the province of La Spezia¹¹. Of these, 13 form the Val di Vara inner area (Fig. 1.3.1), including the seven in the upper valley that will be the subject of this thesis (see next section). The Area Strategy approved for the 2014-2020 period (SNAI, 2020) identified a total area of 529 km² for the inner area, with a population of 15,791 inhabitants and a population density of less than 30 inhabitants per km² as at 1 January 2020; the population aged over 65 stood at 31.2% and the loss of utilised agricultural area (UAA) between 2000 and 2010 was 13.6%. The objectives of the Strategy are to improve the accessibility of the territories, align educational provision, strengthen healthcare services for the population, and economic development focused on small farms and businesses and on the promotion of forms of tourism that are mindful of the local dimension (*ibid.*). The total value of the resources made available for the seven-year period 2014-2020 is €9,524,054.29, coming from: a) Law 205/2017 (2018 Budget Law), €3,759,496.00; b) ERDF Regional Operational Programme (POR) 2014-2020, €4,051,793.00; c) ESF POR 2014-2020, €200,000.00; d) EAFRD Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020, €1,382,320.01; e) local public funds, €150,000.00. Of this amount, not a single euro has yet been spent, nor has any project commenced (*cf.*: OpenCoesione, n.d.[c]). For this reason, they have likely been reallocated for the 2021-2027 programming season following the confirmation of the inner area¹². This means that here the

¹¹ In addition, in the upper valley there is Adelano, a hamlet of the Tuscan municipality of Zeri, while in the lower valley the administrative district of Montedivalli – part of the Tuscan municipality of Podenzana – and a portion of the municipality of Vezzano Ligure.

¹² The expenditure figures for the 2017-2021 period are not yet available. Nor are those for the previous seven-year period anymore, as the OpenCoesione website for the SNAI (<<https://opencoesione.gov.it/it/dati/strategie/AI/>>) is currently being updated.

principle of continuity has taken precedence over that of proven ability to implement measures and meet implementation deadlines. This lack of progress has also prevented small businesses from reaping any real benefits, a finding that will be investigated later. The contrast also is even more striking when compared with the situation in neighbouring inner areas such as Antola-Tigullio in Liguria or the Appennino Piacentino Parmense in Emilia. In the first case, the funds committed up to 2024 amounted to €541,967 (ibid.), whilst in the second case they reached as much as €17 million in 2023, of which €7.1 million has already been paid out. In Emilian case, the funds were allocated primarily to the roll-out of broadband, agriculture and tourism, followed by other initiatives in health, education, transport, etc. (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2024).

Comuni	Classi SNAI 2020	Comune di destinazione prevalente	Tempi medi di percorrenza (minuti)	Popolazione residente ISTAT 2011	Popolazione residente ISTAT 2020	Variazione demografica 2011 - 2020
Beverino	C - Cintura	La Spezia	21	2.403	2.267	-5,66%
Borghetto di Vara	C - Cintura	La Spezia	27,5	1.008	886	-12,10%
Brugnato	C - Cintura	La Spezia	27,4	1.266	1.285	1,50%
Calice al Cornoviglio	D - Intermedio	La Spezia	36,9	1.146	1.058	-7,68%
Carro	D - Intermedio	Chiavari	39,9	580	518	-10,69%
Carrodano	C - Cintura	Chiavari	27	521	476	-8,64%
Maissana	E - Periferico	Chiavari	49,7	659	597	-9,41%
Pignone	C - Cintura	La Spezia	24,4	599	540	-9,85%
Riccò del Golfo di Spezia	C - Cintura	La Spezia	15,4	3.537	3.566	0,82%
Rocchetta di Vara	D - Intermedio	La Spezia	32,5	785	677	-13,76%
Sesta Godano	D - Intermedio	Chiavari	36,7	1.452	1.294	-10,88%
Varese Ligure	E - Periferico	Chiavari	47,9	2.103	1.834	-12,79%
Zignago	D - Intermedio	La Spezia	40,9	524	488	-6,87%
TOTALE AREA <i>nr comuni 13</i>	% di comuni in AI 54		32,86	16.583	15.486	-6,62%

Fig. 1.3.3. The list of the 13 municipalities in the Val di Vara inner area, showing their classification according to the new SNAI mapping, their main pole of attraction, the travel time to it in minutes, the resident population in 2011 and 2020, and the change in population over the nine-year period.

Source: Formez PA, 2022, p. 21.

Moving beyond the SNAI, the case of the upper Vara Valley represents one of the first examples in Italy of extensive conversion to organic farming, and the consequences of this ‘shift’ are still little studied, so its critical analysis will be of primary importance. In addition to the SNAI scheme, which has already been examined, local farms benefit from a variety of grants, which, as previously noted, are generally awarded on a merit-based basis. The most significant of these is the 2023-2027 Rural Development Completion (CSR; *Complemento per lo Sviluppo Rurale*), formerly known as Rural Development Programme (PSR; *Programma di*

Sviluppo Rurale)¹³. It is essentially divided into ‘structural’ (*strutturali*) applications – aimed at purchases for farm improvements – and ‘area-based’ (*a superficie*) applications – i.e. based on quantities per hectare used by the farm, differentiated according to soil type, geographical location and the number of livestock reared. Among the latter grants, those aimed at organic farming stand out; these are particularly important here because, as mentioned, farms in the upper valley began converting to organic farming en masse in the late 1990s in order to access the funding that the European Union was beginning to provide for the sector. This sector currently accounts for over 60% of the total agricultural area (Città della Spezia, 2025). This thesis will examine in depth how this ‘organic turn’ has been met with mixed reactions among local stakeholders in the valley (see Chapter 5).

1.4. The upper Vara Valley

1.4.1. The geographical context



¹³ Other sources of funding – which will not be discussed in detail here – include direct payments under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – the CAP being the basis of the CSR itself – as well as calls for proposals under the PNRR, INPS (*Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale*; National Institute for Social Security) and INAIL (*Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro*; National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work), regional calls for proposals, GALs (*Gruppo di Azione Locale*; Local Action Group), etc.

Fig. 1.4.1. The seven municipalities of the upper Vara Valley within the province of La Spezia, bordering the metropolitan city of Genoa and the provinces of Parma and Massa-Carrara. The main mountains are also listed (Gottero, 1,640 m a.s.l.; Zatta, 1,404 m; Porcile, 1,244 m), the River Vara and, to the north, the River Taro.

Source: Author's elaboration in QGIS based on data: Regione Liguria; Google Satellite.

The upper Vara Valley corresponds to the northernmost section of the valley through which the River Vara – a tributary of the Magra – flows, in the province of La Spezia (Liguria). The area is predominantly mountainous and has a difference in altitude of approximately 1,600 metres: the highest point is Mount Gottero (1,640 m asl), in the municipality of Sesta Godano, and the lowest point is situated along the River Vara, near the hamlet of Stodomelli in the municipality of Rocchetta di Vara (80 m asl). The territory lies almost entirely on the Tyrrhenian side of the Ligurian Apennines, running in a north-west to south-east direction, and is characterised by the fact that its southern portion is also bordered by high hills reaching up to 1,000 m asl, which separate it from the coast. A small portion to the north, however, lies on the Po Valley side and is crossed by the River Taro. The area has a total resident population of 5,676 as of 2024, broken down as follows: 1,761 in Varese Ligure, 1,263 in Sesta Godano, 646 in Rocchetta di Vara, 589 in Maissana, 483 in Carro, 469 in Zignago and 465 in Carrodano (Tab 1.4.1; ISTAT data); however, the actual number of residents is lower. The main town is Varese Ligure, situated in the northernmost part of the valley floor, along a historic route linking the regions of Genoa, La Spezia, Emilia and Lunigiana, connected by passes such as Cento Croci, Bocco – in the municipality of Varese –, the Velva and the Bocco di Bargone Passes – in the municipality of Maissana. Varese Ligure is also the largest municipality in terms of area: covering almost 138 km², it is the second largest in Liguria, surpassed only by Genoa.

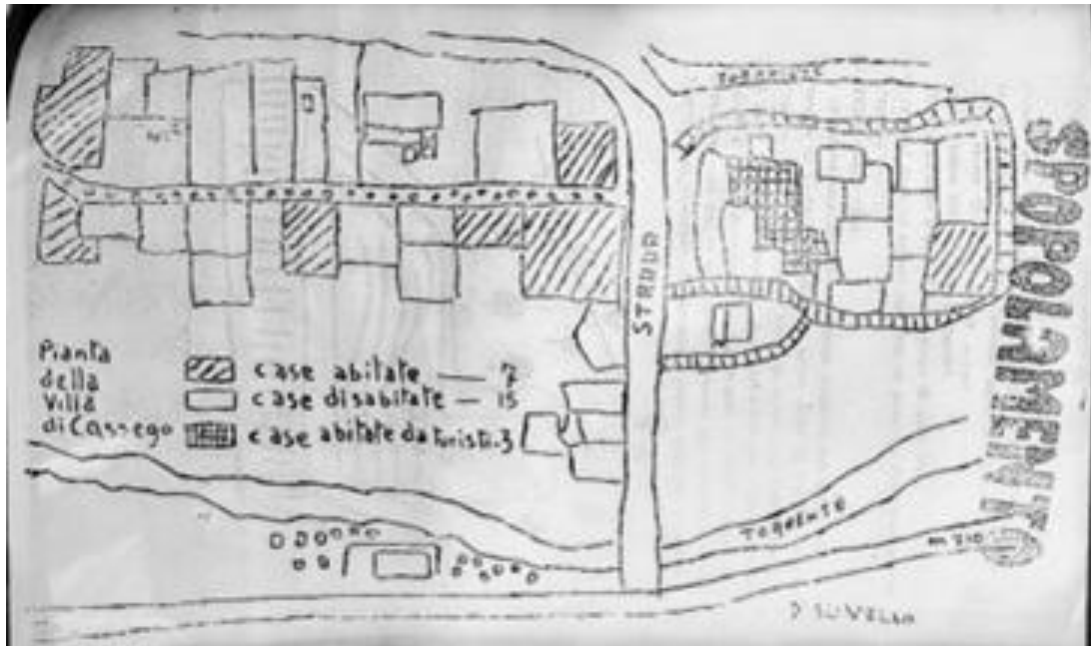


Fig. 1.4.2. A youth-led participatory mapping project from the 1990s on depopulation (*spopolamento*) in Cassego (Varese Ligure, SP), showing 7 occupied houses (*case abitate*), 15 unoccupied houses (*case disabitate*) and 3 houses occupied by tourists (*case abitate da turisti*).
Source: Museo Contadino di Cassego.

As mentioned, the area has experienced a significant decline in population, typical of much of the Ligurian Apennines (Tab. 1.4.1; Fig. 1.4.3), falling from a total population of 21,766 inhabitants in 1871 – the year of the peak – to 18,148 in 1936 – a decrease of 13.7% – and to the current 5,676, representing a 73.9% decline compared to 1871 and a 68.7% decline compared to 1936. The greatest decrease between the municipality’s peak (1871) and 1936 was recorded in Maissana, with a reduction of 29.9%; the smallest was in Zignago, with a decrease of 6.2%. The largest decrease between their respective peaks and today was recorded in the municipalities of Varese Ligure and Maissana, with -78.5% (1881-2024) and -78.2% (1871-2024) respectively; the smallest was in Rocchetta di Vara, with -66.7% (1871-2024). The largest decrease between 1936 and today was recorded in Varese Ligure, with a change of -74%; the smallest was in Carrodano, with -60.9%. Whilst the change is substantial for all the municipalities analysed, it is worth noting that it has been even more pronounced in the two northernmost municipalities, which are also the only ones classified as peripheral by the SNAI, namely Varese Ligure and Maissana.

	Varese Ligure	Sesta Godano	Maissana*	Carro	Zignago	Carrodano	Rocchetta di Vara	Total
1861	7,851	3,990	2,524	1,825	1,509	1,451	1,880	21,030
1871	8,063	4,220	2,707	1,918	1,603	1,315	1,940	21,766
1881	8,185	3,885	2,577	1,893	1,493	1,415	1,731	21,179
1901	7,154	3,895	2,052	1,555	1,469	1,170	1,802	19,097
1911	7,127	3,864	1,861	1,490	1,598	1,213	1,862	19,015
1921	7,158	4,004	2,056	1,424	1,602	1,194	1,806	19,244
1931	6,805	3,616	1,860	1,388	1,494	1,159	1,917	18,239
1936	6,762	3,524	1,897	1,462	1,503	1,188	1,812	18,148
1951	5,909	3,092	1,668	1,263	1,208	999	1,642	15,781
1961	4,710	2,389	1,295	915	975	888	1,311	12,483
1971	3,711	1,839	992	790	679	724	1,097	9,832
1981	3,118	1,649	790	686	611	596	931	8,381
1991	2,681	1,585	724	677	588	569	814	7,638
2001	2,358	1,554	669	635	515	545	852	7,128
2011	2,103	1,452	659	580	524	521	785	6,624
2024	1,761	1,263	589	483	469	465	646	5,676

Tab. 1.4.1. The population of the municipalities in the upper Vara Valley according to the population and housing censuses.

* The data for the municipality of Maissana have been adjusted to exclude the population of the hamlet of Statale, which was transferred to the municipality of Ne (GE) in 1937.

Source: ISTAT.

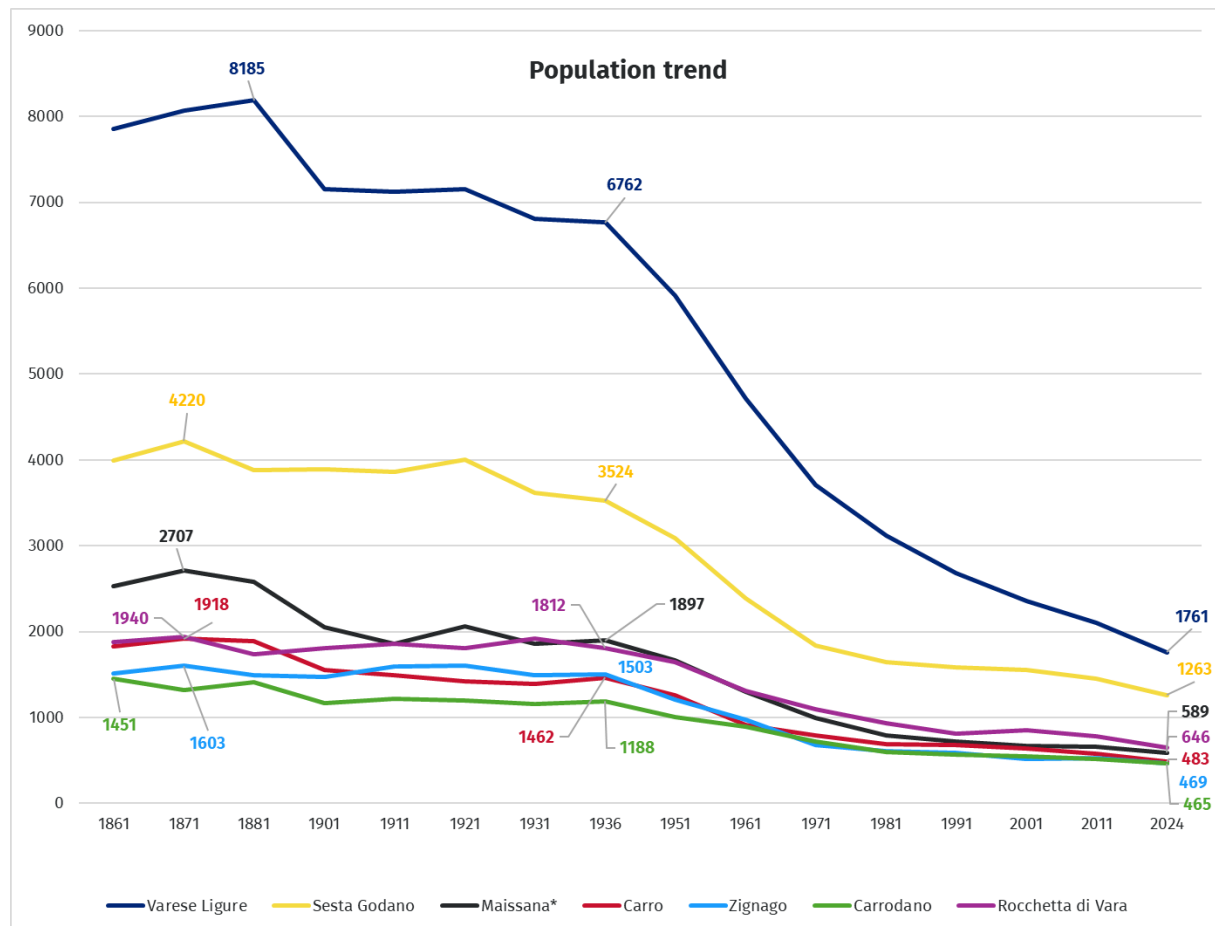


Fig. 1.4.3. Population trends from 1861 to the present day. The table shows the population peaks – 1861 for Carrodano; 1871 for Sesta Godano, Maissana, Carro, Rocchetta di Vara and Zignago; 1881 for Varese Ligure –, the population in the last census prior to the Second World War (1936), and the population in 2024.

* The data for the municipality of Maissana have been adjusted to exclude the population of the hamlet of Statale, which was transferred to the municipality of Ne (GE) in 1937.

Source: ISTAT.

1.4.2. Literature review

The socio-territorial changes of the Ligurian hinterland have been extensively studied in the Ligurian context and in the more particular context of the Vara Valley, mostly under the theoretical approaches of historical geography, historical ecology and archaeology (Moreno 1990; 1995; Moreno, Raggio, 1990; Lagomarsini, 1991b; 1994-95; 2000 [2001]; 2002; Raggio, 1992; 2007; LAM, 1997; Balzaretto et al., 2004; Moreno et al., 2005; Cevasco et al., 2005; Cevasco, 2007; 2013; Balzaretto, 2011; 2012; 2021; Moneta, Parola, 2014; Hearn et al., 2015; Bruzzone, 2015; Piana, 2015; 2020; Piana et al., 2012; 2018b; 2021; Stagno, 2019; Cevasco et al., 2020). These broad-spectrum studies can focus on the history of slope and terrace vegetation cover (Moreno, 1988a; Montanari et al., 1988b; Poggi, Cevasco, 1997; Cevasco et al., 1997-98-99; Watkins, 2004; Watkins, Balzaretto; 2013a; 2013b; Cevasco, 2014; Cevasco et al.,

2015), hydrogeological instability (Federici et al., 2001), abandonment of historical and archaeological artefacts (Milanese, Biagini, 1998; Campana, Maggi, 2002; Stagno, 2016), the spread of wild animal species (Hearn, 2012; Hearn et al., 2014) and the social changes that have occurred (Lagomarsini, 1983; 2017; Museo Contadino di Cassego, 1983).

Since 1995, the upper Vara Valley has hosted a collaboration between the University of Genoa, the University of Nottingham and the Museo Contadino di Cassego (Cassego Farming Museum)¹⁴ – a hamlet of Varese Ligure. This partnership has given rise to the ‘Liguria Field Courses’ of the University of Nottingham, which have now (2026) been organized for 32 years (cf.: Watkins, Balzaretti, 1998; Watkins et al., 2004; Balzaretti, Watkins, 2013). In addition to the aforementioned academic literature, these courses have produced a large number of partly unpublished papers by Geography and History students – currently preserved at the Laboratorio di Archeologia e Storia Ambientale (LASA) of the University of Genoa (cf.: Stagno, 2013; Tigrino, 2013; Cevasco et al., 2019b) and at the School of Geography of the University of Nottingham. The analysis of these documents, in terms of both content and photography, has proved to be particularly fruitful.

Furthermore, other types of studies have been carried out over time: on the one hand, technical or academic studies focusing on regional planning (Facciotto, 1978; Bartaletti, 1978), tourism (Palumbo et al., 1989; dell’Agnese, Bagnoli, 2004) and webGIS solutions (Salvatori et al., 2012); on the other hand, regional (Formentini, 1937; 1960; Scotti, 1947a; 1947c; 1950; Scarin, 1952; 1957; Ferro, 1957; Formentini, Valenti, 1992; Beniscelli, 1978; Marmori, 1980; Plomteux, 1981; Ferro et al., 1983; De Nevi, 1988; Ratti, 1989; Albertini, 1988-89; Barbieri, De Nevi, 2005; Maffei, 2005; Aa.Vv., 2007; Garibaldi, 2008; Camangi et al., 2009; Palumbo, 2010; Salvatori, 2012; Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale, n.d.; Lombardi et al., n.d.) or local territorial analyses (Formentini, 1950; Pavoni, 1987; Bernabò, 1988; 1990; 1997; 2008; 2011a; Museo Contadino di Cassego, Circolo Acli di Varese Ligure, 1986; Figone, 1995; De Paoli, 1995; Bernabò et al., 1997; Giusti, 1997; Aa.Vv., 2002; Lerici, 2004; Barbieri, De Nevi, 2005; Canepa, 2007; Gabrovec, 2009; 2013; De Vincenzi, 2011; Pastorini, 2018; Cordonier, 2022; Gabrovec, Callori, 2023; Sciascia, 2023; Bernabò, Macchiavello, 2024; Castelletti et al., 2024; Brignole, Lavagnino, 2025). Other texts of great interest are historical works concerning the upper Vara Valley or providing collateral information on the area (Cesena, 1993 [1558]; Viviani, 1807; Bertolotti, 1834; Casalis, 1842; 1853), which have either already been analysed in literature or will be examined in this thesis (see Chapter 3).

¹⁴ On the Museum, cf.: Scuola Popolare di Cassego, 1976.

1.5. Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the relevant literature on the main debates within which this research is situated: historical ecology, historical geography, rural geography and landscape studies on the one hand; agri-food supply chains and organic farming on the other; and finally, inner areas in Italy. It has then examined the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), explaining its mode of operation, its funding support, and its shortcomings in terms of the definition of inner areas and the allocation of resources. The focus has then shifted to inner areas in Liguria, especially in the Vara Valley, with an overview of the allocated resources from SNAI and other grants, such as those for organic farming from the Rural Development Programme (PSR). Finally, the geographical context of the upper Vara Valley and its depopulation have been outlined, together with a literature review on the area.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research questions that animated the thesis and the methodology that has been followed. A broad-spectrum, multi-purpose study such as this requires a methodology that combines different methods and the use of diverse sources, both quantitative and qualitative, following what has been called ‘mixed methods research’ (see: Schoonenboom, Johnson, 2017). The underlying idea behind this thesis refers to the key methodologies of historical ecology, particularly the use of different methods, in order to obtain a realistic interpretation of the sources chosen for the thesis, that allows for an in-depth analysis of landscape transformations.

The progressive cartographic comparison carried out in section 3.2 and illustrated in section 2.4.1, which quantifies the extent of different land uses over time, is an example of quantitative research, together with the analysis of statistical data relating to population trends derived from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT; *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica*) shown in section 1.4.1. The qualitative part of the thesis includes other methods, from cadastral maps – used in sections 4.1 and 4.2 and illustrated in section 2.4.2 – to literary travel sources – section 3.1, illustrated in 2.3.2 –, visual travel sources and historical photographs – both used in sections 3.1 and 3.3 and illustrated in section 2.3.1 – necessary for historical analysis and contextualisation of the social and landscape transformations that have taken place.

Much of this chapter focuses on illustrating the methodology used for the extensive ethnographic survey carried out through interviews, according to the participatory action research (PAR) approach. Interviews are used throughout the thesis, but they are particularly central to chapters 4 and 5. These research methods are explained in section 2.2. Field research was at the heart of the three years of research that led to this thesis. In all its facets, it represents the moment of greatest connection between academic intellectual effort and the materiality of the issues addressed by geographical research. This meeting point requires attention to the multiple subjectivities involved and the different research methods and theoretical approaches that can be used, guidelines that have been taken into account throughout the course of study, from the construction of fieldwork to the analysis and processing of data.

2.1. Research questions

Since a municipal doctorate (see Chapter 1) aims to “cover disciplinary and thematic areas consistent with the ‘National Strategy for Inner Areas’, with the aim of guaranteeing the

provision of and full accessibility to essential services for residents, promoting the wealth of the territory and local communities, enhancing natural and cultural resources through the creation of new employment opportunities, and combating demographic and cultural depopulation” (DPC, n.d.[b]), my main research question is: “How can new resources to curb depopulation and land abandonment be developed in the upper Vara Valley and the Apennines?”. To answer this issue, I started with four sub-questions, that will be developed in the main chapters of the thesis: 1) “What changes in practices and land use have occurred in the upper Vara Valley over the last century?”; 2) “What is the condition of current land management and depopulation in the upper Vara Valley?”; 3) “Are the initiatives implemented by the seven municipalities and other institutions – in particular the Biodistrict – effective?”; 4) “To what extent can the case of the upper Vara Valley fit meaningfully into the scientific and political debate on inner and mountainous areas?”.

So, the goals of the thesis are to: 1) provide insights concerning inner and mountainous areas that allow these territories to be seen as self-sufficient laboratories of experience and that lead to overcoming a merely welfarist approach; 2) the elaboration of an in-depth and detailed picture of the processes of abandonment and recovery of the territory; the focus is on the last thirty years and specific aspects – such as organic farming and new forms of land use – or sites; 3) the implementation of new opportunities, useful for the people who decide to remain in this Apennine inner area.

2.2. Field research

The field research in the upper Vara Valley, which was not continuous but constant and structured, began in March 2023 and ended in March 2026, i.e. throughout the duration of the doctoral programme¹⁵. The interviews were conducted mainly between July and December 2024, when most of the informants were interviewed, then during the three field courses held in the municipalities of Varese Ligure and Maissana by the University of Nottingham, in which I participated in March 2023, 2024 and 2025, and finally, other sporadic interviews, sometimes informal, were collected throughout 2023 and 2025. During the field courses, my role as assistant and translator for the students allowed me to conduct interviews and receive input from the students themselves and from those who helped them in their studies¹⁶.

¹⁵ My PhD grant officially lasted from 1 February 2023 to 31 January 2026.

¹⁶ The number of people involved in managing the field courses is large and varies from year to year, but for the mentioned years mainly consisted of: prof. Charles Watkins and dr. Robert Hearn – course organisers –, don Sandro Lagomarsini, prof. Diego Moreno, dr. Rebekka Dossche, dr. Valentina Pescini, prof. Pietro Piana, dr. Leonardo Porcelloni, prof. Virginia Panizzo, dr. Gabriele Casano.

The fieldwork also involved researching and obtaining visual and cartographic material, such as cadastral maps and related documents provided by the municipality of Maissana, or vintage postcards provided by Sandro Lagomarsini and other informants, but also all the related work of exploring the area and choosing suitable locations for repeated photographs and significant cases.

2.2.1. Interviews and Participatory Action Research (PAR)

I chose ethnography and participation as the main qualitative methodology for my field research. Indeed, since the aim of my analysis is to investigate changes in landscape and practices in a rural mountain area such as the upper Vara Valley, and to identify possible responses to depopulation and land abandonment, it is first of all necessary to understand the perspectives and the desires of the human actors involved in these processes of change.

Ethnography is understood here as a set of methods that originated in the social sciences – particularly anthropology – between the end of XIX and the beginning of XX century and were later adopted by other disciplines, including geography. An in-depth study of landscape change requires, in fact, a prior analysis of the social transformations that have produced these modifications. Moreover, participation in people's daily lives, or at least in certain aspects of them (Fig. 2.2.1), enables the researcher to understand how these changes are unfolding and what motivations drive them.



Fig. 2.2.1. Researcher's car surrounded by cows in Pietrebianche, near Scurtabò (Varese Ligure). July 2024.

In support of the more strictly scientific-geographical analysis, given the nature of my municipal doctoral research grant, I selected from the wide range of ethnographic methods the ones that would allow a specific focus on understanding the needs of the resident population and visitors to the two municipalities. A large-scale participatory survey was therefore organised, conducted through participatory action research (PAR) – albeit with some modifications (see below) – and the use of semi-structured or unstructured interviews. According to PAR, participation is conceived in a threefold meaning: a survey methodology that involves local communities as subjects of knowledge and not simply objects of study¹⁷; a political and territorial governance methodology that redraws the frameworks of meaning within which we represent the reality and the future of the territory – a new way of looking at our relationships with the territory we are analysing –; a praxeological device, i.e. a public platform where individual practices relate to each other and become collective. This methodology also has at least two other strengths. On the one hand, it is particularly suitable for complex contexts where problems are not always clearly defined and must be collectively established, as in the case of the sensitive issue of mountain depopulation and land

¹⁷ Cf. also on this: Riley, 2008.

abandonment. These processes arise from a combination of causes and therefore require an approach that begins with the knowledge and aspirations of the people involved. On the other hand, this methodology does not rely on key informants; rather, it aims to engage the widest possible sample, representing all the categories of actor involved in the construction and reconstruction of the territory under study (Agnew, 1997; Cahill, 2007; Li, Marsh, 2008; Calandra, 2017; 2018; 2020; 2015; Martini et al., 2022).

The application of PAR in the upper Vara Valley followed the precise methodological guidelines outlined by Calandra (2020), with minor adjustments, as the original model proved too demanding for a single researcher. Therefore, at the very beginning of the fieldwork, the number of categories and interviews was reduced to those strictly essential for the aims of this research. In this sense, a more flexible version of PAR was adopted, featuring a more selective sample and a smaller number of interviewees within each category. So, a map of actors was created (Fig. 2.2.2), divided into three categories: institutions (category A) – within which I sought to interview at least the main representatives, such as mayors, councillors and presidents –, local operators (cat. B) and interface actors (cat. C); within the latter two categories, subjects were selected on the basis of criteria of territorial distribution and the greatest possible diversification. Subsequently, a map of locations was drawn up (Fig. 2.2.3, showing the interviews actually carried out) to show the distribution of interviews across the territory of the seven municipalities. Thereafter, the type of interviews was decided upon, followed by their design and implementation. Then followed the long phase of data analysis and thesis writing. Finally, public restitution will take place in the study area, in the form of a conference or focus group presenting the results of the research. The aim is to allow the people who contributed indirectly to the production of these outcomes to comment on them and to help correct any possible misinterpretations coming from the researcher.

	A	B	C	D	E
1	CATEGORY A: Institutional actors (tot. n. 20 / expected n. 13 / actual n. 6)	Column1	Column2	Column3	Column4
2	Type of actor	Category	Total	Expected n.	Actual n.
3	Municipality	Cat. A	7	4	3
4	Proloco	Cat. A	5	5	2
5	SNAI	Cat. A	/	0	0
6	Province	Cat. A	2	0	0
7	Region	Cat. A	1	1	0
8	ANCI	Cat. A	1	1	0
9	Local Action Group (GAL)	Cat. A	1	1	0
10	Local Health Authority (ASL)	Cat. A	2	0	0
11	Carabinieri - Command of the Forest	Cat. A	1	1	1
12					
13	CATEGORY B: Local stakeholders (tot. n. 5801+ / exp. n. 53 / act. n. 113)				
14	Type of actor	Category	Total	Expected n.	Actual n.
15	Local producers				
16	Agricultural and/or livestock farm	Cat. B	75	21	21
17	Other producers (artisans, forestry company, cooperatives, etc.)	Cat. B	46	7	5
18	Service providers				
19	Tourism operator	Cat. B	/	0	0
20	Associazione of guides, guides and mountain guides	Cat. B	/	0	0
21	Local residents and experts				
22	Residents/temporary vacationer	Cat. B	5676+	15	65
23	Local experts	Cat. B	/	8	22
24	Users of the area				
25	Recreational sports association (horse-riding, hiking, etc.)	Cat. B	/	0	0
26	Environmental association (CAI, WWF, etc.)	Cat. B	2	0	0
27	ATC/Hunting association	Cat. B	2	2	0
28					
29	Category C: Interface actors (tot. n. ? / exp. n. 4 / act. n. 6)				
30	Type of actor	Category	Total	Expected n.	Actual n.
31	Trade association, trade union, professional association, etc.	Cat. C	/	2	2
32	Cultural/social association	Cat. C	/	2	4

Fig. 2.2.2. Map of actors, divided into three main categories. For each category, the total number of operators ('tot. n. '), the number of respondents expected ('exp. n. ') and those actually interviewed ('act. n. ') are indicated. Each category is then divided into subcategories. Each category corresponds to a separate Excel file – not shown for privacy reasons – containing a list of actors, their addresses, contact details and websites, where applicable.

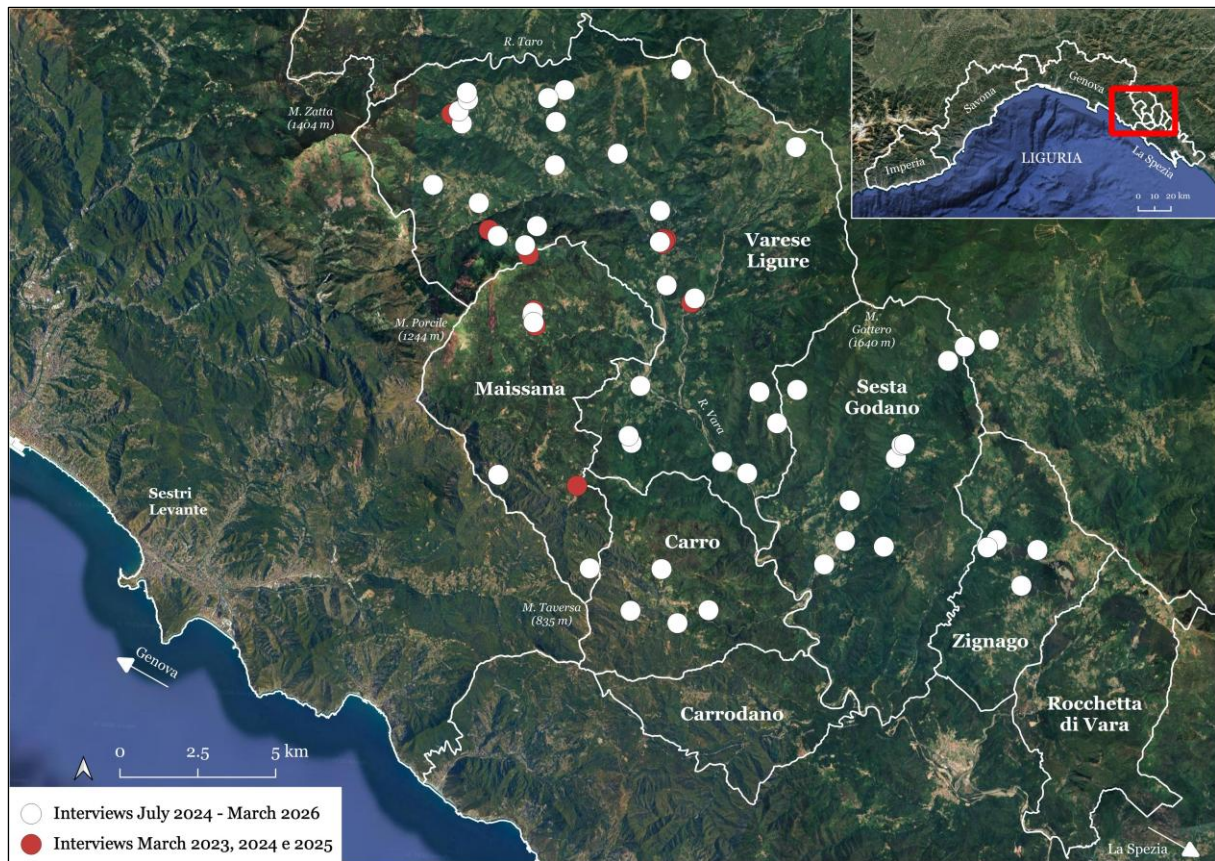


Fig. 2.2.3. Map of the locations showing where interviews were conducted. Interviews conducted mainly between July and December 2024, and partly throughout 2023 and 2025, are shown in white; interviews conducted during field courses in March 2023, 2024 and 2025 are shown in red. Source: Author's elaboration in QGIS based on data: Regione Liguria; Google Satellite.

The sample was chosen primarily on the basis of geographical criteria, i.e. I tried to cover all the municipalities in the upper Vara Valley and as many hamlets as possible, necessarily adapting to the availability of informants to be interviewed. For this reason, and also because of their peripheral location in the upper valley, the municipalities of Carrodano and Rocchetta di Vara were ultimately excluded from the survey, which focused on them only from the point of view of travel sources (see section 3.1). Instead, Varese Ligure had the highest number of interviews, given the considerable size of the municipality and the large number of hamlets.

In a second phase, the institutional actors to be interviewed (category A) were selected, including the mayors and councillors of Varese Ligure, Maissana and Sesta Godano, the local Pro Locos of Varese Ligure and Tavarone, and the Carabinieri Forestry Corps of Varese Ligure, for a total of 6 interviews. Category B, comprising all operators in the area, is in turn divided into subcategories. Local producers include farms and other types of producers, which I have attempted to diversify according to their activity – fruit and vegetable supply chain, dairy farming, meat farming, artisans, agritourism, dairy cooperative, meat cooperative – and

according to other characteristics fundamental to the analysis, especially those outlined in Chapter 5, such as the distinction between organic and non-organic farms, farms run by young people, those run by women, farms that use innovative agricultural methods and those that use older methods, farms or agritourism businesses run by new rural dwellers or people from other areas, and farms that have been passed down from generation to generation. 26 farms were investigated. Then there are the inhabitants – including both residents and regular holidaymakers – and local experts, both of whom are essential for gaining an in-depth understanding of past practices – experienced first-hand or studied in depth in the case of experts – or particular aspects not considered in the research design. In total, 87 of them were interviewed. Service providers and users of the area were not interviewed. Finally, category C includes interface actors such as cultural associations and trade associations. Among the former, the Museo Contadino di Cassego – with his funder, the priest don Sandro Lagomarsini – was of fundamental help to the research, but other interviews were then conducted with Lella Canepa and her association *Erbando* – which deals with the dissemination of information on the collection and use of wild herbs –, Buto Cultura, represented by Sergio Gabrovec and Giacomo Greppi, which collects historical and social information on the hamlet of Buto and the area at the foot of Monte Gottero in general¹⁸, and the soon-to-be-opened Museum of Chestnut Cultivation in the Vara Valley (*Museo della Castanicoltura della Val di Vara*), in Carro, for a total of 4. Among the trade associations, interviews were conducted with people at the Varese offices of the *Associazione Liberi Produttori Agricoli Terra Viva* CISL (Free Agricultural Producers Association ‘Living Land’) and Coldiretti¹⁹.

The choice of the type of qualitative interviews required careful reflection on the most appropriate way to obtain the information needed for the different aspects of my investigation. In general, the qualitative interview is defined as a “conversation provoked by the interviewer, addressed to subjects chosen on the basis of a survey plan and in substantial numbers, having cognitive purposes, guided by the interviewer, on the basis of a flexible and non-standardised questioning scheme”²⁰ (Corbetta, 2014[1999], p. 401). It is also often characterised by a “constructivist approach to social research: [...] as a dynamic relationship in which the interview is ‘built’ together by the interviewer and the interviewee, and its outcome largely depends on empathic connection between them” (ibid., p. 421). In organising and analysing the results

¹⁸ See: <www.buto.it>.

¹⁹ CISL is the Italian Confederation of Workers Trade Union (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori*), while Coldiretti is the National Confederation of Smallholders (*Confederazione Nazionale Coltivatori Diretti*).

²⁰ Author’s own translation, such as the following one.

obtained through qualitative interviews, personal involvements are important elements to be consider: the researcher's personality, background and origins – for example, I'm from Genoa, but my grandmother was from the hamlet of Campore (Maissana), where I spent many summer periods during my childhood –, as well the language spoken – the importance of knowing both Italian and Genoese (see next sub-section) – and other factors inevitably influence the results of the investigation. For this reason, it is essential to take such factors into account²¹.

Since this research is focused on mainly two main aspects – past practices and land use, and their contemporary forms –, I adopted a combination of semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Semi-structured interviews proved particularly useful when working with institutional actors, associations and farmers, that is, when it was necessary to investigate specific topics related to contemporary farming practices and policies, while still allowing interviewees the freedom to expand on relevant issues. By contrast, unstructured interviews were conducted with elderly residents and, more generally, with local inhabitants, experts and informants with whom I wished to discuss changes in landscapes and practices over approximately the last century.

The semi-structured interview begins form an outline consisting of a set of core questions, which may be modified or supplemented during the conversation depending on the interviewee. It aims to obtain information that is otherwise unavailable or highly personal, to involve the informant in the research process, and to examine specific social practices, while maintaining a certain degree of flexibility (*ibid.*). The non-standardised nature of this type of interview implies that the data obtained will be heterogenous and difficult to compare. Moreover, the sample does not have to be statistically representative of the social reality analysed; it is usually composed of individuals on the basis of a few “basic sociographic characteristics” (*ibid.*, p. 405).

By contrast, unstructured interviews, in the form of oral histories (Harvey, Riley, 2005; Riley, Harvey, 2007a; 2007b; Biró et al., 2024), require only a set of key prompts provided by the interviewer as a starting point – for example, questions about how the landscape appeared in the past, or about the main territorial issues currently affecting the valley, etc. From that point onward, however, the interviewees largely guide the dialogue themselves, with relatively limited intervention from the interviewer.

The field survey, designed in terms of methods and topics during the six months spent at the University of Nottingham under the supervision of Prof. Charles Watkins, was then enriched

²¹ For a reflection on these aspects, see: Hearn, 2012.

from the outset with some aspects that had not been initially taken into consideration, requiring a partial revision of the key points of the semi-structured interviews. The first informal or organised interviews, in fact, made it possible to focus the analysis more deeply on those experiences and projects that have had an impact on life in the valley, such as certain specific rural practices of the past or present – above all, the shift in the late 1990s in the upper valley towards organic farming and the creation in 2013 of the Val di Vara ‘Valle del Biologico’ Biodistrict; but also the importance of female agricultural entrepreneurship, not considered as an output at the beginning.

The interviews were recorded – with the informant’s consent – and notes were taken in a diary, which also served as a tool for processing ‘immediate’ reflections. The numerous interviews were then transcribed with the help of the NotebookLM tool²² – unfortunately not very effective with interviews in Genoese, but excellent with those in Italian –, then carefully listened to again and corrected. From these, the parts that addressed issues that had already emerged as predominant during the survey phase or were identified during the new listening were selected. Chapters 4 and 5 are based on the interviews and are therefore organised according to these main themes: past practices and place names in Mount Verruga, urban transformations of coastal and mountain centres during rural exodus, and knowledge about chestnut trees for Chapter 4; young and female agricultural entrepreneurship, the fruit and vegetable, dairy and meat supply chains, the neo-rural and the diverse dynamics of abandonment of the valley for Chapter 5. Finally, based on the interviews, the themes in these chapters were developed following one or more particularly significant family, business or territorial ‘stories’.

²² See: <<https://notebooklm.google/>>.

2.2.2. The use of Genoese and Italian



Carta linguistica da Liguria. Da *La letteratura ligure in genovese e nei dialetti locali*, vol. I de F. Toso, Le Mani, 2009, missa à giorno da Stefano Lusito.

Fig. 2.2.4. The distribution of the Ligurian (or Genoese) language and its main varieties: Genoese, in red (*zeneise*); central-western Liguria, in pink (*ligure çentro-ponentin*); western Ligurian, in orange (*ligure do çentro-ponente*, or *intemelio*); eastern Ligurian, in purple (*ligure do levante*, or *spezzin*); Alpine Ligurian, in yellow (*ligure de Arpe*); eastern Oltregiogo Ligurian, in aqua green (*Ôtrazovo do levante*); central Oltregiogo Ligurian, in blue (*Ôtrazovo do çentro*); western Oltregiogo Ligurian, in light blue (*Ôtrazovo do ponente*). Ligurian language extends beyond the borders of Liguria to France – upper Val Roja, Menton, etc., in yellow –, the Principality of Monaco (*Monego*, in orange), Piedmont – with main centres: Ormea, Ovada (*Oâ*) and Novi Ligure (*Neuve*), in yellow, light blue and blue –, Emilia – with Ottone (*Oton*) and Borgotaro (*Borgotâ*), in aqua green –, Sardinia – Calasetta (*Câdesedda*) and Carloforte (*O Paise*), in red – and Corsica – Bonifacio, in red. In the upper Vara Valley, the Genoese variant (in red) is spoken in the northernmost part around Varese (*Vaeise* in the local variant, *Vaise* in urban Genoese), while descending towards the south-east it gradually slopes into eastern Ligurian (in purple).

