

The development of a landscape: a *Little India* in the Pontine Plain

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Abstract

If the environment of Pontine Marshes was the stage for the forced colonization and foundation of new cities made by Mussolini under Fascist rule (1922-1943) today we have new scenarios: the new migratory flow of Sikh community from Punjab (India) is running over this landscape. New migration flows that choose not the city but the rural areas, driven by affinity with the land of origin, and that become fundamental economic support, especially in agricultural sector, but living a rural isolation and lack of dedicated services.

All this in contrast with the policies and land reclamation schemes desired by Fascism, *borghi di servizio* (service districts, in some case villages) and *Casa del Fascio* with their essential services for the community represented the basic urban unit to set up new settlers (from Veneto and Emilia Romagna regions) in the new-modern rural landscape.

In the province of Latina and in Sabaudia, especially in the district of “Bella Farnia”, we can find the beating heart of this new community (about 12.000 people) that has re-colonized the Pontine Plain, among Indian shops, workers in the countryside and *gurdwara* much more than places of worship but places for socializing and connecting with institutions. The contribution aims at clarifying the relationship between the contemporary and its needs and the Pontine landscape, structured since its inception to accommodate migration flows, in which the change is necessary and has already started.

Keywords: Rural landscape; Migration; Pontine Plain; Landscape planning; Urban Planning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of migrants and the many and large migratory flows that are overwhelming Italy and Europe are daily news stories and themes present in all political agendas. First aid, accommodation, recognition, repatriations, economic funds and many other activities are part of the current emergency situation with which the territories are comparing but what is happening, and it has happened, in the Pontine Plain talks about migrants but about very different stories.

The contribution aims to highlight some issues and put some questions about the changes that are taking place in this area, the new scenarios, how to approach and what is needed. These questions will be set as a starting point for more in-depth research with a project-oriented approach.

A very important aspect to consider is the shift of choice from some migratory flows, as well as in Apulia and Calabria, which choose not the city but the countryside. Historically cities have always represented the major centers of action, nodes and magnets for people. People have always put their expectations, hopes and lives the city precisely, a complex organization where the presence of masses, relations, economic and social exchanges, industrialization have given greater security. [1] In the Pontine Plain is going on an inverse phenomenon, the great migratory flow of the Sikh community hasn't particular interest in the big city but in a strictly rural territory where we could find sporadically widespread urban units.

2. TRANSFORMATIONS OF A LANDSCAPE

Going to the Pontine Plain, we are facing a territory that has substantially changed in the last century compared to its origins. Today rurality and urbanism begin to become confused. As shown in Figure 1, included among Lepini and Ausoni Mountains, Albani Hills and Tirrenian Sea, the territory of the Pontine Marshes was mostly occupied by a malaria-ridden swamp. The hilly areas to the east were all occupied by very fine and old towns (among which Palestrina, Ardena, Ariccia, etc.) and also some settlements along the foothills. Along the coastline there were many towers, especially in the area of Circeo.

At the feet of the hilly area run the Appian Way, a major route dating back to the Roman period, and a road crossing the swamp and which was known as “fishermen road”. From Terracina and Fogliano, fishes in the Sisto Canal could reach Cisterna. Fish was caught in fish ponds and then was brought to Rome.

