

EXPANDING LAYERS OF KNOWLEDGE



RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND PERSPECTIVES ON TANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Edited by

Carlo Bianchini, Marika Griffo, Francesca Porfiri



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Cultural Heritage

Giornate di studio Spoke 8 - CHANGES
Venosa, Basilicata
1-2 Dicembre 2025

Organizzazione evento in collaborazione con i Musei e Parchi Archeologici di Melfi e Venosa e con Janus s.r.l.
startup di Sapienza

Direzione scientifica:
Carlo Bianchini, Paolo Carata

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Mostra “Deambulate. Documentare il Medioevo”
a cura di: Roberto Barni e Rinaldo D’Alessandro

Ente promotore:
Fondazione CHANGES

Finanziato da:
Unione Europea - Next Generation EU, Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR),
Missione 4 (Istruzione e ricerca), Componente 2 (Dalla Ricerca all’Impresa), Investimento 1.3
(Partenariati Estesi - CUP B83D22001210006 - Ministero dell’Università della Ricerca)



Finanziato
dall'Unione europea
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www.gangemieditore.it

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ISBN 978-88-492-5613-0

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and Perspectives on
Tangible Cultural Heritage

Study Days

Venosa, 1-2 December 2025

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2. Cultural Heritage, Communities and Value Creation

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AS DRIVERS OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND HOLISTIC VALORISATION

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Keyword Inner Area; Archaeological site; Community; Integrated cultural system; place-based regeneration.

Abstract *With the update of the 2021–2027 National Strategic Plan for Inner Areas, the debate over the future of these territories has reignited, sparking controversy regarding the vision expressed by the Department for Cohesion Policies. In the document, later amended, some Inner Areas were initially described as requiring “accompaniment along a path of irreversible depopulation,” with a plan aimed at managing what was considered a chronic decline. This approach, subsequently retracted, highlights how the fate of Italy’s Inner Areas remains far from being effectively addressed, despite a decade of planning and substantial financial investments. Considering such decline as irreversible represents both a failure and a sign of societal disengagement. Abandoning these territories would mean wasting resources and undermining the commitment of those who, in recent years, have worked to develop tools and methods for their regeneration. The PNRR has also allocated significant investments to key aspects of Inner Areas, including research on the cultural heritage they hold, an issue this contribution aims to summarise.*

1. USING CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A CATALYST FOR TERRITORIAL REGENERATION

As well known, archaeological heritage comprises all material traces of past human existence and activity that survive in situ or have been recovered through systematic investigation, whose analysis through archaeological methodology contributes to the reconstruction and interpretation of human history, and whose preservation is considered a matter of public interest due to their scientific, cultural, educational, and symbolic value. In the RESTART framework, archaeological heritage is considered as a strategic lever for initiating sustainable and long-term local development for inner areas, since it is understood primarily in its processual and participatory dimension rather than solely in its material dimension.

The concept of inner areas, originally introduced in the 1950s by Manlio Rossi-Doria in relation to Southern Italy, was formally institutionalized in 2013 with the launch of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) to address the specificities of a significant portion of the Italian territory, covering more than 60% of the national surface and hosting approximately one quarter of the population. The definition of ‘Inner Areas’ is not obtained through the application of absolute geographical parameters (such as altitude) or distance from borders (coasts, national boundaries, etc.), as the term might suggest. Rather, it derives from a condition of structural fragility related to the distance from centres providing essential services. The National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) uses a methodology based on the functional distance from so-called ‘Poles’, namely municipalities or clusters of neighbouring

municipalities (referred to as ‘Inter-poles’) capable of simultaneously providing three fundamental services:

- *Healthcare*: the presence of a hospital with a first-level Emergency and Admission Department (DEA).
- *Education*: the presence of at least one high school (liceo) and one technical or vocational institute.
- *Mobility*: the presence of at least a ‘silver-level’ railway station.

Based on road travel times from the Poles, municipalities are classified into the following categories:

- Belt municipalities: within 27.7 minutes.
- Intermediate municipalities: between 27.7 and 40.9 minutes.
- Peripheral municipalities: between 40.9 and 66.9 minutes.
- Ultra-peripheral municipalities: beyond 66.9 minutes.

