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HISTORY OF ITALIAN AGRICULTURE  
AND AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES  
IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES\*

The history of agriculture and agricultural landscapes has always had a long tradition of studies in Italy. The recent bibliographic essay by Alfio Cortonesi and Susanna Passigli<sup>1</sup> has offered scholars of rural history an important tool to become acquainted with over fifty years' worth of studies with the numerous works and research areas including the first authors of rural and of medieval landscape history (such as, for example, Ildebrando Imberciadori, the founder of the “*Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura*” and Emilio Sereni with his famous *Storia del paesaggio agrario*), important scholars like Giovanni Cherubini and Vito Fumagalli, and a flourishing new season of research that started in the late 1980s<sup>2</sup>. Still today, rural history in Italy continues to enjoy great attention<sup>3</sup> both in terms of the history of

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<sup>1</sup> A. CORTONESI, S. PASSIGLI, *Agricoltura e allevamento nell'Italia medievale. Contributo bibliografico, 1950-2010*, Firenze 2016 (on line “Reti Medievali”).

<sup>2</sup> See: G. CHERUBINI, *La storia dell'agricoltura fino al Cinquecento*, in *La storiografia italiana degli ultimi vent'anni*, I, *Antichità e Medioevo*, Roma-Bari 1989, pp. 333-354.

<sup>3</sup> M. MONTANARI, *Dalla parte dei laboratores*, in A. CORTONESI, M. MONTANARI (eds), *Medievistica italiana e storia agraria. Risultati e prospettive di una stagione storiografica*, Bologna 2001, pp. 7-10; A. CORTONESI, *La storia agraria dell'Italia medievale negli studi degli ultimi decenni*.

labor<sup>4</sup> and in a European comparative context as in the case of the history of landscapes<sup>5</sup> or of economic growth<sup>6</sup>. These avenues of research mirror Italy's unique rural history and show groundbreaking approaches of great importance within the European context, as I will show in these pages.

The time frame identified as the focus of these pages dedicated to rural history (1991-2016) takes in a significant shift in Italian agrarian historiography. Indeed, the past quarter century represents an important period of studies for the rural world of our country. It is a period linked to a particular historiographic tradition, committed to delving into classical themes of study, new lines of research and comparative overviews, stimulated more recently by a new sensibility dictated also by the transformations in the rural world.

Following these courses of study and reflection, I plan to identify their original contributions, at least in my opinion, also in view of a comparison at a European level. I will start with some necessary references that place Italy's late medieval agrarian history in a more general environmental and historical context, before starting with the historiographic one.

### *1. Original features: environmental factors*

The first item to come to the attention of historians of agriculture is the influence of the peninsula's environmental features. Indeed, these natural factors (climate, soil, and environment) and their variants have significant differentiation in Italy<sup>7</sup>, although the peninsula is not particularly large (301,278 km<sup>2</sup>). The current national perimeter measures 9,322 km, but what is significant is that about 80% of the border (7,500 km) is coastline,

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*Materiali e riflessioni per un bilancio*, «Società e storia», 100-101 (2003), pp. 235-253. See also D. CRISTOFERI, *La storia agraria dal medioevo all'età moderna: una rassegna sulla storiografia degli ultimi venti anni in alcuni paesi europei*, «Ricerche Storiche», 46, 3 (2016), pp. 87-120.

<sup>4</sup> F. FRANCESCHI, *Introduzione*, in ID. (ed), *Storia del lavoro in Italia. Il Medioevo. Dalla dipendenza personale al lavoro contrattato*, Roma 2017, pp. 7-12; P. NANNI, *Forme e figure del lavoro nelle campagne*, *ivi*, pp. 66-93; G. PICCINI, *L'Italia contadina*, *ivi*, pp. 215-245.

<sup>5</sup> A. CORTONESI, *Introduzione. Note sugli elementi ordinatori di alcuni paesaggi italiani (secc. XIII-XV)*, in *I paesaggi agrari d'Europa (secoli XIII-XV)*, Centro Italiano di Studi di Storia e d'Arte, Roma 2015, pp. 1-32.

<sup>6</sup> F. FRANCESCHI, *Introduzione*, in *La crescita economica dell'Occidente medievale. Un tema storico non ancora esaurito*, Centro Italiano di Studi di Storia e d'Arte, Roma 2017, pp. 1-24; A. FURIÓ, *La crescita economica medievale: progressi qualitativi e quantitativi nella produzione agricola*, *ivi*, pp. 107-136.

<sup>7</sup> L. ROMBAI, *Clima, suolo, ambiente*, in G. FORNI, A. MARCONE (eds), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, I, *Letà antica*, 1, *Preistoria*, Firenze 2002, pp. XVII-LXIII; Istituto Geografico Militare, *Italia. Atlante dei tipi geografici*, Firenze 2007.

which in the past, especially along the Tyrrhenian coast and in the Po delta, had large pools of stagnant water, gradually turning into marshes. The relationship with water increases, considering the expanse of the major river basins and the broad surfaces of the main lakes. Italy's articulated orography and latitudinal development are responsible for significant differences in climate, as verified by the temperatures themselves. In fact, data recorded in the last three decades of the twentieth century show an average annual temperature of 9°C for the northern regions, compared to 16°C for the southern ones (a good 7°C of difference).

The country's topography is also marked by the great number of hilly areas (41.6%), the extensive Alp and Apennine mountain ranges (35.2%), and the limited plain areas (23.2%), corresponding mainly to the Po Valley. This articulation still had the same proportional relationships in the distribution of cultivated surfaces in the mid-twentieth century, with 37% of the productive surface area in the mountains, especially the Apennines; 41.7% in the hills; and 20.6% in the plains, with more than half in the Po Valley alone.

The impact of (fixed and variable) environmental factors is crucial to an understanding of each type of agriculture, and in particular that of Italy. Although these causes may not be considered exclusive, they are indeed factors that have strongly conditioned agriculture's developmental possibilities<sup>8</sup>. Suffice it to recall the profound differences between the Po area, characterized by extensive water resources and a continental climate versus the strongly Mediterranean character of southern Italy.

These geographical features were also responsible for the different influence of climate variability between the Middle Ages and the modern age (from the Medieval Warm Period, or Medieval Climatic Anomaly, to the Little Ice Age) compared to continental Europe<sup>9</sup>. Overall, the effects of these changes are considered by Italian historiography as one (but not the only) component, especially in view of more decisive events of a strictly historical nature (society, economy, and politics)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> G. CHERUBINI, *L'Italia rurale del basso Medioevo*, Roma Bari 1985.

<sup>9</sup> P. NANNI, *Per un quadro ambientale e biologico: il "periodo caldo Medievale" e la variabilità climatica*, in *La crescita economica dell'Occidente medievale*, cit., pp. 69-91.

<sup>10</sup> There have been some scholars of the history of climate also in Italy: M. PINNA, *La storia del clima. Variazioni climatiche e rapporto clima-uomo in età postglaciale*, Roma 1984 ("Memorie della Società Geografica Italiana", XXXVI); D. CAMUFFO, *Clima e uomo. Meteorologia e cultura: dai "fulmini" di Giove alle previsioni via satellite*, Milano 1990; E. GUIDOBONI, A. NAVARRA, E. BOSCHI, *Nella spirale del clima. Culture e società mediterranee di fronte ai mutamenti climatici*, Bologna 2010. On the effects of climate variability, see: G. PINTO, *Le trasformazioni ambientali nella penisola italiana nel basso Medioevo*, in L. SEGRE (ed), *Agricoltura, ambiente e sviluppo economico nella storia europea*, Milano 1993, pp. 125-135; P. SERENO, *Crisi climatiche e crisi di sussistenza: qualche considerazione sulle interazioni tra ambiente geografico e agricoltura nelle economie d'antico regime*, ivi, pp. 137-155;

## 2. *Original features: population and settlement*

A second factor characterizing the history of the Italian countryside is the early urban development as well as its quantitative and qualitative dimensions. We will return to this point, but some demographic data (population and settlement) should be highlighted here that clearly and unequivocally show the intertwining on several levels of medieval urbanization and the rural world<sup>11</sup>. First, the total population increased from 5.2 million inhabitants at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century to 7.3 million in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century and then to 12.5 million in the first decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when about 16% of Europe's population (excluding Russia) lived in Italy. In this period of greatest expansion (late 13<sup>th</sup>-early 14<sup>th</sup> century), it is estimated that as many as 20-25% of the population lived in larger urban areas compared to the rest of Europe: three of the medieval cities with over 100,000 inhabitants (the fourth was Paris) were in Italy, specifically Milan (increasing from 20,000 inhabitants in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to more than 100,000 in the 14<sup>th</sup>), Venice, and Florence (passing from 15-20 thousand to 90-130 thousand in the span of just one century, between the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup>). Genoa had 50-60 thousand inhabitants, while seven cities had 40-50 thousand inhabitants (Brescia, Cremona, Verona, Bologna, Pisa, Siena, and Palermo). There were ten cities with 20-40 thousand (Piacenza, Mantua, Parma, Padua, Lucca, Perugia, Ancona, Rome, Naples, and Messina), 60 with 10-20 thousand, and 70 with 6-10 thousand. The highest concentration can be seen in the Po Valley, in the Milan-Venice-Bologna triangle, and the Arno Valley. The explanation for this increased rate of urbanization, going from 5-8% in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to 20-25% at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (but reaching 30% in Tuscany however), is attributed to a steady stream of people moving from the countryside to towns and cities.