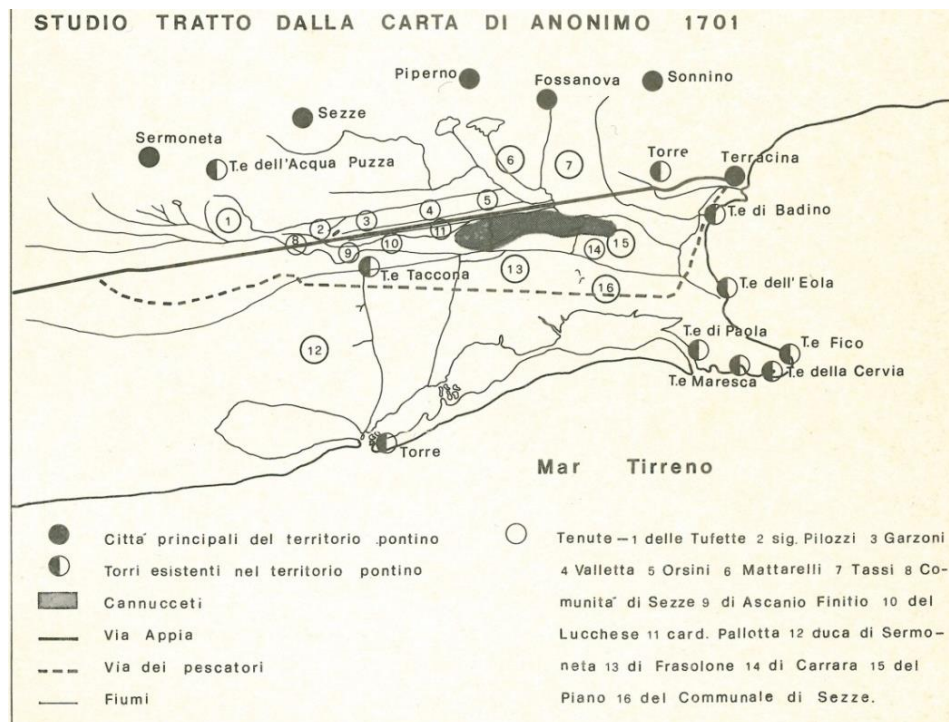


Figure 1. Map of the situation in Pontine marshes in 1700. It shows the Appian Road, The Fisherman Road with dot-line and the settlements on foothill [2]

The first attempts to reclaim the area date back to the 17th century when the reclamation, promoted by Pope Pio VI, was put in place and made possible by opening of the “Linea Pio” an artificial canal running parallel to the Appian Way. Some areas, from the new canal to the sea, remained swampy and unhealthy.

Life in the Pontine Marshes before reclamation works, in the Fascist period, was very different. People used to live in huts called “Lestra” and to go from one place to another across the swamp they used boats called “sandali”. [2]

2.1 Reclamation Project for Pontine Plain

With the rise to power of Mussolini (1925) and the Fascist Regime, the territory of the Pontina Plain suffered a global transformation and a massive modernization.

The Reclamation Project, put in place by the Fascist Regime, finds its reasons in the "Ascension Discourse" (Mussolini's speech on May 26th, 1927, in which he openly declares part of the planned political program and needs for the country) during which he highlighted the demographic problem with the collapse of births and high percentages of deaths due to malaria and health conditions, the

problem of urbanism and cities whose economy and industry were blocked after the First World War, underlining the need to develop the Italian economy in the rural world.

The new rural fascism program foresees a global reclamation, imagining it as a great productive "orchard" to be built around Rome.

With the Mussolini's Law of 24 December 1928, the policy of global reclamation was officially launched. [3]

A sequence of works were required to achieve reclamation, which were the intermediate stages, and whether or not such intermediate stages left a permanent mark – we might even say "crystallized" on the territory.

A number of protagonists came to the fore in large reclamation site of the Pontine Marshes.

First of all, we should clarify that subject to reclamation was initially smaller, covering only the so-called "agro pontino" (the Pontine countryside) and only later extended to the "agro romano" (the Roman countryside). The first two Land Reclamation Authorities started works in the area in 1926-1928: the Piscinara Land Reclamation Authority (later renamed after Littoria, and to which the "agro romano" was annexed) operated south of the Sisto River; the Pontina Land Reclamation Authority Consortium Reclamation, in the land north of the river. Both Authorities were headed by Natale Prampolini, a member of the Italian Senate, and were following common guidelines.

Here we should ask ourselves what "reclamation" actually meant. In the strict sense, "reclamation" means draining the water to convert a marshy area into a healthy countryside.

It's also important to have clear the process whereby the development of the landscape had started.

Before reclamation, there were the first settlements; these were workers' villages required to proceed with road construction that allowed transport of building materials and equipment. After that, drainage canals were built to finalize reclamation.

Therefore, the village arrangement determined the street layout and in this way a first infrastructure framework, consist of artificial canals and new roads, was built on the territory where before there was almost nothing.

Workers' villages were initially little more than prefabricated barracks that could be eventually disassembled and reused elsewhere, even in the Italian colonies. At this early stage, there was no yet a debate about where to build new cities.