Inner Areas consist of the last three categories (intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral municipalities), which are often characterized by territorial polycentrism, with a dense network of small settlements embedded in rural or mountainous contexts (fig. 1). Despite their marginality, they safeguard an immense heritage of biodiversity, gastronomic traditions, and widespread cultural assets. However, while activities such as pastoralism and agriculture continue to constitute a concrete and significant reality in many of these territories, often representing some of the few remaining sources of employment and local economic activity, the widespread cultural heritage that characterizes these areas remains a largely underutilized resource, and its social and economic potential remains unexpressed (OPPIO, 2021).

In these territories, cultural demand does exist; however, it tends to concentrate on a limited number of major attraction sites, where both public attention and financial investment are primarily directed.

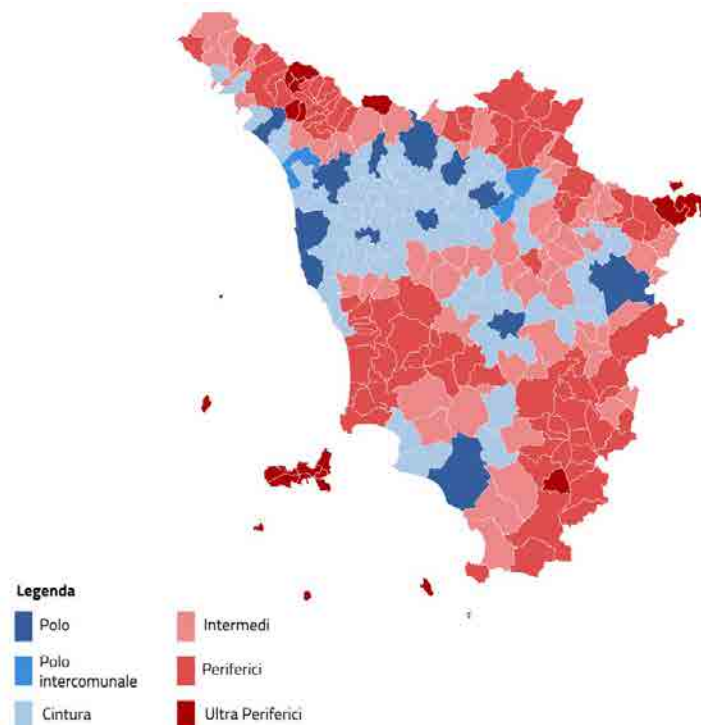


Fig. 1. Map of municipalities in Tuscany classified as Inner Areas according to the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). (authors' elaboration)

This dynamic often disadvantages the more fragile and widely dispersed historical traces and traditional expressions that are scattered throughout the territory and that struggle to attract comparable levels of visibility and support. Analyses conducted by Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning (CIPE) on the basis of data from Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) highlight a clear mismatch between cultural demand and tourism demand. The latter is largely characterized by short-term visits without overnight stays, which tends to generate limited and uneven economic benefits for local communities. In both the cultural and tourism sectors, moreover, the offer of cultural attractions often remains weakly structured. Even where forms of organization are present, they frequently appear to be oriented primarily toward short-term economic returns rather than toward a broader, systemic, and integrated valorization of the territory and its diverse cultural resources.

The under-utilization of this heritage is intrinsically linked to the structural condition in which these territories exist. The need to define a specific strategy for these places is clearly connected to long-standing phenomena that have produced a particular situation from demographic, social, economic, cultural, and technological perspectives. This condition, combined with the deficiencies highlighted by the SNAI (namely the lack of essential services), has generated a situation of disadvantage compared with areas where such conditions have not occurred. The characteristics most commonly shared by Italian Inner Areas can be summarized as follows:

- *Demographic decline*: persistent depopulation, population ageing, and loss of human presence.
- *Limited accessibility*: often inadequate road infrastructure and insufficient public transport. Lack of services: progressive erosion of personal services and limited employment opportunities.
- *Technological lag*: absence of stable and reliable technological infrastructures, poor connectivity, and slow access to digital services.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, another condition also emerged: institutional conflict, namely a misalignment between the modernization logic of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) and the territorial rebalancing objectives of the SNAI, which generated competition for resources and difficulties in coordination (OPPIO 2021).