Source: Conseggio pe-o patrimònio linguistico ligure, <<https://conseggio-ligure.org/domande/>>.

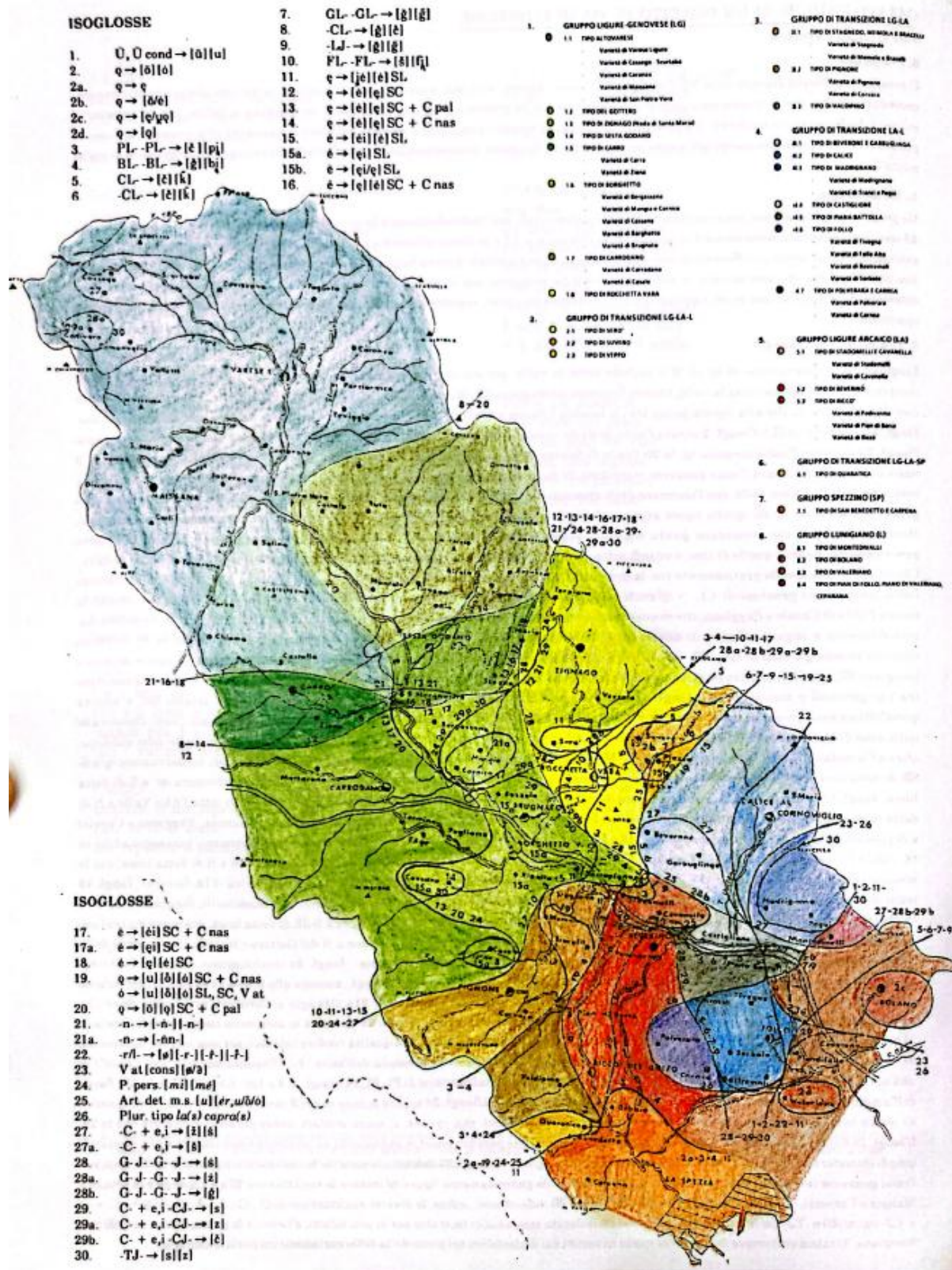


Fig. 2.2.5. The dialectal varieties of the Vara Valley and their isoglosses according to Cavallini, 1988, p. 404. The upper valley is characterised by Genoese varieties, which become transitional with the La Spezia dialect around the municipality of Rocchetta di Vara and Borghetto Vara.

An important aspect of the interviews is the linguistic one. As in the rest of Italy, local languages once spoken by the entire population survive in Liguria and Vara Valley, although they are not recognised or protected by the state and are therefore increasingly endangered²³. In the upper valley, in particular, dialects of Genoese are spoken, a language whose cultural and literary epicentre is the city of Genoa (Fig. 2.2.4). In the northernmost part of the valley, these dialects – shown in light blue in Fig. 2.2.5 – are part of the central Genoese, and in particular they are similar to the eastern coastal dialects, while further down the valley, typical features of the La Spezia dialect, spoken in the lower valley, begin to overlap.

The linguistic aspect proved to be of fundamental importance in the success of a large number of interviews. In fact, on one hand, even the interviews conducted in Italian – which are the majority – were often interspersed with parts or simple expressions in dialect. But above all, on the other hand, there were some cases of interviews conducted half – or even less – of the time in Italian and the rest in Genoese, with an almost natural transition to dialect on the part of the interlocutor – as in the cases of: G.F., in Colli di Valletti; G.D.P. in Valletti; G.N. in Campore –, or of interviews conducted almost exclusively in Genoese – such as: G.N., G.O. and O.L. in Campore; S.N. in Campore.

The use of dialect was a deliberate methodological choice on my part, although it was sometimes complicated by the fact that, in many interviews, the interviewees – even those with whom I actually used this language – were, at least initially, wary of speaking it with a *foresto*²⁴. This choice also involved a profound learning process on my part, because although I grew up in Genoa and spent my childhood and teenage summers in Campore, I was never taught Genoese as a child. So, I began to study the language in depth and asked my great-aunt, S.N. – native speaker, born in Campore and raised in Genoa – to speak to me only in Genoese, so that I could begin to get used to the sounds and vocabulary, with a view to speaking it myself, which I did after about a year.

Genoese proved particularly useful with elderly people, for whom it is their first language and who essentially only spoke Genoese in their daily lives during the period I was investigating: their youth or early adulthood, when Italian was relegated to school, extremely formal occasions or conversations with outsiders. This is particularly true for all practices related to the territory and landscape, objects and plants, and toponymic research. The use of their mother tongue also allowed me to establish a deeper relationship with the interlocutors,

²³ For studies on Ligurian dialectology conducted through ethnographic methods and featuring geographical implications, see: Plomteux, 1975; 1976; 1981; Còveri, Moreno, 1983.

²⁴ Genoese term for a non-local person.

who provided relevant information in Italian as well, but who opened up more in Genoese and added details about past practices that they actually thought about primarily in Genoese. The solid relationship that developed allowed me to discover details and events that I would not otherwise have known about and to be invited, for example, to return in the following days for an informal village festival in Valletti, that I spent with one interviewee's family.

7 people were interviewed entirely in dialect, but at least 10 more interviews contain some parts in Genoese. The thesis text contains many quotations from the interviews, both in Genoese and Italian. I decided to reproduce only the former in the original language and to translate the latter into English – except in the case of mixed, multilingual interviews –, for two reasons. The first is that dialogues and interviews published in the dialect variants investigated are scarce in print, and in this way, this thesis, which has a purely geographical disciplinary structure, can at the same time be enriched by linguistic support and in turn become a secondary source for any future dialectological research on the Vara Valley. The second reason concerns Italian, which I chose not to include simply to streamline the narrative and shorten the thesis, which would otherwise have been too long.

Finally, a few words should be said about reading Genoese, in particular its variants mentioned in the text. In Genoese, the letter *o* is pronounced like the Italian *u*, while the letter *u* is pronounced like in French; however, when these two vowels are found together in the diphthong *ou* (as in *seccou*), they are pronounced as in Italian. The diphthong *eu* is pronounced as in French. *â*, *ê*, *î* are pronounced as in Italian, but long. *ö* and *ò* are pronounced as the open Italian *o*, long and short respectively; *ô* as the Italian long *u*. *æ* generally corresponds to the long open Italian *e*. *ñ* is the velar nasal *n* (as in *banco* in Italian), while *x* is pronounced as the French *j*. *ç* represents the sound of the English *sun*. *z* is always read as in English, corresponding to the voiced *s* in Italian *rosa*; in fact, the Italian zed sound does not exist in Genoese. Double consonants are always read as if they were single when they come before the stressed syllable (for example: *ammiâ*, 'to see', is pronounced 'amiâ'). In some of the local dialects, the *s* before consonants such as *t* and *c* – but sometimes also when followed by vowels – tends to be pronounced as in the Italian *sciare* and is represented in this thesis by *š*; in other cases, it is read as the Italian *s* of *sugo*.

2.3. The use of visual and literary sources: re-photography and travel writing

2.3.1. Rephotography

Visual research is now an established methodology within geographical analysis (Rose, 2001; Schwartz, Ryan, 2003; Bignante, 2011; Gemignani, 2013; Doucet, 2019; Governa, Pellecchia, 2023) that places a strong emphasis on visual materials, which become fundamental tools in the process of producing new geographical knowledge. According to the distinction made by Harper (1988) and taken up by Bignante (2011), approaches based on this methodology range from the more strictly scientific one – consisting of the use of images as a store of information and data – to the narrative – aimed at describing social changes – the phenomenological – focused on the emotions aroused by visual productions – and the reflective – concerning issues related to the positioning of the researcher and the “critical significance of visual language” (Governa, Pellecchia, 2023, p. 32). This thesis uses scientific and narrative perspectives and brings them into dialogue with each other.

Among the numerous visual sources, the power and potential of photographs for geographical research have been widely emphasised in the discipline (Schwartz, 1996; Schwartz, Ryan, 2003; Rossetto, 2004; Cosgrove, 2008; Vecchio, 2009; Giorda, 2009; Gemignani 2012), especially in relation to their connection with the concept of landscape (Turri, 1974; Gambi, 2002; Vecchio, 2009; Gemignani 2011; 2013), whose modern meaning primarily refers to a way of seeing (Cosgrove, 1984). However, alongside this conceptualisation, landscape is also shaped by the criterion of materiality, fully expressed in the centrality given to practices by historical ecology (Moreno, 1990; Grove, Rackham, 2001; etc.) or in the so-called landscape of practice (Cresswell, 2003), those practices that constitute and change the morphological and visual appearance of the landscape.

The essential operational tool of this analytical approach is rephotography, or repeated photography. This is a visual technique that consists of photographing the same place or phenomenon at different times to investigate the changes that have taken place. It already has a long tradition of use, especially in historical geography research (Moreno, Montanari, 1989; Métailié, 1997; Webb et al., 2010; Bignante, 2011; Strati, 2011; Gemignani, 2013; Brocada, 2020)²⁵. It allows us to visually record the changes that have taken place in the territory and to analyse diachronically the social structure of the groups that have contributed to creating a particular landscape (Rieger, 1996). In this thesis, rephotography has been applied to a valley

²⁵ The technique can be used in a similar way, for example, with paintings and works of art, as in the case of the works of nineteenth-century landscape painters (see: Piana *et al.*, 2018).

where, as we have seen, the transition from a rural to a post-industrial society has caused a profound transformation of practices and landscape, with the consequent collapse of active land management²⁶.

Among the many types of photographs that can be used, postcards are certainly of central importance. Starting in the early decades of the 20th century, they reveal an interest in the innermost part of the Apennines as a holiday resort and offer researchers visual information about the area. The texts accompanying the images can also be an important source of observation, as they allow us to understand how outsiders who spend time there perceive the places. Alongside photographs distributed as postcards, however, archives emerge as a geographical source of primary importance, which has been extensively developed in literature (Lorimer, 2009; Ogborn, 2011; Maggioli, 2011), in some cases with particular attention to their role in reconstructing the history of landscapes (Gemignani, 2011; 2013; Strati, 2011). On the other hand, the importance of private collections, especially family or personal collections, for the study of the relationship between society and territory appears to be more sporadically recognised (Chambers, 2003; Rose, 2011).

Following this latter front, alongside the postcards, it was decided to use the extensive photographic archive owned by the University of Nottingham and Professors Charles Watkins and Ross Balzaretto as the primary source of analysis, which was examined in detail during the six months spent at the English university. The existence of field courses since 1995 and the first site visits carried out since 1992 provide access to a rich 30-year repertoire of photographs – as well as research work carried out by students – which, when compared with the current situation, provides a wealth of information on landscape transformations. This time span is particularly important because, as highlighted in section 3.2, between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, there were significant changes, especially in the growth of wooded areas. After reviewing the reports archived in Nottingham, I selected the most significant and highest quality cases, comparing them with older photographs – mainly from postcards – and with images of the current situation.

2.3.2. Travel sources

Straddling visual and literary sources are travel sources, the study of which has scientific value from various points of view and for different disciplines. In geographical analysis, they can be a valuable tool, for example, for constructing a territorial biography of the area under

²⁶ Detailed methodological guidelines on the use of re-photography in rural contexts can be found in: Strati, 2011.

investigation, which in turn can serve as a basis for a wide variety of sectoral research. In this sense, both the aforementioned historical postcards and photographs and the travel reports of the Grand Tour are fundamental in analysing changes in land use and in broader studies concerning the socio-demographic future of inner areas.

Among the sources available for the Vara Valley, I have chosen to focus on the accounts of French travellers, which are still relatively unexplored in this area – unlike those written by English travellers –, who crossed the middle and lower valley longitudinally via the Bracco road towards Genoa or Tuscany; on the ‘technical’ reports of academics such as Domenico Viviani, who in 1807 focused on the upper valley – the current municipalities of Rocchetta di Vara and Zignago – or journalists such as Davide Bertolotti, who described the entire valley. The lack of sources of this type for the upper Vara Valley, which unlike the lower valley was located outside the classic Grand Tour routes (see section 3.1), makes Viviani’s accounts particularly important. Other travel sources, such as views, have been excluded because they have already been analysed, as in the case of the lower valley (Piana et al., 2012; 2018; 2021; Piana, 2020), or because they are not significantly present, as in the case of the upper valley.

2.4. The use of cartography

2.4.1. The progressive map comparison

Another fundamental step in the study of land use transformations was the comparison of maps from different periods. The technique used for the analysis is progressive cartographic filtering, which consists of “comparing a sequence of cartographic documents surveyed and drawn up on different dates representing the same site or area, for the purpose of reconstructing the historical dynamics of vegetation cover/land use over a given period of time” (Cevasco, 2007, p. 74). This must be accompanied by the study and interpretation of the preparatory documents attached, as well as the research that has previously made use of these maps. This integration helps standardise results when comparing different maps (Cevasco et al., 2005), reducing inconsistencies due to differences in the purposes and subjectivities involved in the drafting of the maps, but also in the scales and survey methods used, especially when the time gap between them is large.

Filtering – widely applied in geography and historical ecology studies²⁷ – has both a quantitative purpose, in relation to the extent of different land uses, and a qualitative purpose,

²⁷ See, for example: Moreno, Raggio, 1990; Moreno, 1995; Poggi, 1997; Poggi, Cevasco, 1997; Grove, Rackham, 2001; Cevasco, 2002; Cevasco et al., 2005; Moreno et al., 2005; Osaci-Costache, 2011; Gabellieri, Primi, 2017;

aimed at historicising current vegetation and reconstructing its links with the social practices that created the landscape (Cevasco, 2002).

In the case of this research, the cartography analysed consists of the 1936 Forest Map of the Kingdom of Italy on a scale of 1:100,000 (National Forestry Militia), the 1988 Vegetation Map of the Upper Val di Vara on a scale of 1:25,000 (CNR; edited by C. Montanari and M.A. Guido with the collaboration of M. Petrillo), the Land Use Maps of 2000 on a scale of 1:25,000 and of 2019 on a scale of 1:10,000 (Liguria Region). The time span considered is therefore over eighty years, while the intervals between one map and another are approximately fifty years between 1936 and 1988, about ten years between 1988 and 2000, and just under twenty years between 2000 and 2019. Further details on this cartography can be found in section 3.2.

2.4.2. Cadastral maps

Finally, cadastral maps played an important role. They were used, on the one hand, in section 4.2 to study the progressive transformation of rural centres after the Second World War and, on the other hand, in section 4.1 to study the dialectal microtoponymy of certain areas chosen as pilot study areas, namely the land around Mount Verruga and the villages of Campore, Valletti and Colli di Valletti. A fundamental distinction must be made in the cartography used between ‘historical’ cadastral maps and contemporary ones. The former, which vary between the 1950s – data collected in 1952 and reproduces in 1954 – for the centre of Campore and the 1980s – 1985 update – for the rest, show not only the boundaries between the lands but also the main toponymic indications, although they lack other names that were essential in rural life in the past and which have been added through interviews. The latter, accessible online and geolocatable via portals such as Maps Cadastre²⁸ (*Mappe Catasto*) or the Cadastral Cartographic Geoportal²⁹ (*Geoportale Cartografico Catastale*), and therefore easy to consult and use even in a GIS environment, are, however, at least in the form accessible to the public, devoid of any microtoponyms and therefore lacking crucial information for my research.

Cevasco et al., 2019; Piana et al., 2019; Gallinelli, 2020; Grava et al., 2020; Dai Prà, Gabellieri, 2021; Agnoletti et al., 2022; Brocada, Primi, 2023.

²⁸ See: <<https://www.mappecatasto.it/c2.htm>>.

²⁹ See: <<https://geoportale.cartografia.agenziaentrate.gov.it/age-inspire/srv/ita/catalog.search#/home>>.

CHAPTER 3: LAND USE AND SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE VARA VALLEY

This chapter examines land-use transformations and social changes in the Vara Valley through a broad range of sources, encompassing seventeenth- to twentieth-century travel literature, historical postcards and photographs analysed using rephotography, and progressive cartographic comparison.

The first section draws on selected travel sources available for the Vara Valley, focusing on previously underexplored French travellers who traversed and described the middle and lower valley via the Bracco Pass, on the late nineteenth-century scientific journeys of Domenico Viviani in the upper valley, and on a series of postcards depicting Varese Ligure in the early twentieth century. The second section presents the cartographic comparison conducted between maps from 1936, 1988, 2000, and 2019, highlighting and quantifying the dynamics of woodland and shrubland expansion over the past ninety years, at the expense of grasslands and cultivated land. The third section, finally, investigates site-scale transformations, drawing on postcards circulated from the 1920s through the 1980s and on photographs taken between the 1990s and early 2000s during the University of Nottingham field courses. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the key findings emerging from these three lines of analysis.

3.1. Travel sources for the construction of a territorial biography of the Vara Valley³⁰

3.1.1. The Ligurian Apennines and the Vara Valley in travel literature

Tra la linea verticale della giogaja Apennina ed i suoi rami secondarj che spiccandosi dal monte Zatta coprono il terzo e quarto arco della spiaggia, stendesi la lunga valle della Vara e de' suoi influenti. È il più malinconico ed infertile angolo della Liguria, nelle ime sue parti. In sull'alto ha Varese, piccola e non ingrata città, quasi a' confini dello stato di Parma. La catapecchia di Brugnato, posta ove più trista è la valle, ha titolo di città perchè già decorata di vescovado (Bertolotti, 1834, p. 37).

³⁰ Most of the sources used in this section come from the webGIS of PRIN 2022 PNRR *Envisioning Landscapes* of the Universities of Genoa (lead partner), Roma Tre and Trento (PI: Prof. Pietro Piana): <<https://grandtour.lettere.unitn.it/index.html>> (last accessed: 18 February 2026). The sources used here were collected and added to the website by dr. Lorenzo Brocada and Enrico Priarone.

The study of travel sources has scientific value from various points of view and for different disciplines. As discussed above (see Chapter 2), in geographical analysis they can be a valuable tool, for example, for constructing a territorial biography of the area under investigation, which in turn can serve as a basis for a wide variety of sectoral research. In this sense, travel reports, views, postcards and historical photographs of the Vara Valley contribute to the analysis of changes in land use and to broader studies concerning the socio-demographic future of inner areas.

The Vara Valley is traditionally divided into upper and lower valley³¹. The upper Vara Valley includes, from north to south, Varese Ligure, Maissana, Sesta Godano, Carro, Carrodano, Zignago and Rocchetta di Vara. The lower Valley roughly corresponds to the municipalities of Brugnato, Borghetto di Vara, Calice al Cornoviglio, Beverino, Pignone, Riccò del Golfo di Spezia, Bolano and Follo. Davide Bertolotti (*ibid.*, p. 14) describes the course of the Vara, the longest river entirely located in Ligurian territory, as follows:

Nasce la Vara dal dorso del monte Zatta sopra il luogo detto Codevara per indicarne il principio. Scende tra Comineglia e Valetti, bagna Varese, si cala a S. Pietro di Vara, corre tra Brugnato e il Borghetto, segna in qualche punto il confine tra gli stati del re di Sardegna e quelli di Modena e di Toscana, e finalmente perde il nome e le acque nella Magra a Vezzano (*ibid.*, p. 114).

The distinction between the upper and lower valley is based on geographical and historical reasons³², but it also constitutes a fundamental lens of analysis in the study of travel sources from Eastern Liguria. While the lower Vara Valley is widely represented³³, as it is crossed by the Bracco road, which connects Sestri Levante to La Spezia via internal roads, the upper Vara Valley was located outside the classic Grand Tour routes and is therefore scarcely mentioned in sources, with the exception of the already studied descriptions of travellers such as Frederic Lees (1913)³⁴ or works by ‘specialists’ such as the naturalist Domenico Viviani (1807), the journalist Davide Bertolotti (1834) and the abbot Goffredo Casalis (1853), whose works are analysed to varying degrees in this chapter; and excluding postcards, which reveal an interest in the innermost areas of the Apennines as a holiday resort from the 20th century onwards. An

³¹ Among the many examples, see the 1929 Agricultural Cadastre (ISTAT, 1934).

³² This distinction also poses some problems concerning the identification of a ‘defined and recognisable identity’ based on a physical-geomorphological unity and/or a historical-social identity unit for the Val di Vara inner area, as required by the SNAI criteria (PCM, 2025) for the definition of Italian inner areas (cf. section 1.2.2).

³³ Cf.: Piana *et al.*, 2012; Piana *et al.*, 2018; Piana, 2020; Piana *et al.*, 2021.

³⁴ For an analysis of Lees’ work, see: Balzaretti, 2011; Balzaretti, 2021; Piana *et al.*, 2021.

explanation for the lack of interest in travel to the Apennine area, especially when compared to the Alpine areas, is given by Viviani himself at the end of his 1807 book (p. 27):

Les voyages dans l'intérieur de l'Apennin n'ont jamais cet intérêt, que le spectacle vraiment magnifique des Alpes inspire aux personnes même étrangères à l'Histoire Naturelle. En effet, une chaîne de montagnes monotones dans leurs formes, d'un aspect sombre et sauvage, souvent arides et raboteuses ne présentent pas au voyageur cette variété de tableaux, qui se suivent sans interruption, et toujours avec une nouvelle admiration dans les Alpes Helvétiques. On ne dirait pas que les Apennins de la Ligurie, du triste séjour de leurs vallées intérieures, vinssent étaler toutes les beautés du paysage le plus riant sur les bords de la Méditerranée.

In this work, as in Bertolotti's description opening this chapter (1834), we find some common topic relating to rural life, described as brutal and full of hardship, particularly in this area of Liguria, often described as gloomy, melancholic and not very generous in terms of agricultural production. In addition to landscape analysis, travel sources are also useful because they often provide statistical³⁵, economic and social considerations, such as those of Bertolotti (1834, pp. 114-115 and 291):

La valle della Vara, ricetto di 30[m. abitatori [25,000 negli Stati del Re, 5,000 ne' Modenesi e Toscani], fa mostra di bella coltivazione nelle sue pendici rivolte al sole, molte delle quali si veston d'ulivi. Ma la vite n'è il maggiore prodotto. Vi seminano anche il canape. Tuttavia gran parte de' suoi contadini trapassa in Lombardia a far i lavori campestri nella buona stagione [...] per riportare nell'autunno in patria i suoi pochi risparmi. [...] Il popolo segregato dal mare [...] è povero, sucido, rozzo; fa produrre all'alpestre suo suolo grano, segale, patate, non molto vino, pochissimo olio.

Viviani (1807, p. 25) as well goes into details on descriptions of the population and rural economy of the Eastern Apennines, sometimes relating them to the salubriousness of the air and the spread of disease, which the author attributes to the compact layout of the small, "mal bâtis et mal propres" settlements, which normally have between 300 and 1,000 inhabitants. During the day, the villages empty out because the inhabitants are entirely occupied with agricultural activities.

³⁵ For example, population data for certain municipalities in 1815, 1822 and 1827 reported by Bertolotti (1834, pp. 222-224) or agricultural production data reported by Casalis (1853, p. 829).

Leurs maisons sont si rapprochées, que de loin on dirait, qu'un seul toit couvre tout le village. Cette manière de bâtir, qui ne permet pas la libre circulation d'air dans l'intérieur des maisons, ne contribue pas peu à la rapide propagation des maladies contagieuses qui, malgré la position élevée de ces villages, y font de grands ravages dès qu'elles y pénètrent.

On the subject of rural economy, the same author – like other contemporaries, for that matter³⁶ – emphasises the fundamental importance of chestnuts in the subsistence of the Apennine populations, as much as, and perhaps more than, olives are for the coastal area. Viviani also notes an increase in the production of wheat, cultivated on the edges of the plains along the streams, which is still seen as a luxury product and a habit imported from the cities, and therefore mainly sold to coastal towns. Chestnuts, prepared in various ways, even when fresh, were essential for the production of flour-based foods – known in dialect as *levâ*, *patoña*, *panelle*, *pan martin*, etc.; cf. section 4.3 –, which fed the population throughout the year. Viviani briefly describes the process of producing chestnut flour and paints an interesting picture of the practices surrounding it, such as the drying of chestnuts (see the analysis in section 4.4).

Alongside chestnut trees, the agricultural landscape is also characterised by various other crops, including vineyards, whose grapes, however, never ripen completely and therefore produce an acidic wine that is usually blended with wines from the coast (ibid., pp. 25-26).

3.1.2. “Da Zena verso Spèzza, passando in sciô pe-o Bracco”: crossing the middle and lower Vara Valley between the 17th and 19th centuries

Until the advent of the railway (1874) and then the motorway (1971), the Bracco Pass (612 m a.s.l.), which connects Sestri Levante and Petronio Valley to Borghetto and Vara Valley, was an obligatory stop for anyone wishing to travel lengthwise along Liguria. As highlighted by Piana (2020), the pass has long been described by travellers as a harsh and arid place, wild and dangerous, teeming with bandits; 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century texts by French travellers and Bertolotti's account confirm this view. During his journey in 1830, Pierre Charles Joseph, Baron of Mengin-Fondragon, emphasised (1833, p. 148), for example, the diversity of the landscape along the road from Sestri Levante up to Bracco compared to what he had seen up to that point along the coast:

³⁶ See the analysis of other areas of Liguria in: Cevasco *et al.*, 2015.

La route aujourd’hui m’offrit un aspect tout différent. Ce ne fut plus la mer, des golfes, des promontoires, des sites enchanteurs que j’eus à admirer ; mais j’eus à parcourir des lieux sauvages, à gravir et à descendre des montagnes escarpées, à éviter des précipices dont j’osais à peine mesurer la profondeur, à pénétrer dans des forêts de sapins et de châtaigniers.

The Bracco area became synonymous with banditry in Liguria, so much so that, according to the author, the inhabitants of the Riviera at the time would say, when faced with thieves and murderers, “*est-ce que nous sommes ici à Bracco?*”. According to Mengin-Fondragon, banditry was eradicated in the years immediately preceding his journey only thanks to French intervention (ibid., pp. 148-149). This reputation as a place of banditry has remained to this day, so much so that the danger of the pass is also found in a well-known Ligurian folk song, *Olidin olidena*, a verse of which is widespread in Eastern Liguria and reads as follows:

Da Zena verso Spèzza,
passando in sciô pe-o Bracco,
se no ti stæ attento
[...] i te fan o cû co-o bacco³⁷.

Once past the pass and through Mattarana – now part of the municipality of Carrodano – described by Bertolotti as a “*meschino villaggio*”, wretched village (Bertolotti, 1834, p. 113), the landscape becomes gentler and more fertile on the descent towards Borghetto di Vara, which guarantees the presence of vineyards, wheat, legumes, chestnut trees, and other crops grown on terraces:

Cependant depuis Mattaro, quoique parcourant toujours les Apennins, le paysage devint moins sévère. Les montagnes étaient plus fertiles, et des terrasses s’y élevaient en gradins jusqu’à une certaine élévation. On y voyait la vigne grimper le long d’arbres taillés en forme de gobelets, et y attacher ses délicats rameaux ; entre les arbres croissait quelquefois un peu de froment, de lin, des fèves ou des légumes ; ailleurs des châtaigniers mêlaient leur ombrage à celui des pins et des merisiers (Mengin-Fondragon, 1833, p. 149).

Despite this, descriptions of villages and rural life remain linked to an image of poverty and hardship: “quelquefois je traversais de pauvres villages composés de quelques misérables

³⁷ “From Genoa to La Spezia, passing through Bracco, if you’re not careful [...] they’ll bust your ass with a stick”.

chaumières dispersées çà et là, tantôt je voyais errer quelques vaches maigres et petites, ou paître quelques moutons à longues oreilles tombantes, et chargés d'une toison épaisse et non frisée" (ibid.).

P.N. Dagnet, who had traveled to Liguria just two years earlier (1828), similarly describes (p. 38) Bracco and Mattarana from a social point of view, attributing the credit for the purge of brigands to the King of Sardinia and not to the French, while the harsh and poor landscape painted by Mengin-Fondragon gives way to the outline of a pleasant area, well cultivated and rich in olive groves, thanks in particular to road improvement works: "on travaille sur cette route à l'améliorer ; on y voit beaucoup d'ouvriers occupés à la mine pour faire sauter des fragments de rochers, pour élargir et rendre la route plus sûre".

These descriptions fit well with those of Balthazar Grangier de Liverdis, written a century and a half earlier (1667), who describes (pp. 173-174) these places even more clearly as inaccessible and inhabited by tough and grumpy people, without however mentioning banditry:

en partant de Sestri dit Levante, j'entray dans une route plus fascheuse & plus perilleuse que toutes les precedentes, & je franchis une montagne la plus haute & la plus difficile de toute la côte. S'apprehendois beaucoup que l'on ne mist une Croix à mon occasion avec celles que j'y apperceus, & arrivay à Mataran qui est à douze milles de Sestri di Levante, où je pris mon repas & mon repos. [...] Mataran est un village au milieu des montagnes, éloigné de tout commerce & de la Mer. J'y trouvay des Hôtes qui me faisoient tres mauvaise mine, mais graces à Dieu je m'en tiray & en sortis après avoir pris la Police pour les Chevaux [...]. Je continuay ma route dans des chemins plus perilleux que difficiles à cause de la glace que j'y rencontrais dans les endroits les plus étroits, causée par les petits ruisseaux qui coulent du sommet des Montagnes.

If Mattarana represents the gateway to the Vara Valley, the next stop, often a resting place before arriving in La Spezia, is Borghetto di Vara: "je descendis ensuite dans un valon, où je passay une Riviere à Guay par trois fois, & passay à Borghetto Bourg à six milles de Mataran" (ibid.). Louis Valentin, who traveled the road in the opposite direction in 1820, praised the "bonne auberge", where he stopped before passing through Mattarana, beyond which "on continue alors à voyager par un beau chemin, mais montueux, à travers des roches calcaires, des serpentines et des schistes, ayant presque toujours en vue la mer, et l'on descend à Sestri du Levant" (Valentin, 1826, p. 351).

As we have seen, the stretch of road to Borghetto is often described as gentler than the ascent to Bracco from Sestri Levante, and even the inhabitants appear more beautiful, according to the

classic degrading cliché of rural life: “parmi les habitans j’en remarquai d’assez beaux, ce qui jusqu’ici ne m’était guère arrivé, au moins dans la campagne” (Mengin-Fondragon, pp. 149-150). However, the lower Vara Valley is generally described as a rather unpleasant place, as evidenced by this passage from the Countess of Chastellux, who travelled through Italy in 1834: “puis nous entrons dans de tristes montagnes ; notre déjeuner à Borghetto ajoute à la déplaisance de cette journée, qui nous paraît longue ; il est nuit quand nous descendons à l’auberge de Sestri” (Chastellux, 1885, pp. 558-559). Or, again, this passage by Bertolotti (1834, p. 113) from the same year: “dopo molta vicenda di erta e di china, si giunge finalmente al Borghetto, di trista rimembranza ai viaggiatori per la tetraggine del luogo e pel sucidume de’ suoi abitatori”.

On the left bank of the Vara, opposite Borghetto, lies Brugnato, one of the most important towns in the valley. Viviani (1807, pp. 24-25) links the spread of disease to the conformation of the Brugnato area, a plain surrounded on all sides by mountains that prevent air circulation and cause sunlight to reflect in all directions, leading to the development of cretinism – due to iodine deficiency – among the inhabitants. According to Bertolotti (1834, p. 115), the stretch of road connecting the town to La Spezia is still dotted with places that are horrible to look at, before the spectacle offered by the Gulf of La Spezia:

La strada esce dal Borghetto, costeggia la Vara, poi improvvisamente, senza che quasi ve n’avvegiate, si trasporta sulla manca riva del torrente Riccò, ch’essa attraversa per trasferirsi sulla riva diritta. Pieno di tristaggine anzi d’orridezza è questo tratto se alla natura del paese si miri, ma le opere della strada lungo la Vara chieggono riguardo ed encomio. Nè lieve impresa era il condurla a piè di una rupe che senza posa divalla e ruina. Nobilmente architettato sorge il ponte che cavalca il burrato, o, come e’ dicono, canal del Pignone.

3.1.3. Scientific trips as sources of travel literature: the upper Vara Valley through the descriptions of Domenico Viviani

Travelling ideally northwards through the valley, Domenico Viviani’s 1807 work is useful for learning about the geology, flora, and fauna of the area around Mount Dragnone (1,007 m a.s.l.), in what are now the municipalities of Zignago and Rocchetta di Vara. In his work, Viviani describes the various hamlets he encounters, as well as the agricultural practices and social and health characteristics of the area. Mount Dragnone (municipality of Zignago) dominates the view along the road that leads from the hamlet of Sasseta (in the territory of Zignago) to Rocchetta:

Le chemin, qui de Sasseto conduit à la Rocchetta, traverse une montagne connue ici sous le nom de *Dragnon* : son aspect est aussi rude, et les fables qu'on débite sur sa formation sont aussi singulières, que les habitans la regardent avec horreur. [...] au milieu d'un bassin assez bien cultivé, on voit s'élever le mont du Dragon, aride et raboteux, d'une figure conique, et encombré depuis son sommet jusqu'à sa base de blocs de Serpentine de différentes grosseurs (Viviani, 1807, p. 1; original italics).

The description also refers to the Vezzanelli plain (650 m a.s.l.), formerly a grazing area and now also known as the venue for the annual Festival of Peasant Culture (*Festa della cultura contadina*): “le sommet de ce mont, est tronqué et présente une plaine alongée d'environ 250 mètres de circonférence, qu'on appelle ici la plaine de *Vezzanelli*” (ibid.; original italics) Viviani's journey then continues in the territory of Pieve di Zignago along the Suvero stream, “qui marque ici les bornes entre l'Empire Français et le Royaume d'Italie” and which he crosses “à une lieue, à peu-près, de sa source” (ibid., p. 8) to reach Rocchetta and the Monte Nero (715 m above sea level) above it:

Ce village [Rocchetta] pauvre et mal bâti [...] est enseveli dans l'intérieur des Apennins au confluent de deux torrens [the Suvero canal to the east and the Veppo canal to the west], qui se disputent ensemble les restes d'une plaine, qui fut jadis la partie plus riche et plus fertile de son territoire. La montagne qui s'élève au Levant de la Rocchetta est aride et raboteuse, d'une couleur noire-rougeâtre, d'où, peut-être, elle tire le nom de Montenero. De ce côté le pays spire un air sombre et sauvage ; mais le plateau élevé qui domine la Rocchetta, tout couvert d'oliviers et de vignes, est d'autant plus agréable à la vue, qu'il est environné de montagnes stériles et sauvages. [...] Elle n'est séparée du confluent de ces deux torrens que par une plaine triangulaire très bien cultivée, de deux kilomètres à-peu-près de circonférence (ibid., pp. 8-9).

In describing the rural landscape around Rocchetta – north of which lies Suvero Castle – Viviani points out that farming the land surrounding the villages alone would not be enough to sustain the inhabitants if it were not accompanied by grazing on the extensive grasslands located at higher altitudes in the mountains. Finally, the naturalist descends to Brugnato along the Gravegnola stream (which he calls Cravègna), highlighting what today would be defined as possible geo-hydrological risks:

La réunion de ces deux torrens vis-à-vis de la Rocchetta en forme un autre qu'on appelle ici la Cravègna, qui verse ses eaux dans la Vara tout près de la petite ville de Brugnato, à une lieue de

sa source. Ce torrent très-impétueux, et dont le lit s'augmente tous les ans par les débris des montagnes magnésiennes en décomposition qui le bordent, ne manquera pas tôt ou tard d'encombrer de cailloux les belles plaines de Brugnato, dont la culture forme à présent toute la richesse et le bien-être de ses habitants (ibid., p. 9).

Viviani's interest in Monte Nero is linked to his examination of the manganese mine, which is now inactive, like the others throughout the Val di Vara. According to the naturalist, at the time (1807) manganese mines were very widespread, with five in the Riviera di Levante alone (ibid., p. 12). Among the crops that characterise the landscape around Rocchetta, olive trees stand out, in a variety that allows them to survive down to -10° R (Réaumur scale) and produce olives down to -6° R, and therefore even during the harsh Apennine winters, whose temperatures at the same time prevent the proliferation of the olive fruit fly (*Bactrocera oleae*). However, this variety is not as productive as those of the Riviera:

La plante qui parmi les autres annonce du premier abord le doux climat de la Rocchetta, et de ses environs, c'est l'Olivier. [...] Les variétés d'Olivier qu'on cultive à la Rocchetta, et dans presque tout l'intérieur des Apennins de la Ligurie, sont appelées, parmi nous, *Olivastri*, *Selvatiche*, *Mortine*. [...] Il ne faut pas s'attendre à voir dans les Oliviers de ces montagnes, tout respectés qu'ils sont par le froid, cette régularité et cette quantité de produit, que toutes les variétés de la même plante portent dans la Ligurie maritime. [...] Mais en revanche ce degré de froid, qui n'est pas favorable à la fructification de cet arbre, et à la sécrétion de l'huile dans son fruit, le garantit des dégâts de la larve d'une mouche qui régulièrement tous les deux ans ravage la récolte tout le long de la côte (ibid., pp. 19-21; original italics).

Viviani also provides a wealth of information on the fauna found in the Apennines, particularly rodents – such as the hazel dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*)³⁸ – which feed on chestnuts and olives, from which they derive the nutrients they need to proliferate, and which nest in these trees. Other animals present include various species of birds, which nest in the woods, and fish, notably trout, which inhabit the Vara, Magra and tributary streams such as the Durla and Gottera (municipality of Sesta Godano) (Viviani, 1807, pp. 22-24).

³⁸ Today, the species is in sharp decline and has been included in Annex IV of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) as a species of European interest in need of strict protection. It is considered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (1996) to be of least concern (LC) but close to threatened (Arillo, Mariotti, 2007). It is also included in the IUCN Red List of Italian Vertebrates (*Lista Rossa IUCN dei vertebrati italiani*; Rondanini, 2022).

3.1.4. “Bellissimi dintorni” and “splendide passeggiate”: Varese Ligure and the upper Vara Valley through early 20th-century postcards

As mentioned, travel sources are scarcer in the upper Vara Valley, with the exception of the account by Frederic Lees (1913), who stayed in Varese Ligure in 1911 after visiting Sestri Levante and before arriving in Borgotaro and Pontremoli, travelling along the Velva Pass (545 m a.s.l.) and the Centocroci Pass, thus voluntarily leaving the classic route to Tuscany that crossed the Bracco. Lees himself recommends this detour “off the beaten track” in “a rather deserted district [...] to the lover of mountain scenery, but also to the geologist and mineralogist” (ibid., p. 293).

Further food for thought comes from postcards from the early 20th century, which serve a dual purpose: visual analysis of landscape changes and analysis of the accompanying texts. Unlike the travelogues of previous centuries linked to the Grand Tour phenomenon, these draw on the testimonies of those who were in the Ligurian Apennines on vacation³⁹ or for work reasons linked to the modernisation of unified Italy. The subject of the first two postcards shown (Figs. 3.1.1 and 3.1.2) is Varese Ligure in 1917, already described by Bertolotti in 1834 as a town divided between the older Borgo Rotondo and the new suburbs:

Varese, comune di 6000 abitanti, ha qualche aspetto di città. È come diviso in due; il vecchio e il nuovo. Il vecchio è di forma rotonda, era anticamente fortificato: serve ad uso di prigione il suo vecchio castello. Il nuovo (o i sobborghi) ha qualche bella casa e una piazza. È abitato da gente agiata e civile. Sopra un’eminenza lungi tre miglia stanno le rovine di una rocca che forse difendeva il passo di Cento Croci, onde si scende nella Valle del Taro. [...] I migliori funghi secchi che dal Genovesato si spediscono all’estero e sino in America, vengono apparecchiati dalle monache di Varese (Bertolotti, 1834, p. 114).

³⁹ As Lees himself testified in 1911, defining Varese Ligure as the holiday resort of choice for Sestri Levante, just as Torriglia was for Genoa (ibid., p. 294).



Insegnante Varese-Ligure

Gent.ma Sig.na

Sono quassù a Varese Ligure a 1'h e mezza d'automobile da Sestri Levante dal 1° Gennaio|in qualità di maestra provvisoria della classe 3^a mista.

Mi trovo molto bene sia per la classe come per il paese che è cap. di mandamento quasi una piccola cittadina, con bellissimi dintorni e con splendide passeggiate.

Sono in pensione in casa del notaio Boccardo, colla cui sig.na mi faccio buonissima compagnia. Spesso viene mamma e babbo e anche loro sono contenti. Per parte mia non desideravo altro che d'incominciare la carriera. Speravo venire un po a Genova per Carnevale e invece bisognerà rimandare a Pasqua.

Riverendola assieme alla sua sig.ra mamma e sorella con tanto affetto saluti e baci sinceri.

Dev.ma, [...] 25-/2-/17

Fig. 3.1.1. Postcard sent in September 1917, depicting the centre of Varese Ligure and featuring a description of its surroundings by an outsider on the back, transcribed here: “Teacher in Varese-Ligure. Dear Miss, I have been up here in Varese Ligure, an hour and a half drive from Sestri Levante, since 1 January as a temporary teacher of the mixed Year 3 class. I am very happy both with the class and with the town, which is the district capital, almost a small town, with beautiful surroundings [“bellissimi dintorni”] and splendid walks [“splendide passeggiate”]. I am staying at the home of the notary Boccardo, with whose daughter I enjoy the most agreeable company. My mum and dad often visit and they are also happy. For my part, I wanted nothing more than to start my career. I was hoping to come to Genoa for Carnival, but instead I will have to postpone it until Easter. Sending my respectful regards to you, your mother, and your sister, with much affection and sincere kisses. Yours most devoted [...] 25/02/1917”. Translation by the Author.

Source: Picclick.