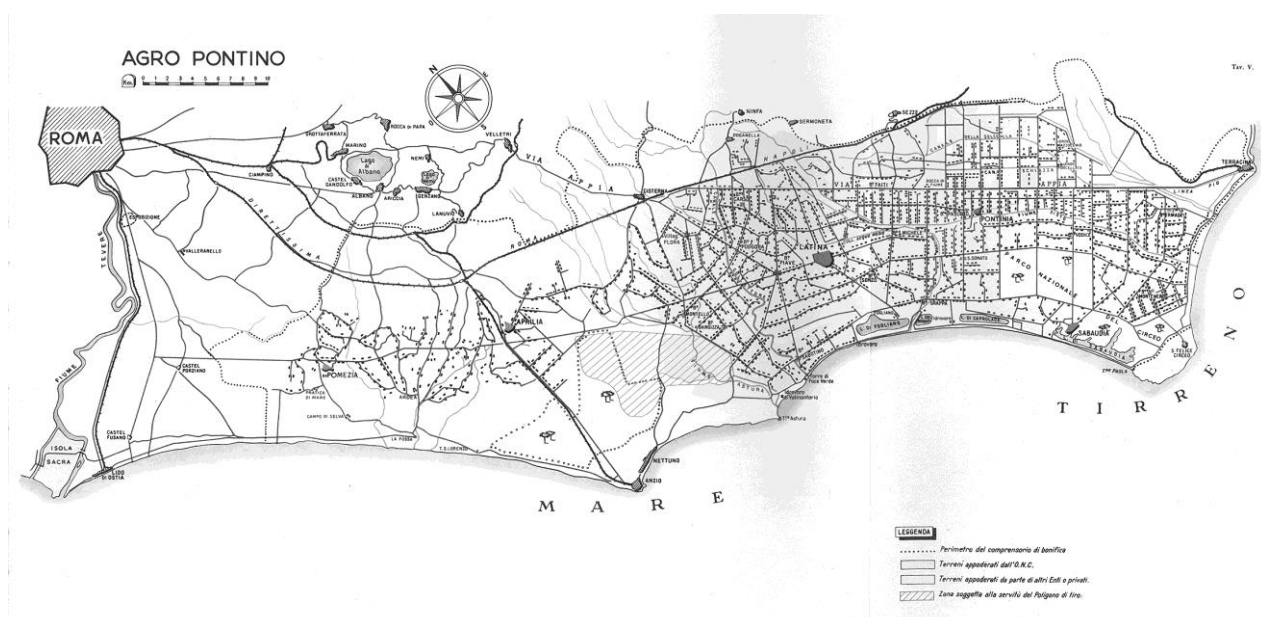


Figure 2. Plan of the reclaimed area in the Pontine Plain made by O.N.C., it show allotment, villages and rural cities [4]

In 1931, however, Mussolini entrusted the National Association of War Veterans (Opera Nazionale Combattenti) to implement «ruralisation», namely preparing the land for agriculture, plotting out the area into farms, colonization and, finally, agricultural exploitation.

In fact Land Reclamation Authorities were supposed to build new residential villages in order to stabilize the population but they undertook only the hydraulic works, without consulting agronomists, economists or urban planners.

This «ruralisation process» was to establish a new social class of farmers-owners of small tracts of land and was fundamental for the fascist policies.

Modernization meant taking the land from large landowners and allocating it to the peasants.

Farms, villages, new towns, and even the new road layout, were to be understood as physical evidence of this social revolution.

The landscape thus began to take shape with a number of "Borghi" (villages) spread around the area surrounded by numerous farms, where migrants were located and worked.

Shortly thereafter, in 1933, Mussolini considered necessary to equip the territory of urban structures, so that it was decided to found the first pontine town Littoria (called later Latina), which is today the largest urban pole present in the Pontine Plain, followed by Sabaudia (1934).

In a very short time, only 5 years, a new urban structure was added to the territory. The five urban settlements founded by Mussolini, Latina (1933), Sabaudia (1934), Pontinia (1935), Aprilia (1937) and Pomezia (1938), were established throughout the whole country. It is interesting to think that a Regional Planning Plan has never been drawn up and that it might have led to better results. [4,5,6]

3. MIGRATIONS ON THE TERRITORY

Fascist colonization moved a large number of families settled in the Agro Pontino. Between 1932 and 1938, 2,953 families were moved to the new farms, for a total amount of about 29,000 people, mainly from the provinces of Ferrara and Veneto.

Families were chosen in these regions because they were already peasants in the land of origin. The colonized population represents the social aspect, not indifferent, in the construction and development of the Pontine landscape and it has to be added to the architectural, urban, hydraulic and agricultural aspects.

The Pontine territory, which has been a stage for the forced fascist colonization, seems predestined to welcome migratory flows. New scenarios open up, being invested by the new voluntary migration flow from a large Sikh community coming from Punjab (north-western region of India).