To complete the demographic picture, we must direct our attention to data on the demographic crisis in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century

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P. DELOGU, *L'ambiente altomedievale come tema storiografico*, in P. NANNI (ed), *Agricoltura e ambiente attraverso l'età romana e l'alto Medioevo*, Firenze 2012, pp. 67-108 (Quaderni della "Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura", 8).

<sup>11</sup> For the history of Italian cities and demographics, see: F. FRANCESCHI - I. TADDEI, *Le città italiane nel Medioevo XII-XIV secolo*, Bologna 2012; F. MENANT, *L'Italia dei comuni (1100-1350)*, Roma 2011; G. CHERUBINI, *Le città italiane dell'età di Dante*, Pisa 1991; ID., *Le città europee del Medioevo*, Milano 2009; M. GINATEMPO, L. SANDRI, *L'Italia delle città. Il popolamento urbano tra Medioevo e Rinascimento (secoli XIII-XVI)*, Firenze 1990; G. PINTO, *Dalla tarda antichità alla metà del XVI secolo*, in L. DEL PANTA, M. LIVI BACCI, G. PINTO, E. SONNINO, *La popolazione italiana dal Medioevo ad oggi*, Roma Bari 1996, pp. 15-71; P. MALANIMA, *L'economia italiana. Dalla crescita medievale alla crescita contemporanea*, Bologna 2002.

when plague waves took the Italian population levels two centuries back: about 7.3 million at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (similar to the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century). Nevertheless, the urbanization phenomenon was irreversible with the proportion of people living in urban centers still remaining high, about twice as many as two centuries earlier: 17-18% at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century versus 9-10% at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These population trends (strong growth, collapse, and new balances) and distribution (a remarkable urbanization rate) are essential to following agriculture's evolution in the late Middle Ages. In fact, in early modern times, the territorialization of states led to a redefinition of the balances: 16<sup>th</sup>-century Naples reached 150,000 inhabitants (about 30,000 in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century) as a result of the Aragonese centralization policy, with Rome also assuming a new dimension. If, before the 14<sup>th</sup>-century crisis, the primacy of the largest centers (Milan, Venice, Florence, and Genoa) had been based on "financial and trade intermediation in international markets", the dominance, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, of the new centers (Milan, Venice, Rome, and Naples) did not depend just on "international role", but also on the "hegemony in the state", and "political control over the economic and fiscal resources" of their territories<sup>12</sup>.

### 3. *Original features: town and country*

Beginning in the centuries after the year 1000, we have seen how the rural world became deeply intertwined with the urban one and its developments, enough so as to render misleading any discussion that does not take into consideration these connections. But, connecting does not mean eliminating. In fact, talking about the "*terra di città*", "land of towns", does not mean minimizing the profound differences that exist between town and country<sup>13</sup>, documented also by the literary, typically urban, satirical tradition on the world of peasants, shepherds, and mountain people.

A recent book dedicated specifically to this theme of the town's integration or penetration into the country has collected the research of a number of authors and offers a comprehensive description for central and northern Italy in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its revealing title – *La costruzione del dominio*

<sup>12</sup> S. R. EPSTEIN, *I caratteri originali. L'economia*, in F. SALVESTRINI (ed), *L'Italia alla fine del Medioevo*, I, *I caratteri originali nel quadro europeo*, Firenze 2006, pp. 381-431.

<sup>13</sup> G. PICCINNI, *Contadini e proprietari nell'Italia comunale: modelli e comportamenti*, in *Ceti, modelli, comportamenti nella società medievale (secoli XIII-metà XIV)*, Centro Italiano di Studi di Storia e d'Arte, Pistoia 2001, pp. 203-237.

*cittadino sulle campagne* or the Construction of the Town Domain over the Countryside<sup>14</sup> – offers a very specific look at the topics of territorial control and organization, land ownership dynamics and organization, agricultural policy and economic elites, town and country, and mental attitudes. Supported by abundant documentation, these approaches to research have highlighted the social, economic, political and cultural aspects that characterized the projection of urban centers towards rural areas, with the “construction” of various countryside types: the extension of cultivated areas (the search for “bread lands”), as well as cropping systems and cultivation techniques. But the signs in the territory constituted by new settlements like the foundation of new towns<sup>15</sup> or the very settlement structures<sup>16</sup> are also not to be underestimated. The historiographic theme of “constructing” a countryside immediately highlights a historical reality that has characterized Italy’s most advanced agricultural areas (central and northern Italy, particularly the Po Valley and Tuscany), but also shows the mercantile, or “colonization”, influence that they wielded in the rest of the peninsula.

Data on the previously mentioned demographic expansion also bring to mind specific differences between northern-central Italy and southern Italy, and the islands. In fact, the presence of an urban phenomenon appears more limited in size and distribution in the south of Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia. However, there are also qualitative differences in medieval urbanism that distinguish republican Italy from monarchical Italy<sup>17</sup> or Italy at the height of its development between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and the early modern age.

Turning our attention to the food supply<sup>18</sup>, or agricultural raw materials, the importance of those populous cities in the context of the entire

<sup>14</sup> R. MUCCIARELLI, G. PICCINI, G. PINTO (eds), *La costruzione del dominio cittadino sulle campagne. Italia centro-settentrionale, secoli XII-XIV*, Siena 2009.

<sup>15</sup> D. FRIEDMAN, P. PIRILLO (eds), *Le terre nuove*, Firenze 2004; F. PANERO, *Comuni e borghi franchi nel Piemonte medievale*, Bologna 1988.

<sup>16</sup> P. PIRILLO, *Costruzione di un contado. I fiorentini e il loro territorio nel basso Medioevo*, Firenze 2001; P. PIRILLO, *Forme e strutture del popolamento nel contado fiorentino*, 3 vol., Firenze 2005-2015, *Gli insediamenti nell’organizzazione dei popoli (prima metà del XIV secolo)*, Roma 2005; A.M. RAPETTI, *Paesaggi rurali e insediamenti nell’Italia del Basso Medioevo*, in SALVESTRINI (ed), *L’Italia alla fine del Medioevo*, cit., pp. 25-56.

<sup>17</sup> G. CHERUBINI, *Scritti meridionali*, Firenze 2012 (Quaderni della “Rivista di storia dell’agricoltura”, 7).

<sup>18</sup> G. CHERUBINI, *L’approvvigionamento alimentare delle città toscane tra XII e XV secolo*, in ID. *Firenze e la Toscana. Scritti vari*, Pisa 2013, pp. 39-55; G. PINTO, *L’annona: aspetti e problemi dell’approvvigionamento urbano fra XIII e XV secolo*, in ID., *Città e spazi economici nell’Italia comunale*, Bologna 1996, pp. 77-96; ID., *Le città italiane di fronte alle grandi carestie trecentesche: percezione della crisi e politiche annonarie*, in ID., *Il lavoro, la povertà, l’assistenza*, Roma 2008, pp. 147-161; G. ALBINI, *Un problema dimenticato: carestie ed epidemie nei secoli XI-XIII. Il caso emiliano*, in R.

peninsula is not to be undervalued. Many cities ate not just the food from neighboring areas, through complex networks of traders<sup>19</sup> or producers from nearby boroughs<sup>20</sup>, but also foodstuffs which arrived through trade flows from more distant areas<sup>21</sup>. The case of cereals, for instance, broadly illustrates a geography of production and consumption in the peninsula: export zones (southern Italy and the islands, Patrimony of Saint Peter and some towns in the Marches and the Po Valley); self-sufficient cities capable of exporting in plentiful years (Arezzo, Siena, cities in Romagna and in the Po Valley); cities that turned to imports in varying degrees (Florence, Lucca, Pisa, Perugia, Bologna, Bergamo, etc.); and seaside towns, with limited hinterlands that were principally supplied by the marketplace (Genoa and Venice). An analysis of consumption and price trends is an essential intersection that places the history of the food supply within the broader context of an urban and rural history<sup>22</sup>.