This postcard (Fig. 3.1.1), sent in February 1917, in the midst of the First World War, not only shows us a glimpse of the main square and castle of Varese Ligure, still topped by two trees, but also allows us to understand the perception of the place by an outsider, a teacher

temporarily assigned to the primary school – which she promptly points out on the left of the first image (“la mia classe”, my classroom), in a building that borders the Borgo Rotondo and still bears the sign of the old school, even though it has changed function – and housed in the home of a notary, in the building opposite the castle, which is indicated in the image (“la casa”, the house). The teacher, who refers to Varese as the district capital, “almost a small town”, praises its “beautiful surroundings” and “splendid walks”.

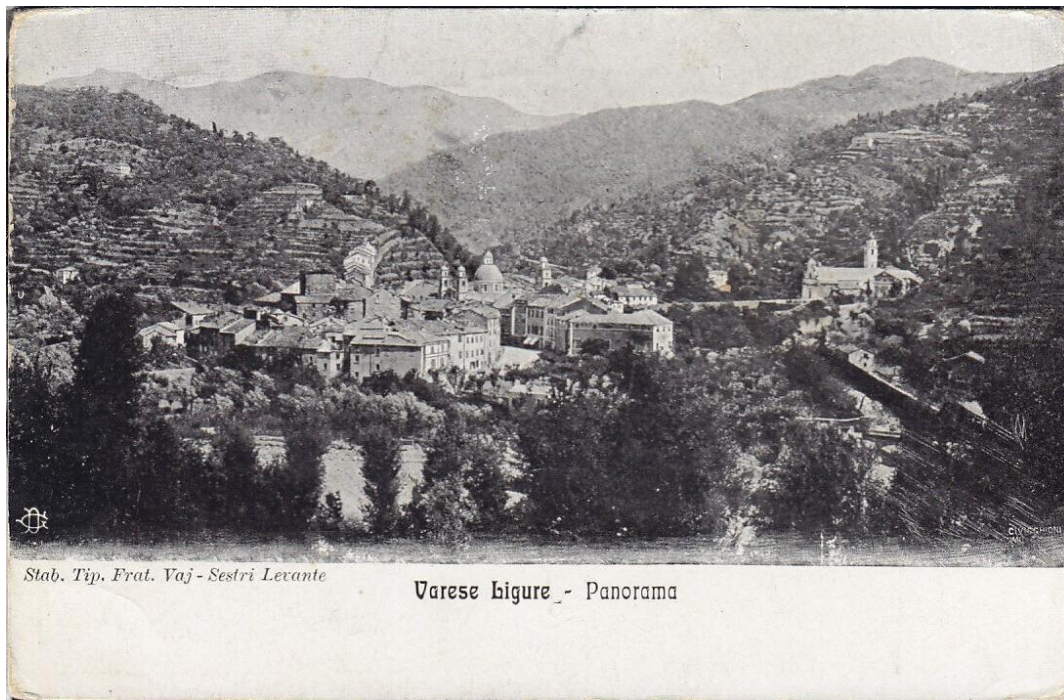


Fig. 3.1.2. Postcard sent in September 1912, depicting Varese Ligure and its surroundings as seen from the south-west.
Source: Picclick.

The beautiful surroundings and splendid walks mentioned above are clearly visible in a postcard sent a few years earlier, in September 1912, to the same recipient as the previous one (Fig. 3.1.2). Varese Ligure is seen from the south-west, just beyond the right bank of the River Vara. Behind the riparian vegetation, the layout of Borgo Rotondo is visible, separated from the rest of the town by the main road leading to the castle, located behind the Borgo. Further behind, along the same route, a group of houses climbs up the hill, in a neighbourhood called Grecino (*Grexin* in the local dialect). On the right stands the church of San Giovanni Battista, separated from the town by vegetation, now replaced by the road leading to the Cento Croci pass, on the border with Emilia. On both sides, the cultivated terraced plains stand out, now mainly covered with woodland vegetation.

3.2. The diachronic analysis of land use in the upper Vara Valley through cartography

Interventions aimed at counteracting, or simply managing, the processes of decline in areas devoted to agro-silvo-pastoral uses and the expansion of secondary woodland formations require tools capable of supporting preliminary analyses of the transformations that have occurred. The diachronic study of land use in the Apennine valleys responds to this need. The area examined in the present analysis corresponds to the two northernmost municipalities of the Val di Vara inner area, Varese Ligure and Maissana, classified by the SNAI as peripheral with respect to essential service centres. The territory of the two municipalities is often equated with the geographical area referred to as the ‘upper Vara Valley’ (as in: Montanari, 1988b), primarily due to the size of the municipality of Varese Ligure, which, with its nearly 138 km², is the second largest in Liguria, surpassed only by Genova. The area is predominantly mountainous and exhibits an altitudinal range of approximately 1,400 m: its highest point is Mount Gottero (1,640 m a.s.l.), while its lowest lies along the Vara River, near the hamlet of Montale (250 m a.s.l.). The two administrative entities have experienced a demographic decline characteristic of much of the Ligurian Apennines throughout the second half of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century – between 1936 and 2024, -74% for Varese Ligure and -68.8% for Maissana (ISTAT, 1936; 2024) – with the consequent abandonment of agro-silvo-pastoral areas.

Within the vast repertoire of research on the upper Val di Vara (see Chapter 1), some studies have focused on reconstructing land use and vegetation activation practices over a long period of time (among others: Moreno, Raggio, 1990; Moreno, 1995; Poggi, Cevasco, 1997; Cevasco et al., 1997-98-99; Cevasco et al., 2005; Watkins, 2004). Diego Moreno, in particular, reconstructs the practices in use until the end of the common law regime – prior to the adoption of the Napoleonic Civil Code in 1806 – based on the multiple, promiscuous use of resources, and those that followed, adopted under the forestry regime and active for about a century between 1833 and 1927, year of the promulgation of the law regulating common land rights (*comunaglie*) (L. 16 June 1927 ‘Reorganization of the Civic Uses of the Kingdom’; *Riordinamento degli usi civici del Regno*). According to Moreno (1988a; 1990), the latter include all those practices that could not be improved and which, at a certain historical stage, that of modernisation and mountain depopulation, were progressively flattened into a ‘traditional’ dimension. These uses are also those that have left the most evident traces on the vegetation and landscape of the valley and can be reconstructed historically: forestry (i.e. regular coppicing) and grazing, mainly – which were equally distributed –, combined with mowing of meadows (or meadow-pastures) and permanent agricultural crops (Moreno, 1988b).

In the wake of the literature described above, this section focuses on reconstructing the changes in land use that occurred between the 1930s and the end of the 2010s, with the aim of identifying the transformations that took place as a result of depopulation. It places particular emphasis on the last thirty years, with a view to updating previous scientific studies on land use in the upper valley.

3.2.1. *The cartography used*

The cartography, analysed using the progressive map comparison technique (see Chapter 2), is composed as follows:

- *Carta forestale del Regno d'Italia* ['Kingdom of Italy's Forest Map'], Milizia Nazionale Forestale, 1936 [1:100.000];
- *Carta della vegetazione dello scenario dell'alta Val di Vara* ['Vegetation Map of upper Val di Vara'], CNR, a cura di C. Montanari e M.A. Guido con la collaborazione di M. Petrillo, 1988 [1:25.000];
- *Carta dell'Uso del Suolo* ['Land Use Map'], Regione Liguria, 2000 [1:25.000];
- *Carta dell'Uso del Suolo*, Regione Liguria, 2019 [1:10.000].

The time span is therefore over eighty years, while the intervals between one map and another are approximately fifty years between 1936 and 1988, about ten years between 1988 and 2000, and just under twenty years between 2000 and 2019. The use of the Forest Map of the Kingdom of Italy, in particular, proved fundamental in identifying changes in the extent and use of the forest following the major transformations after the Second World War, although it does not provide any information on other types of land use. Coeval data on arable land, meadows/meadow-pastures/permanent pastures, and productive uncultivated land are reported in the 1929 Agricultural Cadastre for the Province of La Spezia (ISTAT, 1934), alongside a detailed categorization of land use and livestock types. However, in addition to the differing classification criteria employed, the data relating to the municipality of Maissana are further rendered unusable by the fact that at that time the municipal territory included the hamlet of Statale, which was detached in 1937 and annexed to the municipality of Ne (GE). These data, together with those for Varese Ligure, will nevertheless be presented, as they are undoubtedly of interest. In light of the lack of information on these land-use categories, particular attention was paid to the thirty-year comparison between the situations in 1988, 2000 and 2019, which are more easily comparable also because they are approximately fifteen years apart.

Alongside the analysis of cartography, related sources have been of great importance for the interpretation of the various surveys and classifications, such as the attached written works (Bregola, 1939; Montanari, 1988b; Geographike, Arcadia SIT, 2011; Rocca, De Felici, 2021) and the research that previously made use of them (Marchetti et al., 2009; Ferretti et al., 2018; Agnoletti et al., 2022), in order to obtain a ‘realistic’ deciphering of the sources (Moreno, 1990; Grava et al., 2020). As seen in section 2.4.1, this integration serves to reduce the relativity of the results that the comparison between different maps entails (Cevasco et al., 2005).

The first map used for comparison is the Forest Map of the Kingdom of Italy, produced by the National Forestry Militia in 276 sheets in 1936 at a scale of 1:100,000, based on an original sample initially reported at a scale of 1:25,000 on maps (*tavolette*) from the Italian Military Geographical Institute (IGM) (Bregola, 1939). This is the first map to reproduce a representation of forest distribution at national level divided into categories (Marchetti et al., 2009; Ferretti et al., 2018), allowing the extent and uses of woodlands in the 1930s to be reconstructed. It was digitised and vectorised by Ferretti et al. (2018) and is currently available for download online in raster and vector format⁴⁰. The publication also serves as a secondary source from which to infer the criteria used for the identification of tree species, as coeval information is not available (ibid.). The map presents three levels of classification based on the main species type and the silvicultural system adopted – timber vs. firewood. The first level consists of three macro-categories: conifers, broadleaves and degraded woodland. Broadleaves are further divided into six categories: beech; oak and English oak; Turkey oak (“which can provide construction or working timber”); cork oak; chestnut; other species or mixed. The third level of categorisation has five subcategories for conifers – spruce, silver fir, larch, pines, stone pine –, while each category of broadleaf trees is subdivided into: tall trees, mixed coppice, coppice.

The second map examined is the Vegetation Map of the Upper Vara Valley (Montanari, Guido, 1988a), produced in 1988 as part of the National Research Council’s (CNR) ‘Increasing Agricultural Resources Productivity’ project (*progetto ‘Incremento Produttività Risorse Agricole’ del Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche*) on a scale of 1:25,000, based on the Regional Thematic Cartography (*Cartografia Tematica Regionale*) of the Liguria Region on the same scale. The map is accompanied by explanatory notes, which are of primary importance for understanding the research methods, the distribution and history of the vegetation, the calculations made and the products obtained (Montanari, 1988a; Montanari, Guido, 1988b;

⁴⁰ Available on the website: <carta1936.dicam.unitn.it> (last accessed: 20 February 2026).

Moreno, 1988b). The method used for data collection and processing is phytosociological, accompanied by field studies and aerial photogrammetric rechecking. The map is divided into six main categories: arboreal vegetation, shrubby veg., herbaceous veg., vegetation with a strong anthropic influence, inhabited areas, interpenetrations between different vegetation types. The first is divided into three subcategories: mesophilic and mesothermophilic hillside and submontane woodland (between 300 m and 800/900 m a.s.l.) dominated by chestnut or Turkey oak, locally also by hop hornbeam or mixed species; mesophilic montane woodland (between 850/900 m and 1,640 m a.s.l.) dominated by beech or locally chestnut, hop hornbeam or Turkey oak; scrubland and hygrophilous alveolar woodland. The second is divided into three subcategories: high heaths (at medium-low altitudes); low heaths (above 500 m a.s.l.); pre-forest shrub stages. The third is divided into two subcategories: meso-thermophilic grassland, mostly grazed and sometimes mowed (above 600 m above sea level); predominantly herbaceous vegetation on eroded soils and exposed rock. The fourth is divided into three subcategories: partially abandoned meso-thermophilic hay meadows; specialised crops and arable land; conifers or broadleaves reforestation. There are no further subdivisions for inhabited areas, while there are 14 interpenetrations between arboreal, shrubby and herbaceous vegetation (Montanari, Guido, 1988a; Montanari, 1988a). The map was only available in paper format, so it was digitised at a resolution of 200 dpi in the summer of 2023 by the Geomorfolab of the Department of Architecture and Design of the University of Genoa, under the supervision of Dr Paola Salmona. I then proceeded with georeferencing using QGIS 3.28.4-Firenze LTR software, starting from four IGM tablets from 1937⁴¹ and 1938⁴², taking seven common points along the UTM kilometre grid.

The third source analysed is the Land Use Map produced in 2000 by the Liguria Region on a scale of 1:25,000. It originates from the European CORINE Land Cover project and is therefore based on photo interpretation and aerial photography at a scale of 1:13,000, from which the different types of land surveyed were tessellated (<<https://geoportal.regione.liguria.it/catalogo/mappe.html#>>, Land Use Map sc. 1:25000⁴³). Land use is divided into 39 categories at regional level, based on those provided for in the CORINE Land Cover project. Of these, only 18 are relevant to the area under consideration.

The last source examined is the Land Use Map produced in 2019 by the Liguria Region at a scale of 1:10,000. The map was constructed differently from the previous one and was created

⁴¹ That is (series M 891): Sheet ‘Varese Ligure’ 84 III SE, ed. 3; Sheet ‘S. Maria del Taro’ 84 III NO, ed. 3.

⁴² That is (series M 891): Sheet ‘Sesta Godano’ 95 IV NE, ed. 4; Sheet ‘Castiglione Chiavarese’ 95 IV NO, ed. 4.

⁴³ Last accessed: 18 April 2026.

through the photo interpretation of AGEA digital aerial images from 2016, dynamically updated through the analysis of more recent satellite images derived from AGEA, Sentinel-2, Esri Image, Google Earth and Bing Maps. In particular, the 2019 update “was carried out on images from 2016 and 2019 by processing the NDVI vegetation and NBR fire indices, the ‘matrix’ difference between the indices for the three years and the vectorisation of the result. [...] Virtual inspections were carried out using Street View” (ibid., *Uso del Suolo* sc. 1:10000 – Ed. 2019). Of the 82 land use categories provided for at regional level, only 44 concern the area examined.

3.2.2. The cartographic comparison

The four maps analysed show considerable differences in terms of their purposes and methods of production, the categories of land use adopted, the species represented, etc. Their comparison, therefore, in addition to being necessarily partial, had to take these differences into account, in an attempt to minimise them through the use of auxiliary sources. The Forest Map of the Kingdom of Italy, in particular, despite the quantitative purposes of the surveys (see Brengola, 1939), poses some problems related to the representation of woodland areas, due to both the difference in scale and some graphic inaccuracies (see Ferretti et al., 2018). The first step taken is to standardise and consolidate the different categorisations by creating four categories, based on the subdivision of the 1988 Vegetation Map: woodland, shrubland, grassland, agricultural areas (Table 3.2.1). All categories that do not provide information on vegetation (urban areas, bare rock, roads, etc.) were excluded, as they have a very small impact on the total area under consideration.

Categories	1936	1988	2000	2019
Woodland	Resinous Beech Oak/English oak Turkey oak Cork oak Chestnut Other species or mixed Degraded woods	Mesophilic and mesothermophilic woodland Montane mesophilic woodland Scrublands and hygrophilous alveolar woodland Conifers reforestation	Angiosperms and conifers Submontane, montane and/or subalpine angiosperms Submontane, montane and/or subalpine conifers Chestnut groves Riparian formations	Thermophilic mixed woodland Mesophilic mixed woodland Beech-dominated woodland Chestnut-dominated woodland Hygrophilous species woodland Conifers woodland Mixed woodland Areas with evolving woodland and shrub vegetation Agroforestry areas Chestnut groves Riverbeds and streams with abundant vegetation Areas traversed by fires
Shrubland	/	High heaths Low heaths Pre-forest shrub stages	Thermophilic and/or mesophilic shrubland	Heaths and bushes Vineyards and/or other types of permanent (not olive groves) abandoned crops Unused and/or abandoned lands in urban areas
Grassland	/	Meso-thermophilic grassland Eroded soils vegetation	Grassland and/or shrubbed grassland	Natural grazing areas and high-altitude grassland Areas with sparse vegetation
Agricultural areas	/	Hay meadows Specialised crops and arable land	Used/abandoned hay meadow or herbaceous vegetation in urban areas Simple and wooded arable land Mixed agricultural Olive groves Vineyards	Stable meadows Arable land in non-irrigated areas Open-field horticultural crops in the open air Crops grown in greenhouses or under other cover Juxtaposed open-air crops and crops grown in greenhouses or under other coverings Vineyards Mixed vineyards and olive groves Olive groves Orchards and citrus groves Annual crops associated with permanent crops Complex cropping and parcel systems Predominant agricultural crops with natural areas

Tab. 3.2.1. The four categories (woodland, shrubland, grassland, agricultural areas) based on the subdivisions of 1936, 1988, 2000 and 2019.

Source: Author's elaboration.

The second step is to standardise the colours of the various maps in order to facilitate graphical comparison. This was not possible for the 1988 map, which is only available in raster format. Therefore, an attempt was made to standardise the colours as much as possible for this map: woodlands were assigned the colour red (shown in red, dark green and blue on the 1988

map), shrublands were assigned yellow (corresponding to yellow, light brown and light green in 1988), grasslands were assigned orange (orange and pink in 1988) and agricultural areas were assigned light blue (light blue and bright yellow in 1988). The result of the cartographic comparison is shown in Figure 3.2.1, which provides an initial insight into some of the dynamics highlighted by the data, such as the progressive increase in forest area and the decrease in agricultural areas and high-altitude grassland (see below).

The third step is to calculate the areas occupied by the four categories for each year considered, using Microsoft Excel based on the shapefile attribute tables. For 1936, the only value calculated is the woodland area, given by the sum of the areas of each type of forest surveyed. Using QGIS, the polygons relating to the upper Vara Valley were cut out from the original shapefile – whose area is the Italian West Zone (*Fuso Ovest*) (EPSG:3003) – by overlaying it on the layer of the municipalities under consideration, and then the value of the area in km² was calculated using the ‘\$area’ function, then converted into hectares. As regards 1988, the detailed explanatory notes of the Vegetation Map (Montanari, 1988a) report all the calculations made for each area examined. However, the data were recalculated on the basis of minor categorisation changes – such as for conifer reforestation, originally included in areas with strong anthropogenic determinism and here included in woodland vegetation – with a result that does not differ too much from the original one, and then aggregated into the four categories. With regard to the 2000 and 2019 regional land use maps, the two municipalities of interest were cropped on QGIS, and the area of the polygons was then calculated in km² using the ‘\$area’ function, which was then converted into hectares.

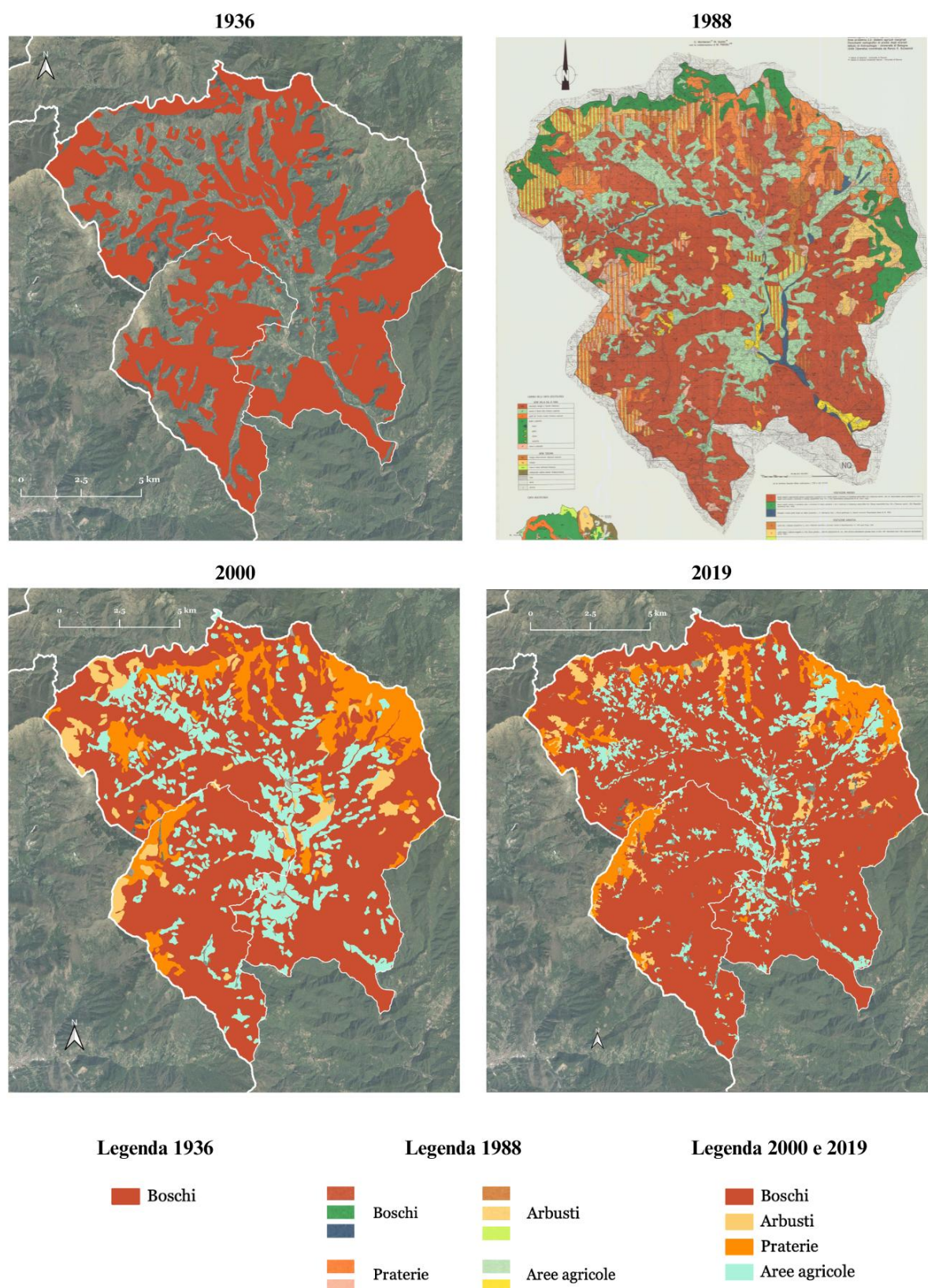


Fig. 3.2.1. Cartographic comparison of land use in the upper Vara Valley between 1936, 1988, 2000 and 2019. Legends for every year are shown, with the categories of woodland (*boschi*), shrubland (*arbusti*), grassland (*praterie*) and agricultural land (*aree agricole*).

Source: Author's elaboration through QGIS based on data: Milizia Nazionale Forestale, 1936; Montanari, Guido, 1988a; Regione Liguria, 2000; 2019; Google Satellite.

3.2.3. Map filtering results

Calculations for 1936 show a forest area of 9,545.03 ha⁴⁴, more than half of which consists of tall chestnut trees⁴⁵. The total values obtained for 1988 are: 10,289.19 ha of woodland⁴⁶, 3,893.75 ha of agricultural areas (95.20% of which is hay grassland)⁴⁷, 1,609.38 ha of grassland⁴⁸, 720.31 ha of shrubland and 1,732.81 ha of intermingled shrubland and grassland that cannot be clearly divided into the two categories. The sum of the shrubland and intermingled areas (2,453.12 ha) indicates a gradual return to forest. The values obtained for 2000 show: 12,614.51 ha of woodland⁴⁹ – although the survey methods differ, there is a significant difference between the data for tall chestnut trees in 1936 and chestnut groves in 2000: -97.01% –, 2,439.86 ha of agricultural areas (87% of which are hay meadows)⁵⁰, 2,201.46 ha of grassland (including shrubby grasslands) and 779.19 ha of shrubland. For 2019, the values obtained are as follows: 13,972.73 ha of woodland⁵¹ – even here the decrease in fruit chestnut groves compared to tall chestnut trees in 1936 is significant: -97.44% –, 1,908.04 ha of agricultural areas (of which 78.30% are hay meadows)⁵², 1,276.77 ha of grassland and 733.81 ha of scrubland⁵³.

The evolution of grassland and shrubland areas is often difficult to interpret due to partial overlap and the different categorisations used in the four maps. For this reason, and although

⁴⁴ Given by the sum of: tall chestnut tree (5,124.11 ha), coppiced beech (1,925.60 ha), other species/mixed coppice (1,783.25 ha), coppiced chestnut (664.20 ha), degraded woods (30.48 ha), resinous (16.46 ha), coppiced oak and English oak (0.93 ha).

⁴⁵ The values derived for the two municipalities from the 1929 Agricultural Cadastre (ISTAT, 1934), with regard to other land-use categories – non-comparable for the reasons discussed above (see Section 3.2.1) – are as follows: arable land, 2,289 ha – of which 1,292 ha under simple cultivation and 997 ha with woody plants; permanent meadows, meadow-pastures and pastures, 3,307 ha – respectively 10 ha, 171 ha, and 325 ha; productive uncultivated land, 2,605 ha; unproductive land, 942 ha. Subsequently (ibid., pp. 22 and 25), further breakdowns are provided according to the agricultural population, the number of farms, livestock types – cattle, equines, pigs, sheep, and goats –, arable land – cereals, other crops, fodder crops, fallow and spaces beneath tree cover, intercropping; further subdivided into wheat, maize, potatoes, beans, and rotational meadows –, and woody crops – vines, olive trees, fruit trees (apples, pears, peaches, plums, walnuts, hazelnuts, chestnut groves, other woodlands, productive uncultivated land). For certain crops, production figures are also reported.

⁴⁶ Given by: broadleaves (9,965.63 ha), conifers reforestation (260.93 ha), interpenetrations of woodland-scrubland/grassland (62.63 ha).

⁴⁷ Given by: hay meadows (3,706.25 ha), vineyards (100 ha), arable land (87.50 ha).

⁴⁸ Given by: seminatural herbaceous vegetation (1,396.88 ha), interpenetrations with eroded stages (212.50 ha).

⁴⁹ Given by: angiosperms (11,366.70 ha), angiosperms and conifers (651.51 ha), riparian formations (283.97 ha), conifers (159.15 ha), chestnut groves (153.18 ha).

⁵⁰ Given by: used/abandoned hay meadows (2,122.29 ha), arable land (164.37 ha), mixed agricultural formations (144.29 ha), vineyards (6.30 ha), olive groves (2.61 ha).

⁵¹ Given by: mixed woodland (5,896.56 ha), chestnut-dominated woodland (4,547.51 ha), beech-dominated woodland (1,757.91 ha), hygrophilous species (998.46 ha), conifers (393.13 ha), evolving woodland and shrub vegetation (153.82 ha), chestnut groves (131.54 ha), agroforestry areas (86.41 ha), areas traversed by fires (7.39 ha).

⁵² Given by: stable meadows (1,494.18 ha), arable land (391.38 ha), vineyards (9.73 ha), mixed vineyards and olive groves (7.47 ha), olive groves (3.92 ha), orchards and citrus groves (1.38 ha).

⁵³ Given by: heaths and scrubs (731.01 ha), vineyards and/or other abandoned permanent crops (1.95 ha), abandoned lands in urban areas (0.85 ha).

both highlight two opposing aspects of land use – grazing management on the one hand and abandonment on the other – the analysis will omit these two groups (whose data are nevertheless reported) and focus on agricultural areas and forests, emblems of the contrast between managed land and land that is (now) abandoned.

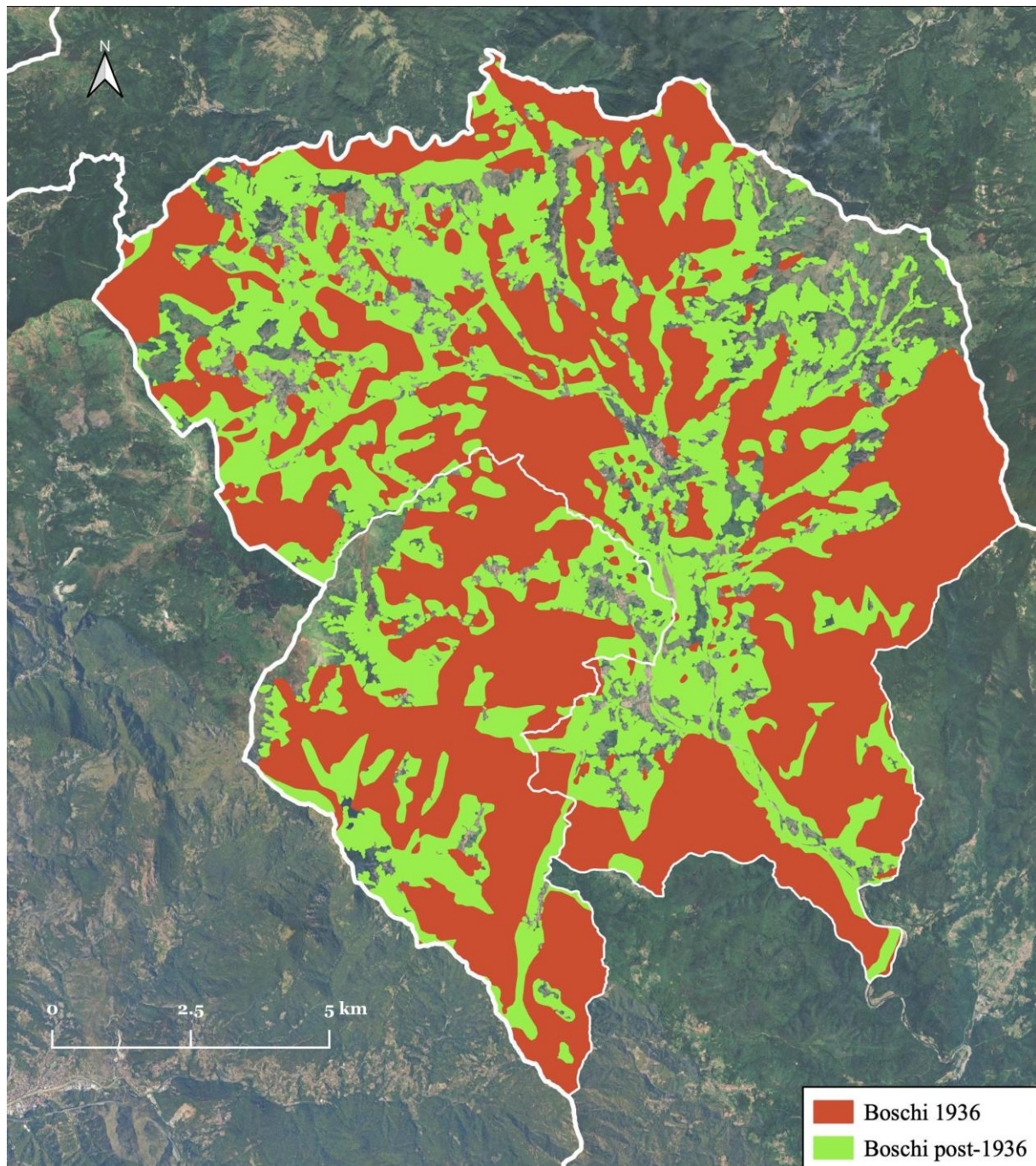


Fig. 3.2.2. The 46.39% increase in forest area between 1936 and 2019. In red, the forested areas surveyed in 1936 (*boschi 1936*); in light green, the subsequent formations (*boschi post-1936*).

Source: Author's elaboration through QGIS based on data: Milizia Nazionale Forestale, 1936; Regione Liguria, 2019; Google Satellite.

Total area = 18,207.68 ha	Woodland (ha)	% on tot. area	% variation comp. to 1936	% variation comp. to 1988	% variation comp. to 2000
1936	9,545.03	52.42	/	/	/
1988	10,289.19	56.51	+7.80	/	/
2000	12,614.51	69.28	+32.16	+22.60	/
2019	1,972.73	76.74	+46.39	+35.80	+10.77

Tab. 3.2.2. Comparison of woodland area in the upper Vara Valley between 1936, 1988, 2000 and 2019. Source: Author's elaboration.

The trend in woodland area between 1936, 1988, 2000 and 2019 (Table 3.2.2) shows a considerable increase in absolute terms between 1936 and 2019 (Fig. 3.2.2), with an evolution in about eighty years from 9,545.03 ha to 13,972.73 ha: +4,427.70 ha (+46.39%). Analysing the intermediate periods, the fifty-year change from 1936 to 1988 is less significant (+7.80%) than the changes that occurred in the approximately twelve years between 1988 and 2000 (+22.60%) and in the approximately nineteen years between 2000 and 2019 (+10.77%). The explanatory notes attached to the 1988 Vegetation Map (Montanari, 1988a) indicate, however, an extremely advanced process of transformation, which probably reached its peak in the increase in forest area in the following decade: shrublands are expanding considerably, mainly due to the abandonment of meadows and pastures; chestnut groves are being abandoned on a large scale and converted into short rotation coppice. In the last thirty years, however, the woodland area has grown by 35.80% (1988-2019).

Furthermore, the percentage of wooded areas in relation to the total area of the two municipalities⁵⁴ shows a shift from 52.42% of the territory in 1936 to 56.51% in 1988, while in 2000 the percentage rose to 69.28% and today (2019) stands at 76.74% (Fig. 3.2.3).

⁵⁴ In the documents examined, the total areas relating to the two municipalities do not correspond, but the variation in the data is minimal (including 1936, for which the precise value is not available): 18,247 ha in 1988; 18,188.23 ha in 2000; 18,207.68 ha in 2019. The intermediate area value for 2019 was therefore chosen for the calculations.

Total area = 18,207.68 ha	Agricultural areas (ha)	% on tot. area	% variation comp. to 1988	% variation comp. to 2000
1988	3,893.75 (of which 95.20% meadows)	21.39	/	/
2000	2,439.86 (of which 87.00% meadows)	13.40	-37.34	/
2019	1,908.04 (of which 78.30% meadows)	10.48	-51.00	-21.80

Tab. 3.2.3. Comparison of agricultural areas in the upper Vara Valley between 1988, 2000 and 2019.
Source: Author's elaboration.

The analysis relating to agricultural areas (Table 3.2.3) necessarily excludes the 1936 Forest Map, which does not provide any information on this subject. However, the explanatory notes to the 1988 Vegetation Map suggest that there had already been a substantial abandonment of ploughed and sown land, which was now mainly family-owned and replaced by hay meadows, largely associated with cattle breeding (Montanari, 1988a). This transformation is confirmed also by an interview made with G.F., a 90-year old farmer of Colli di Valletti, in August 2024: “e bestie i l’an sèmpe costodie, perché i s’è portavo sù pe Verruga a-o pascolo, pe sarvâ o fèn, perché aloa [in the 40s and 50s] fèn o l’ea miga... l’ea sapponaio per tutto. E gente che gh’ea o seu tòcco. Adesso cöse ti veu... t’ô lì, i l’an abandonao tutto. Quand’o l’è vegnuo che o fèn no ghe n’è, l’è finio tutto”⁵⁵. This situation is also confirmed by data on the percentage of rural depopulation between 1951 and 1971, which was 69% for Varese Ligure and 62% for Maissana (Moreno, 1988b). A thirty-year comparison between 1988, 2000 and 2019, on the other hand, shows first and foremost a sharp decline in agricultural areas: from 3,893.75 ha in 1988 to 1,908.04 ha in 2019, i.e. -1,985.71 (-51%). The decline was greater between 1988 and 2000 (-37.34%) than between 2000 and 2019 (-21.80%), in line with the increase observed for wooded areas in the same periods.

The incidence of agricultural areas in relation to the total area of the two municipalities has decreased significantly: in 1988, they occupied 21.39% of the total area, in 2000, 13.40%, and in 2019, 10.48% (Fig. 3.2.3). Finally, it is worth noting that most of the agricultural areas are essentially occupied by hay meadows: in 1988 they occupied 3,706.25 ha (i.e. 95.20% of the

⁵⁵ “They always looked after the animals, because they took them up to Verruga to graze, to save the hay, because back then hay wasn’t... it was ploughed everywhere. People had their own piece of land. Now what do you want... there you go, they’ve abandoned everything. When the hay ran out, it was all over”.

total), 2,122.29 ha in 2000 (87%) and 1,494.18 ha in 2019 (78.30%). This slight decrease is probably due to the abandonment of meadows and their replacement with shrubland.

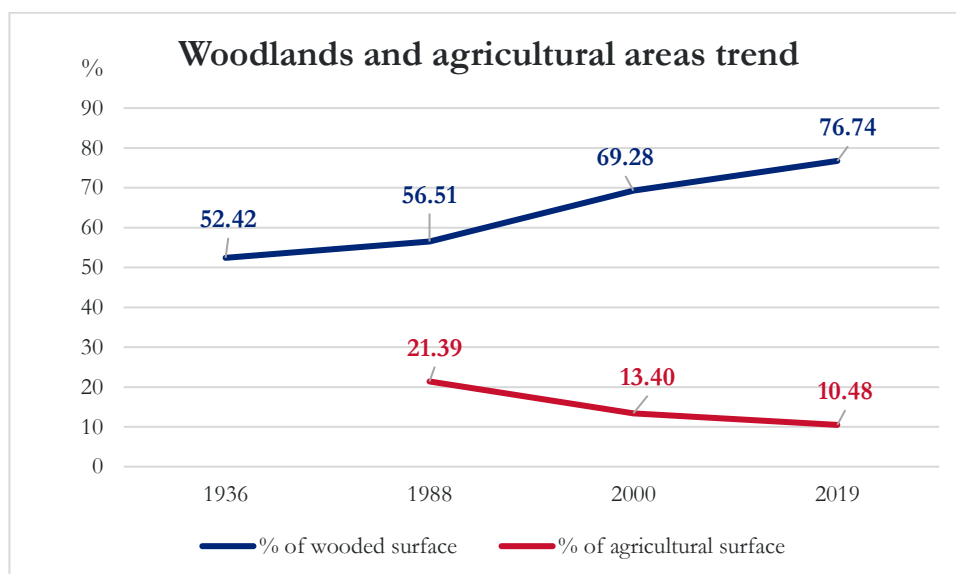


Fig. 3.2.3. Trends in woodland and agricultural areas relative to the total surface area of the municipalities of Varese Ligure and Maissana in 1936, 1988, 2000 and 2019.

Source: Author's elaboration through Microsoft Excel.

3.2.4. Discussion

Analysis of the data reveals a number of interesting aspects relating to the rewilding processes in the upper Vara Valley. The increase in wooded or shrubby areas at the expense of grasslands and cultivated land, already highlighted in the literature for previous decades (Montanari, 1988a; Poggi, Cevasco, 1997; Watkins, 2004; Cevasco et al., 2005) has been quantified on a larger scale, both in absolute terms and in relation to the total area of the two municipalities, and over a time span not previously considered. The data confirm a profound change in land use over the last eighty years and, above all, show how rapid and significant this change was in the fifteen years between the mid-1980s and 2000. The intensification of the phenomenon is probably due to the transition to secondary forest formations of a large number of areas previously classified as herbaceous-shrubby or pre-forest, but also likely to the survival of part of the agro-sylvo-pastoral areas after the Second World War, despite the depopulation of the Apennines. The latter aspect is presumably attributable to the persistence, albeit brief, for a couple of decades of practices such as regular returns to the valley for land management or mowing meadows for livestock. This hypothesis will be analysed extensively and confirmed in subsequent chapters, in particular Chapter 5.

The increase in wooded areas is even more significant when considering the transformation that has taken place in the practices associated with them over the last eighty years. In 1936, wooded areas were largely managed as coppice or consisted of chestnut groves, and were therefore productive: in the upper Vara Valley, in 1936 45.81% of the forests were coppiced (4,373.99 ha out of a total of 9,545.03 ha), which is lower than the national average reported by Agnoletti et al. (2022) at 57%; tall chestnut trees, on the other hand, accounted for 53.68% of the total forest area and 88.53% of the area occupied by chestnut trees in the upper Vara Valley; all beech trees were coppiced, compared to a national percentage of 70% (ibid.). In contrast, the forests of 1988, 2000 and 2019 – whose productive function is reduced to a minimum – are essentially in a phase of rewilding and consist largely of secondary formations. The change, therefore, is evident from a quantitative, qualitative and historical-cultural point of view.

This allows to highlight several considerations that, previously inferred from field observations, can now be quantified: a 46.39% increase in wooded area between 1936 and 2019, and the share of woodland relative to the total surface area of the two municipalities, which rose from approximately 52% in 1936 to about 77% in 2019; a 51% decrease in agricultural areas/hay meadows between 1988 and 2019, and their proportion of the total municipal area, which declined from around 21% in 1988 to approximately 10% in 2019. Particularly noteworthy is the rapid pace of change between 1988 and 2000, as evidenced by a 22.60% increase in forested areas – greater than that recorded during both the preceding fifty years and the subsequent twenty-year period –, and by a 37.34% decrease in agricultural land, again more pronounced than in the following period.

These data provide a solid starting point for further research as well as for spatial planning initiatives that, at different governance levels, will concern the upper Vara Valley in the coming years. Moreover, on the basis of these general considerations, it is possible to undertake detailed cartographic comparisons, complemented by the use of additional sources – such as historical photographs – and by a thorough field survey, with a view to a realistic interpretation of the sources. The following section moves precisely in this direction, presenting six specific case studies. A further step could involve updating other site-scale studies conducted in the upper Vara Valley and currently limited to the 1930s (Moreno, 1995), the late 1970s (Cevasco et al., 2005), and the mid-1990s (Poggi, Cevasco, 1997).

3.3. “L’attuale uso del suolo è l’abbandono”: the upper Vara Valley through rephotography⁵⁶

The statement cited in the title of this section derives from an informal conversation with a local informant from Scurtabò, A.S., who, together with his brother, manages the largest herd of cattle in the upper valley – numbering between 300 and 400 head – and, consequently, the largest farm within the local meat supply chain, thereby contributing to the persistence of pastures along the summits stretching from Mount Zatta to Mount Porcile. This conversation, which took place during one of the numerous summer festivals held in the Vara Valley, provides a vivid account of the territorial transformations that have occurred and of the perceptions of those who continue to engage in active landscape management practices. The first-hand impressions of livestock breeders and farmers regarding abandonment are corroborated by the cartographic analysis conducted (see previous section); however, a further step at a more detailed scale is required in order to distinguish between areas where changes have been more intense and those that, for various reasons, have proved more resistant.

This analysis is carried out using the technique of rephotography – or, repeat photography – , a visual method that consists of photographing the same place or phenomenon at different points in time in order to investigate the transformations that have taken place (see section 2.3.1). The present section therefore compares postcards depicting various hamlets of the valley, circulated between the 1920s and the 1980s, with more recent photographs. A large proportion of the latter were produced during field courses or survey campaigns conducted in the municipalities of Varese Ligure and Maissana by researchers and students from the University of Nottingham from the early 1990s onwards, under the supervision of Professors Charles Watkins and Ross Balzaretti⁵⁷. In particular, the analysis focuses on changes that have occurred in six key locations within the valley: Cassego (Varese Ligure [VL]), Campore (Maissana), Varese Ligure, Salino (VL), Valletti (VL) and the Lagorara Valley (Maissana).

⁵⁶ “The current land use is abandonment”.

⁵⁷ For further discussion of the significance of these sources, see section 2.3.1.



Fig. 3.3.1. On the previous page, Cassego photographed from the south – specifically from the Case Cuniolo area – in the 1920s (postmarked 1928), the 1950s (postmarked 1961), March 1995, and March 2024. Sources: Sandro Lagomarsini collection; Goodwin, 1995; Author's photographs.



Fig. 3.3.2. Cassego in March 2024. Author's photograph.

3.3.1. *Cassego*

The cases illustrate processes of abandonment that, although rooted in the same socioeconomic dynamics and origins, have followed different trajectories. The first case is that of Cassego, one of the northernmost and most remote hamlets of Varese Ligure and of the entire Vara Valley, which today is inhabited by around twenty residents, whereas in 1921 it counted 353 inhabitants (ISTAT, 1926). The hamlet is notable for the presence of the Museo Contadino and the after-school program established by Don Sandro Lagomarsini, the local parish priest from 1965, who played a fundamental role in raising local awareness of the richness of peasant culture, which was gradually being abandoned in the post-Second World War period (see section 4.3).