3.1 The "Little India"

Sikhs started arriving in Italy during the 1980s, where they currently form the second largest community in Europe.

The Sikh story crosses partly with that of Italian migrants from Veneto in the Pontine Plain at the time of fascist reclamation. Of all the communities of migrants residing in the province of Latina, the one that has generated the greatest interest is certainly the Indian community of Sikh religion. The first Sikhs arrived in Pontine land in the early eighties and in a short time, from a few individual units, there were about 7,000 presences spread throughout the province, initially predominantly present in the city of a more distinct agricultural vocation such as Aprilia, Cisterna, Pontinia, Sabaudia, Terracina, Fondi. [7,8]

According to official figures, in the Pontine Marshes there are 30,000 Sikhs, out of whom 12,000 at Sabaudia (numbers are much higher according to non-official sources).

Almost certainly, Sikhs settled in this area precisely because of its agricultural character, which is similar to their places of origin in India. Their skills in agriculture made it easier for them to find an occupation and this is also the reason why they chose to migrate to a rural area rather than to a city.

Although the Sikh community has settled in the 1980s, it has remained almost completely unknown for about 20 years. The community, cultural, historical, religious, and social aspect was completely absent while the use of numerous Indians as a laborer is known. This community has been defined as "comunità di sole braccia" (community that uses only arms). [9]

As members of the Sikh community, similarly to the early Italian colonists, the fundamental contribution provided to economic, social and cultural growth of the province must be recognized, unlike commonplace and widespread prejudices. Thanks to their presence and work that this region can boast of great agricultural production, which is the driving-force behind the economic and employment development for other related sectors such as fruit and vegetable markets, agro-food processing and logistics districts.

4. EXPLOITATION AND SELF-SEGREGATION

These migrant workers, despite they are very useful for our economy, are largely exploited. The Pontine territory seems to be interested in the black labor market and the Caporalato phenomenon, where an employee illegally recruited workers at favorable conditions for the agricultural entrepreneur. Sikh peasants often also work 10-14 hours a day for a few euros and often have problems getting the right reward. This is why it is not easy to quantify the exact number of people within the community, many are hidden peasants. The theme of slavery and exploitation of the Sikh community has greatly affected the cultural and journalistic world, many investigations have been carried out in this regard. In particular, many documentaries shot in the pontine area along with the Sikh community aim to move the issue, bring it to the surface and make it known as much as possible so that it is not forgotten as a bad wound on the territory. [10,11]

The precarious state often forces them to accept the conditions imposed by entrepreneurs and to live in self-segregation due to the lack of knowledge of the Italian language and the lack of dedicated services. Public services often exclude the most marginalized or are completely lacking. The area lacks facilities to offer services to this new migrant community, as well as opportunities for encounter, attendance, cultural exchange and socialization.

As in other cases, particularly in small centers, the presence of the large Sikh community and their children has allowed some public school services to remain active, which would otherwise have been closed for a too low number of users.



Figure 3. Pictures of Sikh peasant in the field and in the *gurdwara* (Google images)

4.1 “Borghi di Servizio” and Bella Farnia

This present situation contradicts the plans and policies that Mussolini wanted during the fascist forced colonization. The willingness of the regime was to tie peasants to the land and to make sure they didn't have the necessity or desire to move away from the new lands. To do this, besides the farms and the allotment, the construction of the *Borghi di Servizio* (service villages) spread over the territory became fundamental.

The *borghi di servizio* can't be defined as urban structures, but they were equipped with those service facilities essential to the new colonists for the conduct of agricultural activity: church, pantry, barracks, school, recreational organization, workers buildings. The villages thus become the reference point for the population. They are arranged along the pattern created by rational allotment. In this way the Fascist regime built a modern rural landscape, that is equipped with services, equipment, architectures and innovative and modern products.

The Architect Luigi Piccinato (Sabaudia's designer) synthesized, with a graphic scheme (Figure 3), the National Association of War Veterans hierarchical vision: Rome was the ultimate centre; each new town – Latina, Sabaudia, Pontinia, Aprilia, Pomezia - was directly connected to Rome, and was in turn the centre of an agricultural colonization area hinged on *borghi di servizio*-rural villages (each the seat of an agricultural colonisation office and some facilities). In other words, their role was to «stabilise ruralisation». Farms were to be spread all around the territory as the smallest units of the chain. [4]

