



INTO THE WOODS

Overlapping perspectives on the history of ancient forests

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Padua (Italy)

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MAKING A RURAL LANDSCAPE: ECOLOGICAL AND HUMAN DYNAMICS IN THE HOLM OAK FOREST OF MT. BARRAÙ (CORLEONE, PALERMO, C-W SICILY)

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The Harvesting Memories Project (funded by Bona Furtuna LLC) aims to investigate the long-term landscape transformations in the central part of the Alto Belice Corleonese (Central-Western Sicily). The case study area is formed by a sequence of gentle hills (Contrade Castro and Giardinello), rich in water springs that offer an optimal condition for agricultural exploitation, irregularly interrupted by the Mt. Barraù (1420 m a.s.l.) with steep and abrupt slopes in the south-west side. The study of this territory is approached by an holistic perspective to detect and evaluate the relationships and the interactions among human activities and the environment. The holm oak forest that covers part of the Mt. Barraù slopes – mentioned in a latin parchment dating to AD 1425 in the Tabularium of the monastery of Santa Maria del Bosco di Calatamauro – represents a sort of palimpsest in the interpretation of the rural landscape forming-processes. In fact, the application of a diachronic and ecological analysis on this woodland displayed the correlation between the habitat characteristics, vegetation dynamics and human activities. A comparative study made on the aerial images showed the absence in the mid-20th century photogram of the lush trees which today growing on Mt Barraù. The decline of the wood as fuel resource occurred after the development of electrification in rural areas may explain the regression of intensive cutting activities since 1950s. These types of changes testify the close interconnection between human practices and the landscape layout that is especially recognizable in the vegetation series. The vegetation series is composed by all plant communities, stages of the same ecological succession process, that can be found within an area with homogeneous environmental conditions (Land Unit). They are defined in relation to the Potential Natural Vegetation resulting to successional process. In the study area, the distribution of the holm oak forest series (*Ampelodesmo mauritanici-Quercu ilicis* sigmetum) indicates the process of formation of grazing lands and the spatial patterns of the land suitability for forestry and pastoral activities. The ecological and historical contextualization of the Mt Barraù woodland has proven decisive for understanding the intrinsic characteristics, suitabilities and transformations of the landscape.