In line with the objectives of the SNAI, the idea of the recentralization of the margin (OPPIO 2021) and the transformation of inner areas into spaces of opportunity for the future (DE ROSSI 2019) implies a reversal of perspective: from places of abandonment to places of concrete opportunity and spaces for the emergence of exchange dynamics based on collaboration and cooperation (OSTANEL 2019) among resident communities, associations, cultural institutions, public administrations, and local authorities.

As the extensive critical debate and academic literature on the subject have long demonstrated, particularly in the works of Salvatore Settis (2002), Hugues De Varine (2005), and Nicoletta Buratti & Paolo Ferrari (2011), the idea that cultural heritage can function as an effective instrument for local development is certainly not new. Over the past several decades, cultural heritage, and specifically archaeological heritage, has increasingly been interpreted not merely as a legacy to be preserved, but as a dynamic resource capable of generating social, economic, and cultural value within territorial contexts. In a perspective that moves beyond a purely conservationist approach and frames cultural heritage as an active driver of sustainable development, the valorization of archaeological heritage can contribute to endogenous development processes, particularly in marginal or rural areas where alternative economic opportunities may be limited. This conception, which in recent years has been extensively developed through an implementation-oriented lens aimed at reforming cultural governance practices and the legal-administrative framework within the SNAI (VITALE 2018, 2024), facilitates a more flexible approach to the challenges of cultural heritage valorization in the inner areas. Specifically, it emphasizes

the role of local communities not merely as passive repositories, but as active creative agents and dynamic stakeholders able to reinterpret, adapt, and revitalize heritage to meet contemporary social and economic needs.

With this purpose in mind, RESTART has adopted a vision of cultural heritage that definitively and tangibly transcends the dichotomy between materiality and immateriality. While maintaining the central role of an archaeological site, and therefore engaging directly with its tangible and material dimensions, the RESTART project adopts a holistic perspective that extends beyond the site itself to encompass the broader cultural heritage of the surrounding territory. This approach recognizes the intrinsically interconnected nature of tangible and intangible elements, acknowledging that both are essential in shaping and defining the cultural heritage of a given place. Accordingly, the project considers archaeological remains, local traditions, knowledge systems, practices, and collective memories as mutually reinforcing components that together contribute to the cultural identity and heritage of the territory. The relationship between these two sides of the cultural heritage is fundamentally symbiotic: while García Cano notes that intangible expressions rely on material “anchors” for their preservation and transmission (2020, p. 87), the material site itself acts as a catalyst, continuously spawning new layers of intangible heritage through local interpretation and communal practice. These considerations coalesce into a dynamic, non-static paradigm of heritage that transcends the traditional “monumental” view. In this framework, cultural heritage is redefined as an evolving ecosystem of both tangible and intangible elements that serve as active catalysts for the ongoing construction of territorial identity and the strengthening of intergenerational transmission and community cohesion. Rather than a collection of fossilized artifacts, heritage is understood as being embedded in a continuous process of creation and recreation; it functions, as Rodney Harrison aptly observes, as «a set of attitudes to, and relationships with, the past» (HARRISON 2013, p. 14). This perspective shifts the focus from the preservation of “things” to the facilitation of “processes”, where the past is not merely inherited but is actively negotiated and reimagined by the present community to address contemporary social and spatial challenges.