The transformations of Cassego are visible in Fig. 3.3.1, which depicts its surroundings in the 1920s⁵⁸, 1950s⁵⁹, March 1995, and March 2024. Immediately striking are the openness of

⁵⁸ Postcard postmarked in 1928.

⁵⁹ Postcard postmarked in 1961.

the landscape and the cleared plains in the postcard postmarked 1928, a time when the plots surrounding the village – including those at higher elevations – were entirely cultivated as arable fields, while hay was cut on the slopes of Mount Zatta (interview with C.C. and D.C., August 2024). The properties were interspersed with groups of trees, primarily chestnuts or other productive orchards, as well as some coppice, as illustrated in the slightly later Kingdom of Italy's Forest Map (1936) (Fig. 3.3.3).

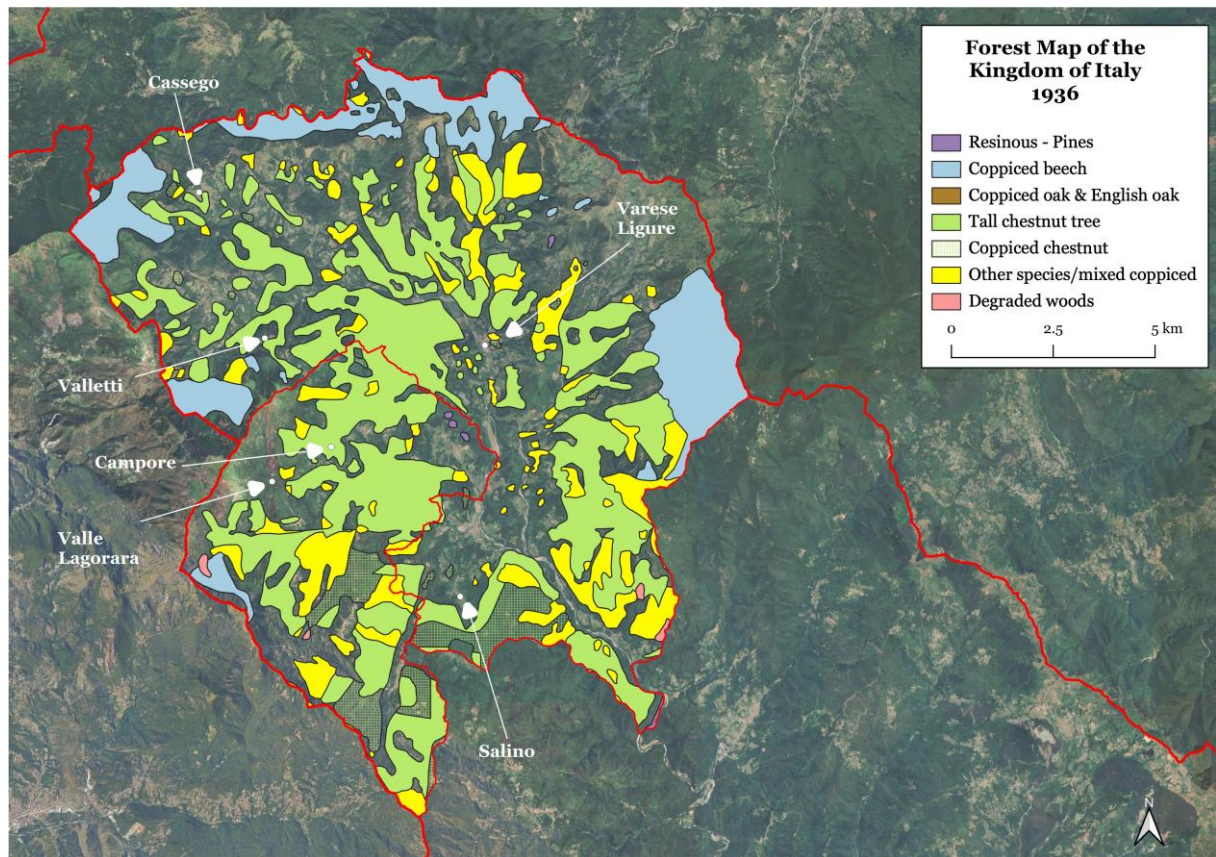


Fig. 3.3.3. The vectorised 1936 Kingdom of Italy's Forest Map.

Source: Author's elaboration based on data: Milizia Nazionale Forestale, 1936; Reg. Liguria; Google Satellite.

This pattern of terrace management is also evident in the subsequent postcard, postmarked 1961, which additionally shows chestnut-dominated woodland along the slope descending towards the Torrente Scagliana, as already recorded in the 1936 map. The situation had already changed more than thirty years later, in 1995, when the landscape, although still relatively open, appeared more disordered, with the first woodland formations encroaching upon higher elevations, and – most notably – the plains now almost entirely devoted to hay meadows, an activity which, as noted, had once been carried out away from the settlement. This practice is corroborated by the Vegetation Map of the upper Vara Valley (Fig. 3.3.4), produced slightly

earlier (1988), which maps in the vicinity of Cassego “hay meso-thermophilous meadows, partly abandoned” or, a few hundred metres from the village, mesophilous or meso-thermophilous woodland, predominantly coppice dominated by chestnut or Turkey oak; thus, fruit-bearing chestnut is now definitively abandoned. The advance of the woodland is, thirty years later still, even more relentless, as the 2024 repeat photograph demonstrates, primarily at higher elevations, that is, further from the main clusters of houses. This situation is perhaps made even more evident by Fig. 3.3.2, which, owing to its wider framing, reveals the dense woodland surrounding Cassego, as it occurs in all the other hamlets of the upper valley.

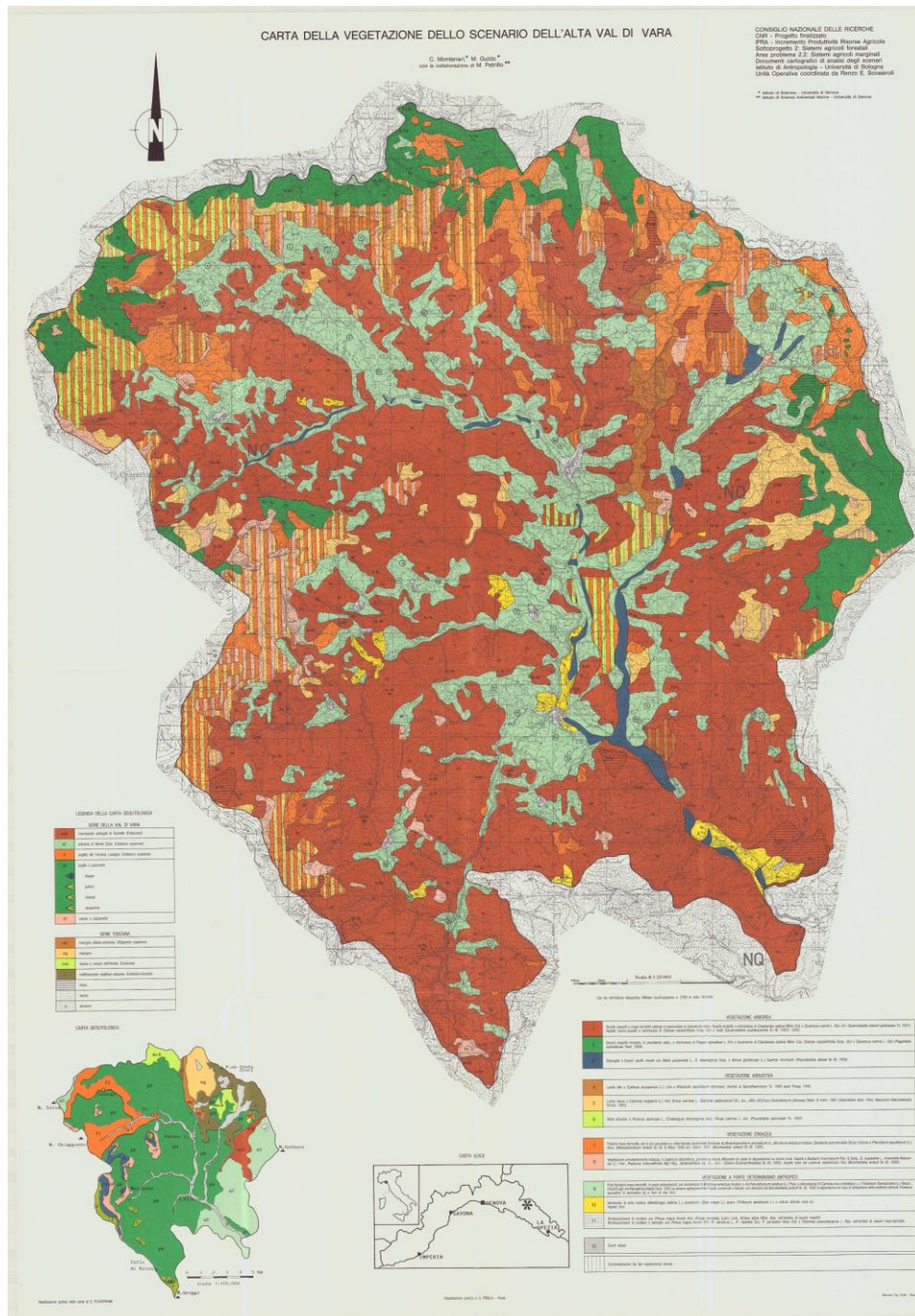


Fig. 3.3.4. The 1988 vegetation Map of the upper Vara Valley. Source: Montanari, Guido, 1988a.

Having conducted this analysis, it should be noted, however, that despite abandonment, Cassego stands out as a relatively ‘virtuous’ hamlet in terms of landscape management, as comparisons with other areas will illustrate later. This is primarily due, however, to a small number of cattle farms that still need to produce forage for their animals, as the interviews have highlighted:

All the fields in Cassego that you see being mown, more or less, that’s us doing it. [...] Most of them are rented or used for free. [...] When we stop, you’ll see... In June, everyone you meet

says, “Ah, when you’ve finished... when you stop cutting the hay: scrub, *maccia*”. [...] And we’ve let it go a bit, because we’ve abandoned the farthest corners, or some places where we only mow the meadows with machines, and then we’ve turned them into... we’ve put up fences for grazing, so we can let the animals onto the second cut, and they eat up on the slopes, things like that (D.C. and C.C., Cassego, August 2024).

A precarious balance, then, maintained largely through the passion and goodwill of a few individuals, as Chapter 5 – focused on interviews with farmers and livestock breeders – will demonstrate. The situation becomes even more critical when considering the opposite slope from Cassego, that of Case Cuniolo and Groppo Rosso, facing north. An attempt to rephotograph from this slope in March 2024 using the postcard postmarked 1961 (Fig. 3.3.5), taken from this very vantage point, shows that the woodland has now completely overtaken the slope, making an exact replication of the framing impossible. This situation is confirmed by the 2019 Land Use Map of the Liguria Region (Fig. 3.3.6), which shows a predominance of mesophilous woodland, interrupted only by occasional chestnut-dominated woods and very few shrubland or permanent meadow areas.



Fig. 3.3.5. Cassego (Varese Ligure) depicted in a postcard from 1950s (postmarked 1961); the same location in March 2024, with woodland vegetation now obscuring the landscape.
Source: Sandro Lagomarsini collection; Author’s photograph.

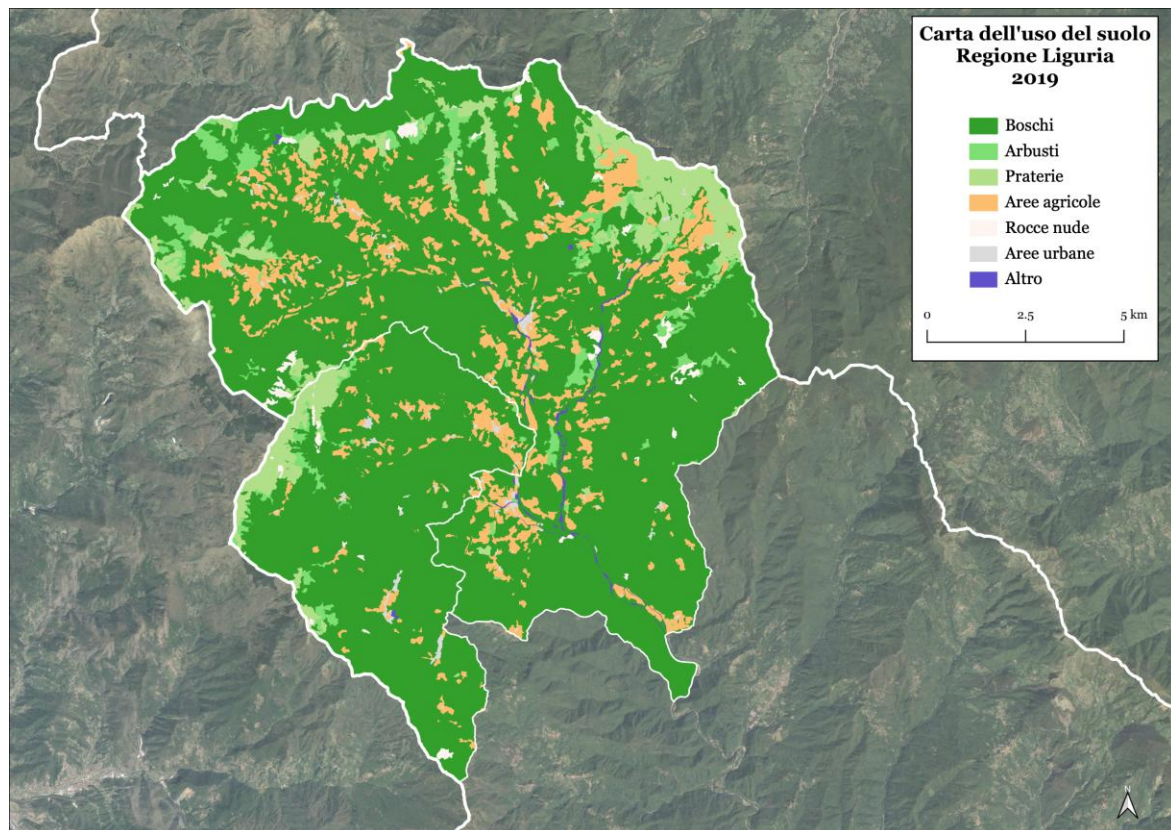


Fig. 3.3.6. The 2019 Land Use Map made by Liguria Region.
Source: Author's elaboration based on data: Regione Liguria, 2019; Google Satellite.



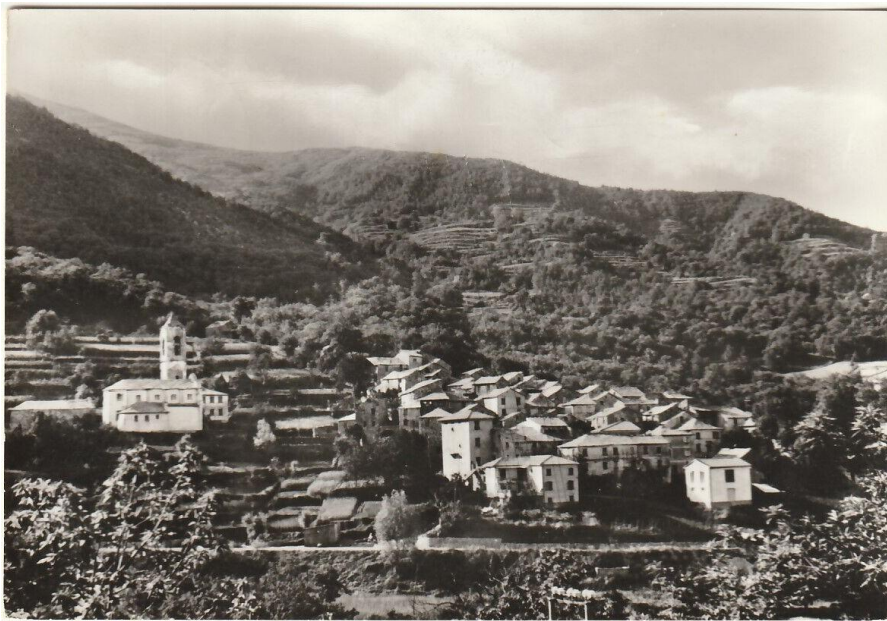


Fig. 3.3.7. On the previous page: Campore photographed from Santa Maria in the 1920s, in 1929, and around 1957, prior to the construction of the road. Sources: Barbieri, De Nevi, 2005; Facebook group *Il Levante ligure: immagini per la memoria* (photograph provided by G. Masseglia).

Fig. 3.3.8. On this page: Campore photographed from Santa Maria in 1967 – after the construction of the road –, in the 80s and in March 2026. Sources: Picclick; Facebook group *Il Levante ligure: immagini per la memoria* (photograph provided by R. Zanzelone); Author's photograph.

3.3.2. *Campore*

Comparable considerations may be advanced for other hamlets of the upper valley, although each displays its own specific features. The case of Campore (Figs. 3.3.7 and 3.3.8), in the municipality of Maissana, for example, adds a further dimension from the perspective of infrastructure.

The images compared consist of postcards depicting the village in the 1920s (postcards a] and b]), the 1950s (postmarked 1957, postcard c]), the 1960s (postmarked 1967, postcard d]), and the 1980s (postcard e]), while the rephotograph dates from March 2026. All were taken from the south, from the neighbouring hamlet of Santa Maria. An important landmark is the Chapel of San Bernardo, visible in almost all the postcards and in the recent photograph, situated in the upper left. It provides a useful reference point for observing the process of woodland expansion on the southern slope of Mount Verruga (1,207 m a.s.l.; north-west of the settlement). In the first three postcards, this slope already appears devoted to chestnut cultivation, with trees reaching close to the northern edge of the village; in postcards a) and b), they are clearly shown as having been pruned. These woodlands, however, alternated with more open areas used for agriculture, as confirmed by interviews (see section 4.1). From the 1960s onwards, by contrast, the slope displays signs of increasing arboreal expansion, which by 2026 has almost entirely covered the territory between the high-elevation grazing pastures and the stream Recueso flowing below the village.

This process is evident not only along the slope of Mount Verruga but also on the northern slope, which in photographs taken between the 1920s and 1967 is clearly terraced for mid-slope agricultural use and grazed at the summit, whereas by 2026 only the lowest terraces next to the road remain maintained. These observations correspond, in this case as well, with the information recorded in the maps of 1988 (Fig. 3.3.4) – which by then identifies only partly abandoned hay meadows as agricultural uses – and 2019 (Fig. 3.3.6), which maps a few permanent meadows at the level of the settlement and at certain points on both slopes, while the remainder is classified as chestnut-dominated woodland or mixed mesophilous woodland⁶⁰. A further decline is visible in the plains immediately adjacent to the village – among the few that still exist – namely that of fruit trees (apples, pears, etc.), which enriched the landscape of Campore until 1967 through a scattered distribution, but appear increasingly sparse in subsequent images.

⁶⁰ The 1936 map (Fig. 3.3.3), by contrast, superimposes woodland cover – chestnut groves – over the entire settlement of Campore and over areas that contemporary visual evidence clearly shows as cultivated, a circumstance that suggests a probable cartographic inaccuracy for this area.

Finally, from an infrastructural perspective, the images document the appearance of the carriage road, absent in the first three postcards up to 1957 and present from 1967 onwards – it was constructed at the end of the 50s– on land ceded by several proprietors, who were subsequently able to build houses along its margins, such as the white dwelling visible in the two most recent photographs at the lower end of the village, later accompanied by a garage. Other buildings have also undergone transformation: most notably, the barn in the foreground on the right, present until 1957, subsequently converted into a cowshed (white), visible in 1967 and in the 1980s, and finally into a dwelling (painted pink).

3.3.3. *Varese Ligure, Salino and Valletti*

The images on the following pages present further examples of hamlets whose human-shaped landscapes are undergoing progressive abandonment. The first two depict the surroundings of Varese Ligure and Mount Tanano (713 m a.s.l.), photographed along the road leading to the hamlet of La Chiappa (Figs. 3.3.9 and 3.3.10), to the south. They reveal a marked advance of woodland vegetation into areas that thirty years ago (1996) were still cultivated or grazed – especially along the ridge –, together with the now familiar presence of trees in the foreground, which prevent an exact replication of the original view.

A similar situation can be observed in Salino (Fig. 3.3.11), compared through a postcard postmarked 1973 and a photograph from February 2026. Before the war, the village had between 200 and 250 inhabitants⁶¹, rising to over 300 around 1945⁶²; today, the number of permanent residents is approximately 30. The advance of woodland is evident in the lands below the hamlet – which is situated along a ridge at 600 m a.s.l. – on the *ciañe*⁶³ once cultivated with wheat, potatoes, other arable crops, or vineyards, ploughed by oxen or by cows themselves – of which there were at most four or five per family, increasing to around ten from the 1960s-1970s onwards –, as emerged by the interviews⁶⁴. Incidentally, unlike other hamlets endowed with grassy pastures (see Chapter 4, in particular section 4.1), in Salino cows and sheep were left to graze in the woodlands – predominantly chestnut groves, which were thereby kept ‘clean’. This occurred both in summer and in winter, when the cows were released at around 8 a.m. and returned at approximately 3-4 p.m. Milking took place in the morning or in the evening, except in the period close to calving, when they were initially milked as many as four

⁶¹ 211 in 1921 (ISTAT, 1926).

⁶² Indeed, some people that already left the valley during the 20s and 30s, came back after the outbreak of the War.

⁶³ The terraced plains.

⁶⁴ Interview with P.T.’s grandfather (82 years old) and great-uncle (88 years old), August 2024.

times a day – at 5-6 a.m., 10 a.m., 4 p.m., and then at 10 p.m. – to feed the calves; this was then gradually reduced to three times daily – morning, midday, and evening – and finally to the customary twice-daily routine. Interviews have also highlighted that during these same years, alongside the onset of abandonment, more substantial interventions in the landscape were taking place. The introduction of mechanisation enabled families who had not emigrated, or those who returned regularly to maintain their land, to cultivate more easily and more extensively; indeed, in these very years many meadows were created in areas that had previously been woodland. In this regard, informants recall that the first tractor – a 25-horsepower crawler – was brought to Salino by the parish priest around 1965-1968, and the first mower around 1968-1970.

Finally, a comparison concerning the hamlet of Valletti, overlooked by Mount Verruga along its northern slope – opposite that of Campore – photographed around 1965, in 2000, and around 2020 (Fig. 3.3.12), highlights in particular the increasing density of woodland vegetation, initially sparse and expanding during the first thirty-five years, and becoming even denser in the subsequent two decades. Moreover, when the 1965 postcard is compared with Fig. 3.3.13, a snow-covered Mount Verruga, then almost devoid of arboreal vegetation, appears today entirely covered with mixed mesophilous woodland – according to the 2019 land-use map (Fig. 3.3.6) – and intersected in its lower section by electricity transmission structures absent in the 1960s: “No gh’aveimo manco d’acqua. Me ricòrdo ch’emmo portao l’acqua, che l’aveimo messo là o lavandin. [...] Né luxe, né acqua, né strâ”⁶⁵ (G.D.P., La Villa di Valletti [*Via de Valle*], aged 96, August 2024).

⁶⁵ “We didn’t even have water. I remember we carried the water and put the sink over there. [...] No electricity, no water, no road”.



Fig. 3.3.9. Varese Ligure, with Mount Tanano (713 m a.s.l.) on the right, from the road for La Chiappa in 1996 and February 2026. On the background, the Mount Ventarola (1,177 m) and the area of the Centocroci Pass (1,055 m). Sources: Charles Watkins' photograph; Author's photograph.



Fig. 3.3.10. The surroundings of Varese Ligure, with Mount Tanano on the left, viewed from the road to La Chiappa in 1996 and February 2026. In the background, Mount Gottero (1,640 m) is on the right and Mount Bertola (1,193 m) on the left, while the area of the Centocroci Pass can be glimpsed in the far left of the background. Sources: Charles Watkins' photographs; Author's photographs.

Fig. 3.3.11. Salino around 1973 and in February 2026. Sources: Facebook; Author's photograph.

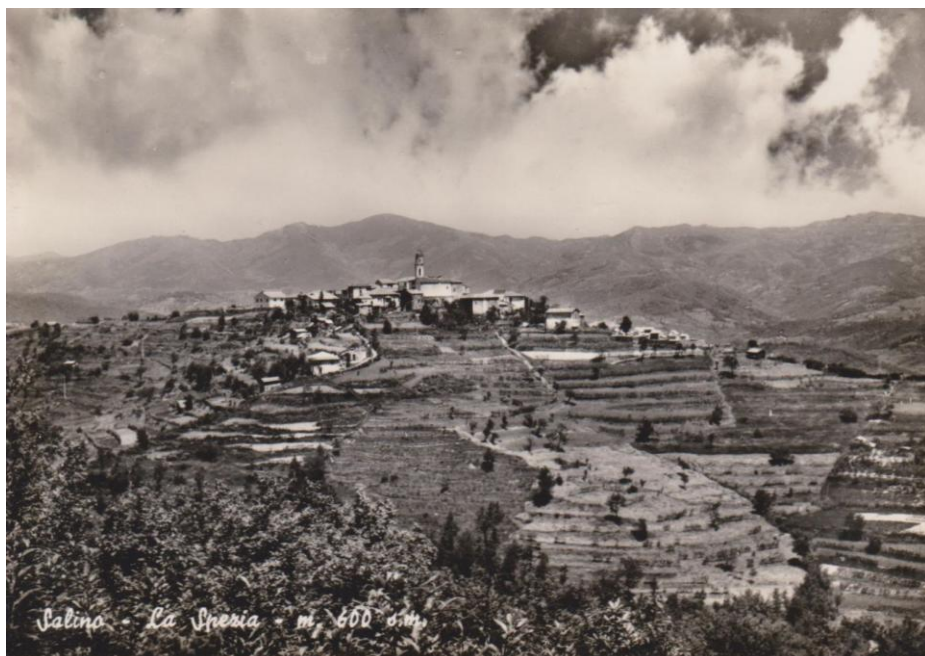






Fig. 3.3.12. On the previous page: Valletti, c. 1965, 2000 and c. 2020. Sources: Watkins, 2004; Adams et al., 2000; L. De Vincenzi.

Fig. 3.3.13. On this page: Valletti, c. 2020, with Mount Verruga (1,207 m a.s.l.) on the background. Source: L. De Vincenzi.

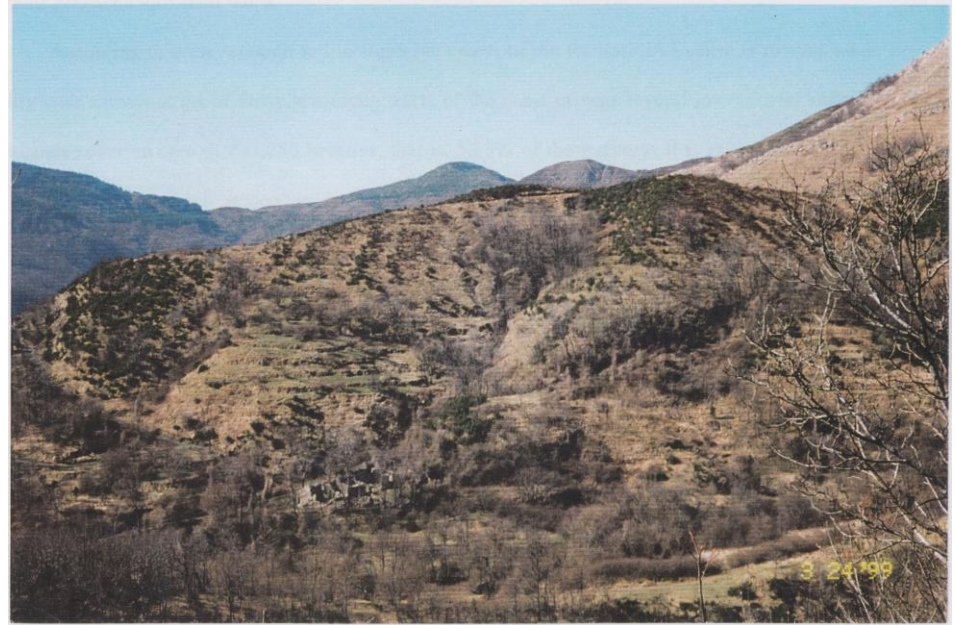




Fig. 3.3.14. On p. 91: the Casoni della Pietra in the Lagorara Valley in a photograph by Marco Vassalli, c. 1955; the same area rephotographed in March 1999 and February 2026. In the background, Mount Bocco (1,018 m a.s.l.) with the Bocco di Bargone Pass (908 m). Sources: Watkins, 2004; Meguro, 1999; Author's photographs.

Fig. 3.3.15. On p. 92: terraces in the Lagorara Valley at the foot of Mount Porcile (1,249 m a.s.l.) in 1995 and February 2026. Sources: Ramlet, 1995; Author's photographs.

3.3.4. Lagorara Valley and the Casoni della Pietra

The comparison that most clearly illustrates the increase in woodland cover identified through the cartographic analysis – recall, +22.60% between 1988 and 2000, +35.80% between 1988 and 2019, and +10.77% between 2000 and 2019, against a +46.39% between 1936 and 2019 – is that conducted at the Casoni della Pietra in the Lagorara Valley, a lateral valley of the stream Borsa – itself a tributary of the River Vara. This area was historically used by the communities of Maissana and Santa Maria for cultivation on terraces and for livestock grazing on the pastures of Mounts Porcile, Verruga, and Scogliera. The *casoni*⁶⁶ and the Lagorara Valley have been studied in the literature, notably by Milanese and Biagini (1998), Poggi and Cevasco (1997), Campana and Maggi (2002), Watkins (2004), and Molinari (2013). Among these, the works of Milanese and Biagini and of Watkins are particularly valuable for the comparison carried out here: the former for the interviews conducted, and the latter as an example of cross-referencing multiple sources, including field surveys (transects), cadastral maps, interviews, and, above all, historical photographs compared with contemporary conditions, spanning from around 1955 to the late 1990s.

The first image (Fig. 3.3.14 a]) is taken directly from Watkins (2004, p. 148) and dates to circa 1955, sourced from the informant Marco Vassalli. The *casoni* appear in good condition, and the landscape cultivated: “the terraces are well-defined and clearly managed” (ibid.), used for potatoes, pumpkins, tomatoes, and, on the larger plains above the *casoni*, wheat – the hay being cut at higher elevations –, but also maize and barley (Milanese, Biagini, 1998; Watkins, 2004). “Trees are pollarded” (Watkins, 2004, p. 148) and rather sparse, as confirmed by the interview collected by Milanese and Biagini (1998, p. 50) with Renzo Rolandelli: “up there, there was no forest, there was little timber, and even if it looks like that now, back then there was very little timber”.

By 1999 (Fig. 3.3.14 b]), the *casoni* appear dilapidated and in some cases collapsed, which prompted the preventive archaeology intervention by Milanese and Biagini's research team:

⁶⁶ *Casone* in Italian and *cason* in the local dialect indicate a stone field barn used as a recovery for livestock, hay and other productions. On this and for the role and use of the *casoni* in the upper Vara Valley, see, in addition to the sources cited above, section 4.1.

“over the last 40 years, the buildings had largely fallen down. Most of the terraces shown in the photograph had been abandoned for at least 20 years and were rapidly disappearing under a sea of *Brachypodium rupestre*. Shrubs and trees such as *Prunus spinosa*, *Erica arborea*, and *Ostrya carpinifolia* were also rapidly encroaching” (Watkins, 2004, p. 149). Some terraces survived thanks to summer sheep grazing and the practice of controlled burning every two years to improve pasture quality.

Rephotography attempts conducted in February 2026 confirm the now familiar difficulty of shooting from the same point due to dense woodland vegetation that has invaded the original viewpoint – Fig. 3.3.14 c]; the profile of the mountains in the background is still visible, comparable to the 1999 image. A photograph taken from a different, higher vantage point (Fig. 3.3.14 d]) clearly illustrates the changes that have occurred: the cultivated plains of 1955, grazed or cut for hay in 1999, have been completely overtaken by secondary woodland vegetation, covering the *casoni* themselves, now derelict but still standing (see: Priarone, 2023), and largely hidden from view. Similar observations apply to several terraces at the foot of Mount Porcile (1,249 m a.s.l.), photographed in 1995 (Fig. 3.3.15 a]) and subsequently in February 2026, thirty-one years later (Figs. 3.3.15 b] and c])⁶⁷. The cartographic evidence corroborates the visual impressions in this case as well: in 1936 (Fig. 3.3.3), the *casoni* and the Lagorara Valley are located outside the mapped woodland area; in 1988 (Fig. 3.3.4), the surroundings are indicated as partly abandoned meso-thermophilous hay meadows, with woodland only on the opposite slope, while ascending Mount Porcile shows herbaceous vegetation interspersed with low heathland; in 2000 (Fig. 3.3.16), the forests begin to show a marked advance even at the level of the *casoni*, which are still surrounded by meadows and/or shrubby grassland. Finally, in 2019 (Fig. 3.3.6), mixed mesophilous woodland has covered the lower part of the valley at the level of the *casoni*, while heaths and shrubs occupy the higher elevations, and grasslands survive only on Mount Porcile.

⁶⁷ The shooting point is not exactly the same in either photograph, but by combining them it is possible to reconstruct the original slope.

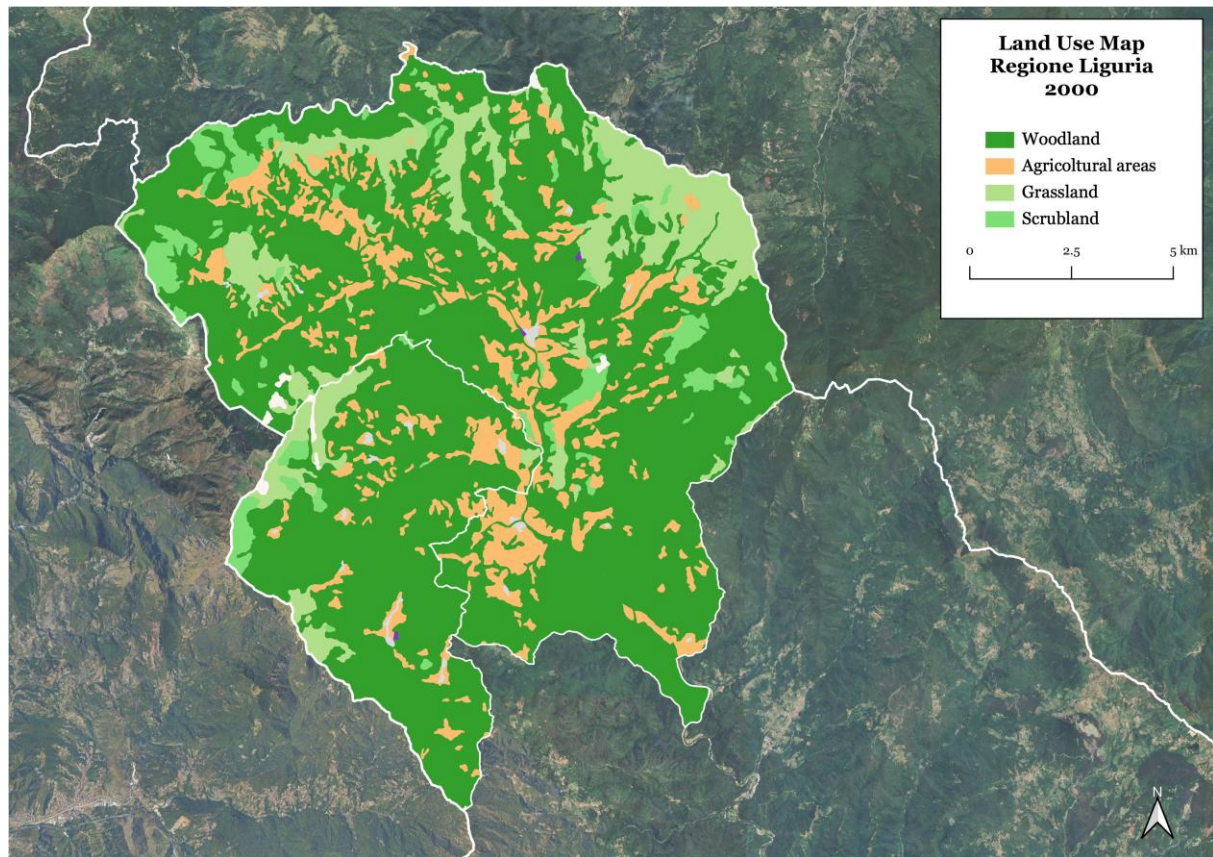


Fig. 3.3.16. The 2000 Land Use Map made by Liguria Region.
Source: Author's elaboration based on data: Regione Liguria, 2000; Google Satellite.

3.4 Discussion

This chapter has traced the transformations of the upper Vara Valley over the past century, alongside the depictions of the area provided by travellers between the seventeenth century and the early twentieth century. The use of literary, visual, and cartographic sources is fundamental for constructing a territorial biography of the upper valley, and simultaneously serves as a necessary foundation for understanding the information derived from the interviews explored in Chapters 4 and 5, which focus, respectively, on historical agricultural practices and contemporary ones.

The overall perspective emerging from the travel sources between the mid-seventeenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century allows not only the historicisation of landscape transformations but also an understanding of how external observers perceived the valley over these two and a half centuries. These sources reveal a specific vision of rural life and the Apennine landscape from the perspective of the French bourgeoisie and aristocracy – essentially negative, yet, at times, paradoxically idyllic with regard to certain aspects of the landscape. This view is partially corroborated by a more ‘technical’ observer such as Domenico

Viviani, who, however, approached the valley from a scientific standpoint, both for social and natural dynamics. Viviani's descriptions of land use and social customs are crucial for understanding the evolution of practices over the last century and a half, and for identifying in the Apennines the effects of events such as ongoing climate change or the geo-hydrological risks affecting areas like the Brugnato plain. The few literary sources available concerning the upper Vara Valley, moreover, represent a potentially crucial and still underexplored repository of information for an area seldom visited during the Grand Tour, highlighting the need for further archival investigation – a need which, it is hoped, this chapter may help to promote.

The analysis of woodland expansion and the reduction of cultivated land is equally essential for quantifying these changes, providing a sound basis not only for further research but also, and above all, for territorial planning that will concern the upper Vara Valley at various levels in the years to come. The use of these data is particularly critical in an inner area where organic agriculture has become, as advocated by the European Union, a leading sector in combating agricultural abandonment. After all, local institutions are currently facing a process that the data suggest as increasingly inevitable, particularly when combined with challenges such as lack of generational renewal, employment, and the provision of services. Analysis quantified these changes in absolute terms and in relation to the total area of the municipalities over a time span not previously considered, showing how profound the change in land use and practices was over the last eighty years and, above all, in the fifteen years between the mid-1980s and 2000.

Finally, the visual analyses – crossed with interviews, cartography and academic sources – presented in the third section demonstrate that the process of territorial abandonment is profound and has accelerated particularly over the past 30-40 years in areas most distant from settlements, as exemplified by the case of the Lagorara Valley. These findings may also be compared with the discussion that Watkins (2004) presents at the conclusion of his chapter regarding the abandonment of terraces in the upper Vara Valley. Of the five practices that, according to Watkins, still ensured terrace conservation at the end of the 1990s, two are now almost entirely lost – the grazing of sheep⁶⁸ and the controlled burning used to improve pasture quality. Other practices, such as the maintenance of walls and the management of trees and vineyards, are increasingly neglected, while horticultural production, fruit trees, and hay now survive only at a family scale for the first two, or within a few agricultural holdings in the case of hay.

⁶⁸ Except in rare cases, to which reference is made in section 5.2.

CHAPTER 4: REMEMBERING PAST LANDSCAPES

4.1. “Allora lo pulivano tutto o Verruga, di qua e di là come una patata!”: past agro-pastoral practices *de chì e de po à Verruga*⁶⁹

Luxe a scorriatta in sciâ martellea,
segno de mòrte inte un quaddro de paise.
Ma quanta vitta gh'è inta seu cadensa
quand'a s'infia e a caccia zu o fen⁷⁰.

Paolo Maria Besagno, *O tempo di òmmi*, 2018

The literature has already extensively described past uses on the slopes of the mountains of the upper Vara Valley (see Section 1.4.2). On Mount Verruga – and in particular on its south-eastern slope – however, descriptions thin out, which is why it seems crucial to devote this section to describing, based on interviews conducted in three key locations, the stories of the shepherds and farmers who over time have shaped the landscape of this mountain, which is so important to the imagery of the upper Vara Valley (Fig. 4.1.1).



Fig. 4.1.1. Sticker depicting the south-eastern slope of Mount Verruga in the style of the popular sportswear company *Patagonia*, demonstrating its iconic value in the imagination of the upper Vara Valley. The display of these stickers around the world is even monitored by an Instagram page: <<https://www.instagram.com/verrugaa/>>.

⁶⁹ The first sentence comes from an interview: “Back then they cleared the whole Verruga, here and there, like a potato” (G.D.P., aged 96, Valletti, August 2024). *De chì e de po a-o Verruga* means “on this side and the other side of Mount Verruga”. This section is based mainly on interviews conducted in the hamlets of Campore (Maissana) between summer 2024 and 2025 with G.N. and S.N., Villa di Valletti (Via da Valle) with G.D.P. in August 2024, and Colli di Valletti (Costa Massucco) with G.F. in August 2024.

⁷⁰ “The scythe gleams on the scythe strike,/ a sign of death in a village scene./ But how much life there is in its fall/ when it pierces and pulls down the hay”, from the 2018 Paolo Besagno Genoese song *O tempo di òmmi*, ‘The Time of Men’.



Fig. 4.1.2. The hamlet of Campore with Mount Verruga on top, and the Ròcca do Cian de Çimma spur to its right. The San Bernardo Chapel is visible at the bottom of the pastures.
Source: Author's photograph, November 2021.

Mount Verruga is now divided between the municipalities of Maissana and Varese Ligure, and, at 1,207 m a.s.l., overlooks the villages of Campore (*e Campoe* in dialect) – which it watches over along its south-eastern slope (Fig. 4.1.2) –, Valletti – located on the opposite side, along the north-western slope – and Colli di Valletti (or simply, Colli; *e Còlle* in dialect) – which lies along the ridge that divides Campore and Valletti and stretches from Verruga to Mount Cucco (906 m asl)⁷¹. Like all the neighbouring hills, Verruga has undergone a profound process of territorialisation, which has led to its subdivision at various levels, even deeper than the municipal scale: in addition to the fragmentation into a multitude of individual private properties, the highest part of Verruga is rigidly divided into *monti* belonging to the various hamlets that orbit around it, in order to regulate grazing (Fig. 4.1.3). In the local Genoese dialect, the *monti* (literally, ‘mountains’) refer to the hamlet pastures (*pascoli frazionali*) in the common lands (*comunaglie*, or, today, *beni frazionali*) (Moreno, 1988a), as evidenced by the place names *Monte de Cascigo* (Cassego Mountain) and *Monte de Santa Maia* (Santa Maria [of Lagorara] Mountain). In the historical agro-silvo-pastoral system, the boundaries were well defined, and the shepherds were careful not to trespass on the mountains of neighbouring

⁷¹ Cf. the cases of Campore and Valletti showed in sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3.

villages: “ognuno aveva il confine dei monti: *quei* di Santa Maria non li lasciavamo venire di qua e *quei* di Colli neanche. *Gh’ea o Giovanni do Moinâ ch’o diva: ‘se vèggo e vacche de Còlle, ghe daggo de quelle baſtonæ!’* per farle andar di là. E i limiti son grandi, eh!”⁷² (G.N., Campore). The *monti* of Santa Maria were below Mount Porcile (1249 m a.s.l.) and in the Lagorara Valley, while “monti non ne hanno *quei* di Ossegna: le portavano nei boschi [...], come ci sono adesso, quello che ce l’ha le mucche”⁷³ (G.N.). In particular, according to G.D.P., the shepherds of Ossegna took their animals to the Bandita area – a *Bandia* in dialect, a place name which, according to Aa.Vv., 2007, p. 30, indicates an area subject to a ban on passage or use – a *còsta*⁷⁴ where three families once lived and which is now uninhabited. The boundary between the lands of Campore and Colli ran along the ridge that descends from Verruga from Pòrta Bertaña towards Colli and Mount Cucco, just beyond Segæ, which is still part of Campore (G.N.) (Figg. 4.1.3 and 4.1.4).