#### 4. Why and how to study the Italian countryside?

Environmental contexts, population and settlement, cities and markets (and their subsequent development with the creation of regional states) are therefore necessary for a satisfactory treatment also of the rural world in the late Middle Ages. Against this background, the questions of *why* and *how* to study the Italian countryside may seem unnecessary, given the medieval world's widespread rural character and agriculture's obvious centrality at the base of the demographic, economic and social development<sup>23</sup>.

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Comba, I. Naso (eds), *Demografia e società nell'Italia medievale. Secoli IX-XIV*, Cuneo 1994, pp. 47-67.

<sup>19</sup> CH. M. DE LA RONCIÈRE, *Firenze e le sue campagne nel Trecento. Mercanti, produzione, traffici*, Firenze 2005.

<sup>20</sup> I. NASO, *Spazi agricoli nel contesto urbano. Gli orti del Piemonte tardo medievale*, in *La costruzione del dominio cittadino* cit., pp. 555-586; P. NANNI, *Spazi verdi urbani e campagne periurbane nell'Italia settentrionale e in Toscana*, in *I paesaggi agrari d'Europa*, cit., pp. 537-586; A. LANCONELLI, T. LEGGIO, *Paesaggi urbani e spazi rurali dell'Italia centrale (Lazio, Umbria, Abruzzo, secc. XIII-XV)*, ivi, pp. 587-625.

<sup>21</sup> B. DINI, *La circolazione dei prodotti (secc. VI-XVIII)*, in G. PINTO, C. PONI, U. TUCCI (eds), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, II, *Medioevo ed età moderna*, Firenze 2002, pp. 383-448.

<sup>22</sup> G. PINTO, *Alimentazione e livelli di vita*, in Id. *Il lavoro*, cit., pp. 71-92; A. CORTONESI, *I cereali nell'Italia del tardo Medioevo. Note sugli aspetti qualitativi del consumo*, in S. CAVACIOCCHI (ed), *Alimentazione e nutrizione. Sec. XIII-XVIII*, Istituto Internazionale di Storia economica "F. Datini", Firenze 1997, pp. 263-275.

<sup>23</sup> The relationships between agriculture and economic development have been also recently the subject of consideration and comparison at the 2015 conference of the Centro Italiano di Studi di Storia e d'Arte (Italian Centre for the Study of History and Art in Pistoia), entitled *La crescita*

Instead, justifying the importance (the *why*) and the perspectives (the *how*) that have emerged from studying the countryside is a fundamental step to highlighting the peculiarities of the rural world in medieval Italy. It is namely the Italian anomalies within the European context that the same contemporary historians have traced back to the centuries of urban and commercial expansion: the “original anomaly” (cities and markets) that distinguishes Italian agrarian history from many (not all) areas on the continent<sup>24</sup>. In fact, those agricultural structures and phenomena that have had a long life in Italian history have their roots in the late Middle Ages, the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The sense of this long duration of the Italian peninsula’s agricultural structures was very well-known among scholars who, in the 1960s and 1980s, set down the history of the countryside, motivated also by the desire to study a world that was gradually disappearing before the eyes of those who had experienced it. Under the agriculture heading in the *Enciclopedia agraria italiana* (1952), on the eve of the rural exodus<sup>25</sup>, Giuseppe Medici, then president of the National Institute of Agricultural Economics, described the Italian countryside as consisting of five major agricultural zones, which corresponded to the major economies and rural structures: from the Prealps to the irrigated Po Valley with its farmsteads (Piedmont, Lombardy); the non-irrigated Po Valley (Veneto, Emilia); the large block of central Italy (Tuscany, the Marches, parts of Lazio, Emilia Romagna, and Abruzzo) with sharecropping farms; southern Italy and the islands, with their “green islands” (specialized arboriculture), but above all the *maserie* (cereal and sheep farms) or the *casale romano*, Roman farmsteads<sup>26</sup>. These do not include the last remnants of pluriactivity in mountainous areas and transhumant grazing, which linked mountain areas with the vast marshy plains in Tuscany and Lazio and with the Apulian tableland. These

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*economica dell’Occidente medievale. Un tema non ancora esaurito*, or the economic growth of the west in the Middle Ages. A topic still to be studied.

<sup>24</sup> P.P. D’ATTORRE, A. DE BERNARDI, *Il “lungo addio”: una proposta interpretativa*, in *Studi sull’agricoltura italiana. Società rurale e modernizzazione*, Milano 1994, pp. XI-LVI: XIV; P. BEVILACQUA, *Tra Europa e Mediterraneo. L’organizzazione degli spazi e i sistemi agrari*, in ID. (ed), *Storia dell’agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, I, *Spazi e paesaggi*, Venezia 1989, pp. 5-36.

<sup>25</sup> At the beginning of the 1950s, agricultural workers in Italy were still 42.2% of the working population, which fell to 29.0% in a decade (1961) and to 17.2% in the following one (1971): L. DEL PANTA, *Popolazione, popolamento, sistemi colturali, spazi coltivati*, in R. CIANFERONI, Z. CIUFFOLETTI, L. ROMBAI (eds), *Storia dell’agricoltura italiana*, III, *Letà contemporanea*, 1, *Dalle «rivoluzioni agronomiche» alle trasformazioni del Novecento*, Firenze 2002, pp. 19-52.

<sup>26</sup> A. CORTONESI, *Il casale romano fra Trecento e Quattrocento*, in A. ESPOSITO, L. PALERMO (eds), *Economia e società a Roma tra Medioevo e Rinascimento. Studi dedicati ad Arnold Esch*, Roma 2005, pp. 123-145.



various “agricultural Italies” were still active in the 1950s and earlier, after the unification of Italy, had already been described in the monumental *Inchiesta agraria* (1878-1882) overseen by Senator Stefano Jacini.

But what must be stressed is the fact that these diverse agricultural Italies already existed in the late Middle Ages<sup>27</sup>. The various types of farming, (*cascine*, *poderi mezzadrili*, *casali*, *masserie*) and seasonal grazing inevitably refer to their origins and their consolidation, traceable to between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, amid crisis, transformation, and development.

In Tuscany’s case, for example, it is one of the fundamental points of Elio Conti’s studies since the 1960s, whom I would like to recall here, because of the recent republication of his studies on the formation of the agrarian structure in the Florentine countryside based on the cadaster<sup>28</sup>. The meaning of these medieval origins was clear: “I had by then decided that the modern age had simply brought to completion a process already fully developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the countryside, the essential had already happened in earlier centuries”<sup>29</sup>. But through the study of agrarian structures, Conti was interested in investigating the origins of the success of Florence’s middle class<sup>30</sup>. The rural world, in other words, has become the place to study general historical phenomena, also in the case of an Italy strongly characterized by its urban dimension.

Faced with these unique and original characteristics, Italian medieval studies have contributed with equal originality to answering these *whys*. Retracing historiographic accounts and perspectives from the 1970s and 1980s, despite their strengths and weaknesses, Giovanni Cherubini did not hesitate to define agrarian history as the “finest innovation in Italian historiography”, in which there was an “explosion of interest” by a new generation of historians, especially late-medievalists<sup>31</sup>. In fact, since the 1990s, a large group of scholars has devoted themselves to this particular

<sup>27</sup> S. GENSINI (ed), *Le Italie del tardo Medioevo*, Pisa 1990; L. ROMBAI, A. BUONCOMPAGNI, *Popolazione, popolamento, sistemi culturali, spazi coltivati, aree boschive ed incolti*, in PINTO, PONI, TUCCI (eds), *Storia dell’agricoltura italiana*, II, cit., pp. 171-221; F. CAZZOLA, *Culture, lavori, tecniche, rendimenti*, ivi, pp. 223-253; L. CHIAPPA MAURI, *Popolazione, popolamento, sistemi culturali, spazi coltivati, aree boschive ed incolte*, ivi, pp. 23-57.

<sup>28</sup> E. CONTI, *I catasti agrari della repubblica fiorentina e il catasto particellare toscano (secoli XIV-XIX)*, Roma 1966 (2014); E. CONTI, *La formazione della struttura agraria moderna nel contado fiorentino*, I, *Le campagne nell’età precomunale*, Roma 1965 (2014); E. CONTI, *La formazione della struttura agraria moderna nel contado fiorentino*, III.1, *Fonti e risultati sommari delle indagini per campione e delle rilevazioni statistiche (secoli XV-XIX)*, Roma 1965 (2014); E. CONTI, *La formazione della struttura agraria moderna nel contado fiorentino*, III.2, *Monografie e tavole statistiche (secoli XV-XIX)*, Roma 1965 (2014).