A further pivotal dimension of the RESTART framework is the spatial extensiveness and territorial embeddedness of a community’s cultural heritage. Beyond acknowledging that heritage manifests through a multifaceted array of tangible and intangible forms, spanning diverse historical epochs and typologies, it is essential to analytically ground this legacy within its specific geographic and environmental context. This profound nexus between cultural assets and their surroundings is widely recognized in both the scientific discourse (DE VARINE 2005), particularly within cultural economy studies (CORTESE, LAZZERONI 2009), and in evolving legal-administrative practices. As Paola Capriotti (2017) observes, national protective legislation has undergone a paradigm shift, transitioning from a narrow focus on isolated “objects” to a holistic consideration of the broader context in which they are situated. Consequently, cultural heritage must be viewed as indissolubly linked to its territory, mirroring its unique historical, environmental, social, and symbolic specificities. In this light, heritage emerges not merely as a legacy to be preserved, but as a strategic driver for place-based development (BARCA 2009), capable of catalyzing sustainable territorial growth by leveraging the authentic local capital of inner areas.

To integrate these multifaceted dimensions of cultural heritage and recognize their mutual cooperation as fundamental, it is essential to conceive of a territory’s cultural assets as a network, or rather, as a multipolar and interconnected structure. Such a framework facilitates a dual objective: it ensures the rigorous protection of heritage, addressing core pillars such as conservation and institutional safeguarding, while simultaneously creating the necessary conditions for its sustainable valorisation. This conceptual framework is well-established in the literature; as early as 1999, Maurizio Carta formulated the concept of the “cultural armour” (*armatura culturale*) to argue that heritage should be understood as more than a mere

repository of tangible and intangible assets. In Carta's view, these assets, while serving as essential evidence of a territory's historical, social, and cultural stratifications, function primarily as a dynamic network of latent resources. When strategically activated, this "armour" provides the structural foundation for sustainable territorial development, moving beyond passive conservation toward an integrated, evolutionary model of local growth. Drawing upon these theoretical and methodological foundations, the RESTART project conceptualizes cultural heritage as an integrated cultural system (CASOLI 2025). This system is defined as a cultural and semantic aggregation, whether potential or already partially realized, of archaeological, architectural, and landscape assets, social practices, sites of interest, and imaginaries (including also the audiovisual ones) (fig. 2). Despite their inherent heterogeneity, these elements are situated within specific territorial boundaries (typically, though not exclusively, at the municipal level), providing the territory with a distinct cultural character and irradiates from a central pivot, represented by a specific archaeological site or asset.