⁷² “Everyone had their own mountain boundaries: we didn’t let those from Santa Maria come over here, nor those from Colli. There was Giovanni *do Moinâ* who said: ‘If I see the cows from Colli di Valletti, I’ll give them a good beating!’ to make them go away. And the boundaries are big, eh!”.

⁷³ “Those from Osseigna don’t have *monti*: they used to take them to the woods [...], as they do now, the ones who have cows”.

⁷⁴ *Còsta* is a dialectal toponym referring to a slope or ridge area (Aa.Vv., 2007, p. 11).

Fig. 4.1.3. Map of the southeastern slope of Mount Verruga featuring some of the toponyms mentioned in this section. The *monti* to the southeast of the Verruga summit belong almost entirely to the hamlet of Campore and correspond to parcels 3, 31, 405 (all below Fontaña Segâ), 1 (the parcel including Ròcca do Cian de Çimma, Cian de Mieggi, Lago do Bossoeuo, Fontaña do Gruppain), and 13 (towards Colli di Valletti, with Segæ). Parcels 7 and 127 in the lower left belong to Santa Maria. North of Mount Verruga and Pòrta Bertaña, along the northern and northwestern slopes, lie the *monti* of Valletti and Colli di Valletti (with Fontaña Segâ). The smaller parcels at lower altitudes represent the private plots, with the locations of the groups of *casoni* (Massänga, Cian Riondo, Foetæ, Ciappèa, Puggèe and Pessa), and other mentioned toponyms, such as Petto de Bò and San Benardo (where the chapel visible in the next image is located). However, this map is not a complete record of all the collected toponyms, which will be shown in further papers.

Source: Author's elaboration.



Fig. 4.1.4. The pastures belonging to the hamlet of Campore along the southeastern slope of Mount Verruga, clearly visible here due to the snow cover. The boundary with the *monti* of Colli runs approximately along the ridge visible on the right of the photo, while the *monti* of Santa Maria are out of frame to the left, towards Mount Porcile. Private lands, instead, approximately coincide with the wooded areas not covered by snow, located just below the snow-capped pastures. In the foreground, the settlement of Santa Maria; behind it, the hamlet of Campore.

Source: Bottari, 2005.

Pastoral life was marked by precise rhythms, and in the *monti* it was particularly lively during the summer months – generally between June and August – when cows, sheep, goats and pack equines (donkeys, mules, horses) were no longer kept in stables or *mollæ*⁷⁵ near the

⁷⁵ ‘Released’.

houses, but people began to *anâ a-i monti*⁷⁶; that is, in early summer the *monticazione*, or alpine grazing, began. Along the south-eastern slope of Verruga, in the *monti* of Campore, the main grazing area was o Cian de Mieggi⁷⁷, a large grassy expanse at the foot of a Ròcca do Cian de Çimma, a spur to the west of Verruga⁷⁸ (Figg. 4.1.2 and 4.1.3). The animals were left *a-i monti* for several months and were mainly looked after by young people⁷⁹ – “i mollavo ste bestie... i figgioammi in regola i favo quello mestê lì”⁸⁰ (G.F.); “we kids were all in the mountains” (G.N.) –, who checked on them and milked them during the day, constantly going back and forth to the village to bring fresh milk: “i l’avan leitao, se gh’ea da leitâ, e i l’avan portao zu o leite”⁸¹ (G.F.). Young people played a fundamental role in livestock farming. In fact, it was mainly practised by those who were old enough to look after cows and other animals but still too young to work the land intensively: an age range between 11 and 17 years old. This practice did not interfere with school, which in those years was compulsory until the age of 10 – 8 for the previous generation⁸². After grazing, the animals were then moved to the stables for milking and for the night.

In the morning, we went to pasture. When we were 14, we were up in Massänga, and [...] *gh’aveivo* [I had]... I had cows in her [SN’s, author’s note] *casone* [...]. We would go to the pasture and take them up there. [...] Then at 10am we would put them in the shed, milk them, and then walk back down. [...] We would take the milk down because our mothers made cheese. [...] At 2pm we would set off again with a bag of bread, a little cheese – there wasn’t much else... – and we would go back up to the pasture. In the evening, the cows were milked and then we slept in the hay [...] all together. [...] Because at 6am we had to leave... because then those flies [horseflies] came, and the cows ran away” (G.N.).

⁷⁶ Literally, ‘going to the mountains’.

⁷⁷ The dialectal word *cian* indicates an area which is flat or gently sloped compared with the surrounding mountain range (Aa.Vv., 2007, p. 11).

⁷⁸ In Valletti and Colli di Valletti the same peak was called *Ròcca do Combo*, literally ‘Dove’s Cliff’. *Ròcca do Cian de Çimma* literally means ‘Summit Plain’s Cliff’.

⁷⁹ And sometimes also by the elderly (G.D.P.).

⁸⁰ “They released these animals... as a rule, the boys did that job”. ‘Released’ in the sense that the livestock were put out to pastures.

⁸¹ “They will have milked the cows, if there was any milk to be milked, and brought the milk down”.

⁸² In any case, the summer holidays began around mid-June and ended on 30 September. Compulsory education lasted until the fifth year of primary school for the generation of interviewees, and until the third year for the previous generation. Children from Valletti and Colli tended to go to school in Valletti, or in the village of Sbaraggia (Sbaraglia, in Italian), near Colli: “A scheua à quelli tèmpi lì l’ea à Vallètti. L’è vegnio un momènto che ghe n’ea unn’atra lì, quelle cà lì [...] Sbaraggio. Eh, i no ghe stavo tutti lazù. [...] Gh’eimo unna torma a-a fin, perché 5 ò 6 figgeu, ò 7, à l’anno i nasceio, anche chi into paeise. Anca da-a mæ classe ghe seimo 7 ò 8, se i conto” (“Back then, the school was in Valletti. At one point, there was another one there, in those houses there [...] Sbaraggia. Eh, they couldn’t all fit down there. [...] There were a lot of us in the end, because 5 or 6 or 7 children were born every year, even here in the village. There are 7 or 8 of us from my age group, if I count them all”; G.F.).

The stables therefore consisted of private *casoni*⁸³, which were located in groups in various locations just beyond the boundaries of the common lands. The main locations were Massänga, e Foetæ⁸⁴, a Ciappèa⁸⁵, Cian Riondo⁸⁶, a Pessa, e Puggèe (see Fig. 4.1.3). There was usually one *casone* per family. Some families, however, could own more than one, in different locations – as in the case of the Nicora family, *do Goštin do Semoe*⁸⁷, from Campore – while others could use those belonging to others if theirs were not large enough. “I figgioammi de vòtte i ghe dormivo fiña [...] sù into cason”⁸⁸ (G.F.), so that for the young shepherds, the *monti* became a real place of entertainment:

We had a small one for the sheep, and we kept the cows in hers, which was there, *attaccou à quello do Elio*⁸⁹. There was a balcony: I can still see myself eating my milk... We kept it in a small pot, because there was a lot of water up there [...], there was that fountain over there. We would sit there, eat bread dipped in freshly milked milk, and then the people from Foetæ, *ch’i dormivo là*⁹⁰, would come out: we dug trenches, there were beautiful plains bathed in moonlight, and then everyone went their separate ways, and we from Massänga all slept together in the barn. (G.N.)

S.N.: “*A Carla, o Medeo... i l’anavan sempre inta Ciappèa, no? E Foetæ i son vixin a-a Ciappèa*”⁹¹”.

G.N.: “But they all came to sleep in Massänga, where we were all staying”.

S.N.: “I think you had a lot of fun!”.

G.N.: “Yes, that’s why *Lalli, a Ina*⁹² *i vegnivo sèmpre sù, perché i figgeu i l’eo tutti lasciù*”⁹³. And one night, my cousin [...], who was a bit older [...], said, ‘Oh, lads, come outside for a bit...’:

⁸³ The same kind of building as the Casoni della Pietra mentioned in section 3.3.4.

⁸⁴ Here “there were four or five [*casoni*]” (G.N.).

⁸⁵ A Ciappèa, where there was a *casone*, was also an area where rock was quarried to produce *ciappe*, slabs used to cover the roofs of buildings, hence the name of the place (see below).

⁸⁶ In “Cian Riondo... there are two or three *casoni* there too”.

⁸⁷ Literally “of Agostino of Samuele”. In the upper Vara Valley, as in other parts of the Apennines, only a few recurring surnames were common within the hamlets. To distinguish between different families, sobriquets were used, often referring to ancestors or specific family traits. In the case of Campore, the most frequent surnames were Nicora, Boicelli, and Lavagnino. The Nicora family known as ‘do Goštin do Semoe’ – among the homonymous –, represented the group whose head was Agostino Nicora (Goštin in the local genoese), son of Samuele Nicora (Semoe or Šemoe in the local dialect). Other examples of sobriquets include i Periddi, of unknown origin; i Carèšchi, indicating a family originally from the village of Carro; i Mericani, so called because they had emigrated to America for a period; and i Moinæ, the millers’ family. For the hamlet of Campore – and partially for Valletti – I have conducted a thorough collection of family sobriquets, as well as the epithets that villagers gave to the inhabitants of neighbouring towns. These will be presented in a forthcoming paper.

⁸⁸ “Sometimes the kids even slept there [...] up in the *casone*”.

⁸⁹ “Right next to Elio’s one”.

⁹⁰ “Who slept there”.

⁹¹ “Carla, Amedeo... They always went to Ciappèa, didn’t they? E Foetæ are close to a Ciappèa”.

⁹² Two kids who only returned to Campore during the summer, and who therefore, in theory, were not bound by the rhythms of rural life.

⁹³ “Lalli, Ina always came up, because the kids were all up there”.

there was a long plain up there in Petto di Bò that belonged to us, and someone appeared with a sheet, you know, walking back and forth... it scared us, because we were younger!”.

S.N.: “He was playing ghost! [...] So, it was also a place of entertainment and... community!”.

While in Campore after the Second World War the *casoni* were mainly associated with livestock farming, in earlier times – probably in the early decades of the 20th century, but perhaps even earlier – they were used as temporary dwellings for workers involved in harvesting wheat and other activities, such as cutting hay, harvesting potatoes or hunting:

*A Ciappèa a l'è do Giancarlo do Medeo. Gh'è o cason, ch'i gh'aneivo [...] i seu nònni e i gh'aveivo tanti terrèn. E i l'anavo sciù e ghe šteivo quinze giorni: feivo da mangiâ, a gh'aveiva o seu de cheuxe o pan... tutto! E o maio o travaggeiva, perché gh'ea e ciañe*⁹⁴. [...] They stayed up there [...] until it was time to harvest the wheat and dig up the potatoes. They moved... *mia nònna ô conteiva*⁹⁵! [...] In Massänga [...], also, there were cherries and there was a fountain nearby, [...] in Fontaña de Groppain. [...] Partridges always came there. [...] An uncle of mine, who was born in [18]55, [...] when he came from America, always went up there to catch partridges [...], near a Ciappèa. (G.N.)

O seu would be the ‘ground’ of the fireplace, i.e. a slightly raised floor where firewood was placed and cooked. The quote is taken from two interviews with the same informant, who slightly changes the details, talking the first time about Giancarlo’s great-grandparents instead of his grandparents, and about a 30-day stay instead of 15.

While what has been described so far applies to the inhabitants of Campore, the north-western slope of Verruga was frequented by shepherds from Colli di Valletti and Villa di Valletti (*a Villa* in the local dialect) – i.e. the ‘upper’ part of Valletti⁹⁶. Unlike their neighbours in Campore, they did not build *casoni* near the *monti*, perhaps because of their greater proximity, and so in summer they moved their animals from the stables located in the town to the pastures every day. Their collective lands roughly followed the boundaries described here by G.D.P.:

⁹⁴ “A Ciappèa belongs to Giancarlo, Amedeo’s son. There is the *casone* where [...] his grandparents used to go and where they had a lot of land. They would go there and stay for 15 days: they cooked their own food, they had a ‘ground’ for baking bread... everything! And her husband worked, because there were fields to plough”.

⁹⁵ “My grandma used to tell me that!”

⁹⁶ From ‘lower’ Valletti, on the other hand, the shepherds moved towards Cerreta, a locality in the direction of the Biscia pass (891 m a.s.l.), since Verruga was too far away (G.D.P.). On the common lands of Varese, and in particular on Cerreta, see: Giusti, 1997.

O Canavèss, che l'è là, distante ben ben, [...] o dividde *quasi Comuneglia* con Vallètti. [...] Perché Vallètti o rive fin e Porçin, eh! *Come territorio*, dixèmmo, l'è 'n terrèn che l'è de tutto o paeise, via [...]: comunaggia! E pöi de là gh'è... *c'è tanto delle* Campoe, eh. Confinèmmo co-e Campoe tutto sù. E pöi de chì, vegnindo a-e Còlle, confiñe co Oscègna. [...] *E di là con Statale, versante di là. E di qua Comuneglia*⁹⁷.

In particular, from the Villa di Valletti, some of the pastures where people 'went to graze' were located on the 'back' side of Verruga and bore the place name *cian*, very common in Valletti, which "o l'è nomminau pe-i cian"⁹⁸: *Cian de Cianascci*, *Cian de Paödo*, *Cian da Ròcca*, which:

l'é che p'anà su, [...] pöi se va avanti e se va à [Fontaña] Segâ. [...] *C'era una strada, diciamo, comunale [...]: passavano tutti lì i pastöi. [...] E noatri più in alto andavamo tutti lì più o meno. [...] Specialmente Colli, che è più vicino. [...] D'estate [andavamo tutti i giorni], sì. [...] Le stalle le avevamo qua* [in the village, author's note]. [...] Noatri [...] camminämo. [...] Quelli che g'eo sciù a-e Còlle, e tutto via, g'eo ciù vixin. Noatri chì emmo ciù distante ma anämo tutti sciù. E g'eo pascoli... *non c'era un pascolo come Cento Croxe*, eh: gh'ea pöco mangiâ⁹⁹. (G.D.P.)

Mountain grazing required careful management of the land, for example in terms of water. Water was essential for watering livestock during the summer, as well as for the crops that were being grown nearby. As a result, there were numerous springs used as drinking troughs for animals, usually called *fontañe*. Some of these were: in the *monti* of Campore, a Fontaña de Groppain, Pòrta Bertaña ("the cows went to drink there", G.N.), a Fontaña Ricca and a Fontaña di Angeli; a Fontaña Segâ for Valletti and Colli; and a Fontaña Sacrà, which was on the land of Santa Maria (*Santa Maia* in dialect). But human intervention could have been even more

⁹⁷ "O Canavèss, which is quite far away, [...] almost divides Comuneglia from Valletti. [...] Because Valletti reaches as far as Porcile! As a territory, let's say, it is land that belongs to the whole village [...]: *comunaggia*! And then, over there, there is... there is a lot of Campore, eh. We border Campore all the way up. And then from here, coming to Colli, it borders Ossegna [...] And over there with Statale, on that side. And on this side Comuneglia". The parts in dialect are in standard type, those in Italian are in italics.

⁹⁸ "It is famous for its plains". *Cian* did not only refer to pastures, but also to other lands in the surrounding area or within the village: *Cian do Lago*, towards Mount Cucco; *Cian de l'Örbo*, towards a Villa; *Cian de Ramâ*; *Cianeio*; *Cian de Valletti*; *Cian de Sapin*, in the centre of the village; *Cian da Cheullia* from the *Risveglio Naturale* agritourism. In the pastures, *Cian de Cianascci* is not particularly big, while *Cian do Lago* and *Cian da Ròcca* "g'en grèndi" ("are large") (G.D.P.).

⁹⁹ "It's to go up, where you go up, then you go forward and you go to [Fontaña] Segâ. [...] There was a road, let's say, a municipal road [...]: all the shepherds passed by there. [...] And we, higher up, all went there more or less. [...] Especially Colli, which is closer. [...] In summer [we went every day], yes. [...] We had the stables here [in the village, author's note]. [...] We [...] walked. [...] Those who were up in Colli, and all around, were closer. We were further away here, but we were all going up. And there were pastures... there wasn't a pasture like Cento Croci, eh: there was little food". The parts in dialect are in standard type, those in Italian are in italics.

profound. The interviews revealed the existence of a body of water created specifically for agricultural and pastoral use, which cannot be found on old cadastral maps or in official cartography in general, and which was also used by young shepherds as a place of entertainment: *o lago do Bossoeueo* (the lake of Bossoeueo)¹⁰⁰.

G.N.: “Bossoeueo. [...] There is always water, even now”.

S.N.: “There was the Bossoeueo lake, where [the shepherds] used to bathe”.

G.N.: “Now it’s all water that flows a little here, a little there: it’s no longer...”

S.N.: “They probably had also dammed it up a bit, that is, they had created that lake there, to make it... it was a swimming pool!”

G.N.: “Oh yes! Do you know who was there [to dam it up, author’s note]? Giovanni, Emilio, Luisitto and o Albi. [...] Bossoeueo is below that cliff [a Ròcca do Cian de Çimma], [...] *un pö ciù erto da Ciappèa*¹⁰¹. [...] Those from e Foetæ went there”.

Given the intense pastoral summer life described above, the pastures became real places of meeting and entertainment, even between neighbouring hamlets, so much so that celebrations were organised in some plains or clearings. One of these was *a Festa de gi Arcsìxi*, which was interrupted shortly after the Second World War. In the local dialect, *gi arcsìxi* refers to narcissi (*Narcissus*).

Eh, unna vòtta i vegnivo anche da-e Campoe [...]. Aneimo un pö sù... noatri eimo de chì e pöi s’attroveimo sciù là insemme [...] à demoâse [laughs]. Sciù in scî valichi. Eh, ghe n’ea de gente sciù là. [...] L’è un pòsto, Verruga zu basso [...]: i Arcsìxi, “Arcisi”. E i feio a festa de gi Arcsìxi, a seconda domènega de mazzo, e i ghe ballavo. Gh’ea gènte coscì [laughs]. L’è funia... dòppo a guæra. Un pö lì, pöi basta, no gh’è ciù anai¹⁰². (G.D.P.)

Another festival held in the hills, which began in 1904 and is still organised today, is the celebration of the Madonna della Guardia at the Cappella della Costa, near o Cian da Còsta. It was once also known as *a festa do cavagno*, because “te mettei o cavagno, te ghe mettei drènto

¹⁰⁰ It is likely that o Cian do Lago, mentioned by G.D.P. and located in the Colli di Valletti lands towards Mount Cucco, also contained a pond, since *lago* means ‘lake’.

¹⁰¹ “A little higher than a Ciappèa”.

¹⁰² “Eh, once they even came from Campore [...]. We went up a little... we were there and then we found ourselves up there together [...] having fun. Up on the mountain passes. Eh, there were a lot of people up there. [...] It’s a place, Verruga down below [...]: the Arcisi. And they organised the Arcisi celebration, on the second Sunday in May, and they danced. There were so many people! It ended... after the war. A little bit there, then that was it, we never went there again”.

o pan e ti anavi sciù e ti mangiavi lì'¹⁰³ (G.D.P.). The custom of going up at the end of August, each with their own food, and gathering together to eat, attending mass after lunch and continuing the festival until evening is still alive today: “o paeise o va là sù, o se pòrte da mangiâ, o va à mangiâ la sù à mëzogiorno, pöi o vëgne o prævo a dî mësä”¹⁰⁴. “Unna vòtta [...] gh'anavo tutti sciù. I vegnivan anche de feua. I ghe portavo o vin à vènde. [...] À pê, tutti: no ghe n'ea strae”¹⁰⁵ (G.D.P.). In nearby Campore, on the other hand, the Feast of St. Bernard was established in 1980 and organised until 2015. In San Benardo (San Bernardo in Italian), on the south-eastern side of Verruga, people had already been going in procession in previous years to celebrate Mass in the chapel there, after which they all ate together. In 1980, almost as a joke, the villagers began collecting money to renovate the dilapidated chapel, and from there came the idea of organising an annual meal to raise some money for other similar projects in the village. Also, the origin of the chapel is steeped in legend:

Up there, where the chapel is, one day there was a shepherd with his sheep [...] – my grandmother used to tell me – and a storm came, with hail, and everyone was scared because that *figgeu* was up there with his animals, and they went to look for him when it was over: he was there, dry, and they said, “What?...”. “Ah...”, *o l'à ito lê*: “*m'è vegnuo un*”¹⁰⁶ in a white coat and told me to stop here”. That's why they built the San Bernardo chapel (G.N.).

¹⁰³ Literally “basket festival”: “you put on your basket, put bread in it, went up there and ate”.

¹⁰⁴ “The town goes up there, they take food with them, eat up there at midday, then the priest comes to say Mass”.

¹⁰⁵ “Once upon a time [...] everyone went there. They even came from outside the area. They brought us wine to sell. [...] On foot, everyone: there were no roads”. Informants repeatedly mention travelling on foot along slopes, mountain ridges, or mid-hill paths to reach neighbouring hamlets for village festivals. An informant from Disconesi (*Desconeixi* in dialect), for instance, during an informal interview in the summer of 2025, recalled how as a child she would travel with her family from Disconesi to Valletti for the Feast of Saint Anne (*Sant'Anna*) on 26th July, covering many kilometres across Mounts Porcile and Verruga.

¹⁰⁶ *Figgeu* translates as “child”, “boy”. For the rest: “he said: ‘one came [...]’”.



Fig. 4.1.5. a) Scythe (*scorriatte*) blades, for haymaking. b) A *marcia* – a small field anvil for peering scythes – and a small hammer.
Source: Held at the Museo Contadino di Cassego. Photographs by Moreno Carbone.

From the perspective of agricultural land use, although the temporary relocation to the *casoni* for the wheat harvest belonged to generations preceding that of the interviewed informants, up until the 1960s the Verruga was nonetheless characterized by an intensive and diversified use of the land: “Allora lo pulivano tutto o Verruga, di qua e di là, come... una patata! [laughs]”¹⁰⁷ (G.D.P.). In addition to the cultivation of potatoes and wheat, large quantities of hay were also cut on the Verruga. Haymaking took place in summer – between June and July – during what were known as *e giornæ* (‘the workdays’; literally ‘the days’). A similar form of organization existed for the wheat harvest.

When it was time [...] to cut hay or time to cut wheat, they would exchange *e giornæ*, that is: a good group of [people] [...] would go and cut the hay or wheat for one family for a day, let’s say. They would do several days for one family, then the other family would do several days for the other one [...]; that way [...] one could say, “in two or three days I get all my hay cut [...], instead of going every day for a month”. (S.N.)

For transporting hay down to the valley, *fie*, ‘cableways’, were used. These installations, which existed in the past and were sometimes also used to transport firewood, had already been in place before the birth of the interviewed informants: “From Verruga [...] there were several of them, but not big ones. [...] I’ve always seen the one from Verruga. Then... well, there had been others around, because there were no roads. Sometimes they brought wood down from the mountain; there were also ones that went back and forth... There was one [...] with a double cable” (G.D.P.). The served villages were Campore, Colli, and the Villa di Valletti, while others, such as lower Valletti and Comuneglia (*Commineggia* in dialect)¹⁰⁸, did not have cableways. In Campore there were at least three cableways: two starting from Massänga, one reaching San Bernardo and the other ending in the village at the Liggia do Læte; and another, privately owned, running from the Ciappèa/Foetæ area to San Bernardo¹⁰⁹ (G.N.). The cut hay

¹⁰⁷ “Back then they cleared the whole Verruga, here and there, like... a potato!”

¹⁰⁸ The toponym *Commineggia* recalls the common lands, called *comminagge* in the local dialect and *comunaglie* in Italian.

¹⁰⁹ The area of San Bernardo, behind the chapel, was mainly devoted to “potatoes and hay: [...] in San Bernardo there were plains where you could see all of them [the potatoes], when they were in bloom” (G.N.). With regard to potatoes – called *patatte* in Genoese and also in the local dialect – the informant G.D.P. points to an interesting former use of the term *tròfie*, which in Genoese normally refers to gnocchi: “ò sentio de quelli che e patatte i ê ciamman ‘e tròffie’! Pöi e tròffie g’en quelle che ghe fa à pasta [...]: i gnocchi. Carchedun a-e patatte ghe dixe ‘tròfie’. L’ò sentio. Adèss no, ma unna vòtta i gh’eo!” (“I’ve heard people calling potatoes *tròfie*! Then *tròfie* are the ones made as pasta [...]: gnocchi. Some people call potatoes *tròfie*. I’ve heard it. Not now, but once they did!”). Furthermore, the informant T.D.N., 63, a resident of Codivara (*Cò Và* in dialect, meaning “the head of the Vara river”) but raised in Tevigio – two hamlets of Varese Ligure located in different parts of the valley – notes that

was wrapped in *e reie* (Fig. 4.1.6) and transported by cableway, whereas the wheat was carried down on people's backs.

[*E reie*] are two sticks, let's say, and then they have the *còlle*: you put the hay on them and then you tie it like this... And they were also carried on the back, you know. Many people carried them from Verruga [...] down to lower Valletti. We had the cableway up here at the top, whereas those [down below didn't; author's note]. They used to come up from [...] lower Comuneglia to get the hay there. (G.D.P.)

We would also go up to cut hay, but we carried the pulleys with us, everything on our backs. We went up, and then there was a *fia* [...], a cableway. They would send the *reie* – *ghe dimmo*¹¹⁰ – down, with the pulley, and they would arrive there [...] *inta Liggia do Læte*. [...] [The cableway] was in Massänga and [...] it ended there. [...] They made the *reie*: they had two sticks, then they were placed on the pulley and sent down. [...] Always [for] hay, and nothing else. Wheat was carried on the back. (G.N.)



Fig. 4.1.6. A spread-out *reia* (net) for transporting hay, on the top of the picture. Below on the left, the *paggetto*, an old jacket folded to protect the head and shoulders while carrying hay. Source: Held at the Museo Contadino di Cassego. Photograph by Moreno Carbone.

her aunt used the word *trifole* to refer to potatoes (personal communication via Facebook, March 2026). In Genoese, this term in its masculine form normally refers to truffles.

¹¹⁰ "We call them".

Agricultural life, as discussed in Chapter 3, took place on land owned by local inhabitants. In the case of Campore, for example, these properties extended – and still extends – from the base of the pastures below the Verruga to the left bank of the Borsa stream, covering about 2.5 km as the crow flies and a difference in altitude of approximately 600 m – from the 960 m a.s.l. of a Ciappèa to the 360 m of the Borsa valley floor. These properties, which are extremely fragmented (cf. Fig. 4.1.3) due to being divided among all family members from generation to generation, belongs to a vast number of owners. In the dialect of Campore, a peculiar expression is used to indicate plots belonging to a specific owner: the periphrasis *aveighe da fâ*, which literally means “to have work to do there”; this seems to emphasise the hardship and labour associated with tilling the land. Consequently, during interviews, when an informant refers to land owned by a specific person, they tend to use phrases such as “*là o gh’à da fâ o Barella/o Goštin*”, meaning “that place is Barella’s/Agostino’s property”).

This system of landownership was also based on sharecropping, with *manenti* (sharecroppers; *mezzadri* in Italian) managing the land while retaining, as the term implies, half of the harvest. Between Valletti and Colli, out of roughly forty families, about ten were sharecroppers: “there were landowners who had large plots of land. [...] But back then it was hard even for the owners [smiles], and [for] the sharecroppers... it was really hard!” (G.D.P.). A distinctive story, yet one that is indicative of the many possible experiences of migration to the city, comes from Campore and the Nicora family do Goštin do Semoe. After leaving Campore for Genoa in 1946 – where they ran a fresh pasta shop –, they entrusted the care of their land to a sharecropper and his family, who managed it until the mid-1950s, before eventually leaving Campore themselves. During this period, the Nicora family returned periodically, especially the mother with the three youngest of her six children, who spent the three months of the summer holidays there:

In casa nòstra gh’ea o manente. Quande niatri semmo andæti a stâ à Zena, ma za anche primma, mæ papà o l’aveiva piggiou o manente, perché o gh’aveiva tanto terren [...] coltivabile [...]. E niatri anavimo sciù d’estæ, solo d’estæ. [...] Anavimo [...] e træ [figge] ciù picciñe, dixemmo, [...] e inti questi trei meixi chî viveivimo comme viveiva a popolaçion de Campoe, che a l’ea formâ da famigge che gh’aveivan tutti [...] *animali*, dixemmo, da portâ a-o pascòlo, e anavimo sciù con liatri a-i monti.¹¹¹ (S.N.)

¹¹¹ “In our house there was a sharecropper. When we went to live in Genoa, but even before that, my dad had hired the sharecropper because he had so much arable [...] land [...]. And we went up in the summer, just in the summer. [...] We went [...] the three youngest [daughters], let’s say, [...] and during those three months we lived like the

Among the rituals associated with the products of rural life, three types of threshing should be noted: wheat, maize, and chestnuts (for the latter, see Section 4.3). These processes were traditionally carried out by hand for a long time, using, depending on the case, sticks, sacks, or other tools to separate the components of the harvested products. In the early decades of the twentieth century, machines that allowed these operations to be completed much more quickly and with less physical effort began to spread. Such machines were typically industrially manufactured and purchased by specialized farmers, who travelled from village to village in rotation¹¹² to carry out the threshing – initially in exchange for a portion of the product and later for money¹¹³. These events were true collective rituals, festive occasions for both adults and children, as attested by all four interviewed informants, in whose homes they took place.

There were two or three main spots in the village [in Campore]. The one in the lower village was our terrace over there [in the Torisso area, author's note]. Then there was one *inte Lèe* [...]. And then there was another one up at the top of the village [...]. A chap from Còlle di Valetti came with the wheat-threshing machine and brought it down [...] They'd put those sheaves [of wheat, made after the harvest, author's note] into the machine here. [...] It separated the straw [from the wheat grains] and then they'd throw the straw down from the terrace, right? [...] They made piles of straw, right? And we, for example, from my terrace down below, we'd jump into them: *i sati inta paggia*. [...] Kids couldn't wait for the wheat to be threshed so they could go and do the *sati inta paggia*. [...] Then they put all the wheat grains into those big jute sacks, and that was... it was the Campore villagers' gold... I mean, for the farmers, the wheat: it was, it was the most precious raw material. (S.N.)

Here they threshed the wheat on the terrace. [...] It wasn't built like that: there was a little wall, eh, not even tiles. [...] And the straw they'd throw down there. We kids would run around and, from here: paff! We'd jump right into the straw. (G.N.)

Among the evidence provided by the collected interviews, the account of G.F., a 90-year-old farmer from Costa Massucco (Colli di Valletti), stands out. His father Agostino traveled for months to carry out threshing, sometimes accompanied by his son. In particular, Agostino

people of Campore, who were all made up of families that had [...] animals, let's say, to take to pasture, and we went up to the mountains with them".

¹¹² G.D.P. notes that "there were lots of people who went to thresh... [...] one year maybe this one would come, another year that one".

¹¹³ "Ghe davo tanto à quintale: [...] ti gh'æ dexe quintali da gran? Tanto à quintale! [...]. Se ti ghe n'aveivi dôi, l'è pe dôi. Gh'ea unna tangente" ("They gave them a certain amount per quintal: [...] got ten quintals of wheat? An amount per quintal! [...] If you had two, it's for two. There was a kickback") (G.F.).

personally designed and built the machines he used for threshing, after observing those that were beginning to spread, in order to address a problem that affected many of the more isolated villages: their excessive weight, which made them unsuitable for areas without carriageable roads, where transport had to be carried out on the shoulders:

O l'â [inventao e] fatto tutte e machine. Perché, quella da-o gran [*wich trashes and cleans it*], o gh'ea un de San Peo ch'o l'aveia fatta e o gh'â vendeia, e o l'aveia portâ sù, ma à chelli tempi strae... no gh'ea de strae, e aloa beseugna portâla in spalle. [...] Mæ poæ a vegniva à mente, studiando... o l'â fatta fiña de legno de palloa, che no l'é legno che tie tanto, però praticamente l'é leggero [...] e o l'â fatta picciña [...], e l'an fatto pe tanti anni o gio. [...] Pe batte, pe fâ sto gio, sò che ghe n'aveivo pe un meise ò dôi¹¹⁴. (G.F.)



Fig. 4.1.7. G.F.'s chestnut beating machine on the left. The machine can be dismantled and converted into a maize threshing machine by replacing the upper part with the device shown in the photo on the right. Both machines were invented and constructed by Gino's father.

Source: Photographs taken by students during the March 2025 Nottingham field course.

¹¹⁴ "He made all the machines himself. Because, for the wheat one, there was a chap from San Pietro who had made it and would have sold it to him, and he had brought it up, but back then roads... there were no roads, so you had to carry it on your shoulders. [...] My father got the idea, studying it... he even made it out of *palloa* wood, which isn't a very strong wood, but basically, it's light [...] and he made it small [...], and they went around with it for many years. [...] To do the threshing, to make this round, I know it would take them a month or two". For further details on this threshing circuit, see section 4.3.



Fig. 4.1.8. Wheat threshing in an old, undated photograph. The threshing machine can be seen on the right near the barn, with the threshed wheat being output from the front.

Source: T.D.N., via Facebook.

The invention of new threshing machines represented a small revolution in the agricultural villages of the upper Vara Valley, as it made it possible to drastically reduce the workload. This relief was also felt in the threshing of maize and chestnuts, carried out respectively in October and December:

Quella da-a mæga [...] o l'â inventâ. Perché, praticamente, [...] a mæga â batteio pe coscì, chî sù inte Gèe. E mi gh'anavo à battele: aloa gh'ean tutte e famigge... [A mæga] l'ea ciù un lavô de Gèe, perché [...] gh'ea l'acqua, e aloa i â feio. O primmo anno o l'aveia fatto solo ch'a batteia [...] e o buggio de feua o l'avea fatto de legno [...]. Aloa o l'â fatto o buggio de færo e inandiâ adòsso a chell'atra da-e castagnea, ch'a vande, ch'a â poliva. A veniva into sacco, bella polita¹¹⁵.

[...] Quand'o l'aveiva fatto quella machina lì, anca zu, lì, g'eo risòrti, [...] perché primma i â piccavo co-o baston. Unna vòtta co-o sacco. [...] A aloa co-o baston remeneuia, poi beseugnava

¹¹⁵ "He invented [...] the one for maize, too. Because basically [...] they used to thresh a lot of maize, up here in the Gèe. And I used to go and thresh it: back then there were all the families... [Maize] was more of a Gèe kind of job, because [...] there was water there, and so they managed to grow it. The first year he had made it so that it only threshed [...] and the outlet hole was made of wood [...]. Then he made the hole out of iron and fitted it onto the other machine for chestnuts, the one that winnows, that cleaned it. It came out into the sack, nice and clean." *Gèe* is a toponym generally referring to gravelly land or gravelly torrent bed (Aa.Vv., 2007, p. 18).

vandela, comedie... [...] invece lì, belin, inte unn'oa 8-10 quintali de castagne... de mæga, belle pulite into sacco. [...] Ti â giavi à man con unna maneggia¹¹⁶. (G.F.)

Alongside agricultural production, the gathering of wild berries was also important, both for household consumption and for sale, which in some cases could even become specialized (Don Sandro Lagomarsini interview). The most commonly found wild fruits were *e pelle* (blueberries), *e moie rosse* (raspberries), *i mielli* (strawberries), and *i armòttoi* (the fruits of the strawberry tree). A site particularly rich in *mielli* was the grazing land of the Cian de Mieghi, while *e pelle* are reported in two different locations, not yet identified – but one located *de po à Verruga*¹¹⁷ –, on the two slopes of Mount Verruga; one of these sites was also abundant in *moie rosse*:

Pielle ghe n'ea ciù tènne sciù, perché o bòsco o l'ea polito [...]. Verruga, de là gh'è un pòsto, i ghe dixo *a Luvega*, gh'ea de pelle erte coscì. Chì [in Valletti] g'en ciù basse, picciñe. Invece là g'eo ciù gròsse e erte, e i ê piggeivo co... [...] unna pettena [...], un affare pe coggî... i ghe passavo sotta [...] comme un rastello [...]. I ê vendeivo anche, eh"¹¹⁸. (G.D.P., Valletti; Fig. 4.1.9)

Tra Porçin e Verruga gh'è un valico e [...] l'en lì. E anaivimo lì à piggiâ [...] e pelle e i lampon [sic]. [...] E mangiaivimo, mangiaivimo... aveivimo e man tutte neigre, a bocca neigra, a faccia neigra [laughs]¹¹⁹. (S.N., Campore)

¹¹⁶ “When he made that machine, even down there, they were reborn, [...] because before they used to thresh it with a stick. Once with a sack. [...] Back then with the stick you it *remeneuia*, then you had to winnow it, fuss... [...] but there, damn, in an hour 8-10 quintals of chestnuts... of maize, nice and clean in the sack. [...] You turned it by hand with a handle”. For further details on chestnut threshing, see section 4.3.

¹¹⁷ “Behind Mount Verruga”, relative to Campore.

¹¹⁸ “There were more blueberries up there, because the forest was clear [...]. In Verruga, over there, there's a place they called *a Luvega*, there were blueberries this tall. Here they're lower, smaller. But over there they were bigger and taller, and they picked them with [...] a *pettena* [...], a thing for gathering... they ran it under [...] like a rake [...]. They sold them too, eh”.

¹¹⁹ “Between Porcile and Verruga there is a pass, and [...] they're there. And we used to go there to pick [...] the blueberries and the raspberries. [...] And we'd eat, eat... our hands were all black, our mouths black, our faces black.” The informant uses the Italianism *lampon*, but in Campore raspberries are called *moie rosse*, while in Genoa they are known as *framboase* or *ampoe*.



Fig. 4.1.9. Berry pickers (*pettene*) for harvesting blueberries – locally called *pielle* around Verruga; but the name changes along the valley. The frame is made of wood, while the teeth are made of shaped iron. Source: Held at the Museo Contadino di Cassego. Photographs by Moreno Carbone.

Finally, other forms of knowledge, manifested in specific land-use practices, concerned the need to produce heat at home, sometimes through charcoal production, or construction, which required the production of lime and the extraction of rock slabs useful, for example, for roofing. In the first case, charcoal piles are widely documented in literature and mentioned in the collected interviews. The production of wood charcoal was, in fact, a common practice, as attested in Campore and Valletti, but also in Case Rotte, on the heights of Taglieto. Charcoal was sometimes produced by local inhabitants, but more often professionals came from outside – typically from Veneto and eastern Lombardy –, who settled in the forests for months or even years, so much so that many of them eventually remained in the valley and started families (see Chapter 5.4):

We made a lot of them, but not continuously. [...] There were forests there, *de macce de fò*¹²⁰. There had been several charcoal burners from Veneto, people who came from outside to make charcoal. [...] They slept there, had shacks, ate there... basically, they stayed there all summer. From Veneto and Bergamo area. [...] We did a bit ourselves because we had learned how, but we

¹²⁰ “Beech forest”.

only made about twenty [charcoal piles] in total, a bit here, a bit there, a bit over there. But them [...], they stayed there for years”. (G.D.P.)

In the surroundings of Valletti, the areas most used for charcoal piles were “a Scrava, below Monte Verruga, around there, in that valley there. Then [...] over there, going up to Biscia, [...] *i ghe dixo o Canavaèssso, che l’è là distante ben ben, ma o dividde quasi*¹²¹ Comuneglia with Valletti” (G.D.P.). The lime kilns, on the other hand, were constructed as follows:

They made big holes, at least 2 meters in diameter. [...] Some smaller, some bigger... [...] And about 2-3 meters deep, and they did the wrapping. It was like a tube in the ground, you know, you had to dig, set it up... then they filled it with stones. They made a spot for the fire, then created a round of stones. And there they kept the fire going for 8 days, 9; night and day. Until those stones were turned into lime. (G.D.P.)

Lime performs particularly well in areas with high humidity, which makes it essentially indestructible: “If you go into the houses, even the ruins around, go down to the foundations, [...] you can’t break that! [...] The walls they made along the rivers, you can’t even break them with bombs!” (G.D.P.).

Another widespread activity around the Verruga was the extraction of rock for the production of roofing slabs and for other building and domestic uses, the so-called *ciappe*. The extraction areas are still reflected today in toponyms such as *Ciappèa*, *Ciappain*, *Ciappeuzo*, which are very common throughout the valley. In Valletti, during the extraction the specialists:

e ciappe [...] ê piggeivo à Arzen. L’è dòppo o Biscia: gh’è un paeise lì, gh’è e cave de ciappe. [...] *C’erano quelle che mettevano nel fondo [dai muri] per grondaia. Ma ce n’è di quelle di un metro e mezzo o due, 2,5. [...] Come han fatto a portarle non si sa. [...] E i è favo co-e taggeue, unna pria, pöi “tan, tan, tan”, veniva feua di lastron comme di mattoni, eh! De doi metri ne ò visto mi, eh, longhe*¹²². (G.D.P.)

¹²¹ “They called it *o Canavaèssso*, which is over there, quite far away, but it almost divides [...]”.

¹²² “The *ciappe* [...] they got them from Arzeno. It’s past the Biscia: there’s a village there, there are the *ciappe* quarries. [...] There were the ones they put at the bottom [of the walls] for the gutter. But some were like a meter and a half or two, 2.5. [...] How they managed to carry them, nobody knows. [...] And they made them with the *taggeue*, a stone, then ‘tan, tan, tan’, and out came big slabs like bricks, eh! I’ve seen some two meters long, eh”. The parts in dialect are in standard type, those in Italian are in italics. Arzeno is located beyond the watershed, in the Graveglia Valley, along the western slope of Mount Chiappozzo (*Ciappeuzo*).

Almost all buildings were covered with *ciappe*, including the mills. Milling activity was indeed widespread, as the basis of the diet in this Apennine area revolved around chestnut (see section 4.3), maize and wheat flours, as well as legumes one. While there were 17 mills in the municipality of Carro, numerous mills were located between Varese and Valletti along the river: around Valletti there were three, two of which are now in ruins, while the third, managed by W.B., stopped milling two years ago:

Back then they were always milling, because [...] everyone had maize – *mæga*, *dixemmo*¹²³ –, wheat [...]. Along the river, from Varese there were three or four. [...] The one that's there... *i ghe dixo Moin da Rivea*¹²⁴, which even has the wheel outside on display, coming up from Varese. [...] And down in the centre of Varese there were three. And then further up there was the one of... *a Cattèa*. (G.D.P.)



Fig. 4.1.9. The Bricchetti Mill (*Moin di Bricchètti*) near Valletti, in the municipality of Varese Ligure, owned by W.B., who stopped his chestnut, maize and wheat milling activity in 2024. The *ciappe* roofs are visible.

Source: Author's photograph, November 2021.

¹²³ "Maize, let's say".

¹²⁴ "They call it Rivea Mill". *Rivea* comes from the river.

4.2. *À Casarsa tutti montagnin s'ea: transformations in coastal and rural towns*¹²⁵

Chiama [...] quella mattina si è svegliata con la consueta litania degli animali: i galli hanno cantato, le galline si sono agitate, le pecore belavano dentro la stalla di Gigliola e le tre mucche della Rina rispondevano con muggiti e cornate contro il recinto. [...] Il tramestio di scodelle e cucchiari si intuiva lento e delicato nelle cucine, ma nessuno scendeva in carruggio, sembrava domenica. Non si litigava, non si spaccava legna, non si urlava dalle finestre...