<sup>29</sup> CONTI, *La formazione della struttura agraria moderna*, cit., p. VII.

<sup>30</sup> G. FRANCESCONI, *Elio Conti e la società fiorentina del Quattrocento: un’incompiuta di successo*, Roma 2014.

<sup>31</sup> CHERUBINI, *La storia dell’agricoltura fino al Cinquecento*, cit.

field of study, continuing to dig ever deeper into the opening created by those early experts<sup>32</sup>, one that should be specified to include some approaches to research: the *how* of Italy's agrarian history.

### 5. *A historiographic legacy*

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the history of agriculture has been cultivated mainly by historians of the Middle Ages especially attentive to the general issues and problems that affected medieval society. One common trait that must unquestionably be recognized is the example and constant reminder to not consider the countryside as isolated from the more general problems of medieval history, from the early Middle Ages to the communal age, through the crises and transformations of the late Middle Ages up to the dawn of the Early Modern Age. Accordingly, Giovanni Cherubini wove an agrarian history for the late Middle Ages in the context of a general history of society as a whole, under the eloquent and thoughtful title of *Signori, Contadini, Borghesi* (1974). This volume can still today be considered full of implications for his firm statement that “any inquiry, even very particular ones, must contribute to solving general problems, and that indeed there is no useful examination of the “special” if not oriented towards these purposes”<sup>33</sup>. A task, I would almost say a responsibility of historical studies shines through these words with which, in a certain sense, he expressed also the commitment of other authors. It will be enough for me to recall Vito Fumagalli's studies<sup>34</sup>, for which “the idea of change, of the gradual transformation of a society” was essential, even while discussing the rural societies of the early Middle Ages<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> Published by Florence's Georgofili Academy, the “Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura” (Journal of Agricultural History), has been a point of reference in Italy for the study of agrarian history since 1961, the year it was set up by Ildebrando Imberciadori: see P. NANNI, *Note sui primi quarant'anni della “Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura” (1961-2000)*, “Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura”, XL, 2 supplemento (2000), pp. VII-XXIII. In the 1970s and 1980s, Vito Fumagalli was at the center of an informal initiative, designed to “communicate and discuss the research of a group of scholars, young and old”, which took place in Bagni di Lucca between 1976 and 1987: see MONTANARI, *Dalla parte dei laboratores*, cit., p. 7. Those meetings were the basis of a new period for agrarian history, from which the Study Centre for the History of the Countryside and Peasant Labor, in Montalcino, was created in 1997.

<sup>33</sup> G. CHERUBINI, *Signori, contadini, borghesi. Ricerche sulla società italiana del basso Medioevo*, Firenze 1974, p. XII; see also: G. PICCINNI, *Signori, contadini, borghesi. Una recensione tardiva*, in D. BALESTRACCI, A. BARLUCCHI, F. FRANCESCHI, P. NANNI, G. PICCINNI, A. ZORZI (eds), *Uomini, paesaggi, storie. Studi di storia medievale per Giovanni Cherubini*, Siena 2012, vol. II, pp. 1193-1206.

<sup>34</sup> A. CASTAGNETTI, *La storia agraria dell'alto Medioevo nel Novecento fino ai primi contributi di Vito Fumagalli (1966-1971)*, in NANNI (ed), *Agricoltura e ambiente*, cit., pp. 41-65.

<sup>35</sup> V. FUMAGALLI, *Introduzione*, in B. ANDREOLLI, V. FUMAGALLI, M. MONTANARI (eds), *Le campagne italiane prima e dopo il Mille. Una società in trasformazione*, Bologna 1985, pp. 9-11.

The historiographic legacy that comes from the early scholars of Italian agrarian history has provided important knowledge on specific aspects: the fluctuations of cultivated areas, especially in relation to demographic trends; the integrations or divisions between agriculture and animal husbandry; forms of management (serfdom, land pacts, rent, and sharecropping) and cropping systems (mixed and rotated crops); the distribution of landed property and production relations (owners and peasants); rationing policies; cultivation techniques and productivity; the characteristics of mountain farming, the use of forests and the “*civiltà del castagno*”, or chestnut civilization; and rural communities and rights of common. Various studies have been devoted to the dynamics of settlement, the transformation of rural housing, and the very founding of new settlements – “*ville nuove*”, “*terre nuove*”, “*borghi franchi*”, and “*mercatali*” – planned by the towns for anti-feudal and commercial reasons. This does not include the wealth of local research that has multiplied, with the publication also of such sources as statutes, under pressure of interests also outside the world of studies.

#### 6. *For a history of the rural world*

For the time span identified as the focus of this paper, the 1997 Montalcino conference dedicated to Italian Medieval Studies and Agrarian History constitutes an important reference point. Reading those papers again, one early historiographic characteristic to clearly emerge is that it was mainly the historians of the Middle Ages who focused attention on the world of the medieval countryside and not the economic historians. This trend and these sensibilities have directed the research towards an approach more interested in those aspects of society as a whole, the events that characterized specific historical contexts, and regional varieties as well as the different mindsets, largely using documentary sources that, especially for northern and central Italy, are rich in information, including those from such invaluable sources as land registers and cadasters (see, for example, the cases of Siena, 1315-18, and Florence, 1427). It must however be pointed out that these research approaches have never neglected to focus on comparison and interdisciplinary – but perhaps it would be more correct to say interpersonal – enrichment, especially with the archeological sector as documented by the Siense school tied to Riccardo Francovich<sup>36</sup> and the work of the journal “*Archeologia Medievale*”.

<sup>36</sup> R. FRANCOVICH, R. HODGES, *Villa to Village*, London 2003. See also: G. BIANCHI,

Research questions and methods, the insight of individual scholars and specific historical and geographical contexts of medieval Italy have led to adopting levels of regional or territorial study, following their respective, not easily generalized characteristics. The book thus has a good nine *regional itineraries*<sup>37</sup> that rightly start with Tuscany, the cradle of these studies, to then arrive at *intersections*<sup>38</sup> with other historical and historiographical dimensions.

Overall, the last twenty-five years have been so full of contributions as to make an exhaustive historiographical reconstruction very difficult. Considering the main study topics, let us mention some of the main regional overviews that include the history of landed property<sup>39</sup>; peasant labor<sup>40</sup>, land management<sup>41</sup> and agrarian contracts<sup>42</sup> (sharecropping<sup>43</sup>); rural sei-

Curtes, *castelli e comunità rurali di un territorio minerario toscano. Nuove domande per consolidati modelli*, in P. GALETTI (ed), *Paesaggi, comunità, villaggi medievali*, Spoleto 2012, pp. 495-510; G. BIANCHI, *Recenti ricerche nelle colline metallifere ed alcune riflessioni sul modello toscano*, «Archeologia Medievale», XLII (2015), pp. 9-26; M. VALENTI, *L'insediamento altomedievale nelle campagne toscane. Paesaggi, popolamento e villaggi tra VI e X secolo*, Firenze 2004; Id., *Villaggi e comunità nella Toscana tra VII e X secolo: la ricerca archeologica*, in GALETTI, *Paesaggi, comunità, villaggi medievali*, cit., pp. 477-493.

<sup>37</sup> *Toscana* (G. Pinto); *Umbria e Lazio* (A. Lanconelli); *Mezzogiorno tirrenico* (G. Vitolo and M. Pucci); *Mezzogiorno adriatico* (R. Licinio and S. Russo); *Sicilia* (R.M. Dentici Buccellato); *Sardegna* (B. Fois); *Italia nord-occidentale* (R. Comba and A.M. Rapetti); *Area veneta e friulana* (M. Zucchigna); *Emilia, Romagna, Marche* (G. Pasquali).

<sup>38</sup> *Storia agraria e storia economica* (A. Grohmann); *Storia agraria e storia delle istituzioni* (G. Sergi); *Storia agraria e storia delle città* (A. I. Pini); *Storia agraria e selvicoltura* (P. Piussi and O. Redon); *Storia agraria e gestione del territorio* (G.F. Di Pietro).

<sup>39</sup> G. PICCINNI, *L'evoluzione della rendita fondiaria in Italia: 1350-1450*, in *Italia 1350-1450: tra crisi, trasformazione, sviluppo*, Centro Italiano di Studi di Storia e d'Arte, Pistoia 1993, pp. 233-271; A. CORTONESI, *Espansione dei coltivi e proprietà fondiaria nel tardo Medioevo. L'Italia del Centro-Nord*, in S. CAVACIOCCHI (ed), *Il mercato della terra. Sec. XIII-XVIII*, Istituto Internazionale di Storia economica "F. Datini", Firenze 2004, pp. 57-95; S. CAROCCI, *Poteri signorili e mercato della terra (Italia ed Europa occidentale, sec. XI-XIV)*, ivi, pp. 193-221.