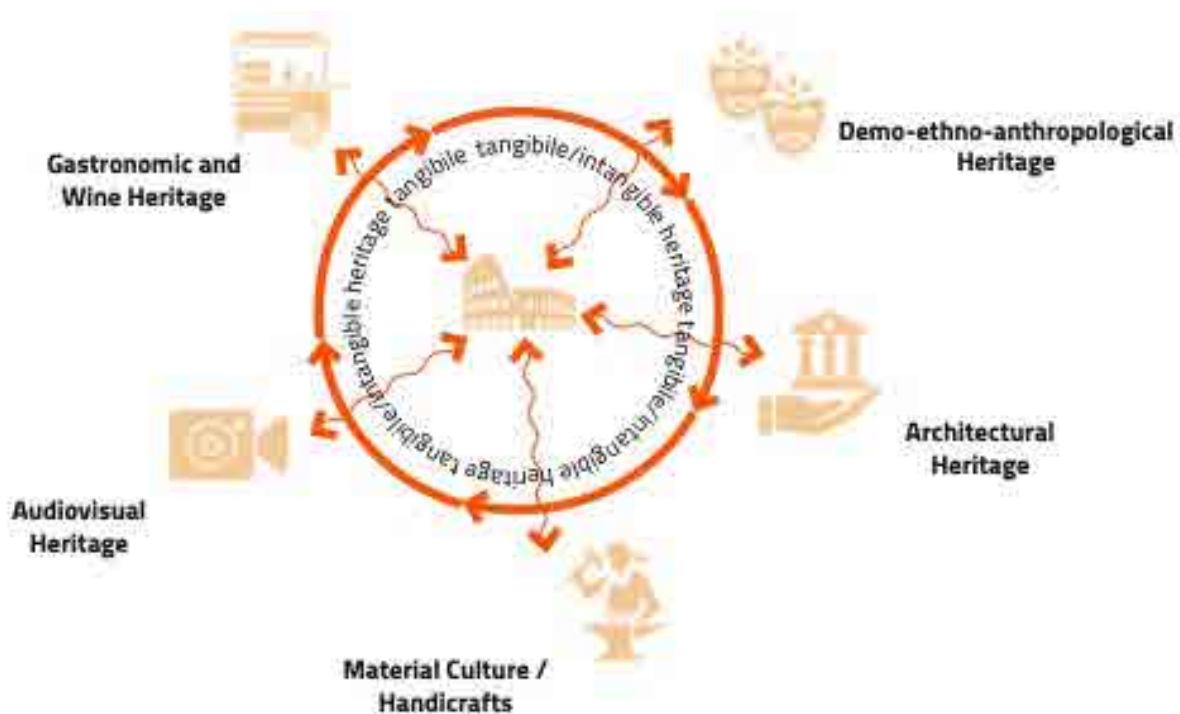


Fig. 2. Conceptual framework of the RESTART integrated cultural system. (authors' elaboration)

The communities that inhabit and safeguard the central archaeological site and its cultural network play a pivotal role in both conceptualizing the RESTART integrated system and formulating the operational guidelines for its actualization. From its inception, the project has intentionally distanced itself from "colonial" heritage paradigms, which typically enforce a rigid hierarchy between the expert, tasked with deciphering the archaeological record, and a passive public. Instead, RESTART adopts the principles of community archaeology (LA BIANCA 2024), reframing the archaeological site as a collaborative space. In this model, the production of historical meaning is no longer an elite academic imposition but a shared, democratic process that values local knowledge alongside scientific expertise. Within this framework, active public engagement emerges as an indispensable prerequisite for the effective conservation and management of cultural heritage. Rather than treating social involvement as a peripheral or optional activity, this perspective posits that the long-term survival of a territory's cultural assets is intrinsically

linked to the stewardship exercised by its inhabitants (PENDLEBURY, BROWN 2021). Moreover, from a different perspective, we need to consider how active participation of the communities in the strategic redesign of territories, including the cultural one, is no longer a peripheral option but an essential requirement for contemporary planning (PICONE 2021). The profound socio-economic shifts of the last decade have repositioned the territory as the primary locus of development policy, shifting the focus from top-down administrative mandates to the lived experiences of the people who inhabit and navigate these spaces. In this context, the “territory” is redefined not merely as a physical container, but as a dynamic social fabric woven by its residents and temporary users, whose collective agency and local knowledge are indispensable for the success of any place-based development strategy.

Building on these principles, RESTART engaged the local communities surrounding the project’s primary archaeological sites, (fig. 3), specifically Bruscoli, Pratovecchio Stia, San Quirico, and Poggio Murella (fig. 4), as active strategic partners. This engagement followed a dual-track approach: on one hand, digital outreach utilized online instruments, such as targeted questionnaires, to capture a broad range of perspectives; on the other, the research team conducted a series of on-site, offline activities to deepen direct community involvement. The synergy between these online and offline methodologies facilitates a more comprehensive and iterative interpretation of the meanings associated with specific locales. This approach is distinguished by its adaptability to complex social and material environments, providing flexible, creative tools designed to foster inclusive and generative assessments.







Fig. 3. The photographs above illustrate the four RESTARTER sites selected as case studies. Rocca di Bruscoli, Lago degli Idoli, Insediamento rupestre di Vitozza, Castellum Aquarum. (Photo by authors)

One of the primary offline tools, and one of the most useful ones, employed was the *World Café* methodology (VOGT, BROWN, ISAACS 2003), which allowed for a multipolar dialogue where residents could collaboratively “map” the intangible meanings of the archaeological site in an informal, democratic setting. A World Café is a structured conversational process designed to facilitate open and creative discussion among large groups of people. Based on the idea that the “collective intelligence” of a group emerges when people engage in focused, informal dialogue, this format reproduces the atmosphere of a social gathering, often inspired by the convivial environment of a café, thereby lowering hierarchical barriers and encouraging participants to speak freely. Such an environment is particularly conducive to eliciting narratives, memories, perceptions, and expectations related to the topic under discussion, while also allowing participants to confront and reconsider their viewpoints through dialogue with others. Rather than privileging individual contributions, the methodology emphasizes the progressive layering and interweaving of ideas as participants move between groups and conversations. Through this iterative process, reflections are gradually refined, expanded, and reinterpreted. Individual perspectives converge and overlap, producing shared meanings that emerge from the interaction itself. As a result, once the dialogue is consolidated into collective insights, the original sources of specific ideas often become indistinguishable.