Rossana Sciascia, *L'Elvira Conta*, 2023, p. 10

The analysis carried out so far has shown that the depopulation of this area of the Apennines during the second post-war period mainly occurred through migration along the coast. The consequence of this phenomenon was the urban expansion of coastal towns, especially those close to towns that were already partially saturated, such as Sestri Levante and La Spezia. In a way that is only apparently counterintuitive, parallel to this, another growth phenomenon took place in the hamlets that were gradually emptying, through the construction of detached houses outside the historic centre, which, in addition to expanding the villages, substantially shifted their population. In this section, the two themes will be addressed through the stories of two localities: Casarza Ligure (*Casarsa* in Genoese), in the metropolitan city of Genoa, and Campore (*e Campoe*), in the municipality of Maissana.

Although located outside the study area, Casarza Ligure is deeply connected historically to the events of the upper Val di Vara, both from an administrative point of view and from a functional one (cf.: Figone, 1995; 1998). The Petronio Valley, where the municipality of Casarza is located – between Castiglione Chiavarese and Sestri Levante –, is connected to the upper Vara Valley by two important communication routes: the Bracco road (Bracco Pass, 612 m a.s.l.), which until the advent of the railway (1874) and then the motorway (1971) was the only direct land route between Genoa and La Spezia, via the current municipality of Carrodano; the Velva hill road, which passes through the municipality of Maissana and continues towards Varese Ligure and the Emilia region – and is for this reason officially named Strada Statale 523 del Colle di Cento Croci¹²⁶ –, has been enhanced since the 1970s by the Madonna della Guardia di Velva tunnel (or ‘Velva Tunnel’), which allows travellers to avoid passing through the pass

¹²⁵ This section is based on a series of interviews conducted between March 2022 and August 2025 with four key informants, sometimes interviewed individually and sometimes together: S.N. and E.N., sisters born in Campore (Maissana) in 1941 and 1945 respectively, who moved to Genoa in 1946 but returned to Campore for three months every summer throughout their childhood and then again on holiday when they were older; G.N. – not related to E.N. and S.N. –, born (in 1936) and raised in Campore, who then moved to the Riviera as a young adult and finally returned to live in Campore; M.N. – not related to the others –, born in Campore in 1937 and raised elsewhere.

¹²⁶ About the Centocroci road, see: Palumbo, 2010.

of the same name (Velva Pass, 545 m a.s.l.). This connection and the extreme proximity to the town of Sestri Levante – of which Casarza is now effectively a continuation – meant that many emigrants from the Vara Valley moved there to work in the factories located there, such as the Fabbbrica Italiana Tubi di Sestri Levante and the Fincantieri in Riva Trigoso: “Casarza è piena di *montagnin*! [...] *tutti montagnin s’ea*. Tutta gente di su di qua: di Campore, Santa Maria... son tutti lì” (G.N.)¹²⁷.

This influx of labour contributed decisively to the increase in population, which grew by 82% between 1961 and 1981 – from 2,763 to 5,019 inhabitants – and by 143% between 1961 and 2011 – when it reached 6,708 inhabitants. Such a dramatic increase in population obviously led to unprecedented urban expansion for the town, which until then had been nothing more than a small village:

S.N.: I remember Casarza when I was little, we used to come up in the summer, right?, and we would pass through Casarza to get here, right?... Well, look, in my opinion it must have been a quarter of what it is now.

G.N.: Oh yes, *anca meno*¹²⁸! There was no motorway, nothing.

S.N.: Even less. Then there was a... it became... [...] people couldn’t build or buy a house in Sestri Levante because it was too expensive and also because there weren’t any, and Casarza developed in a really dizzying way.

G.N.: [In the 1960s and 1970s] they built all the villas down there. That part up on that hill is all high walls and houses.

S.N.: Because, look, I remember it being almost deserted when I was ten or thirteen [between 1955 and 1958, author’s note].

Many who moved there used their skills to build their own homes, as did G.D.P. (born in 1929), a bricklayer (*massacan*) from Valletti, who built his relatives’ house in the hamlet of Battilana (*Battilaña*), where he now lives too.

Casarza was not the only place transformed by the effects of internal migration. Cogorno and its hamlets – such as San Salvatore – in the hinterland of Lavagna also saw their populations increase, and the municipality grew by 92% between 1961 and 1981 – from 2,779 to 5,337

¹²⁷ *Montagnin* means ‘person from the mountains’ in Genoese. “Casarza is full of *montagnin*! [...] We were all from the mountains. All the people from up here: from Campore, Santa Maria... they’re all there”. The parts in dialect are in italics, those in Italian are in standard type.

¹²⁸ ‘Even less’.

inhabitants – and by 103% between 1961 and 2011 – when it reached 5,641 inhabitants – thanks to contributions from the neighbouring valleys of the Genovesato:

Beppe too [her husband, born in 1935, author's note]... they were in Maissana but they were sharecroppers. Then they moved down south in 1952, I think. They went down there [to San Salvatore di Cogorno] and they all went to work... he worked for Coca Cola. [...] Because back then, he used to deliver Coca Cola in his van to all the restaurants all the way there to Recco; he worked in Chiavari. *E mi*¹²⁹... I used to cycle down there [to work] in a tailor's shop" (G.N.).

G.N. and B.O. are both from Vara Valley (Campore and Maissana, respectively), but they met in Lavagna on 15th August 1959/1960, during the Torta dei Fieschi festival: "*Mi l'ò conosciuto pe-o Ferragosto à Ciavai* [sic], *ch'i deivo a torta*¹³⁰... they make the big Fieschi cake, and they gave us a piece of cake and then everyone had to go and see what number they had, and we found ourselves there: we had the same number..." (G.N.). They married in 1963 in Campore and then lived for several years in Tigullio, travelling back and forth for a while, although in 1991 they were forced by circumstances to sell their animals and reduce their trips to Vara Valley. They then returned permanently to Campore, where they still live in retirement.

The urban change highlighted by oral sources is confirmed by a comparison of aerial photos and satellite images available on the geoportals of the Municipality of Genoa and the Liguria Region (Fig. 4.2.1). The first image is from 1964 (flight carried out on behalf of the Comune di Genova, strip 34, frame 851), the second from 2025 (ESRI Imagery). In the first photograph, the town already appears to be expanding beyond the historic hamlets, with some houses along roads branching off to the south and north of the Petronio. For the rest, however, the land is used for crops on the floodplains on the southern bank of the Petronio or on terraces along south-facing slopes, such as the one above Verici Inferiore – at the top of the image. The informant G.N. probably refers to this latter area when she mentions the mountain with "high walls and houses" (see above). Today's satellite image shows this slope to be heavily urbanised, with some residual crops scattered among the buildings. Similarly, the plains along the Petronio are occupied, in equal distribution, by residential buildings and industrial plants. All this confirms the informants' statement that in the 1950s, the built-up area of Casarza was less than a quarter of what it is today.

¹²⁹ 'And I'.

¹³⁰ 'I met him on August 15th in Chiavari [sic], where they were giving out the cake [...]'. Actually, the Torta dei Fieschi festival is organised in Lavagna.

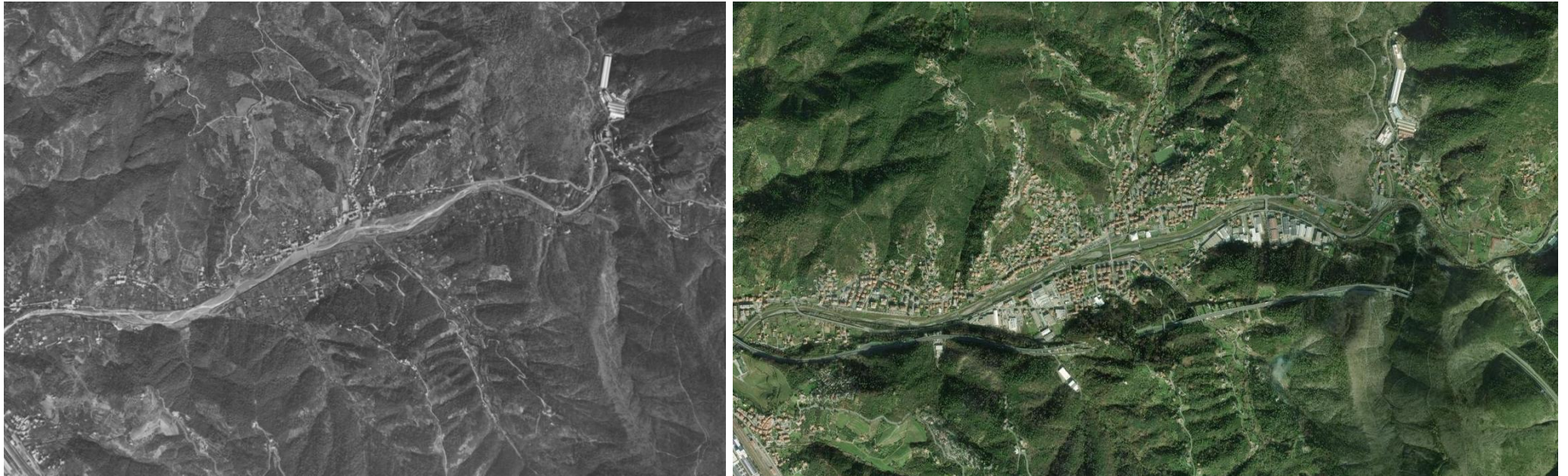


Fig. 4.2.1. Two images of Casarza Ligure side by side, showing the area between the hamlets of Francolano and Massasco, from west to east, and Novano and Verici Superiore, from south to north. The municipality of Sestri Levante is on the left beyond the image, Castiglione Chiavarese on the right. In the first photograph, the motorway, inaugurated in 1971 and visible south of the town in the second image, is absent.

Sources: Flight carried out on behalf of the Comune di Genova, 1964, strip 34, frame 851 (<<https://mappe.comune.genova.it/MapStore2/#/viewer/854>>); ESRI Imagery, 2025 (<<https://srvcarto.regione.liguria.it/geoservices/apps/viewer/pages/apps/geoportale/>>)

Campore, on the other hand, is a hamlet in the municipality of Maissana, characterised until the 1950s by a concentrated settlement and the absence of scattered houses (see: ISTAT, 1926). The village was inhabited by 177 people in 1921 (ISTAT, 1926); “I remember them all being inhabited [the houses]. I tell you, even the *manenti*¹³¹, all of them. I remember all those people there. There were three or four people here too: there, in that one with the windows, there were three” (G.N.). With rapid depopulation, the soundscape that characterised Campore and all the villages in the upper Vara Valley also disappeared, but it remains etched in the memories of those who experienced it during their childhood and is well described by Rossana Sciascia in the opening quote of the section¹³². A soundscape made up of chatter among the women who worked sitting along the *carroggi*¹³³ in Campore: ‘A Delia a chixiva’ (G.N.); ‘Scì, m’â ricòrdo in sô vòtin co-a machina: ‘du du dun, du du dun, du du dun’”¹³⁴ (S.N.). Of pots and pans used in the houses. Of sound of bells ringing to call people to Mass on Sundays and feast days, called by the onomatopoeic term *dan dan*; or of the practice of *addrissâ a campanâ*, which means ‘to straighten the bell’, referring to the fact that during feast days *i campanâ* (the bell ringers) used to ring also the fourth and biggest bell, not normally used, with this specific technique to obtain a more complex polyphony (S.N.). Of boys and girls singing and playing in the streets or on the terraces of the dwellings in the evening or on Sundays¹³⁵:

I ragassi andavano tutti là sotto, ma tanti, eh, che c’era solo quella luce lì... Sai quando invece di andare di lì, vai di là, c’è una luce, no? Allora c’era solo quella lì nel paese, eh, o due... E giocavano alla *môra* tutte le sere lì. [...] Facevano: “cinque, sei, sette, otto, *môra*!”. Me li ricordo perché li sentivamo [*smiles*, author’s note]. E noi, invece, ragazze andavamo sempre laggiù sotto al portico [...] laggiù in fondo che c’è quella pietra da sedersi. [...] E andavamo sempre lì a cantare e... non c’era niente, né televisione, niente, eh. [...] Ce ne son per così di canti!¹³⁶ (G.N.)

¹³¹ That is, as seen, sharecroppers, in Genoese.

¹³² Rossana Sciascia was born in Milan but has been living for 29 years in Chiama, a hamlet in the municipality of Maissana, with her husband and two children, where she runs the *Cà Marcantonio* fruit and vegetable farm and agritourism business, carries out rural craft work and courses, and writes books (see section 5.3). Her latest novel, *L’Elvira conta*, is entirely dedicated to the village of Chiama, faithfully reconstructing daily life there during the 20th century, based on direct accounts from the last inhabitants of the village and through the story of Elvira, a fictional character born on 8 September 1930 (Sciascia, 2023).

¹³³ Genoese word for ‘alley’.

¹³⁴ “Delia used to sew”. “Yes, I remember her under the vault with the machine: ‘du du dun, du du dun, du du dun’”.

¹³⁵ The quotation is mostly in Italian, with some ‘dialectised’ terms (*ragassi*, *ragasse*, *terasso*) and the Genoese word *môra*.

¹³⁶ “The boys all used to go down there, but many of them... since there was only that one light... You know when, instead of going this way, you go that way, there’s a light, right? Well, there was only that one in the village, or two... And they played the *môra* there every evening. [...] They would say: “five, six, seven, eight, *môra*!”. I remember them because we could hear them [*smiles*]. And we girls, on the other hand, always went down there under the portico [...] down there, where there’s that stone to sit on. [...] And we always went there to sing and...

Ma laggiù [to *o Goštin* Nicora's house]¹³⁷ ci andavamo, eh, perché portavano su il giradischi e poi si ballava sul terasso¹³⁸. (G.N.)

Among these cited songs were those performed for the *Cantamaggio* (*Cantamazzo* in dialect; literally, 'Singing May'), a festival widespread across the Apennine area between Eastern Liguria, Emilia, Lunigiana and Tuscany: "Mi sembra che c'avevo quella di maggio: 'e maggio è il primo e [giugno] è il secondo, rallegra tutto il mondo, e viva maggio'"¹³⁹ (G.N.). Held on May 1st to bring good fortune for the upcoming summer harvest season, it also served – according to interviews conducted during the Cantamaggio of San Pietro Vara (*San Pê* in dialect) on April 30th, 2025 (Fig. 4.2.2) – as a moment for redistributing food among the population, specifically towards those who had run out of provisions. Indeed, the beginning of May, the "head of spring" ("*capo di primavera*", to cite San Pietro's Maggio song), was typically the time of year when most of the previous year's produce had been consumed, yet it was still too early for the new, uncertain, harvests (Lagomarsini, 2017, p. 101). The *cantar maggio* ritual thus functioned as a house-to-house procession through the village, carrying a tree – usually a common laburnum (*maggiociondolo* in Italian; *mazzo* in Genoese). At each stop, an 'exchange' took place between the *maggianti* (the singers) and the owners: the former sang auspicious songs accompanied by an accordion and symbolically 'planted' the tree on the property; the latter, in return, donated food – "eggs, whatever [they had]. No money. And then they would make ravioli, they'd have a bit of a party" (G.N.). Every village had its own Cantamaggio, but during the twentieth century, this practice gradually began to disappear, to the point that informants only remember it from their youth or had only heard about it from their parents. In recent decades, there has been a revival of the custom, partly due to the intervention of figures such as Don Sandro Lagomarsini, the parish priest of Cassego and Scurtabò. Among the hamlets in the municipality of Varese Ligure that still celebrate the *Maggio* today – serving as hubs for residents of villages that have abandoned the custom – are Varese Ligure, San Pietro Vara, Comuneglia, Codivara, Cassego and Scurtabò. Between 1979

there was nothing, no television, nothing, eh. [...] There are so many songs!". *Môra* (*morra* in Italian) is an ancient Italian folk game in which two people simultaneously lower their right fists, quickly extending one or more fingers, or even none at all, while trying to predict, and announce aloud, the total number of fingers extended by both players (<<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/morra/>>).

¹³⁷ Agostino Nicora – as seen, known in the village as *o Goštin do Semoe* from his father's name, Samuele Nicora –, born in 1906 in Campore, was the father of the informants S.N. and E.N. He left Campore with his family in 1946, but returned regularly, and, once retired, spent six months there every year.

¹³⁸ "But we used to go down there, eh, because they brought up the record player and then we danced on the terrace".

¹³⁹ "I think I had the one for May: 'And May is the first and [June] the second, it brings joy to all the world, and long live May'".

and 1999, Mauro Balma compiled a collection of Ligurian folk songs (Balma, 2004), which includes the May songs of various hamlets in Varese Ligure and Maissana – also sung by some of my informants, such as G.N. – available on YouTube¹⁴⁰.



Fig. 4.2.2. Photographs from the 2025 Cantamaggio in San Pietro Vara. The *maggiociondolo* and the *maggianti* are visible in a), while new ‘may transports’ (*Maggio mobile*, that is ‘Maymobile’) are shown in b).

Source: Author’s photographs, May 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Link to the playlist: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_klqtH-3MxZ2llm13Y4yFIYvtF_ZR3apm0>. Hamlets from the study area included are Campore, Torza, Scurtabò, Comuneglia, and Varese Ligure.

The soundscape of Campore was also made up of the sounds of autumn evenings spent drying chestnuts or husking corn – dried husks then used to fill mattresses and roll cigarettes – and having fun dancing to the sound of the accordion:

With the white stuff they took out of, the husks, you know, they made mattresses. [...] It was harvested around September-October, and there was a custom that everyone collected their own and then put it down in the cellars. [...] In winter they held vigils in the cellars. [...] In the sense that it was probably the warmest place... I don't know. And they gathered together: *a veggia*. [...] and they [...] shucked [...] the corn [...] and then took it to the mill. [...] And so they gathered: once they shucked one family's corn, another time they shucked the corn of... [...] They kept each other company, instead of... obviously, they didn't have television or radio or anything, so they told each other stories, which were probably always the same, exaggerating them, transforming them... Which is where, how can I put it, myths come from, stories that are more like myths, that aren't true, right? About strange things, ghosts... [...]. And they dried the white part of the corn cobs and made mattresses with it, while the plant itself was used as fodder. They didn't throw away any part of the corn. (S.N.)

E.N.: When it was corn season...

S.N.: Eh, they had *serate* [Italian word for 'evenings'] there: they had to shuck corn...

E.N.: No, husk it first.

S.N.: Husk it... and then, it wasn't like everyone husked or shelled their own. I mean, again, there was the gathering in the cellars in the evening... they did it in the evening. Remove it from the cob...

E.N.: And then they danced! There was the one with the accordion...

The mattresses were made of, eh... Then they made them out of wool, sheep's wool, my mum made them too, but I remember my grandmother had one, what was it called... it was full of *šcartòcci* ['husks'], those things... where you grind corn – the *mæga*¹⁴¹. You know you take everything away from it, don't you? [...] They kept the nicest white ones, dried them and then put them in this sack, let's say, as big as the bed. And then, in the morning, I remember my mum making the bed, they left holes in it, she mixed them up a bit. [...] And with those nicest, thinnest husks, they dried them and then made cigarettes to smoke. (G.N.)

Of the sounds of the animals that lived in the stables on the lower floors of all the houses – usually between two and four cows, a few *Marrana* sheep, goats, rabbits, chickens, mules, a

¹⁴¹ *Mæga* is the local Genoese word for 'corn'.

pig during winter... –, or that crossed the streets to be taken to pasture in the mountains; or that roamed the village when someone let them loose:

Sheep... we didn't have many sheep. But that man who was there, Giovanni, had lots of them, and at night he would get drunk and let them roam around the village. [...] And then he also had a horse... a chainsaw... Sometimes you could hear him starting it up because [...] he was drunk. [...] The sheep didn't have horns. [...] We called them *marrañe*. (G.N.)

Or, again, from a certain point onwards, customers who frequented the tobacco shop to buy goods that were not otherwise available (tobacco, coffee, salt, dried pasta) or the *Dalla Rita* trattoria, which, before moving along the provincial road, was located in the village.

This soundscape was emphasised by the historical structure of the village, which, as can be seen in Fig. 4.2.3 – a cadastral map with surveys from 1952 – was compact, with only a few outbuildings, which were *casoni* used as stables, barns or drying rooms. With the arrival of the vehicle road at the end of the 1950s, it was not only the geography of travel that changed – with the old mule tracks travelled on foot, by mule or on horseback gradually being abandoned and becoming municipal roads covered with brambles – but the geography of the village also changed, which from the 1960s began to expand along the road or outside the historic centre. This happened in many hamlets in the upper Vara Valley, following, on the one hand, what M.P. (Montale, Varese Ligure) defines as the need for convenience in being able to arrive by car and park in front of the house, and, on the other hand, more generally the desire to have an independent and more open home, surrounded by land and a vegetable garden, something that the compact houses in the centre did not allow.

The exemplary case of Campore is the area known as a *Ciôsètta*¹⁴², divided into properties and characterised until then by tree vegetation, mainly domestic chestnut and cherry trees, the latter planted by a man called *o Vittorin do Pin* in the first half of the 20th century (G.N.). At that time, a *Ciôsètta* was also a place for socialising, primarily because it was home to the laundry (*o posso*) used for washing clothes (*a bugâ*) with ash (*a çennia*), which were then rinsed in another laundry located at the Cà do Podestà, as the first laundry was also used to wash *pataelli*, cloths used by women as sanitary towels. Among the trees of a *Ciôsètta* there was also a square, a clearing where clothes were hung out to dry under the cherry trees. However, this

¹⁴² The toponym *Ciôsètta* could be the diminutive form of *Ciösa/Ciöso*, names commonly used in the upper Vara Valley to indicate an area that was once fenced off (from the Latin *clausum*, 'closed') in order to mark private property or isolate particular crops or forms of livestock farming (Aa.Vv., 2007, p. 30).

same clearing was also a Sunday meeting place for young people, who carried out various recreational activities there:

Gh'ea pròpio un ciassâ terroso con di erboi tutt'intorno – me pâ de castagno – [...] e, mi eo piccinetta, ma i gh'anavan à ballâ. Ma gh'anava anche mi à vedde... faxeivo parte da combriccola, anche se... cioè, gh'anava i mæ seu à ballâ. I l'anavan à ballâ, zugâ a-e bòcce, i faxeivan tutto: l'ea o ponto de ritròvo. [...] *Dicevamo: “Anemmo inta Ciôsètta!”*. [...] *Ci passavamo la domenica lì, eh! Giocavamo al fazzoletto o... giocavamo, ballavamo...* o l'ea o ponto de ritreuvo da domenega, perché i atri giorni i travaggiavan... e a domenega ripöso assoluto... [Gh'anaivimo] dòppo mangiou.¹⁴³ (S.N.)

Since the 1960s, houses have begun to be built in a Ciôsètta on some of the buildable plots where the *casoni* already stood, and most of the families who remained in Campore during the depopulation phase moved there, leaving their properties in the historic centre uninhabited:

A famiglia ch'a se chiammava 'i Barelli' i l'an fæto a casa inta Ciôsètta. [...] I l'an fæta perché lì i gh'aveivan e stalle. [...] I l'an fæto doî appartamenti inte stalle. [...] Invece o Giovanni do Barella [...] o s'è fæto quella casa – me pâ gialla –, e o l'è o primmo ch'o l'ha fæto a casa. Pöi o l'ha fæto o Milio [do Pin], pöi i l'an fæto... i l'an accattou gente de Lavagna, i l'an fæto quella da Daniela.¹⁴⁴ (S.N.)

One of the informants, G.D.P., a resident of La Villa in Valletti, was one of the builders who helped construct several of the 'new' houses in Campore, such as the *o Milio* house, belonging to the Periddi family ('da-o Peridda') in a Ciôsètta, built around 1970:

Quella cà lì, presèmpio, e primme prie ghe l'emmo misse mi e un atro. Euh, ma l'è gròssa quella cà lì! Tutte prie. *Tutte pietre, i muri! L'avevo fatta io fino in cima, poi l'ho portata a tetto.* [...] *Eh, non c'era niente lì, eh.* Gh'ea o Barella, scì, ma... ma l'è 'na cà gròssa quella lì, eh. [...] *C'ho*

¹⁴³ “There was an earthy square surrounded by trees – chestnut trees, I think – [...] and, I was little, but they went there to dance. I went there too, to watch... I was part of the gang, even though... well, my sisters went there to dance. They went there to dance, play bocce, they did everything: it was the meeting place. [...] We used to say: ‘Let’s go to the Ciôsètta!’ [...] It was the meeting place on Sundays, because the other days they worked... and on Sundays they had a complete rest... [We went there] after lunch”. The interview alternates between Genoese (in regular type) and Italian (in italics).

¹⁴⁴ “The family called ‘i Barelli’ built their house in a Ciôsètta. [...] They built it there because they had stables there. [...] They built two flats in the stables. [...] Giovanni do Barella, on the other hand, built that house – I think it is yellow – and he was the first to build a house. Then Emilio [do Pin] built one, then they built... people from Lavagna bought it and built Daniela’s house.”

*messo due anni a fare l'ossatura e poi c'è da lavorare... l'intonaco l'abbiamo fatto tutto dentro noi, ma poi c'è il falegname, gli idraulici, i piastrellisti, tutta quella roba lì. Ma c'han fatto presto, però l'è grande. [...] Portavano le pietre col carro da buoi; le prendevano su, sopra... [...] Però into frattèmpo mi gh'aveia anche a tæra, gh'aveia e bestie, gh'ea da aggiuttâme un pö... gh'anava, no fisso, gh'anava magari dötrei... finii i travaggi chî: quande gh'ea o fèn, o gran, no ghe poei anâ, poi dòppo sci... tèmpo de castagne no ghe poei anâ... ma son vint'anni, eh! Insomma, no sèmpre fisso, ma...*¹⁴⁵

The evolution of the village can be seen by comparing the 1954 cadastral map based on surveys carried out in 1952, the aerial photograph taken in 1964 – carried out on behalf of the Comune di Genova – and the current cadastral map (2024). In the first map, the village of Campore is shown in all its compactness, with the sole exception of the church, which is separated from the village¹⁴⁶, and a few *casoni*. The road has not yet been built, while the municipal road (*strada comunale*) is highlighted in blue. This road crosses the lower part of the village and connects the hamlet to the neighbouring villages of Santa Maria and Ossegna, while to the south-east and north-west there are mule tracks connecting, respectively, with the Recueso – a stream that flows between Campore and Santa Maria and flows into the Borsa – and Borsa – a stream whose basin occupies a large part of the municipality of Maissana and is a tributary of the Vara – and with Mount Verruga and Valletti. A Ciôsètta – located north of the village and erroneously referred to as “Ciosella” – has no buildings, except for a few *casoni* at its ends, which include the stables owned by *o Barella* mentioned by the informants.

The aerial photograph from 1964 shows the road now built and the first buildings beginning to appear along its southern edge. In a Ciôsètta area, the tree vegetation stands out, interrupted at its edges by a few clearings where the first houses of the ‘new part’ of the village will appear. These buildings are clearly highlighted on the current cadastral map, where numerous scattered

¹⁴⁵ “That house there, for example, another chap and I laid the first stones. Er, but that house is big! All stone. All stone, the walls! I built it up to the top, then I took it up to the roof. [...] Eh, there was nothing there, eh. *O Barella* was there, yes, but... but that’s a big house, eh. It took me two years to build the framework, and then there’s all the work to be done... we did all the plastering ourselves, but then there’s the carpenter, the plumbers, the tilers, all that stuff. But they did it quickly, even though it’s big. [...] They transported the stones with an ox cart; they mined them up there... [...] But in the meantime, I also had land, I had animals, I needed a little help... I went there, not regularly, maybe two or three... when the work here was finished: when there was hay, wheat, you couldn’t go, but afterwards you could... during chestnut season you couldn’t go... but that was twenty years! So, not always regularly, but...”. The interview alternates between Genoese (in regular type) and Italian (in italics).

¹⁴⁶ This is a unique feature of Campore compared to other hamlets in the municipality. This can be explained by the fact that the original church was located in the village – on the eastern edge of the town, in the area called *Valle de Noxe* (literally “Valley of Walnuts”), at the location of plots numbered 241 and 244 on the 1952 cadastral map –, but was destroyed by a landslide in ancient times. It was therefore decided to build a new one away from the town, this time among the plains to the west.

houses appear and the centre of gravity of Campore has now shifted eastwards. The new buildings are mostly located on the edges of the road – especially along the southern bank – or in a Ciossetta and neighbouring areas – such as *a Liggia do Læte*¹⁴⁷ – now cut in two by an asphalt road that continues towards the chapel of San Bernardo – on the south-eastern slope of Verruga – and Valletti¹⁴⁸.

Fig. 4.2.3. Three images of Campore di Maissana compared. The first is the cadastral map from 1954, based on surveys from 1952, in which the current provincial road 52 is still absent. The second is an aerial photo from 1964, in which the road has already been built. The third is the current cadastral map (2024; scale 1:2,200.), which shows buildings in orange, roads in grey and waterways in blue. Sources: Land Registry, 1952 (personal property of the author); flight carried out on behalf of the Municipality of Genoa, 1964, strip 38, frame 283 (<<https://mappe.comune.genova.it/MapStore2/#/viewer/854>>); Catasto Regionale, ESRI Imagery, 2024 (<<https://srvcarto.regione.liguria.it/geoservices/apps/viewer/pages/apps/geoportale/>>).

¹⁴⁷ The toponym literally means ‘Milk Landslide’. An explanation for this name is given by G.N. and S.N., and dates back to when the kids would come down from the pastures to bring the freshly milked milk to their homes, where it would be turned into cheese: “Because, when we came down to the Ciossetta, where there were all the chestnut trees, there were already kids playing, right? So we wanted to hurry up and sometimes we spilled the milk, *e aloa i ghe divo ‘a Liggia do Læte’* [‘and so they called it...’]” (G.N.). “*I mi dixeivan anche che sgriggiavi perché gh’ea tutti i sassolin, che sgriggiavi, un pö perché voeivi fâ presto e gh’ea tutti i sassolin* [‘They also told me that you slipped because there were pebbles everywhere, that you slipped, partly because you wanted to hurry up’] and everyone was slipping and then they spilled all the milk... [laughs]” (S.N.). ‘Yes, not always, but it happened sometimes. So, they called it *a Liggia do Læte*” (G.N.).

¹⁴⁸ The topic addressed here was also developed during the mentioned thirty-year field courses (1995-present) conducted by the University of Nottingham with undergraduate students of Geography and History in the municipalities of Varese Ligure and Maissana, with several interesting insights. See in particular the work carried out by a group of students during the 2002 field course: Havcroft, 2002; Shelton, 2002; Woods, 2002.





4.3. Surviving arts, knowledge and practices around *o cařtagno e a faiña de cařtagne*¹⁴⁹

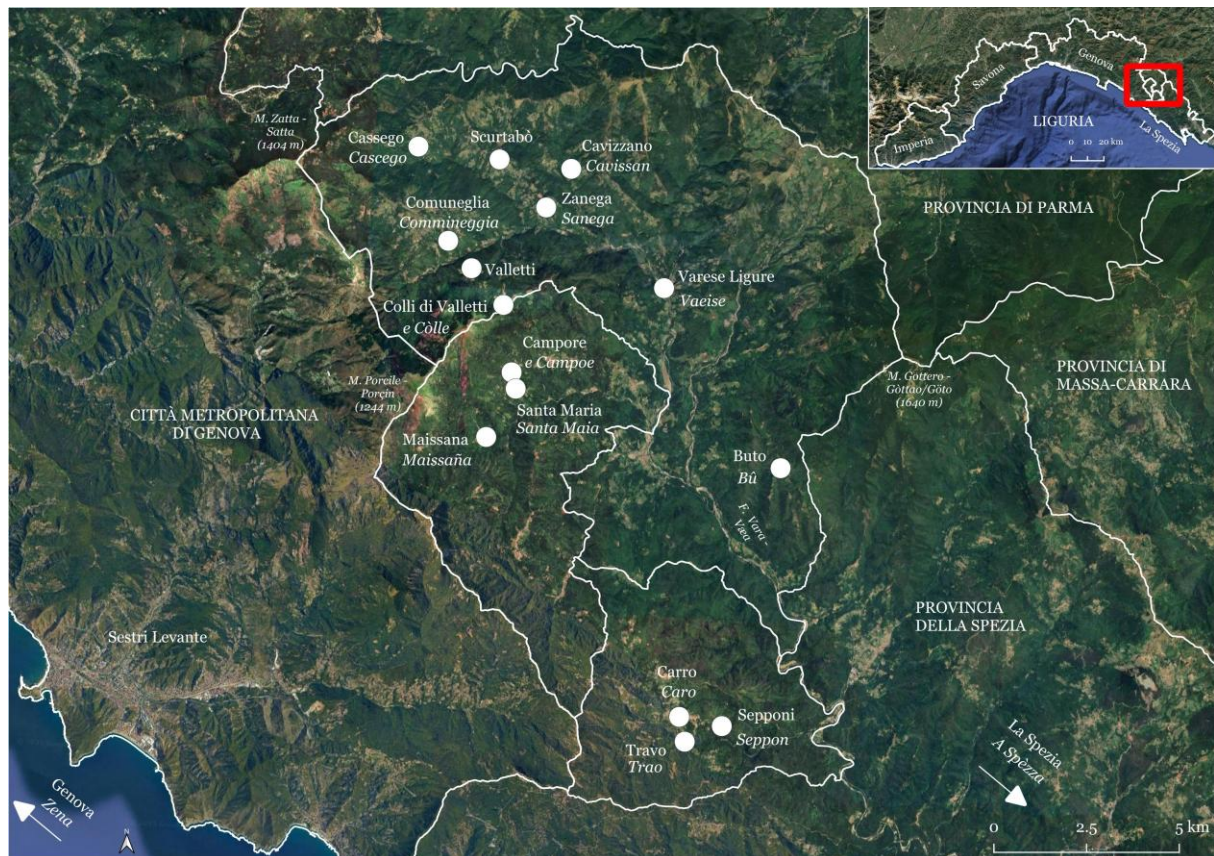


Fig. 4.3.1. The hamlets cited in this section, in Italian (standard type) and Genoese (italics). In the municipality of Varese Ligure (*Vaèise*) there are: Cassego (*Cascigo*), Comuneglia (*Communeeggia*), Scurtabò, Valletti, Cavizzano (*Cavissan*), Zanega (*Sanega*), and Buto (*Bù*); Salino (*Sain*) – in southern Varese – and Codivara (*Cò Và*) – near Comuneglia – are not shown. In the municipality of Maissana (*Maissaña*): Campore (*e Campoe*), and Santa Maria (*Santa Maia*), while Colli di Valletti (*e Còlle*) is crossed by the border of the two aforementioned municipalities. Finally, in the municipality of Carro (*Caro*): Travo (*Trao*), and Sepponi (*Seppon*).

Sources: Author's elaboration through QGIS based on data: Regione Liguria, Google Satellite.

Depopulation has had a profound impact on the transmission of local knowledge, causing the loss of much of the expertise associated with so-called peasant civilisation. Despite this, some practices are still in use on farms – often family-run – and some local associations continue to perpetuate their memory. The protagonists of this story are the practices that revolved around the chestnut tree (*Castanea sativa*), the tree par excellence of much of the Apennines¹⁵⁰, once a fundamental plant for the sustenance of peasant families and now in decline and becoming wild almost everywhere. In particular, this story starts from the

¹⁴⁹ *O cařtagno* refers to the chestnut tree in the dialect of some of the hamlets; *a faiña de cařtagne* to the chestnut flour (see below).

¹⁵⁰ Diego Moreno (1990, p. 253) points out, in this regard, the use in the local dialect at the beginning of the 20th century of the generic word *erboro*, “tree”, to designate the chestnut grove, emphasising its importance: *inti g'erbori*, “in the chestnut grove”. This observation is confirmed by expressions that are still widespread, such as *poâ g'erboi*, to indicate the pruning of domestic chestnut trees.

experiences and interviews collected – combined with reference literature – to focus primarily on chestnut flour and its production cycle¹⁵¹.

The flour (called *a faiña* in Campore and *a feina* in Carro) produced from chestnuts was for a long time, and at least until the 1960s, the staple food of the peasantry, especially in the winter months, as it was mostly consumed between December and March¹⁵². Flour also had economic value, as it was used as a commodity to trade for other products that were not otherwise (or scarcely) available locally, such as wheat flour, oil (*l'euio*) and salt (*a sâ*)¹⁵³. Given its central importance, the flour production process took place in stages throughout the year and involved a large number of skills and knowledge (Fig. 4.3.2). The stages are still followed by farms that produce chestnut flour today, while the procedures and individual practices may differ for reasons related to mechanisation or changes that have occurred over time. The main stages are outlined below.

¹⁵¹ The data reported in this chapter are based on interviews conducted between summer 2024 and December 2025 in the municipalities of Varese Ligure, Maissana and Carro. The main informants include: Maurizio Canessa (M.C.), chestnut grower and president of the Association of Chestnut Growers of Eastern Liguria (*Associazione Castanicoltori del Levante Ligure*), and his wife Silvia Bonfiglio (S.B.), who together restored the Sepponi Chestnut Grove (*Castagneto dei Sepponi*; *Seppon* in dialect) and the Travo Mill (*Molino del Travo*; *Trao* in dialect) in the municipality of Carro; Don Sandro Lagomarsini (S.L.), parish priest of Cassego (*Cascego*) and Valletti, as well as founder of the Farming Museum (*Museo Contadino*) and after-school club (*doposcuola*) in Cassego. Other important informants come from other hamlets in the municipalities: G.N. and S.N., aged 89 and 80 respectively, informants from Campore (*e Campoe*), together with other people interviewed during the chestnut harvest of 2025; G.F., a 90-year-old farmer, with other informants from Colli di Valletti (*e Còlle*); G.D.P.; 96 years old) and other informants from Valletti; several informants from Buto (*Bù*), interviewed during the chestnut harvest in 2024; a young informant (28 years old) from Maissana hamlet.

¹⁵² Alongside other products that were ground, such as various legumes – including chickpeas (*i çeixi*) and broad beans –, corn (*a mæga*) and wheat (*o gran*), but these to a much lesser extent.

¹⁵³ A hundred years ago, 7 kg of chestnut flour was often exchanged for 1 kg of wheat flour (MC).



Fig. 4.3.2. Front page of the chestnut calendar (*Il calendario del castagno*) created by pupils at Scurtabò primary school in 1984. Chestnut trees require year-round care; here, the main activity carried out during each month is depicted. In January (*gennaio*) and February (*febbraio*), in particular, the chestnuts were beaten – *la battitura*; here depicted the sack beating – and ground (*la macinazione*), while in other areas this was done earlier, in December (see below).

Source: Museo Contadino di Cassego.

Poâ g'erboi: forest management and the use of wood

The first set of skills involved forest management, which began in winter with the pruning of domestic chestnut trees (*poâ g'erboi* in Campore, *scravâ* in Cassego, *remondâ* a Salino; literally 'pruning trees')¹⁵⁴ by agile and experienced workers. Then there was the regular cutting of coppiced chestnut trees, wild specimens that did not bear fruit. Chestnut wood was of great importance for a wide range of activities, from the construction of work tools to vineyard stakes, support beams and gutters for houses (Meriana, 1985), and firewood. For example, the logs used to dry chestnuts were strictly made of chestnut wood (see below).

¹⁵⁴ In Cassego, the expression *scravâ à bòtto* referred to the clearing of the entire chestnut grove (S.L.).



Fig. 4.3.3. Cleaned chestnut woodlands in the Lagorara Valley (February 2026), Airola Inferiore, near Sesta Godano (*Eua de Sotta*, October 2024), and Galera, near Buto (August 2024).
Source: Author's photographs.

The grafting of chestnut trees

In spring, chestnut trees were grafted, a process useful for domesticating wild chestnut trees, which takes place according to three main techniques: cleft (*a spacco*, in Italian) grafting, crown (*a corona*, in Italian) grafting or flute (*a zufolo*, in Italian) grafting, the latter being particularly suitable for chestnut trees. The *zufolo* grafting technique (*à bixonello*, in the dialect of Carro) is practised in the week around 25th April, when it is possible to easily detach the bark without causing damage to the wood. For cleft and crown grafting, the week of St Joseph's Day (19 March) is recommended, as this is the period of winter awakening, when the plant begins to grow again and the scions (*e tescioe*, in Cassego) are nourished by new sap. Grafting is extremely useful for renewing the forest, as an ideal chestnut grove should consist of three generations of plants: young, adult (over 20 years old) and old.

Regoggî e feugge e o rosco: collection and importance of leaves

With the waning moon of July or August, the leaves were harvested from the trees and left to dry in bunches in the shade all'ombra, then they were tied together with willow strips, called *ligammi* in Salino (P.T.'s uncle, 88 anni). They could then be used in cooking, after being soaked in hot water, for example as a kind of baking paper to be used under the *testo/tešto* (or *campañã*; Fig. 4.3.4a) and between the *testetti/teštetti* – terracotta or cast-iron utensils used to cook various foods (Fig. 4.3.4b). The *teštetti* – small heated and stacked terracotta discs, between which a mixture of chestnut flour and water was placed, with the leaves acting as baking paper – were used to prepare *panelle* (as they are called in Campore; *chisseue* in Cassego, *castignassi* in Codivara):

I piggian e feugge de castagno verdi ancon [...] a-a fin d'agosto. Ne piggian ben ben e i fan i massi. I fan... i mettan uña sopra à l'atra e pöi ne mettan... mah, [tante] coscì, e pöi i ligàn sempre con... co-a feuggia de castagna, con... un tòcco de cöso de feuggia à fà da agoggia, e i ê ligàn. [...] Pöi i ê seccan, coscì durante l'inverno i ghe fan e panelle. Pöi l'arvan e... l'arvan e i piggian e feugge uña à uña e i ê mettan in sô testo. [...] I ghe mettan a panella, pöi... L'é solo fæña de castagne e ægua. [...] Aloa, pöi, i â mettan in sô primmo testo... Ah, i testi intanto i son bornixenti: i son missi inta stufà e pöi tiæ feua co-a mòlla. [...], pöi i mettan o testo, o primmo testo in sô predellin, pöi ghe mettan e feugge, pöi ghe mettan a panella, pöi i ô creuvan de neuvo de feugge

adòsso. [...] Træ de sotta e træ de d'ato, træ feugge de sotta... Pöi ghe mettan l'atro testo bornixento. Pöi i rifan de neuvo feugge, panella, feugge, atro testo bornixento (S.N., Campore)¹⁵⁵.



¹⁵⁵ “They pick chestnut leaves that are still green [...] at the end of August. They pick lots of them and make bunches. They make... they put them on top of each other and then they put... well, like this, and then they always tie them with... with chestnut leaves, with... a piece of leaf to act as a needle, and they tie them. [...] Then they dry them, so that during the winter they can make *panelle*. Then they open them and... they open them and take the leaves one by one and put them on the griddle. [...] They put the *panella* on, then... It’s just chestnut flour and water. [...] Then they put it on the first *testo*... Ah, the *testi* are red-hot: they’re put in the stove and then taken out with tongs. [...] Then they put the *testo*, the first *testo* on the shelf, then they put the leaves on it, then they put the *panella* on it, then they cover it again with leaves. [...] Three underneath and three on top, three leaves underneath... Then they put the other red-hot *testo* on top. Then they repeat the layers of leaves, *panella*, leaves, another red-hot *testo*”.



Fig. 4.3.4. (a) The cast-iron *testo grande* in Campore, now used mainly to dry chestnuts; (b) little terracotta *testi* in Carro.
Source: Author's photograph.

One of the typical products of these areas was a leavened bread called *a levâ*, which could be made using different types of flour, and the variant made with chestnut flour mixed with wheat was called *o pan martin*. Another product made from chestnut flour was *a patoña*, a chestnut cake enriched with walnuts (*e noxe*, in Campore), rosemary (*o romanin*) or whatever was available. Then there was *a fainâ* (*farinata* in Italian), topped with ricotta cheese, and the *gnocchi* and the *piccagge matte* (*fettuccine* in Italian), both made with a mixture of chestnut and wheat flour. The leaves were also used by children for various games¹⁵⁶. The forest was cleared of chestnut husks (*e risse*) and dry foliage, which was collected (*regoggî o rosco*), in September, just before the chestnut harvest. These leaves were used – together with other plant residues – in stables as bedding for animals or in fields as fertiliser.