<sup>40</sup> B. ANDREOLLI, M. MONTANARI, *L'azienda curtense in Italia. Proprietà della terra e lavoro contadino nei secoli VIII-XI*, Bologna 1985; B. ANDREOLLI, *Contadini su terre di signori*, Bologna 1999; P. PANERO, *Schiavi, servi e villani nell'Italia medievale*, Torino 1999.

<sup>41</sup> A. CORTONESI, *Ruralia. Economie e paesaggi del Medioevo italiano*, Roma 1995; A. CORTONESI, G. PICCINNI, *Medioevo nelle campagne*, Roma 2006; A.M. RAPETTI, *La terra degli uomini. Campagne dell'Italia medievale*, Roma 2012.

<sup>42</sup> A. CORTONESI, G. PASQUALI, G. PICCINNI, *Uomini e campagne nell'Italia medievale*, Roma-Bari 2002; R. COMBA, F. PANERO (eds), *Aziende agrarie nel Medioevo. Forme della conduzione fondiaria nell'Italia nord-occidentale (secoli IX-XV)*, Cuneo 2000; A. LANCONELLI, *La terra buona. Produzione, tecniche e rapporti di lavoro nell'agro viterbese fra Due e Trecento*, Bologna 1994; P. NANNI, *Uomini nelle campagne. Agricoltura ed economie rurali in Toscana (secoli XIV-XIX)*, Firenze 2012 (Quaderni della «Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura», 9).

<sup>43</sup> G. PINTO, P. PIRILLO, *Il contratto di mezzadria nella Toscana Medievale*, I, *Contado di Siena. Sec. XIII-1348*, Firenze 1987; O. MUZZI - M. D. NENCI, *Il contratto di mezzadria nella Toscana Medievale*, II, *Contado di Firenze, secolo XIII*, Firenze 1988; G. PICCINNI, *Il contratto di mezzadria nella Toscana Medievale*, III, *Contado di Siena, 1349-1518*, Firenze 1992.

gnories<sup>44</sup>; rural communities<sup>45</sup> and common good<sup>46</sup>; the minor centers<sup>47</sup>; the history of food<sup>48</sup> and food administration policies<sup>49</sup>; the history of vineyards<sup>50</sup>, olive trees<sup>51</sup> and woods<sup>52</sup>; natural resource management<sup>53</sup>, political and commercial places<sup>54</sup>; the characteristics of southern Italy, and

<sup>44</sup> C. VIOLANTE, M.L. CECCARELLI LEMUT (eds), *La signoria rurale in Italia nel Medioevo*, Pisa 1997; G. CHITTOLENI, *Per una geografia dei contadi alla fine del Medioevo*, in Id., *Città, comunità e feudi negli stati dell'Italia centro-settentrionale (secoli XIV-XVI)*, Milano 1996, pp. 1-18.

<sup>45</sup> G. CHERUBINI, *Fra Tevere, Arno e Appennino. Valli, comunità, signori*, Firenze 1992; P. GUGLIELMOTTI, *Comunità e territorio. Villaggi del Piemonte medievale*, Roma 2001; GALETTI (ed), *Paesaggi, comunità, villaggi medievali*, cit.

<sup>46</sup> R. RAO, *I beni comuni di Vercelli. Dalla rivendicazione all'alienazione (1183-1254)*, Vercelli 2005; Id., *Beni comuni e identità di villaggio (Lombardia, secoli XI-XII)*, in GALETTI, *Paesaggi, comunità, villaggi*, cit., pp. 327-343; R. RAO, *I beni comuni nel Piemonte bassomedievale*, in M. ORTOLANI, O. VERNIER, M. BOTTIN (eds), *Propriété individuelle et collective dans les États de Savoie*, Nice 2012, pp. 169-183; M. BICCHIERAI, *Beni comuni e usi civici nella Toscana del basso Medioevo*, in Id. (ed), *Beni comuni e usi civici nella Toscana tardomedievale*, Venezia 1995, pp. 13-50. See also: D. CRISTOFERI, *Da usi civici a beni comuni: gli studi sulla proprietà collettiva nella medievistica e nella modernistica italiana e le principali tendenze internazionali*, «Studi Storici», 57, 3 (2016), pp. 577-604.

<sup>47</sup> A. BARLUCCHI, *I centri minori della Val di Chiana*, in G. PINTO, P. PIRILLO (eds), *I centri minori della Toscana nel Medioevo*, Firenze 2013, pp. 57-95; G. FRANCESCONI, *Un contado miniaturizzato e una valle-sistema: il Pistoiese e la Valdnievole*, ivi, pp. 217-239.

<sup>48</sup> M. MONTANARI, *Alimentazione e cultura nel Medioevo*, Roma-Bari 1988; M. MONTANARI, *La fame e l'abbondanza. Storia dell'alimentazione in Europa*, Roma-Bari 1993; J.L. FLANDRIN, M. MONTANARI (eds), *Storia dell'alimentazione*, Roma-Bari 1996; A. CAPATTI, M. MONTANARI, *La cucina italiana. Storia di una cultura*, Roma-Bari 1999; CAVACIOCCHI, *Alimentazione e nutrizione*, cit.

<sup>49</sup> G. PINTO, *L'annona: un caso particolare. L'ufficio fiorentino dell'Abbondanza negli anni 1411-1412*, in Id., *Il lavoro*, cit., pp. 97-122; Id., *Le città italiane di fronte alle grandi carestie*, cit.; Id., *L'annona: aspetti e problemi*, cit.

<sup>50</sup> A. I. PINI, *Vite e vino nel Medioevo*, Bologna 1989; J.-L. GAULIN, A.J. GRIECO (eds), *Dalla vite al vino. Fonti e problemi della vitivinicoltura italiana medievale*, Bologna 1994; M. DA PASSANO, A. MATTONE, F. MELE, P.F. SIMBULA (eds), *La vite e il vino. Storia e diritto (secoli XI-XIX)*, Roma 2000; G. ARCHETTI (ed), *La civiltà del vino. Fonti, temi e produzioni vitivinicole dal Medioevo al Novecento*, Brescia 2003.

<sup>51</sup> A. BRUGNOLI, G.M. VARANINI (eds), *Olivi e olio nel Medioevo italiano*, Bologna 2005.

<sup>52</sup> B. ANDREOLLI - M. MONTANARI (eds), *Il bosco nel Medioevo*, Bologna 1990; G. CHERUBINI, *Il bosco in Italia tra il XIII e il XVI secolo*, in S. CAVACIOCCHI (ed), *L'uomo e la foresta. Sec. XIII-XVIII*, Istituto Internazionale di Storia economica "F. Datini", Firenze 1996, pp. 357-374; P. GALETTI (ed), *Civiltà del legno. Per una storia del legno come materia per costruire dall'antichità ad oggi*, Bologna 2004.

<sup>53</sup> P. MALANIMA, *L'energia disponibile*, in R. ROMANO (ed), *Storia dell'economia italiana*, I, *Il Medioevo dal crollo al trionfo*, Torino 1990, pp. 117-136; G. FANTONI, *L'acqua a Milano. Uso e gestione nel basso Medioevo (1385-1535)*, Bologna 1990; A. LANCONELLI - R.L. DE PALMA, *Terra, acque e lavoro nella Viterbo medievale*, Roma 1992; A. MALVOLTI, G. PINTO (eds), *Incolti, fiumi, paludi. Utilizzazione delle risorse naturali nella Toscana medievale e moderna*, Firenze 2003. See also the essays dedicated to woods (M. Zanarini) water (F. Roversi Monaco) in M. MONTANARI, A. VASINA (eds), *Per Vito Fumagalli. Terra, uomini, istituzioni medievali*, Bologna 2000. More recently: D. CANZIAN, R. SIMONETTI (eds), *Acque e territorio nel Veneto Medievale*, Roma 2012.

<sup>54</sup> O. REDON, *Lo spazio di una città. Siena e la Toscana meridionale (secoli XIII-XIV)*, Roma 1999; A. BARLUCCHI, *Il contado senese all'epoca dei Nove. Asciano e il suo territorio tra Due e Trecento*, Firenze 1997; M. BICCHIERAI, *Ai confini della repubblica di Firenze. Poppi dalla signoria dei conti Guidi al vicariato del Casentino*, Firenze 2005.

the specific nature of the relations between town and country in northern and central Italy<sup>55</sup>. Building further on the local and regional insights<sup>56</sup>, while also paying attention to comparison, important working sessions have taken place in recent years, like, for example, those dedicated sheep farming<sup>57</sup>, milk<sup>58</sup>, fruit<sup>59</sup> and honey<sup>60</sup>.