Fig. 4. Closing moment of one of the four RESTART Cafés held with the active involvement of local communities. (Photo by authors)

This dynamic reflects the broader epistemological orientation of participatory and deliberative research methodologies, in which knowledge is not simply extracted from participants but generated collaboratively. The outcome of a World Café discussion is therefore not a set of isolated opinions but a collectively elaborated narrative that reflects the plurality of voices within the community while simultaneously transcending them. In this sense, the method provides both a practical tool for gathering qualitative insights and a process through which participants actively contribute to shaping a shared understanding of local issues, resources, and potential development pathways.

The research team developed a customized version of the World Café methodology, titled the *RESTART Café* (BROCCOLI 2025, VENTURA 2025), specifically designed to bridge the gap between territorial analysis and community visioning. This format addressed critical pillars, such as collective future imaginaries, participatory mechanisms, and complex governance challenges, by employing a ludic or playful engagement strategy. Central to this approach was the use of thematic cards and illustrative territorial maps (fig. 5), which were synthesized directly from the project's preliminary mapping of the site's material and social values. By repurposing these data-driven "RESTARTER" maps as interactive stimuli, the team enabled participants to navigate complex spatial and social relationships in an intuitive, creative, and collaborative environment. The RESTART Café thus serves as a methodology for collective reflection with community members upon the preservation and valorization of their cultural, and especially archaeological, heritage within a hybrid and familiar setting, with the aim of co-constructing a choral discourse.



Fig. 5. One of the maps used during the RESTART Cafés for stimulating the active involvement of local communities. (Drawings by Elisa Broccoli)

The collaborative methodologies employed facilitated the engagement of a heterogeneous group of stakeholders, which proved essential for understanding contemporary social values. Their application within the current research enabled an exploration of the role played by “RESTARTER” sites in the construction of local identity. Furthermore, they served to unveil the evolving values and relationships between individuals and the site over time, also in relation to the broader territory, while providing a framework to assess public knowledge, awareness, and expectations. Ultimately, these methods fostered a critical reflection on the site’s role in both the present and future, particularly within the specific context of its belonging to an ‘inner area’ (SNAI).

Once these data, suggestions, and impressions had been collected and systematized, and taking into account the RESTART project’s objective of fostering a bottom-up regeneration process through place-based actions, as conceptualized by Fabrizio Barca (2019), the research team proceeded to develop a set of guidelines aimed at the holistic valorization of archaeological heritage. Within this perspective, regeneration is not conceived solely in terms of economic profitability, although economic sustainability remains a legitimate and necessary component, but rather as a broader process of territorial revitalization that integrates social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The place-based approach adopted by the project emphasizes the importance of grounding development strategies in the specific characteristics, resources, and needs of local contexts. Consequently, the guidelines were formulated on the basis of insights

emerging from the participatory processes carried out with local stakeholders and community members, as well as from the desk-based analysis conducted by the team on the integrated cultural system surrounding the site. Particular attention was devoted to identifying ways in which archaeological heritage could act as a catalyst for wider territorial development, strengthening connections between heritage sites, local knowledge systems, traditional economic activities, and contemporary cultural practices.

These guidelines were not conceived as an immediately applicable operational tool. Rather, they present themselves as a repository of ideas and suggestions useful for shaping local policies oriented toward the objectives described above. They represent the outcome of an intellectual activity conducted both through desk research and fieldwork, sometimes with a speculative dimension, yet consistently driven by the intention of giving back something tangible, albeit immaterial, to the territories that served as case studies. For this reason, the RESTART guidelines sought within the studied territories those elements, characteristics, traditions, and landscapes that could serve as leverage to trigger a multiplicity of activities and initiatives, both small and large, in the short and long term, primarily aimed at bringing communities closer to these places. The ultimate goal is to gradually build, over time, a stronger attachment to the territory, to the place where people live or have chosen to live. This process aims to foster greater attention to what happens locally and to nurture or revive a sense of belonging, collective identity, shared memory, and even the sense of pride that cultural heritage can and should generate among people.