Chestnut harvesting

Chestnut harvesting then took place, which usually began in October and ended on St Martin's Day (11 November), a period during which everyone was required to work on their own land; after that date, any chestnuts left on the ground could be picked up by anyone. The fruits were gathered with the help of spring-loaded tongs (*a mòlla*), used to remove the

¹⁵⁶ There were countless children's games related to the world of chestnuts, which involved not only the leaves but also the male inflorescences, fresh or undeveloped fruit, flour, suckers and their bark, branches, trunks and various types of wooden tools (cf.: Albertini, 1988-89).

chestnuts from their husks, and a small rake (*o rastrello*) (Fig. 4.3.5). Today, a blower called *boffetto* (Campore) is used locally. During the harvest, the chestnuts were placed in a sort of small apron-bag tied around the waist (*o scösâ*) and then transferred to a larger bag that could hold about 50 kg, which was carried away on the shoulder. Various types of baskets were then used for different purposes, including *a panea* (in Carro) – with four handles and carried on the head by women – *o cavagno* and *a còrba*. Usually, three harvests were made on each plot of land, depending on the stages of fruit fall.



Fig. 4.3.5. Rake (*rastello*) and tongs (*mòlla*) once used during the chestnut harvest in October. Source: Photograph by Moreno Carbone. Held at the Museo Contadino di Cassego.

Seccâ e castagne: *drying chestnuts on the græ*

E aloa i ê piggeio, i ê feivo seccâ e poi i cacciavo sù e castagne. Perché â mettei in sâ græ e beseugna fâla seccâ. No co-o feugo: in so seu, perché aloa o piggia o fumme. Beseugnava seccâ co-a stiva.¹⁵⁷ (G.F.)

The harvested chestnuts were placed on the drying rack for subsequent drying (*seccâ e castagne*), which took place in November (Figs. 4.3.6 and 4.3.7). The drying room consisted of a lower level (*o seu* in Campore, Colli and Valletti), where the fire was lit, and an upper level where the chestnuts were dried on the grating. The drying rack was made of alder (*agnana* in

¹⁵⁷ “And so, they took them [the corn], they make them dry and then they toss up the chestnuts. Because you put them in the rack and let them dry. Not with fire: on the ground, because then they would take on the smoke. You would let them dry with the stove”.

Carro, *öna* in Campore) or chestnut wood rods in an inverted trapezoidal shape (Fig. 4.3.8a), while today steel racks are also available, which are more efficient and require less maintenance (Fig. 4.3.8b). Drying requires continuous monitoring of the fire, which must remain lit 24 hours a day for 30-35 days and, especially in the first fifteen days, must be kept low so as not to cook the chestnuts. To this end, a large *testo* can be used to cover the fire or the husk (*l'orba*, in Campore) from the previous year's threshing can be scattered over the wood to reduce the flame and slow down the fire (Fig. 4.3.9). The chestnuts were turned at least a couple of times to ensure even drying. During this period, the drying room was used for cooking and as a place for socialising, to make the most of the heat, despite the heavy smoke. Usually, the smoke came out of two small windows high up on the side walls, so there was no need for a chimney. Domenico Viviani wrote about the custom of meeting inside the drying room on cold autumn evenings in his *Voyage dans les Apennines de la ci-devant Ligurie* del 1807 (p. 25-26):

Pendant l'hiver ils passent leur soirée autour d'un grand feu qui sert, en même-tems, à faire sécher leurs châtaignes. [...] Il faut, à la vérité, être habitué à ce degré de chaleur pour y résister à la longue, d'autant plus que ce feu, entretenu ordinairement par de bois frais, rend une fumée insupportable. Rien ne prouve davantage l'influence de l'habitude dans nos plaisirs, que de voir une quantité de personnes, hommes, femmes, enfans se rôtir autour de ce feu, se fondre en larmes par la fumée, et continuer tranquillement leurs entretiens avec le même plaisir, que nos Dames passent leur soirée au spectacle.

A drying room could generally hold 35 quintals of green chestnuts – i.e. a dozen quintals of dry chestnuts – but in particularly productive years, double drying was carried out, up to 70 quintals. The drying room could be located inside the house in the village – usually above the kitchen – or in a separate building away from the village. In some cases, the term used for the drying rack refers to the entire structure: it is called *græ* in Campore, *græ* or *seccaisso* in Colli di Valletti, *seccaèssso* in Valletti, and *graia* in Cassego. In other cases, the structure has its own specific name: in Maissana, for example, the term *seccou* is used for the structure and *græ* for the drying rack alone. In Carro, the drying shed in the woods is called *cason* – like similar structures used to shelter animals in summer pastures – and the drying rack is called *græ*.



Fig. 4.3.6. Chestnuts drying in Campore (Maissana), placed on a rack on the upper floor of the drying room for about a month.
Source: Author's photograph, November 2024.



Fig. 4.3.7. Lighting the fire to dry chestnuts at Casone dei Sepponi in Carro.
Source: Author's photograph, November 2024.



Fig. 4.3.8. (a) A new, inverted trapezoid-shaped wooden drying rack in Galera (near Buto); (b) a steel drying rack in Campore.
Source: Author's photograph, August 2024 and December 2025.



Fig. 4.3.9. The beating waste (*orba*, *ziggia* and *pua*) is stored in the drying room to be used the following year.

Source: Author's photograph, December 2025.

Pestâ e castagne: beating chestnuts in sacks and with machines

Once dried, the chestnuts were beaten. This could take place between the end of November and January. In local dialects, the process is indicated by the verbs: *pistâ* in Buto, *pištâ* or *piccâ* in Colli di Valletti, *pestâ* in Carro and *peštâ* or *batte* in Campore and Maissana. Before mechanisation, beating was done by hand and organised as follows (Fig. 4.3.2): 10-15 kg of chestnuts were placed while still warm in a hemp (*a cavena*, in Cassego) sack (Fig. 4.3.10), held at the corners – where potatoes had been placed for grip – by two men and beaten rhythmically on a chestnut stump (*o çeppo*) 8-10 times, so as to remove the two skins, the outer one (*l'orboa* in Carro, *l'orba* in Campore, Cassego and Valletti) and the inner one (*a ziggia*). This procedure was referred to as *pestâ e castagne* (and variants) *into sacco*¹⁵⁸. The beaten chestnuts were then separated by women using a basket (*o vallo*; Fig. 4.3.14) with a wave-like motion, then further sifted with a sieve (*o crevello*) and finally selected for grinding using a hollowed-out chestnut trunk, called *çernaggioa* in Cassego and *gambiggioa* in Valletti. The beating of about 12 quintals of dry chestnuts took up to 15 hours and continued late into the night, normally carried out by eight men who took turns and a demijohn of wine.

¹⁵⁸ As an alternative to beating the sack on the stump, it was possible to beat it with a stick.



Fig. 4.3.10. Hemp sack used for beating chestnuts, held at the Museo Contadino di Cassego.
Source: Author's photograph.

Around the 1920s, threshing machines began to appear, often owned by a few specialised farmers, who were visited specifically for this purpose or who travelled around the various hamlets. The father of one of the informants (G.F., 90 years old, Colli di Valletti) built machines for beating chestnuts, corn and wheat in the first half of the 20th century, and his expertise was also in demand in neighbouring villages, where he would go with his son for several months to thresh: he would go as far as Valletti, Cavizzano (*Cavissan*) and the surrounding area, Scurtabò to Zanega (*Sanega*), Comuneglia (*Commineggia*) and the surrounding area (in the municipality of Varese Ligure) or to Campore and Santa Maria (*Santa Maia*) in the municipality of Maissana (see section 4.1). This invention was fundamental in reducing the workload and is still used today by those who continue to produce flour in this area: the chestnuts are inserted from above and, through an internal rotating structure, are ejected from below – the larger pieces on the left and the smaller ones on the right – while the waste and dust (*a pua*) are ejected from the front (Fig. 4.3.11, 4.3.12 and 4.3.13).



Fig. 4.3.11. Chestnut beating in Buto (Varese Ligure), using a mid-20th century beating machine. Source: Author's photograph, November 2024.



Fig. 4.3.12. Chestnuts beating in Campore (Maissana). The beating machine is connected directly to the dryer through the window, from which the chestnuts, still warm, are fed in to be beaten. On the right, the waste and dust expelled by the machine are piled up. Source: Author's photograph, December 2025.



Fig. 4.3.13. The dried chestnuts, freed from their two skins, are ejected from the machine, collected and placed in sacks for subsequent grinding.
Source: Author's photograph, December 2025.



Fig. 4.3.14. Beaten chestnuts put in a *vallo* in Buto.
Source: Author's photograph, November 2024.

Selection, grinding and storage of chestnuts

The chestnuts were then selected through a lengthy sorting process to separate out any damaged or unsuitable ones and remove any remaining skin, which would give the flour a bitter aftertaste. The best chestnuts were then sent to the mill (*o moin*, while the miller is *o moinâ*) for grinding (*maxinâ e castagne*). Even the discarded chestnuts (*i pestummi* or *peštummi*; the largest and most beautiful pieces of the *peštummi* were called *caštagneue* in Campore) were ground separately to enrich the pigs' food (called *a breua*). In times of need, *peštummi* flour was also consumed. The drying and threshing processes are very delicate for subsequent grinding, because if the chestnuts are not ready, the flour risks becoming sticky and ruining the millstones: “o molin o peighe” (A., 78 years old, Buto). The flour was finally stored in a large chestnut wood chest (*o bancâ*), which could hold up to 10 quintals, where it was pressed with a wooden hammer (*pistæ*, in Carro) to remove air and prevent it from going rancid in the following months.

The chestnuts could of course also be eaten fresh, as roasted chestnuts (*e rostie*), or boiled, with the skin on (*i balletti*) or without (*e peæ*). Other products of the chestnut grove were honey (*l'amê*; Fig. 4.3.15) and mushrooms, in particular porcini mushrooms (*i fonzi porçin*).



Fig. 4.3.15. Beehives in a young chestnut grove for the production of chestnut honey (Buto).
Source: Author's photograph, August 2024.

Abandonment and problems affecting chestnut trees

As we have seen, chestnut cultivation is now in sharp decline, mainly due to abandonment, which has caused chestnut groves to gradually become wild: abandoned domestic chestnut trees tend to sprout wild plants from their stumps, which are stronger and, as they grow, take resources away from the domestic tree, causing it to dry out. Furthermore, the lack of orchard management has led to an increase in damaging factors. Among these, the main ones are chestnut diseases, including ‘historic’ ones that are now more widespread and severe – such as ink disease, mainly caused by *Phytophthora x cambivora* e *P. cinnamomic*, which is carried by rainwater and attacks the root system of plants; or chestnut blight, caused by *Cryphonectria parasitica* which blocks sap circulation – and new ones, fortunately in decline – such as damage to buds by the chestnut gall wasp (*Dryocosmus kuriphilus*), which around 2005 reduced chestnut production by 90% and is now being combated with an antagonistic insect, *Torymus sinensis*. A second problem is caused by wildlife, such as wild boar, squirrels, hazel dormice (*Monti d’Italia*, 1974) and edible dormice, which feed on chestnuts and damage the drying huts. For example, at Casone dei Sepponi (Carro) the only way they found to control dormice is thanks to two cats.

Finally, in the 1960s, domestic chestnut trees suffered a major blow when they were cut down on a large scale for the production of tannin (*o tannin*), used in the leather tanning industry, which generated large profits from a resource that was becoming less and less important to the community’s economy. This felling, which took place at a point lower than the graft, caused the regrowth of wild coppiced specimens; therefore, in order to recover an abandoned chestnut grove, it is necessary to proceed with re-grafting. The felling of chestnut trees for tannin worked more or less as follows: some men used an axe to fell the trunk, then cut it into pieces (*à tòcchi*) in the forest with a saw (*o serron*), split it, “i ghe leveio a scòrsa, i ô portavo co-i beu, i ô carregav’â brasse e o l’anava”. The wood was then taken to Sestri Levante, where there was a tannin processing factory. The value of chestnut wood today is much lower than it was then: “E adesso che i pòrto de là i castagni intregghi, no ghe dan niente, o ne va pöco. Aloa o l’anava... [...] Adesso castagne no vâ ciù niente. [...] O va o ceduo, dixemmo, da vigna: [...] ghe fan di pali de quatto-çinque metri gròsci coscì, [...] i î pòrto via...” (G.D.P., 96 years old, Valletti)¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁹ “They stripped off the bark, took it away with oxen, loaded it by hand and off it went”. “Now that they take the whole chestnut trees away, they don’t give them anything, not much. Back then it was worth it... [...] Now chestnuts are worthless. [...] The coppice, let’s say, for the vineyard works: [...] they make 4-5 metre poles, this thick, [...] they take them away...”

The transmission of practices

As mentioned, in the upper Val di Vara, the transmission of knowledge related to chestnuts often takes place simply between generations within farms, where chestnuts are still dried and threshed, as in Campore, Maissana, Colli di Valletti, Valletti, Cassego, Buto, Carro, etc. Despite this, their survival is being severely tested by the current conditions of the chestnut groves. At the same time, there are several associations in the upper valley that are working hard to maintain these practices ‘actively’ and not merely as museum pieces.

Among them is the aforementioned Museo Contadino di Cassego in the municipality of Varese Ligure (see section 3.3.1). In Carro, on the other hand, Maurizio Canessa and Silvia Bonfiglio have recently restored a chestnut grove, native chestnut varieties, a drying shed and an abandoned mill, which together will soon form the Val di Vara Chestnut Museum (*Museo della Castanicoltura della Val di Vara*), a ‘living’ museum where it will be possible to participate in all stages of chestnut management and flour production, as well as courses on grafting and forest management. Canessa is also the president of the Levante Ligure Chestnut Growers’ Association (*Associazione dei Castanicoltori del Levante Ligure*), founded in 2017 to bring together chestnut growers between Genoa and La Spezia, with the aim of engaging in dialogue with institutions, resolving issues affecting the sector and spreading knowledge about chestnuts, for example in schools. The association now has around thirty members, mainly located in Vara and Fontanabuona Valleys.

The restoration of the Casone dei Sepponi (*Cason di Seppon*), built in 1821, took place in 1992, when Maurizio decided to resume his grandfather’s activities in the family chestnut grove, which had been interrupted with the last drying in 1956, and to return to live in Carro with Silvia. While many of the drying rooms in residential areas have been converted into rooms over time, the *cason* in the woods have tended to be abandoned, as was the case with the Sepponi, where, however, they managed to intervene just before they collapsed. Thanks in part to European funding, the *cason* was restored, retaining its original materials and renovating only the roof – now with tiles instead of *ciappe*, slate slabs from the Fontanabuona Valley or local stone once used in these areas – and the drying rack – now made of steel.

Together with the *cason*, Maurizio and Silvia restored the chestnut grove, which had been abandoned and cut down in the 1960s to obtain tannin. The chestnut grove, duly grafted, has been enriched by the recovery of all the known local chestnut varieties: *boiasca*, *borneiva*, *carpeneise*, *nouna gianca*, *nouna neigra*, *ciavain* (*saegrètta* in the Varese Ligure area; Fig. 4.3.16), *negrixexa*; with the addition of minor chestnut varieties: *foglia stretta*, *selvatico di*

Vara, *fontanella*, *massese* and *marron*¹⁶⁰. Each variety, in addition to being well suited to the territory, had its own distinctive characteristics: the *ciavain* and *negrixexa* sweetened the flavour of the flour – usually made from a blend of different varieties –, the *carpeneise* improved the taste, while the *borneiva* was bland but very productive and resistant to temperature fluctuations; the *marron*, on the other hand, is generally very sweet and suitable for fresh consumption, but requires greater care (Aa.Vv., 1982). Along with these, 40 other varieties, both national and from neighbouring areas (Lunigiana, Garfagnana, Fontanabuona), are present in the chestnut grove to preserve them from extinction.

In addition to the Casone, the Travo Mill (*Moin do Trao* in dialect, *Molino del Travo* in Italian), built in 1690, was also restored. It was decommissioned in the 1960s for chestnuts and in the 1980s for corn and wheat, and was finally purchased by the couple in 2019. Of the 17 water mills that existed in the municipality of Carro until the 1950s, this is the only one still in operation. There were five mills along the Travo stream within a distance of just 2 km. The mill still contains the original millstones: one made of local stone for chestnuts and the other made of French stone, therefore imported, for wheat and corn.



Fig. 4.3.16. A *Ciavain* variety chestnut tree in the Sepponi chestnut grove (Carro).
Source: Author's photograph, July 2024.

¹⁶⁰ The *nouna negra* (navona nera in Italian) and the marron (*marronera* in Italian) are the two types of *marroni* of the Val di Vara.

4.4. Discussion

Chapter 4 originates from the interviews and focuses on the landscapes of the past. First, past practices and toponyms of Mount Verruga are explored, as Mount Verruga is understudied in academic literature on the valley, especially on Maissana slope. This section gives a wide tableau of the pastoral life that characterised the area until the Sixties. In fact, Verruga was a place of summer grazing for different animals – cows, sheep, goats, and equines –, becoming by extension a place of entertainment and community for the young shepherds who used to monitor the animals and often slept uphill in the *casoni*, as well as a meeting place for the residents of the three hamlets gravitating around it: Campore, Valetti and Colli di Valletti. Interviews revealed the complex management system to which Verruga was subject, with fragmented private pieces of land on the lower part dedicated to crops and hay production, including all related practices and mechanisation processes; while *monti*, the strictly delimited common lands devoted to pastures, involved interventions such as water management through the creation of lakes and drinking troughs, as well as practices related to wild fruits. The interviews also revealed a wide range of microtoponyms unrecorded in official cartography, as well as dialectal expressions and terms fundamental to understanding landscape management.

By crossing interviews, cadastral maps, and aerial photographs, the thesis then focuses on the urban transformations of coastal and mountain centres during the period of the rural exodus, showing the contemporary expansion of Casarza Ligure, near Sestri Levante, where most of the farmers from the upper Vara Valley moved, and the parallel expansion of the valley villages, where the few people who stayed moved from their properties in the town centre to new detached houses, in this way expanding the villages and ‘shifting’ the population. This section is also useful to highlight past land uses in the village of Campore, as well as its soundscape created by practices such as livestock transfer, women’s work, corn husking, and songs during the Cantamaggio.

The final section gives new insights into surviving knowledge about chestnut trees and chestnut flour production, highlighting information on the entire process throughout the year and on the changes in practices over time, in particular on chestnut beating. It also gives an overview of how these practices are transmitted today within families and farms, in a period of chestnut abandonment and widespread disease. It finally highlights the cultural associations that work for their conservation, in the municipalities of Varese Ligure, Maissana, and Carro, such as the Museo Contadino di Cassego, the soon-to-be-opened Museo della Castanicoltura della Val di Vara and the Associazione Castanicoltori del Levante Ligure.

CHAPTER 5: CREATING NEW LANDSCAPES: CONTEMPORARY FARMING IN THE ‘ORGANIC VALLEY’

Based on the interviews conducted, this chapter aims to explore the new landscapes that contemporary practices in the upper Vara Valley are creating. The establishment of the ‘Valle del Biologico’ (‘Organic Valley’) brand, promoted in the late 1990s by former mayor Maurizio Caranza and reinforced by the establishment of the Val di Vara ‘Valle del Biologico’ Biodistrict in 2013, undoubtedly represented a historic turning point for the valley’s farming economy, although, almost thirty years on, it has been received in different ways by both producers and residents. Through the analysis of four stories and several interviews, I will retrace the positive and negative aspects of organic certification and explore key issues of contemporary rural life.

The first story ties in with what we saw in the previous chapter, illustrating, first of all, the story of a family from the upper Vara Valley who moved to the Riviera for work but never lost touch with their homeland and finally decided to return permanently in the 2000s. The same story then highlights the experience of a young man who took over the family farm and plans to expand its scope, with the primary stated aim of taking care of the land that raised him. The second story explores a particularly interesting aspect of the organic supply chain – which in some ways represents one of its cornerstones – namely livestock farming, through two different approaches adopted by the two cooperatives in the valley: meat production and dairy production. The third story touches the topics of neo-ruralism, (non-)organic fruit and vegetable supply chain, adaptation to climate change and agritourism, showing the experience of one family (plus two) hailing from other parts of Italy who decided to settle in the upper Vara Valley to start a new life in agriculture and the agritourism market. Finally, the fourth story explores a topic that came up repeatedly during the interviews and is growing rapidly in inner areas, namely female entrepreneurship in agriculture, particularly in the dairy sector, through the story of two owners of businesses whose families have never left the valley. In the background, the topic of rural abandonment and return in the valley shows up through the four stories, highlighting how variable this dynamic is. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the elements that emerged from these four stories.

5.1. “*Mi veuggio fâ o contadin*”: the new generations of farmers and their connection to the land

The protagonist of this story is L.P., 19 years old, owner of a farm in Case Camou, not far from the hamlet of Cavizzano (*Cavissan*, in dialect) in Varese Ligure¹⁶¹. The interview is interesting for three main reasons: his family history, his young age, and his desire to combine milk production with meat production. Starting from the beginning, his family history is immediately revealed to be one of departures and returns. Three of his grandparents were originally from the upper Vara Valley: his paternal grandmother from Case Camou – from the house where L.P. currently lives –, his paternal grandfather from the nearby small village of La Cucca and his maternal grandfather from Caranza (*Caransa*; VL), while his maternal grandmother was the only *foresta*¹⁶², being a native of Moneglia. Both sets of great-grandparents moved to the Riviera early on for work reasons, one to become a Carabinieri officer, another to work in the Fabbrica Italiana Tubi in Sestri Levante, the others as secretary at Fincantieri in Riva Trigoso or as housewife. However, both couples always kept their land holdings in the valley and never stopped moving up and down, in a sort of constant transhumance without flocks, for the purpose of maintaining their vegetable gardens and producing firewood, for example. One couple then returned to live in the valley, while the other remained in Casarza Ligure, which still allowed them to move continuously to Cavizzano. So, L.P.’s parents lived on the Riviera, and his father was also connected to Fincantieri in Riva Trigoso, where he worked as a labourer. On the land adjacent to Cavizzano, which continued to be productive, the family decided over the years to buy some horses, following a passion that began with L.P.’s paternal grandfather and was passed on to his heirs. Over time, the horses were followed by a cow, and then another, until 2007 – when L.P., born in 2004, was three years old –, when they decided to settle back in Case Camou, open a farm and increase the number of animals – reaching the current total of twenty, which graze on the slopes of nearby Mount Ventarola (1,177 m a.s.l.).

The bond with the homeland and their return illustrate a dynamic that is widespread in family histories of internal emigration in Italy, but also explain well the reasons that led L.P. to take over and manage his parents’ farm at a very young age. L.P. says that he never considered an alternative to farming and that, ever since he was a child, he always replied, when asked what

¹⁶¹ Hereinafter referred to sometimes in full, sometimes with the abbreviation ‘VL’. L.P. was interviewed in August 2024.

¹⁶² Genoese terms to refer to someone who comes from a different area.

he wanted to do when he grew up, “*mi veuggio fâ o contadin*”¹⁶³. His close bond with his paternal grandfather, who, as mentioned, was originally from La Cucca, and the time he spent in the fields as a child instilled in him a passion for the land first, and then for cows in particular, a field in which he continued to work. The reasons behind his job choice are easy to understand – often distancing himself from many of his peers who prefer other professions unrelated to their farming origins – even when he points out, with regard to his occupation: “I don’t consider myself [...] an agricultural entrepreneur, I don’t like that. I feel like a farmer”. His concept of rural landscapes is the opposite of that held by many of his peers, who often express a positive opinion of the current landscape dominated by forests¹⁶⁴; a perspective that is closer to that of informants from previous generations, and which L.P. fully embodies when, listing his dreams for the future, he emphasises his desire to “keep it clean”, in line with his family’s ethic that “we prefer to see clean surroundings rather than dirty ones”: “cleaning all the pastures there are, slowly buying new plots of land, etc. Bring them back to... having them cleaned, like here. Because I can’t stand seeing them dirty: I don’t like it because our elders worked so hard for it that letting them go to waste is not fair to them either”¹⁶⁵. His goal would therefore be to create a sort of complete supply chain within his own farm, from meat and cheese production to the sale of vegetables and the cultivation of cereals for cows, to timber production, with the hope that his children, if he has any, will also want to continue the farming life.

L.P.’s company is also affiliated with organic farming for the meat supply chain, a topic that will be explored in more detail in the next section, with a focus on the two cooperatives (meat and dairy) operating in the upper Vara Valley. The farm has been affiliated for just under ten years through his parents, and he has decided to maintain the certification, stating that he is happy with the choice, partly because conventional farming in the valley already had many of the characteristics required by organic regulations, so adapting did not require much effort. Like other farms, L.P. also relies on the European subsidies discussed above – including those relating to the organic supply chain –, which are a great help from an economic point of view, but which are not essential for him: “to be honest, I would do it even if there were no subsidies, because I see a future in agriculture”.

¹⁶³ “I want to be a farmer”, in Genoese.

¹⁶⁴ Such as A.A., a 20-year-old from Marcantonio (Chiama, Maissana). For a report on young people in inner areas, see: Barbera et al., 2021. For a report on young people in the inner areas of the neighbouring region of Emilia-Romagna, see: Capua et al., 2020.

¹⁶⁵ D.C., a 60-year-old meat livestock farmer from Cassego, shares the same view: “The woodland is not beautiful just because it is like this, [because] it’s ‘natural’; [it’s beautiful] because people work it, they cut it when it’s time, and renew it after many years. [...] ‘The woodland is beautiful’, ‘people come to see it’... but think of those who have to live there!”.

Finally, staying on the subject of production chains, L.'s story is also of great interest because of his desire to combine the meat chain with the milk chain, aiming to obtain a secure income that will allow him economic stability. His farm would be the only one among those I observed that is present in both supply chains. In fact, these are generally two separate supply chains – and this would also be the case for him, given that he would ideally raise about twenty Holstein Friesian dairy cows and thirty Limousin beef cows –, and farms tend to be involved in only one of them.

In conclusion, L.P.'s story is a striking example of that part of the younger generation that goes against the widespread rhetoric of a lack of attachment to the land and a desire to abandon inner areas, which is often attributed to young people in rural areas¹⁶⁶.

5.2. *Anâ ancon a-i monti*: cattle farming in the organic milk and meat supply chains¹⁶⁷

The second story unfolds as a web of different voices, the two main ones coming from the associations that currently manage two key organic supply chains in the seven municipalities of the upper Vara Valley: the Cooperativa Casearia ('Dairy Cooperative') Val di Vara in Varese Ligure¹⁶⁸ and the meat Cooperativa San Pietro Vara¹⁶⁹, both associated with the Biodistrict and both mainly involved in the organic supply chain, but also active in the conventional one¹⁷⁰. Their stories, together with those of eleven farmers¹⁷¹, allow us to analyse what has proved to be the most important aspect of organic farming in this area of Liguria: livestock farming.

As is well known and as we saw in Chapter 4, livestock farming has profoundly shaped the landscape of the upper Vara Valley, through, on the one hand, local alpine pasture – *alpeggio* or *monticazione* (Moreno, 1988a) – of cattle, sheep and pigs (locally referred to as '*anâ a-i*

¹⁶⁶ A similar example is the story of P.T., 26 years old, who returned from Casarza Ligure to Salino (VL) to recover his grandparents' land and restart the family farm, through which he now produces vegetables and chestnuts and raises *Cabannina* cattle and sheep. The main difference between these stories is the fact that P.T. didn't move back permanently and keeps living in Casarza.

¹⁶⁷ The expression in Genoese literally means 'still going to the mountains', with the meaning of *monti* explained in section 4.1.

¹⁶⁸ In October 2024, following a period of economic hardship, the dairy cooperative changed its business name and is now known as *I Formaggi della Val di Vara s.r.l.* See the Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/caseificio_valdiva?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNIZDc0MzIxNw==>. Last accessed: 18 April 2026.

¹⁶⁹ See the website: <<https://www.sanpietrovaracooperativa.it/>>.

¹⁷⁰ According to Alessandro Triantafyllidis, president of the Biodistrict until 2025, they are the only cooperatives associated with livestock farming still present in Liguria. All the others have closed.

¹⁷¹ C.A. (Pian d'Ordia, Scurtabò [VL]), S.A. (Pavareto [Carro]), D.C. e C.C. (Giavenù di Sopra, Cassego [VL]), F.F. (Pian delle Galline [VL]), N.G. (Giandriale, Tavarone [Maissana]), R.G. (Cardeto, Caranza [VL]), S.M. (Case Rotte, Taglieto [VL]), G.O. (Configno, Teviggiò [VL]), A.S. (Zanega, Scurtabò [VL]), P.T. (Salino [VL]). In addition to them, the president of the Biodistrict "Val di Vara - Valle del Biologico", Alessandro Triantafyllidis (VL).

monti’ or ‘*anâ à mollâ e bestie*’¹⁷²) and, on the other hand, the centuries-old transhumance of sheep and goats between the Ligurian Riviera and the Po Valley (Moreno, Raggio, 1990), which has been active since at least the 16th century. While transhumance has disappeared, cattle grazing, despite having lost its central role and undergone profound changes, has survived the abandonment of most agro-sylvo-pastoral practices over the last seventy years. One of the most significant changes it has undergone is linked to the transition from dairy to meat production, as evidenced, among other things, by the events surrounding the Meat Cooperative.

Starting this story with the latter, it was founded – as reported on the Biodistretto website¹⁷³ and as revealed in an interview with the current president Sandro Toni (S.T.) –, in 1958 as a dairy and association for the management of forests in the upper Vara Valley, and only converted to beef slaughtering in the 1980s, when what the informant (S.T.) defines as the “meat trend” spread, thus adapting to market demands. This transition is crucial and reflects a much broader trend, which will be explored in more detail later. Having shifted its focus to meat production, the cooperative achieved good economic results and grew to include around 90 affiliated farms. With the creation of the organic brand in the late 1990s, the cooperative became a representative of the organic meat supply chain, while continuing to produce conventional beef, pork and sheep¹⁷⁴ in parallel. According to the president, this transition was of fundamental importance for producers and for the cooperative itself: sales increased, and turnover doubled, in a supply chain that, despite settling at large numbers – 900 quintals of beef in 2023 –, continues to have room for growth, as it produces less than the market demands. Today, it supplies small and large retailers in a geographical area stretching from Parma to La Spezia and from Massa to Genoa, with its epicentre in the hamlet of San Pietro Vara (VL). This growth linked to the organic supply chain has made it possible to maintain the same number of members as in the past. The importance of affiliating is testified by R.G., a livestock farmer from Cardeto (*Cardeio*, near Caranza, VL): “Everyone here in the area is into organic, because otherwise... [...] organic [only makes sense] if you’ve got numbers... if you don’t have a group, on your own it doesn’t really make much sense”. The largest and most productive member companies are mainly located in the municipality of Varese Ligure, which accounts for about 60% of the total, followed by Zignago, Sesta Godano and Rocchetta di Vara, while the other municipalities have significantly lower numbers. The largest farm, owned by the

¹⁷² Literally “going to the mountains” or “going to release the animals”. See section 4.1.

¹⁷³ Cf.: <<https://www.biodistrettovaldivara.it/602/>>.

¹⁷⁴ Among its suppliers is F.F.’s farm (Pian delle Galline, VL), which supplies lamb meat from the *Nostrana* breed – an endangered, triple-purpose sheep (meat, milk, and wool) native to the area around the Cisa Pass (<<https://www.agraria.org/ovini/nostrana.htm>>) and formerly common in the upper val di Vara (see Fig. 5.4.2).

brothers A.S. and S.S. of Zanega (Sanega; near Scurtabò, VL), has between 300 and 400 cows, while the average number of cows per farm is around 30.

Parallel to the events described above, in 1978¹⁷⁵ the Cooperativa Casearia Val di Vara was founded in Varese Ligure. Initially, the member farms supplied milk that was then processed in external dairies located in Emilia or in the lower valley. It was then decided to build the current dairy in the small village of Perazza (VL), which, however, only became operational in 1994, making it possible to process the milk supplied by around 70 members on site. A few years after the opening of the dairy, the ‘Valle del Biologico’ was established and the cooperative, with most of its members, joined this supply chain, while also maintaining conventional production. The first few years of this change proved to be very positive from an economic point of view, but over time the number of contributing members declined, and with it the production of organic cheeses. Although there are now fewer than ten members – about 90% fewer than thirty years ago –, individually they produce more than in the past, and the quantities that were once achieved by many small farms are now covered by a few, larger barns.

The decline in dairy production is not linear and has various causes, but informants have highlighted four main ones, all of which are interconnected. The first is the closure of many farms run by older producers who have not had generational change. The second is the low profitability of extensive milk production, which, on the one hand, forces existing farmers to seek additional income through a second job and, on the other, prevents new entrants from entering the sector, given the high costs of raw materials and the starting conditions. The third cause is related to the previous one and comes from the high costs, especially those of animal feed. It is connected to the impossibility of creating a complete supply chain for livestock nutrition, due to the valley’s orography: although many farms are able to produce their own hay, cereals must always be purchased. Finally, the fourth cause lies in the aforementioned widespread shift to the meat supply chain, a phenomenon that subsidies for organic farming over the last thirty years have accelerated: while subsidies are accessible regardless of the supply chain to which they belong, as they are allocated on the basis of pasture area¹⁷⁶, dairy farming requires greater commitment – for example, because of milking, which must be done twice a day, while beef cattle can be left to roam freely without supervision for up to a week – and tends to be less profitable¹⁷⁷. The shift from the milk supply chain to the meat supply chain

¹⁷⁵ Information taken from the website <<https://www.coopcasearia.it/chi.html>> and from an interview with two employees of the dairy.

¹⁷⁶ Refunds known, precisely, as ‘surface measures’ (*misura a superficie*).

¹⁷⁷ From the interview with C.A. (Pian d’Ordia, Scurtabò [VL]).

is therefore often seen as a more manageable way to continue farming. With a few notable exceptions, such as L.P. (see section 5.1), market trends indicate a direct relationship between the decline in dairy farms and the increase in meat farms. This is an inevitable process if what S.M. from Case Rotte (*Cà Rotte*, Taglieto, VL) says is true, namely that in dairy production “farming as we know it has no future”: in order to survive, it is now necessary to shift to meat or come up with new ideas, such as teaching farms (*fattorie didattiche*), or, otherwise, to get involved in tourism through accommodation facilities.

This shift to meat production, therefore, while harmful to a historic industry such as dairy farming, which is also important in terms of identity, at the same time seems to ensure the continuation of livestock farming, which is fundamental in the Apennines for the active protection of the territory, as well as a guarantee of income in an inner area already poor in job opportunities. The farmers themselves emphasise the crucial role of this practice, well summarised by C.A. of Scurtabò, who argues that “a barn that closes means abandonment of a territory”, or by R.G. of Cardeto, according to whom organic farming “has managed to keep the valley alive, because otherwise it was destined to die”.



Fig. 5.2.1. Pastures on Mount Porcile (Maissana), used for cattle grazing by A.S. and S.S.
Source: Author's photograph, August 2025.

Land management through livestock farming today can take many forms. One example is farms that decide to expand production and therefore need larger pastures and hay meadows, ending up buying or renting areas now occupied by secondary forests or shrubbery, and

reclaiming them. A second aspect is grazing on common lands associated with different hamlets (*beni frazionali*), plots directly descended from the *comunaglie* (common lands) and managed by municipalities on behalf of individual hamlets: in exchange for an almost symbolic payment, the administrations grant farmers the use of these high-altitude grasslands for cattle grazing. The most significant example is the herd belonging to A.S. and S.S. – brothers –, who in the mild months leave their cows to graze on the *beni frazionali* of Reppia, Arzeno, Statale (municipality of Ne), Santa Maria, Campore, Maissana and Disconesi (municipality of Maissana) (Fig. 5.2.1). The herd is moved through an annual transhumance, which involves, in the spring, transport by cart to the roadman's house in Cassego and then on foot to Codivara (VL), where it is left to graze freely. In the autumn, the cows are brought back to the barn via the dirt road of Valletti (VL), a journey of about 4-5 hours. F.F. also practises transhumance, albeit at different times of year: from Pian delle Galline (*Cian de Galliñe*), crossing the Crovana stream, she leads her cows for about an hour to Taglieto (*Taggeio*), at 800 metres a.s.l., where she leaves the herd in rented pastures during spring and autumn; in summer and winter, however, the animals remain grazing near the Pian delle Galline barn. Finally, it is worth mentioning grazing in the woods, an increasingly widespread practice in a patchwork landscape where managed land alternates with woods and shrubbery. This practice is carried out, for example, by C.A. in the pastures around Mount Pietrebianche (*Prie Gianche*) and in the lower-altitude pastures of Pian d'Ordià (*Cian d'Ordià*), near Scurtabò, where her cows graze on both grasslands and wooded pastures¹⁷⁸, keeping it clean and feeding on acorns and chestnuts, among other things, in the autumn (Fig. 5.2.2).

¹⁷⁸ Defined at European contribution level as 'pastures with tare' (*pascoli con tara*). Given the current landscape, wooded pasture is practiced by the majority of the farms interviewed: S.A. in Pavareto (Carro) with his *Cabannina* cows, D.C. and C.C. in Cassego, etc.



Fig. 5.2.2. C.A.'s cows grazing in the woodland around Mount Pietrebianche (Scurtabò).
Source: Author's photograph, July 2024.

In closing, the variety of cow breeds found in the area is of some interest to researchers. The following list is obviously not exhaustive. While Limousin (Fig. 5.2.3a) cattle are the most popular for meat due to their hardiness, adaptability to rough pastures and independence (owned by A.S., S.S., R.G., L.P., N.G. and, in the past, G.O.), there are other breeds to a lesser extent, such as the Angus kept by G.O., the Charolais once bred by F.F., or those at risk of extinction that some breeders have decided to recover: the *Pustertaler Barà*, Piedmontese, which F.F. has crossed with Charolais, or the Ligurian *Cabannina* (bred by S.A. and P.T.), which has been part of a large regional recovery programme for years¹⁷⁹ (Fig. 5.2.3c). The *Cabannina* is also found in the milk supply chain, bred by S.A. in Carro, alongside the Braunvieh (*Bruna Alpina*), present in C.A.'s herd (Fig. 5.2.2) and already widespread in the valley in the second half of 20th century, or S.M.'s *Grigia Alpina*. But in this sector – and sometimes also in the meat sector –, crossbreeds are the most popular, as they are better suited to the rugged pastures of the upper Vara Valley and combine hardiness with high productivity: C.A. (Fig. 5.2.4a) has crossbreeds between Holstein Friesian and Aosta Black Pied cows, which produce milk that is fattier than that of the *Bruna Alpina*; F.F.'s crossbreeding of *Barà* and Charolais cows (Fig. 5.2.3b) has allowed her to obtain smaller cows, which therefore require less food and are better suited to pasture, while at the same time producing more milk due to the characteristics of the *Barà* breed, thus ensuring better growth for the calves.

¹⁷⁹ Cf.: <<https://www.cabannina.it/>>. The *Cabannina* today is a Slow Food presidium (*presidio*).

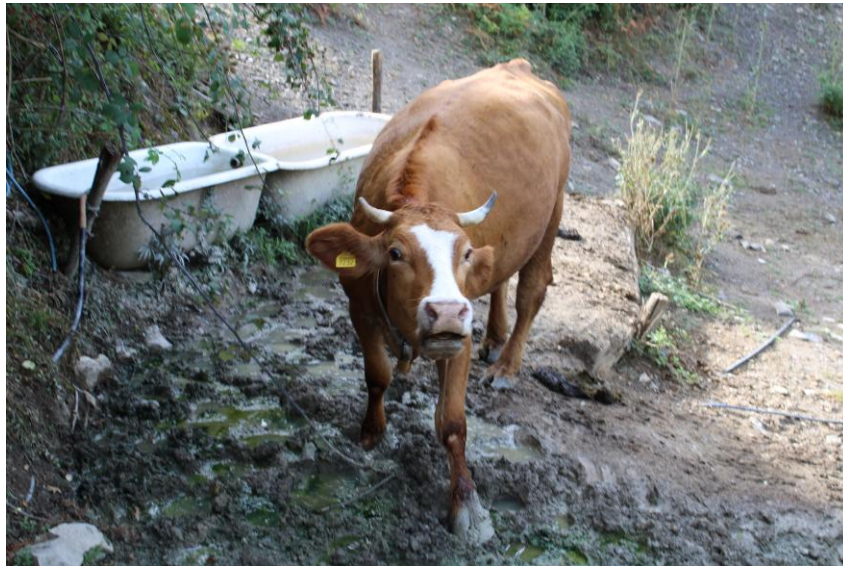


Fig. 5.2.3. (a) Limousin cows in Centocroci near Taglieto, with the Centocroci Pass pastures in the background; (b) a cow belonging to D.C. near Cassego; (c) Cabannina cows in Pavareto (Carro). Source: Author's photograph, August and July 2024.



Fig. 5.2.4. (a) C.A.'s cows of different breeds in Pietrebianche (Scurtabò); (b) F.F.'s crossbred of Barà and Charolais cows in Pian delle Galline; (c) cows surrounded by farmed wild boars near Cassego. Source: Author's photograph, July and August 2024.

5.3. Neo (non-)organic rurals: “adattare lo stile di vita e le colture” in the vegetable and fruit supply chain¹⁸⁰

The third story features a family living in Marcantonio, near the hamlet of Chiama (*Ciamma* in Genoese) in the municipality of Maissana, consisting of Rossana Sciascia, Alberto Anzi and their sons F. and A. The interview is useful for addressing some crucial aspects of life and land management in inner areas: the parents’ urban and non-Ligurian origins, which characterise them in all respects as neo-rurals; the fruit and vegetable supply chain in which they are involved with their farm; the adaptation to climate change; the depopulation that characterises Chiama, the village where they live. In addition, other elements are discussed, intertwining their story with that of two other farms – *Risveglio Naturale* owned by F.M. and E.F. in Valletti and *Il Giglio e la Rosa* owned by M.P. and A.P. in Montale (VL): agritourisms, organic farming and how the fruit and vegetable supply chain is developing.

Rossana and Alberto are from Lombardy, one from Milan and the other from Varese. Rossana was the first to arrive in Chiama, in 1997, with the bucolic idea of changing her life by moving from the city to the countryside and opening a subsistence farm that would produce vegetables and wild strawberries and serve as a base for learning ancient farming crafts. The impact of rural life was more difficult than expected, and Rossana lived alone in Chiama for some time, until she met and married Alberto, who had come to the valley as a tree climbing instructor and then moved to the small town himself. Shortly afterwards, their two children were born, and the decision to expand the farm’s production came naturally, given the need to ensure a steady income. According to the two informants, the issue of children and family is central to the broader theme of repopulating inner areas, also in terms of motivation, as it requires long-term planning, which is not a given in the case of single people without children. In the case of a farm, this planning ensures a more profound and lasting management of mountain areas. Ten years after starting production, the two decided to open an agritourism, with the main aim of securing a steady income to renovate a ruined *casone* on their property, which then became the agritourism. To this end, they managed to obtain European funding for about 55% of the costs, which allowed them not only to pay off the house, but also to reinvest by purchasing new land and another property in the village. As soon as their children grew up, they started working on the farm and are still an integral part of it, especially the eldest, F., aged 22.

¹⁸⁰ The expression in Italian literally means “adapting lifestyle and crops”, from the interview to Alberto Anzi (*Ca’ Marcantonio*).

The farm now carries out a variety of activities. On the one hand, these involve rural crafts, which are inextricably linked to the land, due to their dependence on the availability of raw materials: wool spinning, clay working, chair caning and others, which require the rational management of the land and woodland vegetation, as evidenced, in their case, by the cultivation of willow¹⁸¹. Furthermore, the crafts mentioned above are disappearing in the countryside of Northern Italy and, therefore, this situation creates a niche market for them, allowing them to sell and teach professional courses without competition. On the other hand, the company's main outlet is the direct sale of fruit and vegetables at the Saturday market in Sestri Levante. The idea came almost immediately when one day they found themselves with an excess production of purple beans (*fagiolini viola*) and, through the former mayor Maurizio Caranza, they decided to start selling the surplus at the Varese Ligure market, filling a gap in local producers that had existed for some time and, in a way, opening the way for other farms. After some time, they decided to move to the Riviera, where there would likely be greater sales opportunities and a larger number of buyers. They thus began by selling at the markets of Moneglia and Riva Trigoso and finally settled in Sestri Levante, where they have occupied a market stall for over twenty years and built up a large and loyal customer base, to the extent that weekly demand exceeds the supply they are able to provide. This sales choice reflects demand from the coast for agricultural products from the hinterland, while local demand for fruit and vegetable is significantly lower in inner areas. At present, they are among the few in the study area – and the only ones among my informants – who sell vegetables directly at the market.