### 7. *The need to lay the bases for a comparison*

This very wealth of general and territorial information has rekindled an ambition that never died out starting with Ildebrando Imberciadori and continuing with Giovanni Cherubini: the idea of providing an overall discussion of Italy's long agrarian history, capable of gathering facts and offering a possibility of comparison. Namely, is it possible to carry out an overall synthesis of agricultural Italy, specifically for the centuries between the Middle Ages and the modern age? How should the peninsula's radical geographical differences and the different histories be evaluated? Do elements exist that can be considered common traits (and what are they)? What are the important variations? These are the questions that have continually arisen, even only for the need and the difficulty of determining homogeneous regional areas.

<sup>55</sup> G. CHERUBINI, *Città comunali di Toscana*, Bologna 2003; Id., *Firenze e la Toscana. Scritti vari*, Pisa 2013; G. PINTO, *Toscana medievale. Paesaggi e realtà sociali*, Firenze 1993; Id., *Campagne e paesaggi toscani del Medioevo*, Firenze 2002; A. I. PINI, *Campagne bolognesi. Le radici agrarie di una metropoli medievale*, Firenze 1993. For southern Italy: FRANCESCHI, TADDEI, *Le città italiane*, cit.; R. LICINIO, *Uomini e terre nella Puglia medievale. Dagli Svevi agli Aragones*, Bari 2009; CHERUBINI, *Scritti meridionali*, cit.; S. CAROCCI, *Signorie di Mezzogiorno. Società rurali, poteri aristocratici e monarchia (XII-XIII secolo)*, Roma 2014.

<sup>56</sup> P. GUGLIELMOTTI, *Ricerche sull'organizzazione del territorio nella Liguria medievale*, Firenze 2005; G.M. VARANINI, *La Terraferma veneta nel Quattrocento e le tendenze recenti della storiografia*, in A. VIGGIANO, G. DEL TORRE (eds), *1509-2009. L'ombra di Agnadello. Venezia e la Terraferma*, Venezia 2011, pp. 13-63; G.M. VARANINI, *Per la storia agraria della pianura bresciana nel Quattrocento*, in G. CHITTOLINI, E. CONTI, M.N. COVINI (eds), *Nell'età di Pandolfo Malatesta. Signore a Bergamo, Brescia e Fano agli inizi del Quattrocento*, Brescia 2012, pp. 83-108.

<sup>57</sup> A. MATTONE, P.F. SIMBULA (eds), *La pastorizia mediterranea. Storia e diritto (secoli XI-XX)*, Roma 2011.

<sup>58</sup> G. ARCHETTI, A. BARONIO (eds), *La civiltà del latte. Fonti, simboli e prodotti dal Tardoantico al Novecento*, Brescia 2011.

<sup>59</sup> I. NASO (ed), *Le parole della frutta. Storia, saperi immagini tra Medioevo ed età contemporanea*, Torino 2012; A. CARASSALE, C. LITTARDI, I. NASO (eds), *Fichi. Storia, economia, tradizioni – Figs. History, Economy, Traditions*, Ventimiglia (IM) 2016; M.P. ZANOBONI, *Frutta e fruttaroli nella Milano sforzesca*, «Archivio storico lombardo», CXXIII (1997), pp. 117-151.

<sup>60</sup> L. PROSPERI, *Il miele nell'Occidente medievale*, Firenze 2010 (Quaderni della "Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura", 6).

At the end of the 1990s, after a difficult start, the review committee of the “*Rivista di storia dell’agricoltura*” (Review of Agricultural History), edited by Giovanni Cherubini, decided to embark on this demanding initiative. There were many difficulties, including that skepticism which is typical when people are asked to leave the comfort of their tradition of study in view of a lengthy and wide-ranging work. In particular, the two critical issues were the creation of a thematic interpretation able to maintain the same common basis from the Roman era up to the contemporary age and the composition of the various languages and specific issues in order to allow not only an easy reading of this wide-ranging work, especially for the centuries regarding the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, but also a possibility for comparison.

Despite the possible criticism for the choices made, Cherubini himself clearly stated the purpose and task in the presentation of the work: to fill a historiographic gap; to offer “the possibility to follow a common thread from antiquity up to today and to set up analogies and comparisons between the conditions, structures and aspects of our countryside”; to present a “vast harvest of facts and knowledge and a clear outline for the history of our countryside”. So, the five thick volumes of the *Storia dell’agricoltura italiana* (History of Italian Agriculture) were published in 2002<sup>61</sup>, organized according to the same table of contents to allow a “vertical” reading: 1) *Popolazione, popolamento, sistemi colturali, spazi coltivati, aree boschive ed incolte* (population, settlement, cropping systems, forests and uncultivated areas); 2) *Colture, lavori, tecniche, rendimenti* (crops, labor, techniques, yields); 3) *L’allevamento* (breeding); 4) *L’uso del bosco e degli incolti* (the use of forests and uncultivated areas); 5) *La proprietà della terra, i percettori dei prodotti e della rendita* (land ownership, the beneficiaries of products and income); 6) *La circolazione dei prodotti* (movement of goods); 7) *Il sapere agronomico* (agronomic expertise). As can be inferred from the chapter titles, the scheme is not exceedingly rigid but it contains some deep convictions: an overall view capable of keeping together the various factors making up the environmental and historical picture (through

<sup>61</sup> Two other volumes were added to the initial plan of three volumes, the opening volume dedicated to prehistory and a final one dedicated to recent developments (the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The part dedicated to the Middle Ages was carried out by authoritative historians of the medieval countryside (L. Chiappa Mauri, M. Montanari, A. Cortonesi, B. Andreolli, G. Piccinni, B. Dini, A. Saltini) and supplemented with in-depth studies on *Vite e vino*, or vineyards and wine (A.I. Pini), *Olivo e olio*, or olive trees and oil (G. Pinto), *L’orticoltura e i Giardini*, or horticulture and gardens (M. Ambrosoli), *Le piante tintorie*, or dyeing plants (U. Tucci), *Strumenti e macchine agricole*, or agricultural tools and machines (G. Forni).

which to highlight constants and variables); an in-depth discussion of the various agrosilvopastoral activities, sometimes integrated, sometimes separate; a reconstruction of man's relations with the land (property and use), relationships of labor, and the distribution of products and incomes; and finally the market for agricultural products, commercial networks and agronomic expertise.

### *8. Common traits and variants*

The discussion of the various topics permitted making some clarifications for the centuries between the early and late Middle Ages. Firstly, there were common traits, like the extensive agricultural development that occurred not because of an increase in unit productivity but rather through an expansion of cultivated areas, reducing forest or uncultivated areas; or the strong push toward cereal production, especially of wheat. Secondly, productivity data were specified, that had mistakenly been considered excessively low by historiography that had dealt with European scenarios. A correct interpretation of these sources<sup>62</sup> fixed the seed-yield ratio at 1:3-4 also in the centuries around the year 1000, not 1:2 as was reported also in manuals. What emerges is a picture of a Middle Ages less "dark" than the scarcity of sources permits documenting, characterized by innovations like the manorial system in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

These data have enabled taking a new look at those elements of "agricultural revolution" often attributed to the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, in support of greater consideration for the Roman legacy (e.g., the differentiation in plows already in the Imperial era<sup>63</sup>; or previously known practices for crop rotation or the use of green manure) and for the slow but progressive transformations that took place during the centuries between the early and the late Middle Ages (greater use of iron in agricultural tools or the spread of water mills for grinding). Thus returning to environmental conditioning, "there is a logic as to why certain things happen," Montanari stated, "even if the technological immobility of the Italian agricultural system left our country on the sidelines of the innovations triggered in other areas of Europe, in many cases it was the only possible solution. With those climate

<sup>62</sup> M. MONTANARI, *Culture, lavori, tecniche, rendimenti*, in PINTO, PONI, TUCCI (eds), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, II, cit., pp. 59-81.

<sup>63</sup> G. FORNI, *Strumenti e macchine agricole dal Medioevo al Rinascimento*, ivi, pp. 579-632.



and soil conditions, multiplying the plowings was the method most widely used to attempt to increase the land's fertility"<sup>64</sup>.