The central concept underpinning the Guidelines is the development of an integrated cultural system. As already mentioned, this approach seeks to establish meaningful connections between the archaeological site, identified as the RESTARTER Site, and the wider network of cultural resources present within the territory, with the purpose to overcome the fragmentation and isolation that often characterize individual heritage assets like landscape heritage (natural systems and pathways), architectural and urban heritage (settlements and public spaces), demo-ethno-anthropological heritage (traditions and material culture), food and wine heritage (local products and practices) and audiovisual heritage (films, TV and documentary narratives). Taken together in their interaction, these assets can enhance their visibility, accessibility, and interpretative potential while simultaneously reinforcing their role within wider processes of territorial development and cultural regeneration.

These different facets of cultural heritage permeate the entire structure of the RESTART Guidelines. In particular, the guidelines propose interventions articulated into six strategic classes:

- *S.1 Education and Training*: strengthening residents' awareness, particularly among young people, of the value of heritage.
- *S.2 Inclusion and Social Cohesion*: improving accessibility (both physical and cultural) and strengthening associative networks.
- *S.3 Sustainability*: developing eco-compatible models by integrating infrastructural and landscape networks.
- *S.4 Communication*: conveying the values of sites in order to increase their external attractiveness.
- *S.5 Promotion*: generating economic value by activating local supply chains and forms of experiential tourism.
- *S.6 Governance*: harmonizing collaboration among public bodies, private actors, and third-sector organizations in order to mobilize resources and strengthen the planning capacity of local territories.

Each strategy is articulated through a series of concrete and context-specific actions, designed in relation to local territorial contexts rather than as abstract recommendations, and grouped into

clusters. Each strategy therefore consists of a variable number of actions, potentially implementable and adaptable, organized into thematic clusters.

These clusters are in turn organized into four main thematic areas: knowledge, safeguarding, valorization, and governance (LAURIA 2025). These areas do not represent rigid compartments but rather guiding threads that help organize and clarify the various concepts and proposals that emerged during the RESTART research. They provide an interpretative framework that makes it possible to organize the identified actions coherently, linking together different dimensions of heritage and territorial policies. The thematic areas therefore attempt to group within recognizable conceptual sets, while maintaining inevitable margins of overlap and interaction, the main fields of interest related to the objective of the holistic valorization of the archaeological site in relation to local development and community engagement. Within this perspective, valorization is not understood merely as the material conservation or museumization of the archaeological asset, nor as a process aimed solely at generating economic returns through cultural tourism. Rather, the concept of valorization is interpreted in a broader sense as an integrated and multidimensional process, capable of simultaneously activating cultural, social, economic, and identity-related dynamics (CASOLI 2025).

Within this framework, conservation and protection represent a necessary but not sufficient condition. They must be accompanied by policies capable of fostering the social appropriation of heritage, community participation, and the construction of new forms of relationship between heritage and local development. This perspective leads to an understanding of valorization as a relational process, in which the value of heritage is not fixed once and for all but is constructed through interactions among institutions, local communities, cultural operators, and economic actors. The objective therefore becomes the promotion of actions capable of combining the protection of heritage assets with the strengthening of territorial social capital, the creation of sustainable economic opportunities, and the consolidation of a collective and identity-based relationship between communities and the cultural heritage that represents them.

In this sense, the valorization proposed by the RESTART Guidelines represents an approach that aims to integrate within a single strategic vision the conservation of archaeological heritage, the social development of local communities, and the strengthening of territorial economic networks. It is therefore not a form of valorization aimed exclusively at the protection of the asset or its touristic use, but rather a more ambitious process seeking to activate culturally rooted forms of local development, in which heritage becomes a shared resource capable of generating knowledge, social cohesion, and new opportunities for the territory.

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