¹⁸¹ Many of these activities were once carried out when bad weather prevented outdoor work. In Codivara (Varese Ligure), the wild willow wood once used to make baskets (*i cavagni*) is called *e veisce*, while *e còrbe* (smaller baskets) were made using *i scuisci*, strips of chestnut wood. In particular, “i feian e veisce de luña vegia pe fâle duâ [...] pe no fâli begâ” [“they made *veisce* during the old moon to make them last... so they wouldn't bend”] (T.D.N., communication via Facebook).

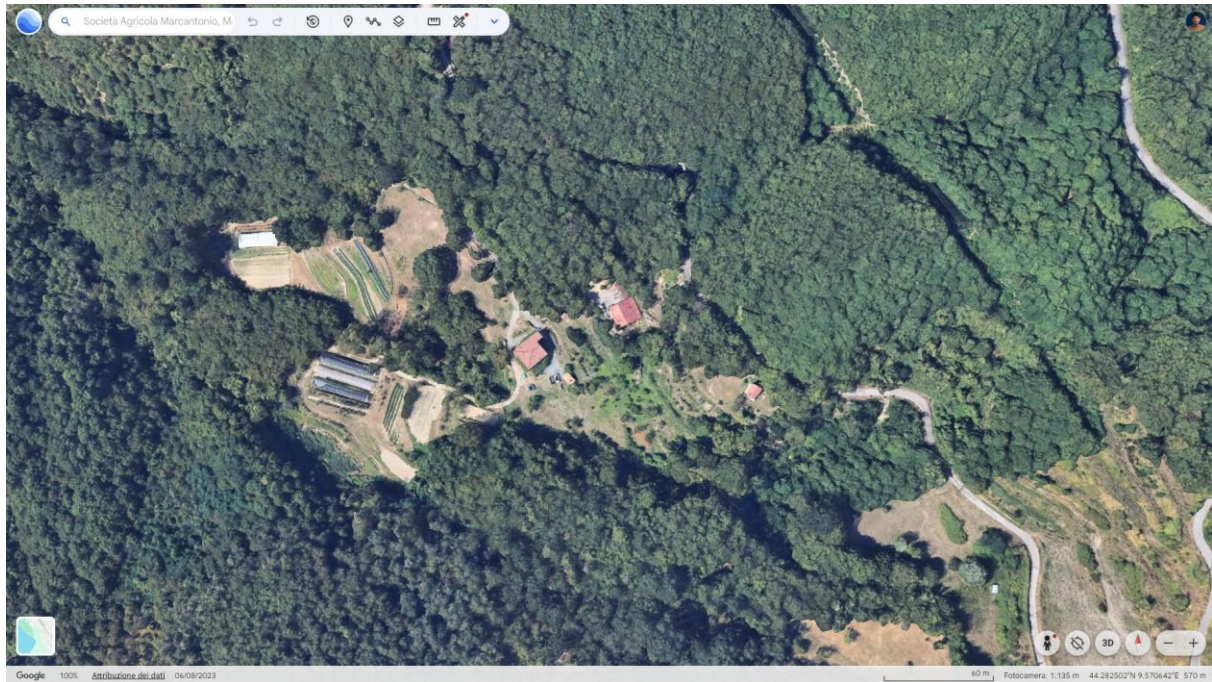


Fig. 5.3.1. The *Ca' Marcantonio* farm, near Chiama. In this aerial image, the plots around the house and agritourism are visible, surrounded by dense woodland. Just to the south, beyond the bottom-right corner of the image, lies the Mola Pass (656 m asl), which connects the municipalities of Maissana and Carro. Source: Google Earth.



Fig. 5.3.2. Crops at the *Ca' Marcantonio* farm.
Source: Author's photograph, July 2024.

Their main products are vegetables and fruit: at the time of my interview (July 2024), they were growing or preparing the soil for cabbages, potatoes, tomatoes, aubergines, peppers, courgettes, broad beans, green beans, strawberries, watermelons, melons, apples, etc.; or for

ancient local varieties, such as the Pignona onion (*cipolla di Pignona*, a little village in the municipality of Sesta Godano) (Fig. 5.3.2). Their crops include some experiments, such as Albenga purple asparagus (*asparago violetto di Albenga*)¹⁸², which is well suited to the soil in Chiama. Partly to diversify the market and ensure good economic returns, and partly due to the need to adapt to climate change, Alberto argues that it is essential to adapt crops nowadays: while new crops such as asparagus are proving suitable for these areas, the abnormal temperatures of the summer of 2024 – as in previous years – have delayed and ruined the production of tomatoes and peppers. The issue of adaptation to climate change is one that concerns all the informants I interviewed and is clearly highlighted, as one of the most striking examples, by the gradual advance of olive growing in areas of the municipalities of Maissana and Varese Ligure where it would not have survived before¹⁸³. Problems related to climate change are also confirmed by G.F., a 90-year-old farmer from Costa Massucco, in Colli di Valletti, where he was born and has always lived:

Pe conto mæ l'è a neutte e o giorno! [...] Anca pe-a agricultua, perché [...] gh'è tante malattie, l'è sciortio tante cöse... pöi inte piante l'è o ciù donde ô se vègghe! Adesso, ma ti sæ che a frutta...? [...] Nasceia de persegòtte da l'osso [...] senza malattia. Adesso ti gh'æ da fà [...] e da salvâlo, ch'o veu seccâ. [...] E fighe, li adesso mi ghe n'æ dôi lì, piccin [...]: o ne fava pe un paeise. Adesso saà za dex'anni, anca quinze, che un no ti ô mangi! I creuvo primma de meuiâ, grösse coscì! [...] G'en tutte in tæra. Comme mai? Mi no ô so... A pianta a l'è bella, ma fighe i creuvo tutto. [...] A i ê fa, ma a no l'arriesce à portâle à maturâge: quande i l'en grösse coscì, i vegno neigre e i creuvo. [...] Beseugna ben che ghe segge cangiao quarcösa, loatri [e fighe] sentian da l'äia, carcösa beseugna che l'agge sentio! [...] Comme o l'è sto cangiamènto? Mi no pôsso distinguèlo da cöse o l'è vegnuo sto cangiamènto, ma beseugne che sie cangiau quarcösa!¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² It is a Slow Food presidium. S.A. and family, at *Il Filo di Paglia* in Pavareto (Carro), have also introduced this crop, that is well suited to their soil.

¹⁸³ I point out its presence in the high hamlet of Scurtabò (Pian d'Ordià, around 700 m a.s.l.; interview with C.A.), of the *Leccino* variety. For a comparison with the past regarding the presence of olive trees in the upper Vara Valley, see: Viviani, 1807, pp. 19-21. At the beginning of the 19th century, Viviani emphasised the strong presence of wild olive trees (*Olea europaea* var. *sylvestris*) in the surroundings of Rocchetta di Vara, as domestic varieties would not have been able to withstand the cold winter temperatures; on the other hand, these temperatures protected them from damage by the olive fruit fly (*Bactrocera oleae*), as it happens to the varieties grown today north-west of Sesta Godano.

¹⁸⁴ “For me, it’s night and day! [...] Even for agriculture, because [...] there are so many diseases, so many things have come out... and it’s most noticeable in plants! Now, but you know that fruit...? [...] Small peaches grew from the pit [...] without disease. Now you have to work hard [...] to save it, because it wants to dry out. [...] The figs, I have two there now, small ones [...]: they used to produce enough for a village. Now it’s been ten years, maybe even fifteen, since I’ve eaten one! They fall before they ripen, this big! [...] They’re all on the ground. Why? I don’t know... The plant is beautiful, but the figs all fall. [...] It produces them, but it can’t bring them to ripeness: when they’re this big, they turn black and fall. [...] Something must have changed, they [the figs] must have sensed

The choice of the hamlet where Rossana and Alberto went to live is also interesting. Chiamia is now essentially depopulated, as only one occasional inhabitant who works remotely remains in the village, and only a few scattered houses – such as the one where they live – are still permanently inhabited. When they arrived twenty years ago, the situation was not much better, as there were three families living there, with three more joining them in the summer; even this type of ‘roots’ vacation has now declined to the point of almost disappearing altogether. Their move to this hamlet was so daring that the birth of their first child was greeted with joy by the inhabitants and, above all, by the local press.

This leads us to the topic of tourism and agritourism, which is intertwined with Rossana and Alberto’s story and, in some ways, takes a different direction from the experiences of other farms, such as those of F.M. and E.F.’s *Risveglio Naturale*, in Colea, near Valletti, or M.P and A.P.’s *Il Giglio e la Rosa* in Tarso, near Montale (VL). According to Rossana, Alberto and their 20-year-old son A., a type of agriculture based on multi-skilling is essential: “in my opinion, we have to adapt our lifestyle, our crops [...]; so you have to know how to do a bit of everything, know how to use new technologies [...] on the one hand, but on the other hand you have to be able to light a fire or maybe build a piece of roof... [...] which is actually a very interesting life” (Alberto). It can guarantee economic stability – “if you are capable of doing something, you will always find work here” –, has a direct impact on land maintenance and creates tangible assets, while the agritourism and, more generally, tourism sector remains primarily subject to fluctuations that are difficult to control, also risks being ‘culturally poor’ and not creating any substance for the territory – if not actually causing damage, as happened in the Cinque Terre –, unless the focus is on niche sectors that enhance specific aspects and are not linked to large flows¹⁸⁵; and, finally, it may prove to be a strategic failure, as incentives for a certain type of tourism have shown, namely that which led to the sale of a large number of flats in more or less depopulated villages – such as Mattarana, in the municipality of Carrodano, and Velva, in that of Castiglione Chiavarese – to wealthy foreigners who, however, do not live there permanently and therefore do not create a real social fabric¹⁸⁶. Unlike many farms in the upper valley,

something in the air, they must have sensed something! [...] What is this change? I can’t pinpoint what caused this change, but something must have changed!”.

¹⁸⁵ Such as the Adventure Park ‘Val di Vara’ opened by N.G. in Giandriale, Tavarone (Maissana).

¹⁸⁶ In this regard, it will be interesting to observe the development of a project carried out by a Scottish entrepreneur in the almost abandoned hamlet of Porciorasco (VL) – it has only one inhabitant, who arrived when the village was already depopulated –, who has acquired the entire village – with the exception of a single house – and the large stately home that belonged to the De Paoli family with the aim of creating a luxury ‘village resort’. Restoration work is underway: the residence is still to be completed by 2025, while the renovation of the other houses has not yet begun.

therefore, *Ca' Marcantonio's* production is not linked to agritourism, as they do not offer catering services, and is directed solely to the market or to private individuals.

F.M. and E.F. are also neo-rurals. They arrived in the Vara Valley from Genoa in 2007 after deciding to change their lives and searching throughout Liguria for a farm that would allow them to open an agritourism – which they did in 2011 – and produce everything they needed. Their interview (taken in July 2024) reveals that, although the agritourism business is a natural extension of their farming activities¹⁸⁷ and supports them, it is difficult to make the two coexist because the peak tourist season coincides with the busiest time in the fields, so they have to choose between the two, in their case the agritourism business – although initiatives such as *woofing*¹⁸⁸, where young people work the land in exchange for board and lodging, have been a great help in recent years:

The fact is that, in the end, it becomes really complicated to combine farming and agritourism. It seems strange, because we created the agritourism precisely to support agriculture... and thank goodness! But in reality, the timing overlaps. I mean, in the end most of the work in the fields happens at the same time as the peak tourist season, so it becomes difficult to keep up with everything. (F.M.)

M.P., on the other hand, is a native of Tarso and, after travelling around the Riviera working as a surveyor, around 2014 he decided to return to the valley to take over the family farm, maintain the land that was slowly deteriorating and start an agritourism in his birthplace, followed by his girlfriend A.P., who was born in Russia and continued her profession as a journalist remotely. In addition to products for their own consumption and for the agritourism business, the couple cultivate a local grape variety that they replanted to save it – called *bottigiasca* in Montale and *çeraxiña* in Sesta¹⁸⁹, a red variety – and are experimenting with olive cultivation, planted about 25 years ago, taking advantage of rising temperatures, which

¹⁸⁷ In addition to agricultural production, they have a donkey and breed around twenty Val di Vara black roosters (*galli neri della val di Vara*), a Slow Food presidium.

¹⁸⁸ Cf.: <<https://woof.net/>>.

¹⁸⁹ The informant reports that DNA studies of the species have not been found in the Italian variety register; his hypothesis – taken from: <<https://www.viten.net/tags/liguria/it/1402>> – is that it was introduced by the illustrious Gabaldoni family, of Spanish origin, who settled around 1780 in Cavallanuova (or “Campanile”), along the Vara river not far from Tarso, and during the 19th century had developed mulberry cultivation and silkworm breeding, planted vineyards, expanded livestock breeding and cultivated rare flowers (cf.: Lagomarsini, 2017; Pastorini, 2018). The wine that was historically produced there was diluted with the Dolcetto variety and coloured with Tintoretto. In this regard, Viviani (1807, p. 26) makes an interesting observation about local vineyards in the early 19th century, praising the quantity of grapes produced, which, however, never ripen completely and therefore produce an acidic wine, so it is necessary to correct their “austérité et [...] aigreur en le mêlant aux Vins généreux de la Côte”.

allow it to survive while still preventing the spread of the olive fruit fly (Fig. 5.3.3); they are also trying to recover an ancient variety of corn – or, locally, *mæga* – with small, reddish grains¹⁹⁰. For three years, they have also been managing their uncle’s centuries-old chestnut grove – with trees aged 250-300 years – in Galera (near Buto [VL], below Mount Gottero) and produce chestnut flour. The agritourism business, which began with the purchase of the house on the neighbouring property, is essential also for them in providing with a stable and effective source of income, which would not be possible with agriculture alone, given the limited amount of land available.



Fig. 5.3.3. Olive trees in Tarso (Montale) at the *Il Giglio e la Rosa* agritourism.
Source: Author’s photograph, August 2024.

On the topic of agritourism, the words of N.G. (Giandriale, Tavarone) are also important. He highlights the difference in perspective that the valley’s inhabitants had compared to his family, that arrived thirty years ago from Lombardy, and how it has changed over time:

When we started the agritourism, local people would pass by here, some would tell you... you could hear them out loud in Genoese dialect saying, ‘Ah, these ones won’t last long’, [...] and I used to talk with my wife: ‘You’ll see that in thirty years they too will be hosting guests in their homes’. Because at the time they weren’t prepared for it, and they

¹⁹⁰ Perhaps the *granturco dell’asciutto di Pignone*. Cf.: <<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/granturco-dallasciutto-di-pignone/>>.

didn't appreciate the territory, they didn't think that such a place could be lived in a touristic way. We, coming from outside, saw something – damn – wonderful, and that's why we believed in it more. The locals, instead, I think they experienced it as, as a trauma: the hard work of their grandparents... [...] And so now [...] you go around and they've opened them everywhere: holiday homes, bed and breakfasts – some good, some bad, but they've opened them, so it means they've also opened up a bit a certain way of seeing things, and now they even host people in their homes, which once...

Finally, the last topics that emerge from the interviews are organic farming and the closely related issue of the fruit and vegetable supply chain in the upper Vara Valley. While *Ca' Marcantonio* has never been an organic farm – although this was not an ideological choice, and they participate in Biodistrict initiatives – *Risveglio Naturale* was affiliated until recently, while *Il Giglio e la Rosa* still is. E.F. and F.M. signed up for organic farming as soon as they opened, but after a few years, around 2021-22, they decided to leave, partly because of excessive bureaucracy and certain rules they did not agree with, and partly because of the cost, which has a certain impact on small businesses. M.P.'s parents also joined the organic label when they had the opportunity, and so M.P. and A.P. did with the agritourism. It seemed an obvious choice, because “the land here is suited to organic farming”. For M.P. and A.P., too, the presence of certain rules represents a limitation that sometimes makes them want to give up the label, particularly because “the rules for the big farms also apply to the small ones, but the small ones get hit hard in the arse”. In general, organic certification is less advantageous for producers in the fruit and vegetable supply chain than for those working in livestock farming, and often proves to be an additional burden on the already complicated life of the contemporary farmer, considering that “nowadays, to be a farmer you have to be an accountant, a notary, a solicitor and even a bit of a tax advisor, a trade unionist... in other words, you have to be all these things, because logically they ask you, ‘But, here, this thing...?’, ‘Eh, but a decree has come out and...’: you have to know how to do everything” (E.F., *Risveglio Naturale*).

Other informants put forward proposals to resolve these dynamics: R.G. (Cardeto) starts from the differences in the vocation of the territory in the valley, which makes livestock farming profitable only at high altitudes and on gentler slopes, while in the valley floor or mid-slope areas it would be advisable to focus on other productions, such as specialised crops of high-value fruit or vegetables. To this end, R.G. and A.P. (*Il Giglio e la Rosa*) herself – in practice responding to a networking problem highlighted by most informants in the fruit and vegetable supply chain – put forward the proposal for a fruit and vegetable cooperative or consortium, as

is the case for the milk and meat supply chains, which would help to combine efforts to obtain value from agriculture, perhaps accompanied by incentives for the management of productive land on behalf of others¹⁹¹.

5.4. “Most of the farms here are managed by women”: female agricultural entrepreneurship in inner areas¹⁹²

The fourth and final story intertwines those of two farms run by women and addresses the issue of female agricultural entrepreneurship¹⁹³. This emerged as a direct and unexpected result of the interviews, revealing itself to be a growing phenomenon in today’s agriculture and livestock farming, closely related to the economic dynamics that have affected inner areas over the last fifty years. It was precisely some of the female informants who own farms who emphasised this aspect, as well as the then president of the Biodistrict, Alessandro Triantafyllidis, and the director of the Varese branch of the ‘Terra Viva’ Union of the CISL. Moreover, although the data are not statistically significant – given the small size and heterogeneity of the sample –, it is true that among the farm owners interviewed in my research, 43.48% are women¹⁹⁴.

However, recent statistical research confirms this trend: according to the latest Agricultural Census (2020), there are 355,627 female agricultural entrepreneurs in Italy, or 31.9% of the total, with Liguria accounting for 33.3% of farms registered to women, which is above the national average (ISTAT data¹⁹⁵), while the recent report by the association *Riabitare l’Italia* entitled *Donne e aree interne* (Lucatelli, Storti, 2025, pp. 42-43) highlights that around 33% of farms in inner areas are run by women and points to a propensity among young women in inner areas to engage in agriculture and sheep farming. Sectors in which women are predominant or growing in number are, in particular, the dairy industry and agritourism – in the latter case, Liguria is one of the regions where this phenomenon is most evident, with 48.6% of owners

¹⁹¹ Cf. land banks (*banche della terra*) initiative. This has got both national and regional coordination: *Banca nazionale delle terre agricole* (National Bank of Agricultural Lands): <<https://www.ismea.it/banca-delle-terre>>; *Banca regionale della terra* (Regional Land Bank; Liguria): <<https://www.agriligurianet.it/en/impresa/politiche-di-sviluppo/banca-della-terra.html>>.

¹⁹² Quotation from the interview with the then president of the Biodistrict Val di Vara ‘Valle del Biologico’, conducted in English in March 2024 during the annual *Ligurian Field Course* of the University of Nottingham.

¹⁹³ See on this: Riley, 2009.

¹⁹⁴ That is, 10 out of 23: C.A.’s farm (Pian d’Ordìà, Scurtabò [VL]), F.B.’s *Il Filo di Paglia* (Pavareto [Carro]), Silvia Bonfiglio’s farm (Carro), Lella Canepa’s Cultural Association *Erbando* (Ghiggeri, Comuneglia [VL]), D.C.’s farm (Giavenù di Sopra, Cassego [VL]), F.F.’s farm (Pian delle Galline [VL]), E.L.’s *La Taverna del Vara* (Torza [Maissana]), T.L.’s farm (Campore [Maissana]), F.M.’s *Risveglio Naturale* (Colea, Valletti [VL]) and S.M.’s farm (Case Rotte, Taglieto [VL]).

¹⁹⁵ Cf.: <<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/678ba9f76cf3417cb66dc3d5fe603eb0?item=9>>.

being women, compared to a national average of 34.9% –, which are linked to educational farms and training courses (Selmi, 2021, pp. 17-18), which are also part of the income diversification projects of most of the female informants' farms.

C.A., former president of Coldiretti Liguria 'Donne' ('Women') – a trade association that includes a 'Women'¹⁹⁶ division alongside 'Giovani Impresa' ('Young Entrepreneurs') and 'Pensionati' ('Retirees') – gives us some insight into the possible historical causes of this trend. She is also the owner of a farm in Pian d'Ordia, in Scurtabò (VL), which she inherited from her parents in 2008, and which today is mainly dedicated to organic dairy farming (see section 5.2). The informant claims that during the economic boom and the consequent exodus to the Riviera, among the families who decided to remain in the upper valley, the division of tasks meant that the men went to work in factories and businesses on the coast, while the women stayed behind to manage the fields and stables, and it was therefore often the women who were named as the owners of the farms.

In addition to this historical overview, the interview with C.A. sheds some light on possible explanations for this phenomenon in relation to the current milk supply chain, which she defines “another rather unusual fact: [in] most of the companies that supply [milk], the owner is a woman”. She draws on both her experience at Coldiretti and her family history. C.A.'s family, in fact, is one of those that has never left the valley. Among the reasons that prompted her to continue her parents' work are her connection to her family's past and her resulting passion for this activity, as well as her desire to go in the opposite direction to the majority of contemporary farmers, who are slowly converting to meat production. On this point, C.A. emphasises that it is impossible for her to conceive of her farm as part of this supply chain and, therefore, to set it up for the sale of calves for slaughter, due to her personal sensitivity. According to her, it is precisely this greater sensitivity and cultural predisposition to caring roles that is one of the reasons why many women are involved in agriculture or run extensive dairy farms, where men often play a supporting role and are otherwise engaged in other work activities. The second reason is that this type of job, which can be done close to home, allows women to better manage their children and family, and therefore guarantees them employment in a context where it is usually still the man who does the main job, often located far from home.

S.M., on the other hand, lives in Case Rotte (1,000 m a.s.l.), above Taglieto (VL), in a rather isolated house where her entire 'extended' family lives, immersed in an atmosphere that seems

¹⁹⁶ Founded in 1953 as the *Movimento Femminile contadino* ('Farmer Women's Movement'), it took on its current name in 2023 after undergoing various transformations (see: <<https://donne.coldiretti.it/>>; <<https://www.coldiretti.it/servizio/donne-in-agricoltura>>; <<https://liguria.coldiretti.it/donne-impresa-liguria/>>).

partly frozen in time. Hers is one of those families that never left the valley, even though their origins are rather complex: her father's grandparents were from Emilia and moved first to Cento Croci, then to the nearby village of Begagin and finally to Case Rotte in 1940, while her mother is the daughter of a charcoal burner from Veneto¹⁹⁷ who arrived for work in the 1920s, married a local woman and settled in the little village of Noci. S.M. inherited the family business years ago, which mainly supplies milk to the organic cooperative, and she is also the provincial manager for La Spezia of the 'Women' section of Coldiretti Liguria. In addition to the activities provided for in the statute¹⁹⁸, during events sponsored or participated in by Coldiretti or within schools, the coordination offers workshops aimed mainly at children on the themes of agriculture and food, such as cheese production, the seasonality of products and the importance of supply chains. Following this vein, S.M. would like to open an educational farm (*fattoria didattica*) to guarantee income at a time when the milk supply chain does not guarantee regular income, taking advantage of the possibility of managing an extremely diversified farm, which integrates the production of vegetables and wheat with the breeding of various animals (cows, goats, donkeys, chickens and ducks), etc. (Fig. 5.4.1). This intention reflects a widespread desire among women farmers to complement their agricultural activities with professional training courses or courses aimed at children. This is also the case for Silvia Bonfiglio and her husband Maurizio Canessa of Mulino del Travo (Carro) with the chestnut cycle at the upcoming Chestnut Museum or with the lessons on grafting and woodland management; F.F. (Pian delle Galline) for spinning and processing wool (Fig. 5.4.2); F.M. and her husband E.F. of *Risveglio Naturale* (Valletti) with various types of residential courses; and, as we have seen, Rossana Sciascia of *Ca' Marcantonio* (Chiama).

¹⁹⁷ He arrived from Valstagna, in the municipality of Valbrenta (VI), after losing his family during the First World War. In this area of the valley, charcoal burners moved between various locations to produce charcoal, which they then sold elsewhere. In other parts of the valley, such as Valletti, charcoal burners, from Veneto or Bergamo province, were usually paid for their production directly by the major landowners (interview with G.D.P., Via de Valle, Valletti [VL]).

¹⁹⁸ Promotion of rural female entrepreneurship, development of proposals on social policies, promotion of female participation in trade union action, promotion of gender equality and women's policies, commitment to equal opportunities (see: <<https://donne.coldiretti.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Donne-Coldiretti-Regolamento-2024.pdf>>).



Fig. 5.4.1. Goats grazing at S.M.'s farm in Case Rotte (Taglieto).
Source: Author's photograph, August 2024.





Fig. 5.4.2. (a) *Nostrana* breed sheep and (b) a wool-spinning machine at Pian delle Galline (VL).
Source: Author's photograph, August 2024.

5.5. Discussion

The chapter has addressed key themes of contemporary rural activities, thereby opening up space for the analysis of new forms of practices that are shaping the landscape of the upper Vara Valley and, in some respects, much of the Apennine inner areas.

Among the main topics discussed, the issue of organic farming stands out first and foremost – a true hallmark of the upper Vara Valley for over 25 years and a shrewd marketing move that created a brand. Within this production chain, the most rapidly growing sector appears to be extensive beef farming, which is gradually taking over the space and enterprises of the still significant dairy sector. Fruit and vegetable farms are also well represented, although they are more affected by problems related to production capacity. In analysing the pros and cons of the ‘organic turn’ – met with mixed reactions by those operating in the valley – and, by extension, of the incentive-based logic of agriculture – through PSR/CSR, CAP, PNRR, INPS, INAIL, GAL, regional funding programmes, etc.¹⁹⁹ – it is clear that, on the one hand, the foresight of

¹⁹⁹ See section 1.3.

intercepting European funds allocated to a production chain that was rapidly expanding in the 1990s cannot be denied. Especially in the early years of implementation, these funds have allowed farms to remain active for longer than they likely would have, given the generally low profitability of most productions in this Apennine area. It is the former president of the Biodistrict himself, Alessandro Triantafyllidis – who stated that he was initially opposed to the ‘organic turn’ but later changed his mind –, who reiterates the importance of such funding and of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in general: “for areas like these, if you don’t have the CAP, it will be gone decades ago”. Many of the farmers highlights the economic importance of the subsidies too, which, whilst hardly allowing for a good profit margin, at least enable them to recoup their costs: “in Val di Vara, the day the subsidies stop, there won’t be a single cow left” (C.C.).

On the other hand, however, the reward system based on ‘per-hectare’ (*a superficie*) measures or similar mechanisms have tied agriculture to external, standardising dynamics and regulations, implemented at European level in areas that are geomorphologically, culturally and economically diverse, both amongst themselves and within themselves, and has often burdened an already hyper-bureaucratized agricultural sector: “There is so much paperwork to fill in that small-scale farmers lose heart, and the ones who get the money are always the same ones, who have got the hang of it by now, they know how to go about it, or they have a consultant... they can afford it, they pay for one” (S.A.). Those who are most disadvantaged are therefore precisely those small- and medium-sized farms that EU aid should be doing most to protect, who often find themselves swamped by bureaucracy and prohibitive costs, leading them to detach from the organic label and to diversify their sources of income in other ways. Due to issues linked to other internal and external dynamics, farms operating in the fruit and vegetable and dairy sectors are equally disadvantaged, with the latter in particular seeing a decline in 30 years of around 90% in the number of farms in the upper Vara Valley, many of which have switched to the meat sector, which offers higher revenues, less labour involved in livestock management, and relies on a more efficient local cooperative. These dynamics make it difficult to assess the current state of the agro-pastoral sector in the upper Vara Valley and, by extension, in the Apennines. What the interviews clearly highlight, however, is that the incentive-based approach triggers a cycle of dependency on subsidies: “In the past, you just were a farmer and, if you received a subsidy, you’d think: ‘Great, I’ll expand the farm’. Now, however, the mirage is simply to get the grant, that’s all: it’s no longer the means” (D.C.). The dependency is such that it seems that without these grants, extensive farming in inner areas cannot have a future. Not everyone agrees, both because they prioritise lifestyle choices and the passion that has

shaped them, and because they firmly believe in this economic sector, as the story of L.P., 19 years old, demonstrates.

Furthermore, the themes of departure and remaining (*restanza*; Teti, 2017; 2022), have also been addressed, both from a historical perspective – through the experiences of families who left and later returned, as well as those who never left the valley –, and from a contemporary one, by analysing the phenomenon of neo-rurals: often couples from urban areas who have decided to change their lives and dedicate themselves to agricultural activities. What generally emerges from these informants is a strong desire to create a deep bond with the territory in which they have chosen to live, seeking to enrich or rebuild the social fabric of villages suffering from severe depopulation, or even completely abandoned, as in the case of Chiama. Many of them have opened an agritourism, which overall have proved to be the most straightforward and reliable means of ensuring a sufficient income – though still highly subject to unpredictable fluctuations, especially considering the large proportion of foreign tourists. In general, the findings clearly highlight the necessity of adapting agricultural activities to chronic emergency situations – ranging from economic and market crises to climate change –, which increasingly demand diversification of their farm in both productive and touristic terms, within the broader framework of multifunctionality and multiskilling.

Finally, the research has also explored the themes of youth and women's agricultural entrepreneurship in inner areas. In the first case, there clearly emerges the will of some young people who have inherited family farms not to leave, but to continue the work – driven by their attachment to family history, by the desire to preserve what previous generations have laboriously built, but also by their passion for such a way of life. In the second case, the phenomenon of farms whose owner is a woman has shown an increase, with historical motivations linked to commuting between the upper Vara Valley and the Riviera, and social motivations connected to the organisations of job or household tasks within the family as well as to a greater interest in practices such as, for example, dairy farming, educational farms or professional training courses.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis demonstrates the value of combining various methods, following the logic of the realistic interpretation of the sources (Moreno, 1990; Grendi, 2000) and the mixed methods research (Schoonenboom, Johnson, 2017), in order to identify the changes that have taken place in the upper Vara Valley and to outline possible future developments in response to the main research question: “How can new resources to curb depopulation and land abandonment be developed in the upper Vara Valley and the Apennines?”. The methods and sources included the use of progressive cartographic comparisons to analyse land-use changes, statistical data relating to population trends, literary and visual travel sources and an extensive ethnographic survey carried out through interviews, according to the participatory action research (PAR) approach.

Semi-structured interviews and, above all, oral histories have been a cornerstone of my research. The latter, conducted with residents and experts to discuss changes in landscapes and practices over approximately the last century, were conducted in Italian or in the local Genoese language; this last aspect proved to be of fundamental importance to the success of many interviews. In fact, Genoese proved particularly useful with elderly people, both to connect with a part of their life essentially lived speaking only Genoese – especially relating to all the landscape practices I was investigating – and to establish a deeper relationship with the interlocutors. This allowed me to discover details and events that I would not otherwise have known about.

Furthermore, from a methodological perspective, the in-depth analysis of governance documents relating to the SNAI and other Italian mountain management policies was essential, not only for the initial contextualisation of the research, but also for comparing the findings with the insights gained from interviews conducted with farmers and local authorities. This comparison often revealed discrepancies between policy intentions and actual outcomes, as in the case of SNAI funds – which have not yet been spent since 2014 –, or the conflicting views on the incentive-based approach of European funds for rural development and organic farming. On the one hand, these funds enable farms to survive, but on the other, they primarily favour medium-to-large farms or specific supply chains, such as organic beef production. Alongside the methodological benefits, the discussion on SNAI and inner areas represents a central theoretical contribution of this thesis. Specifically, this work connects Italian debates on these

topics with the traditions of historical ecology and historical geography – two research fields too often treated separately –, thereby seeking to overcome contemporary policy approaches that remain blind to the long-term historical production of landscapes and local ecological knowledge. These aspects partially answer the fourth research sub-question: “To what extent can the case of the upper Vara Valley fit meaningfully into the scientific and political debate on inner and mountainous areas?”²⁰⁰.

The transformations of the upper Vara Valley have been documented and analysed in Chapter 3, providing an initial answer to the first and the second research sub-questions: “What changes in practices and land use have occurred in the upper Vara Valley over the last century?”; “What is the condition of current land management and depopulation in the upper Vara Valley?”. The use of literary and visual travel sources proved fundamental for constructing a territorial biography of the upper valley, through the perception of external observers over two and a half centuries – from the mid-seventeenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. The French bourgeoisie and aristocracy who visited the valley revealed a vision of rural life and the Apennine landscape that was simultaneously negative and idyllic, while ‘technical’ observers, such as Domenico Viviani, gave precise descriptions of land use and social customs. These accounts provide valuable context for understanding the evolution of practices and the effects of climate change and geo-hydrological risks of the area.

Analysis of woodland expansion and the reduction of cultivated land between 1936 and 2019 helped quantify these changes in absolute terms and in relation to the total area of the municipalities over a time span not previously considered, providing a sound basis for future territorial planning concerning the upper Vara Valley. The data confirm a profound change in land use over the last eighty years and, above all, show how rapid and significant this change was in the fifteen years between the mid-1980s and 2000. Practices have changed just as profoundly: while in 1936 wooded areas were productive and largely managed as coppices or consisted of chestnut groves, the forests in 1988, 2000 and 2019 are in a phase of broad spreading of secondary formations. Rephotography – crossed with interviews, cartography and academic sources – has captured these processes, comparing postcards from 1920s to 1980s with photographs taken in the last 30 years during the ‘Ligurian Field Courses’ of the University of Nottingham and contemporary images, of which the changes showed for the Lagorara Valley are exemplary. These changes also emerged from the interviews, which revealed a range of views – from the prediction of “abandonment as a future land use” to a vision of the valley’s

²⁰⁰ For the research questions, see section 2.1.

future landscape as a patchwork where a few managed lands alternate with woodland and scrubland.

Chapter 4 draws from the interviews and focuses on the landscapes of the past, providing further information to answer the same research sub-questions addressed in Chapter 3. First, past practices and toponyms in Mount Verruga were explored, as this area remains understudied in the academic literature on the valley – particularly regarding the slopes within the municipality of Maissana. This section provides an extensive assessment of the pastoral life that characterised the area until the 1960s. In fact, it was a place of summer grazing for various livestock, becoming by extension a place of entertainment and community for the young shepherds who monitored the animals and often slept uphill in the *casoni*. The area was subject to a complex management system, with fragmented private plots on the lower slopes and common lands at the summit, both involving a wide range of practices. This section is also crucial as a collection of microtoponyms and land uses which are not reported in official cadastral maps, but which were essential to past rural life, having been collected through interviews. By cross-referencing interviews, cadastral maps, and aerial photographs, the thesis then examines the urban transformations of coastal and mountain centres during the period of the rural exodus. It highlights the simultaneous expansion of Casarza Ligure (near Sestri Levante), where most of the farmers from the upper Vara Valley relocated, and the parallel expansion of the valley villages, where the few people who stayed moved from their original properties in the historic centres to new detached houses, thereby expanding the villages and ‘shifting’ the population distribution. This section is also useful to highlight past land uses in the village of Campore, as well as its soundscape created by different daily rural life practices, from which the songs of the Cantamaggio emerge. The final section gives new insights on the surviving knowledge regarding chestnut trees and chestnut flour production, detailing the entire year-long process and the changes in practices over time. It also provides an overview of how these practices are transmitted today within families and farms, in a period of chestnut abandonment and widespread diseases. It finally highlights the role of cultural associations working for their conservation in the municipalities of Varese Ligure, Maissana and Carro.

Key themes of contemporary rural practices that are shaping the landscape of the Apennine inner areas are addressed in Chapter 5, answering simultaneously the second and third research sub-questions: “What is the condition of current land management and depopulation in the upper Vara Valley?”; “Are the initiatives implemented by the seven municipalities and other institutions – in particular the Biodistrict – effective?”. Among the main topics discussed, the issue of organic farming stands out first and foremost. Within this production chain, the most

rapidly growing sector appears to be extensive beef farming, which is gradually taking over the space and enterprises of the still significant dairy sector. Fruit and vegetable farms are also well represented, although they are more affected by problems related to production capacity. In analysing the pros and cons of the ‘organic turn’ and, by extension, of the incentive-based logic of agriculture, on the one hand, the foresight of intercepting European funds cannot be denied, as they allowed farms to remain active for longer than they likely would have, especially in the early years of funding. On the other hand, this reward system benefits medium- and large-sized farms, while smaller ones often find themselves swamped by bureaucracy and prohibitive costs; and in general, interviews clearly highlight how the incentive-based approach triggers a cycle of dependency on subsidies among farmers.

The themes of leaving and remaining have also been addressed. Interviews revealed different stories of abandonment, of the maintenance of links to the land, and of the return of families to the valley – sometimes after two or three generations – revealing that these processes are anything but linear. The chapter also investigated the contemporary phenomenon of neo-rurals, where people from urban areas decide to change their lives and dedicate themselves to agricultural activities, creating a deep bond with the territory. Agritourism is typically their most reliable means of ensuring a sufficient income, though still highly subject to unpredictable fluctuations. In general, contemporary farming shows the necessity of adapting agricultural activities to chronic emergencies, such as economic and market crises or climate change, which increasingly demand diversification of farms activities. Finally, key results emerged regarding youth and women’s agricultural entrepreneurship in inner areas. Some young people were clearly strongly determined to continue working on inherited family farms, driven by an attachment to family history, the desire to preserve what previous generations had laboriously built, and an overall passion for such a way of life. In addition the phenomenon of female-led farms has shown an increase, due to historical and social motivations; these are linked to commuting between the upper Vara Valley and the Riviera, the organisations of household and work tasks within the family, or a greater interest in practices such as dairy farming, educational farms (*fattorie didattiche*), or professional training.

In conclusion, some words must be spent on future development strategies to mitigate the socio-environmental vulnerabilities shown in this thesis, as this is one of the goals of a ‘municipal doctorate’. As expected, answering this research question proved to be challenging. As seen in Chapter 2, I decided to face this challenge starting from the people who work the land and fully live in the valley. The informants gave many insights on this topic, but they can

be summarised into four main themes, which, however, will have to be expanded in further research.

Some of the informants discussed, with mixed opinions, the topic of natural parks as a possible way of protecting the land and revamping the territory. Some of them state that an integration, for example, with the Cinque Terre National Park could link the two areas to develop more sustainable forms of tourism. Others would prefer to follow the already proposed – and partially rejected by politicians – idea of a regional park of the upper Vara²⁰¹, which would involve the main mountains (Gottero, Porcile, Zuccone, Dragnone, etc.) to regulate and encourage land conservation and rural practices.

This is related to the second insight. Since many of the informants are involved in agritourism or tourism-related production, many of them highlighted the need for policies that encourage responsible tourism. The support given to coastal destinations such as the Cinque Terre or Tigullio, in contrast to hinterland areas, is seen as a sort of betrayal by national and regional policymakers. Some informants are thus convinced that the aforementioned integration with the Cinque Terre would be a way to retain the already present international tourists, who prefer to stay in a quiet, ‘green’ location instead of a packed village, and then move around. After all, even though it is not institutionalised, this dynamic already links the two areas. In fact, the excessive crowding in the Cinque Terre – and the consequent decision of some international tourists to avoid them during summer –, is having an effect on hinterland arrivals, which seemed to be lower regarding international tourists, as the 2025 interviews highlighted. This touristic conception is understandable also because, as discussed in Chapter 5, agritourism seems to be the only way to ensure a profitable income within the fruit and vegetable supply chain today.

In terms of production, some proposals emerged from the interviews. Some informants highlight that monoculture cannot be the future of the valley, even if the wider market demands it, and a diversification of agriculture is necessary. It is also crucial to diversify the market in relation to the land – R.G. notes that open and gentle pastures of Centocroci make livestock farming profitable at these high altitudes, while in the valley floor or mid-slope areas it would be advisable to focus on specialised, high-value fruit or vegetable production. Furthermore, diversifying rural life itself is essential, since only a multifunctional agriculture can ensure

²⁰¹ Actually, the lower municipalities of the upper Vara Valley (Sesta Godano, Carro, Carrodano, and Rocchetta di Vara) are already part of the Montemarcello-Magra-Vara Regional Park; however, this only affects the course of the river, and the municipalities of Maissana and Varese Ligure refused to be involved at the time of its establishment in 1995.

economic stability, have a direct impact on the upkeep of the territory and create tangible assets. This can also be achieved by recovering local endangered species, such as the Cabannina cow, the Pignona sweet onion, and so on. While, from one hand, these visions are related to the creation of niche tourism to “give the town a reason to come up”, on the other hand, some farmers and local experts highlight the need for a wider re-education – through schools, organised courses, etc. – of both citizens and rural inhabitants on the importance of growing the food one eats and simplifying supply chains, possibly ending farmer’s dependence on European and national funding. Moreover, some interviewees in the fruit and vegetable supply chain believe that the creation of a network or consortium between producers would be crucial, similar to how beef and dairy organic production operates with cooperatives. This would help to combine efforts and obtain value from an otherwise less profitable activity. Parallel incentives for managing currently unproductive plots abandoned by their owners are also proposed, following the model of land banks (*banche della terra*). Through these, owners can give custody of their land to these banks, which then find farmers to cultivate it, thereby both generating profit and managing otherwise abandoned terrain.

Furthermore, during the fieldwork, I took part in several initiatives related to the valley and my research topics. The most important one was the 50th anniversary of the Museo Contadino di Cassego (22 November 2025), which was officially opened in 1975, but whose activities started in 1965, when Don Sandro Lagomarsini was assigned to the parishes of Cassego, Scurtabò and Valletti. The event was widely attended by insiders and the academics who have studied the area in past years and was an occasion to reflect on what has been done in these past 60 years within the valley and what can be done in the near future. In this sense, a possible area of intervention for further research – with the aim of proposing topics for policy investment – is the future management of currently abandoned woodlands to foster carbon sequestration in an era of climate change, which, as seen in Chapter 5, affects all farms in the valley. Improved management would maximise biodiversity, which is proven to be higher in a multilayered and complex landscape. The topic of organic farming requires deeper monitoring too, since it will be at the heart of the valley’s future policies, and upon it, the future of the territory will also depend.

All the results that emerged from the three research chapters and from the conclusions can also help researchers who face inner or mountainous areas sharing some of the characteristics that emerged from the analysis of the upper Vara Valley. If, on the one hand, the current situation of the upper Vara Valley has shown some unique peculiarities and trajectories, other urgencies are typical of a large part of the Apennine, and these results can contribute to

answering the fourth research sub-question: “To what extent can the case of the upper Vara Valley fit meaningfully into the scientific and political debate on inner and mountainous areas?”. To conclude, this thesis has shown that depopulation, land abandonment, and agricultural and environmental transformation are uneven, layered and continuously produced processes, a fact that gives space for intervention in socio-environmentally vulnerable areas such as the Apennines. The suggested proposals that emerged from the interviews are inevitably partial and, if implemented, will have to face the problems of policymaking that emerged throughout the thesis and that the SNAI itself suffered in recent years; therefore, their feasibility and possible unintended consequences will have to be carefully evaluated. Most importantly, they are only a part of the solution; the ultimate key lies in making those individuals who, to quote one of the youngest interviewees, still “see a future in agriculture”, feel less isolated.

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