The crisis in the 14<sup>th</sup> century offered new opportunities for rationalization (property layout and administration methods), the result also of new economic and business approaches (investment and profit). Since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there had already been slow, but generalizable increases in productivity (1: 4-5); new agricultural forms like irrigated agriculture, made possible by territorial works, new farm structures (*mezzadrili*, share-cropping and *cascine*, large-scale farming); new crops (rice); and regional specializations like pasture areas (field and grass system) along the Tyrrhenian and Apulian coasts. Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, there reappeared agricultural treatises, like those by Pietro de' Crescenzi, Corniolo della Cornia and Michelangelo Tanaglia, which were signs of a new attention to production, but also of new perceptions regarding the world of the countryside, set between *utilitas* (usefulness) and *delectatio* (pleasure)<sup>65</sup>.

Returning to the outline proposed for a general discussion on the world of the Italian countryside, it serves, as stated, as a sort of functional knowledge filter, not a fixed interpretation tool, in the knowledge that regional-level varieties and the assorted wealth and composition of the archival sources are essential elements for the history of the Italian countryside. It will provide guidelines for agricultural production rationalization and enhancement even in the most general economic and social contexts. Given these basics, remarks can more easily be made on the broader field of Italian economic development between the late Middle Ages and the modern age, especially in light of more recent reconsiderations on the general economic development<sup>66</sup>, the land market, and the relations between economics and the biological environment<sup>67</sup>. The same economic analyses relating to the previously mentioned new balances on a regional bases in the peninsula<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> MONTANARI, *Colture, lavori, tecniche, rendimenti* cit., p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> J.-L. GAULIN, *Trattati di agronomia e innovazione agricola*, in PH. BRAUNSTEIN, L. MOLÀ (eds), *Il rinascimento italiano e l'Europa*, III, *Produzione e tecniche*, Vicenza 2007, pp. 145-163.

<sup>66</sup> F. FRANCESCHI, L. MOLÀ, *L'economia del Rinascimento: dalle teorie della crisi alla preistoria del consumismo*, in M. FANTONI (ed), *Il rinascimento italiano e l'Europa*, I, *Storia e storiografia*, Vicenza 2005, pp. 185-200; A. GROHMANN, *Vecchie e nuove sensibilità nella storiografia economica italiana: le tematiche*, in F. AMMANNATI (ed), *Dove va la storia economica? Metodi e prospettive. Secc. XIII-XVIII*, Istituto Internazionale di Storia economica "F. Datini", Firenze 2011, pp. 25-37.

<sup>67</sup> S. CAVACIOCCHI (ed), *Le interazioni fra economia e ambiente biologico nell'Europa preindustriale. Secc. XIII-XVIII – Economic and Biological Interactions in pre-industrial Europe*, Istituto Internazionale di Storia economica "F. Datini", Firenze 2010.

<sup>68</sup> EPSTEIN, *I caratteri originali*, cit.

can be put to the test by specific elements that regard agriculture together with its related environment and history.

*9. Agriculture and economic development: the turn of the late Middle Ages*

One central element for the history of the Italian countryside thus comes out. In fact, in the field of agriculture, the Middle Ages did not end in an “irremediable depression”, an assumption that is contradicted by the “concentration of land assets in fewer hands and of the remaining laborers in the cultivation of the best lands. These two facts made it possible, especially on the more extensive properties, to reorganize the crops, rendering them more productive”<sup>69</sup>. The general drop in wheat prices, caused by the decrease in population and consequently in demand was actually compensated by the presence in Italy of those urban centers that, though reduced in size, were nonetheless of a certain size. The bargaining power of workers was also short-lived<sup>70</sup>, in the face of an economic restructuring by the town-based owners who looked at landed property with renewed interest. On these issues, Gabriella Piccinni has made remarkable contributions of synthesis, illustrating the “undiscovered crossroads” that was tackled by landowners and governments: preparing a “recovery of value, calling for land to produce more as well as for things that would sell better – in other words, strengthening agriculture, or settling for what could be provided without too much effort, thus favoring grazing and widespread grain farming”<sup>71</sup>. The first solution was the one adopted in those areas with more cities and towns, abounding with capital and commercial networks, and with the spread of *poderi mezzadrili*, sharecropping farms (and the first Tuscan *fattorie*<sup>72</sup>) and of irrigated agriculture and Lombard *cascina*, the typical Lombard large-scale farms<sup>73</sup>. In other areas, instead, there was

<sup>69</sup> G. PICCINNI, *La proprietà della terra, i percettori dei prodotti e della rendita*, in PINTO, PONI, TUCCI (eds), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, II, cit., pp. 145-168: 161.

<sup>70</sup> R. MUCCIARELLI, G. PICCINNI, *Un'Italia senza rivolte? Il conflitto sociale nelle aree mezzadrili*, in G. CHERUBINI (ed), *Protesta e rivolta contadina nell'Italia medievale*, «Istituto Alcide Cervi. Annali», 16 (1995), pp. 173-205; G. CHERUBINI, *L'Italia*, in M. BOURIN, G. CHERUBINI, G. PINTO (eds), *Rivolte urbane e rivolte contadine nell'Europa del Trecento. Un confronto*, Firenze 2008, pp. 93-104.

<sup>71</sup> PICCINNI, *La proprietà della terra*, cit., pp. 164-165; PICCINNI, *L'evoluzione della rendita fondiaria*, cit.

<sup>72</sup> G. CHERUBINI, *Scritti toscani. L'urbanesimo medievale e la mezzadria*, Firenze 1991; PINTO, *Toscana medievale* cit.

<sup>73</sup> L. CHIAPPA MAURI, *Paesaggi rurali di Lombardia. Secoli XII-XV*, Roma Bari 1990; EAD., *Terra e uomini nella Lombardia medievale*, Roma-Bari 1997; F. MENANT, *Campagnes Lombardes au*

the beginning of crop specializations<sup>74</sup>, various forms of forest and uncultivated land management<sup>75</sup>; and the codification of the main transhumant areas, like those in the marshy lowlands of Tuscany and Lazio and in the Apulian tableland<sup>76</sup>.

Although these solutions were strongly related to specific environments and climatic zones (the orography, soil, and morphology of the territory, coastal areas, water supply), which are profoundly diversified on the Italian peninsula, there were also, whether prudent or myopic, significant choices made by individuals, communities, and governments. Not to be underestimated, for example, is the role of the agricultural land valuation introduced by 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century cadasters (where present). Beyond the fiscal policies and aspects, they created a sort of land “accounting”, which was of some consequence in ensuring assessments for the land market and in maintaining the farm network in the countryside.

In addition, interest has been growing more recently in a particular player in land ownership that differs from landed property and from ecclesiastical or monastic holdings<sup>77</sup>. I am referring to charities, which became a kind of public enterprise, whose economic foundation was based on land management and the marketing of foodstuffs. It is a theme that has already been discussed, for instance, by Epstein regarding the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala in Siena<sup>78</sup>. However, interest in the charities has also been revived in the more comprehensive context of their capacity to invest

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*Moyen Âge. L'économie et la société rurales dans la région de Bergame, de Crémone et de Brescia du Xe au XIIIe siècle*, Roma 1993.

<sup>74</sup> MONTANARI, *Culture, lavori, tecniche, rendimenti* cit.

<sup>75</sup> B. ANDREOLLI, *L'uso del bosco e degli incolti*, in PINTO, PONI, TUCCI (eds), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, II, cit., pp. 123-144.

<sup>76</sup> Regulations relating to transhumance were almost concurrent: Siena's *dogana dei Paschi* (1419), the Patrimony of Saint Peter's *Dogana del bestiame* (1402-1424), the *Dohana Menae Pecudum* in Aragonese Apulia (1443): A. CORTONESI, *L'allevamento*, in *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana*, II, cit., pp. 83-121; LICINIO, *Uomini e terre*, cit.; D. CRISTOFERI, *La 'costruzione' della Dogana dei Paschi di Siena in Maremma (1353-1419)*, in I. DEL PUNTA, M. PAPERINI (ed), *La Maremma al tempo di Arrigo. Società e paesaggio nel Trecento. Continuità e trasformazioni*, Livorno 2015, pp. 121-131.

<sup>77</sup> F. SALVESTRINI, *Santa Maria di Vallombrosa. Patrimonio e vita economica di un grande monastero medievale*, Firenze 1998; R. COMBA, G.G. MERLO (ed), *L'abbazia di Staffarda e l'irradiazione cistercense nel Piemonte meridionale*, Cuneo 1999; ID. (eds), *Certosini e Cistercensi in Italia (secoli XII-XV)*, Cuneo 2000; C. CABY, *De l'éremitisme rural au monachisme urbain. Les camaldules en Italie à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Roma 1999.