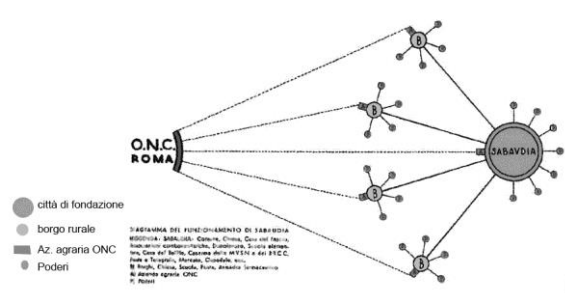


Figure 3. Piccinato's scheme of hierarchical vision of the organisation of the land [4]

Today, however, the territory and government that manages it doesn't seem to be able to offer the services needed for new migrants. Migrants often use the old farms of Fascist reclamation as homes, mixing housing with work, or in other cases occupying peripheral or semi-abandoned neighborhoods. In particular in the neighborhood of Bella Farnia (Sabaudia), neighborhood built in the '70s with the aim of developing the tourist sector and offering a second house for vacation to the citizens of Rome and Naples.



Figure 5. Localisation and aerial view of Bella Farnia neighbourhood (Google maps, made by Author)

Bella Farnia is part of Sabaudia municipality, where many Sikhs live near the sea. Numerous parceling plans have been made in this area, structured in small dwellings. In particular, the housing complex of Bella Farnia Mare, derived from the Somal parceling plan started in the early 1980's and never fully completed, hosts the largest concentration of Indian immigrants in Agro Pontino. In this area there are parts still owned by Italians, in particular the parcels where single villas were built, while in the other parcels (Figure 5) is the Sikh community which is bringing the neighborhood back to life. Sikh families and individual peasants live in small crowded houses, designed to be second houses for vacation that clearly show the design and constructive problems of the parceling plans at the time.

Paradoxically, the condition of the residence seems to be a revenge to exploitation situations in the fields. At Bella Farnia, as in other small centers, some Sikh community members are abandoning the peasantry status by opening up Indian business. The Sikh community, for which religion and work are fundamental to their lives, has also "built", by adapting existing buildings, some *gurdwara* far more than places of worship but rather socialization sites. Today, these are centers of socialization within the community itself but show the innumerable potential for being intercultural exchange centers. [12,13]



Figure 5. Images of sikh peasants in the Bella Farnia residence (photographer Martino Di Silvestro)

5. CONCLUSIONS

There are some images that are now evident to many people and that necessarily place us in front of the problem. Every day, at dawn and at sunset, hundreds of workers cross the plain for miles on their way home from work, using old bicycles with their long beards and turbans. Keeping a train that cross the Pontine Plain will be surrounded by men, women and children belonging to the Sikh community.

It is clear that social and economic changes are taking place in this area, but, the territory itself and the policies governing it are not evolving. They are blocked by a past migratory phase of which some of the winning aspects can still be exploited.

Starting from this stalemate, the contribution aims to provide project-driven questions so that it can stimulate future changes.

The current migratory flow differs from the fascist one as voluntary and unforced, but the community and some of the new migrants, unlike the old settlers, don't aim to stabilize on this territory. What kind of services and policy support may be needed to transform the territory so that it becomes welcoming towards the new migratory stream?

Other migrants, on the other hand, are investing work and money for new activities on the territory and are revitalizing it. What are the prospects of the transformation implemented by Little India itself?

The speed of economic and social changes, as we are seeing, is greater than that of the landscape and its physical patterns, static and rigid. Assessing the phenomenon as an economic-social transformation whose magnitude and importance are substantial, how can a process of development of the landscape itself, though slowly, be activated?

The living and religious issues are the most delicate. The Sikh community, strongly religious as mentioned, celebrate in the *gurdwara*, one of them is in Sabaudia. The community is planning to build a second temple whose building request has been authorized as a warehouse because otherwise unnamed by law. There is therefore a will not to exclude this community and to create intercultural systems but we have to work with rigid and, above all, dated transformation tools.

The landscape is dotted with poor farms and semi-abandoned neighborhood for vacation that the Sikh community is beginning to revitalize. The type of tourist use of these dwellings during the economic development period has ensured that they are out of service for the community and that the houses themselves, even if rent to numerous groups of people, are not able to meet the needs.

To conclude, it is therefore necessary to imagine quickly adopting new tools (laws, plans, services) that allow the territory to change and to test to be less rigid in view of possible future migrations again other than before. Critically to the fascist policies, migrants must be one of the protagonists of the urban, economic and social re-planning of Pontine Plain.

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