<sup>78</sup> S. R. EPSTEIN, *Alle origini della fattoria toscana. L'ospedale della Scala di Siena e le sue terre (metà '200 – metà '400)*, Firenze 1986; G.C. ROMBY, *Le proprietà dell'ospedale degli Innocenti di Firenze. Documenti a cartografia sec. XVI-XVIII*, Pisa 2001; P. NANNI, *Impresa pubblica e proprietà fondiaria: il «Ceppo pe' poveri di Cristo» di Francesco di Marco Datini (Prato, XV secolo)*, «Rivista di storia dell'agricoltura», LIV, 2 (2014), pp. 93-130.

in production<sup>79</sup> and for the role of hospitals within the various towns and their works of solidarity<sup>80</sup>.

### 10. *New interests, “ancient” beliefs: agrarian landscapes*

Returning to the close mutual relation between the environment and historical events, the term “landscape”, as the synthesis of natural factors and man’s toil, is very often found in Italian historiography, among regional descriptions and local situations. However, new interests today have turned towards the history of the landscape and of the agrarian landscape<sup>81</sup>. There is in fact a tendency to flatten out the meaning of the transformations as we gradually go backwards in time until we identify “historical landscapes” with those seen at the dawn of the contemporary age. The continuing and slow change in the countryside must not overshadow the fact that there has always been discontinuity and change, even in more distant periods. Not to mention that, in the same definition of “landscape”, especially in a complex situation such as Italy’s, the sensible elements (forms and types) must be combined with other aspects such as natural (hydrography, soil properties, climate) or historical ones (agricultural structures, rural economies, local works) that are necessary to clarify what we can reconstruct in our visual restoration of the past.

Even in this context, the medieval centuries represent an important step for the history of the landscape as the events that we have pointed out have

<sup>79</sup> G. PINTO, *Formazione e gestione dei patrimoni fondiari degli istituti assistenziali cittadini (Italia, secoli XIII-XV)*, in F. AMMANNATI (ed), *Assistenza e solidarietà in Europa. Sec. XIII-XVIII*, Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica “F. Datini”, Firenze 2013, pp. 169-178; M. GAZZINI, *La fraternità come luogo di economia. Osservazioni sulla gestione delle attività e dei beni di ospedali e confraternite nell’Italia tardo-medievale*, in *ivi*, pp. 261-276; M. GAZZINI, A. OLIVIERI (eds), *L’ospedale, il denaro e altre ricchezze. Scritture e pratiche economiche dell’assistenza in Italia nel tardo medioevo*, «Reti Medievali Rivista», 17, 1 (2016) (<http://rivista.retimedievali.it>).

<sup>80</sup> G. PICCINNI, *Documenti per una storia dell’ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala di Siena*, «Summa», 2-5 (2013), pp. 1-29; G. PICCINNI, *Siena, il grano di Maremma e quello dell’ospedale. I provvedimenti economici del 1382*, «Bullettino senese di storia patria», CXX (2013), pp. 174-189; G. PICCINNI, *Siena 1309-1310: il contesto*, in N. GIORDANO, G. PICCINNI (eds), *Siena nello specchio del suo Costituto in volgare del 1309-1310*, Pisa 2014, pp. 15-36; P. NANNI, *Charitable Organizations as Social Economic Facilitators. The Case of the Ceppo of Francesco di Marco Datini*, in R. LEGGERO (ed), *Lavoro e impresa nelle società preindustriali. Labour and Business in Pre-Industrial Societies*, Mendrisio (CH) 2017, pp. 79-102.

<sup>81</sup> The European Convention on Landscape, signed in Florence in 2000, was the catalyst of these new interests, also from a historical point of view, although with some critical elements. See: P. NANNI, *Paesaggio e Storia*, «Ri-Vista. Ricerche per la progettazione del paesaggio», 2 (2012), pp. 26-33.

left indelible marks on the forms of settlement, on the rural dwellings, and in the radication of particular crops or cropping systems that have had a long history. Riccardo Rao's recent book<sup>82</sup>, offers numerous insights into the various Italian landscapes and their formation in the Middle Ages.

This special attention and necessary perspective, combining agricultural, historical, and environmental aspects, was behind an important conference dedicated to *Europe's Agrarian Landscapes* during the late Middle Ages, organized in 2013 by the Centro Italiano di Studi di Storia e d'Arte (Pistoia). The topic chosen and the continental dimension clearly expressed the interest in addressing the most important aspects of the countryside in Europe, even facing these new interests but with a determination to keep the "ancient" beliefs alive. These include the geographical area chosen (from the Atlantic to the Urals), a look at a Europe characterized by elements of unity in diversity (comparison but not particularism), the centrality of general historical events and their effects on rural areas and on the same landscapes. Here too, the titles of the sections were sufficiently explicit: the study *perspectives* (geography, archeology, sources for the narration of the landscape) were followed by speeches on *demolishing events, politics and effects on landscape* (the Mongolian invasion, the fall of Byzantium, the Reconquista, the Hundred Years' War, the German advance in the East, the Aegean, and the demographic crisis); then by *economies, techniques and landscapes* (transhumance, mills, irrigated agriculture in Italy and Spain, and forests); the *representation of landscapes* in iconographic sources; and the *countryside inside and around towns* (the Netherlands, northern Italy and Tuscany, and central Italy)<sup>83</sup>.

In addition to the substantial contents of synthesis collected in the book, the problems that arose for the definition of landscape itself and the crucial points for a correct discussion of the topic<sup>84</sup> can be mentioned: the difficulty coming from the many levels of observation, the integration of objective and subjective dimensions, the search for a rigorous approach

<sup>82</sup> R. RAO, *I paesaggi dell'Italia medievale*, Roma 2015. See also: E. CAMERLENGHI, V. REBONATO, S. TAMMACCARO (eds), *Il paesaggio Mantovano nelle tracce materiali, nelle lettere e nelle arti*, Firenze 2005.

<sup>83</sup> This is the list of speakers in order: A. Cortonesi (introduction), L. Rombai, J. Burnouf, G. Piccinni, L. Pubblici, M. Gallina, A. Malpica Cuello, M. Arnoux, M. Matheus, E. Basso, A. Grohmann, G. Cherubini, P. Racine, F. Menant e M. Campopiano, A. Furió, B. Andreolli, P. Mane, E. Neri, M. Boone, P. Nanni, A. Lanconelli and T. Leggio, and P. Iradiel (conclusions).

<sup>84</sup> CORTONESI, *Introduzione. Note sugli elementi ordinatori di alcuni paesaggi italiani (secc. XIII-XV)*, cit., pp. 1-32; P. IRADIEL, *Consideraciones conclusivas*, in *I paesaggi agrari d'Europa*, cit., pp. 627-639.

to the study of landscapes from an interdisciplinary perspective (history, archeology, art, geography, and ecology).

## *II. Concluding notes*

New interests and new sensibilities, originating from the challenges facing our world, have turned today to history with new attention to the intersections between agriculture and landscape, or between agriculture and the environment or natural disasters<sup>85</sup>. Although not new terms, they are being addressed with a new sensibility, requiring interdisciplinary skills and collaborations. In particular, the history of the environment or of climate today call for new approaches to history, making use of various types of sources (documentary data and proxy data).

Today we have a wealth of knowledge that enables us to collect and compare various types of data and to intercorrelate them within specific economic or ecological theories<sup>86</sup>. In this context, historical studies cannot ignore these new sensibilities and methods of study, nor can they give up their responsibilities and specific contributions<sup>87</sup>.

It is ultimately to those historical reasons (purposes, contingencies, needs, formulating responses, choices of people and communities) that we continually turn our attention, because we understand that there is always something that escapes mere description or data analysis. It is something we can focus on, investigate and assess in the short or the long run, but which always leaves something unresolved in our eyes. Besides, predictable outcomes belong to fictional reconstructions, not to the unpredictable twists of human life. Moreover, landscapes cannot be imagined without those who lived there. And it is this that, in hindsight, forms the emerging point of interest in history.

<sup>85</sup> M. MATHEUS, G. PICCINNI, G. PINTO, G.M. VARANINI (eds), *Le calamità ambientali nel tardo Medioevo europeo: realtà, percezioni, reazioni*, Firenze 2010.

<sup>86</sup> G. SERRELI, R.T. MELIS, CH. FRENCH, F. SULAS (eds), *Ecologia storica dei sistemi di lavoro contadino in Sardegna*, Cagliari 2017.

<sup>87</sup> P. NANNI, *Facing the crisis in medieval Florence: climate variability, «carestie» and forms of adaptation in the first half of the 14th century*, in *The Crisis of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century: 'Teleconnections' between Environmental and Societal Change?* (forthcoming); ID., *Per un quadro ambientale e biologico*, cit.