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Paradise Lost of the Landscape-cultural Mosaic.
Attractiveness, Harmony, Atarassia

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Il Paradiso perduto del Mosaico paesistico-culturale.
Attrattività, Armonia, Atarassia

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**ATTRACTIVENESS AND DYNAMISM.
REDISCOVERY OF AN ENCHANTING SICILIAN LANDSCAPE
BETWEEN NATURE, MYTH AND ARCHEOLOGY**

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***Abstract.** Sicily has always been a favorite destination for tourists and travelers, but also writers, painters and photographers who, at different moments and with subjective experiences, have described history, city development, architectures and the beauty of the landscape. A landscape that has been and continues to be, a source of inspiration for artists, poets and writers of all ages and origins. Our focus is on the rediscovery of the magical landscape of the Kolymbethra Garden, within the Archaeological and Landscape Park of the Valley of the Temples of Agrigento, a UNESCO world heritage site. Through a multidisciplinary approach, we want to know the value and varieties of the historic agrarian landscape of the Garden - a place of cultural development and tourist attraction - and to stimulate the curiosity (inherent in the human being), creativity, and desire to explore in potential users, but above all the desire to know and to get to know an enchanted place of great attraction that has no equal.*

***Keywords:** attractiveness, dynamism, nature, landscape, archaeology*

1. Introduction

The history of Sicily - a land of conquest and subject of numerous dominations - is full of events. The historic and artistic heritage of Sicily is in fact the result of influences of peoples who have succeeded one another over the centuries, it conserves their signs, preserves their values, and hands their meaning over to future generations. Thanks to its strategic location, geographically barycentric in the Mediterranean Sea, it has long been a cradle of ancient civilizations, a center of political interests and trade. For the beauty of its landscape, it has been, and continues to be, inspirational muse of artists and writers who have acclaimed its uniqueness and the fascination of its places (Cilona, 2017).

Through this study you will rediscover the Garden of Kolymbethra, one of the most beautiful and magical Sicilian landscapes: an enchanting site set within the area of the Archaeological and Landscape Park of the Valley of the Temples of Agrigento, winner of the 2017 Landscape Award for the project "AGRI GENTIUM: Landscape Regeneration" (1), and Italian candidate at the Council of Europe Landscape Award. A landscape of great potential for the socio-cultural, tourism and economic development of the city, which together with the

illustrious landscape of the Valley of the Temples, linked to the cultivation of the almond and the olive, represents a unique and exceptionally rare landscape of irrigated arboriculture. This study, through an interdisciplinary approach, aims to rediscover the values and variety of this landscape and to stimulate in users (present and future) an attraction, an interest, a thirst for knowledge for a *paradise* that seemed lost and since 2001 has finally been rediscovered (Fig.1).

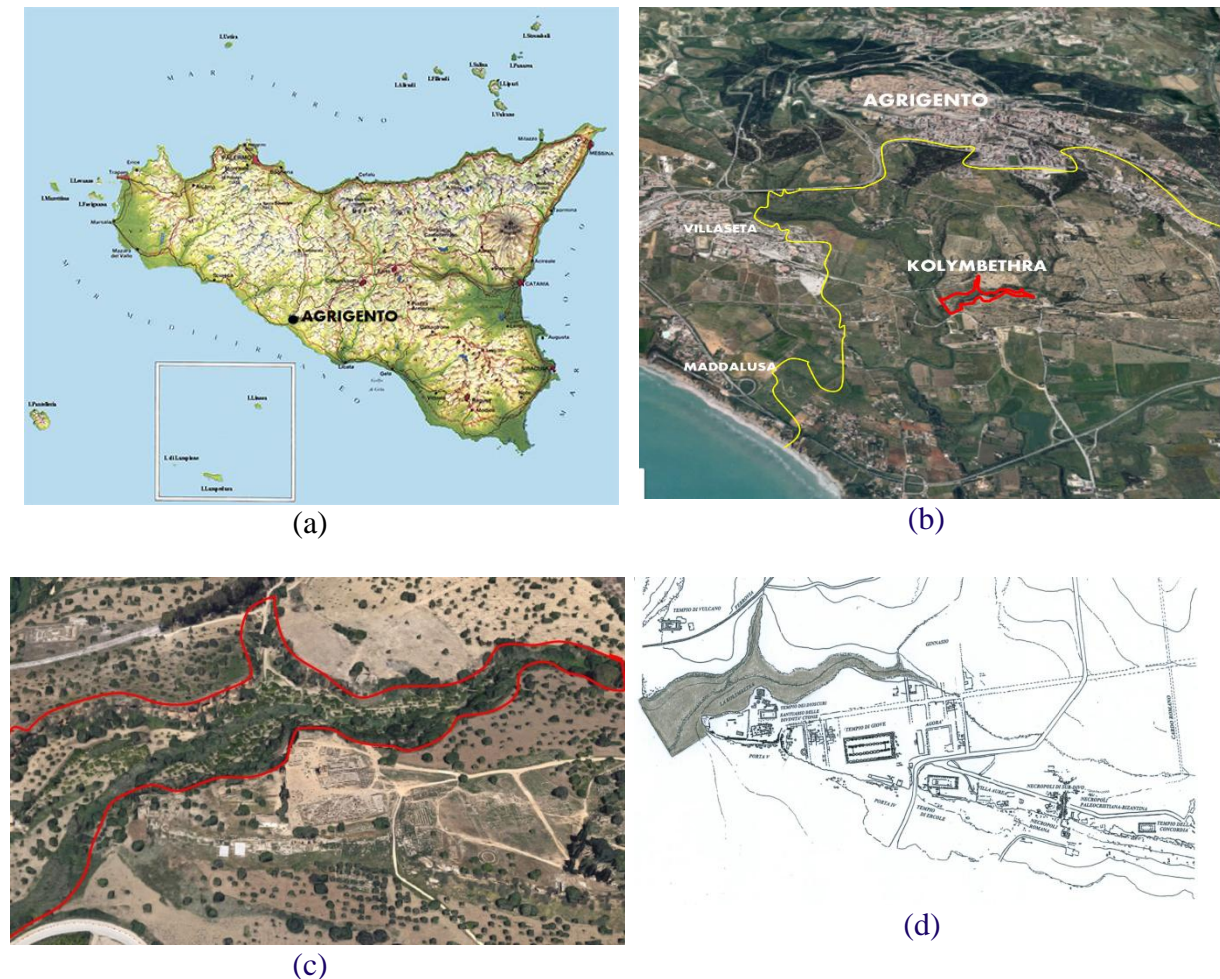


Figure 1. a) Agrigento in Sicily; b) Aerial photo: Agrigento and the Kolymbethra Garden (in red) in the Valley of Temples area (in yellow), c) Aerial photo: the area of the garden is highlighted in red, d) The Kolymbethra Garden in the Valle of the Temples, a drawing by M. Ala.

2. The Garden between Degradation and Redevelopment

As mentioned previously, Kolymbethra is a Garden (2) cultivated in a small six-hectare valley at the western end of the Hill of Temples, between the Temple of Dioscuri and the Temple of Vulcan.

The place was described as a Greek pool (κολυμβήθρα = swimming pool, bath, cistern, fish pond) by Diodoro Siculo (Miccichè, 1992), who wrote about the work being done by Carthaginian slaves after the Battle of Himera (480 B.C.). The Garden, originally constructed as a water reservoir or “*Pool of the Gods*”

(Kolymbethra) for the city of Akragas during Greek rule in the 5th century B.C. was fed by the ancient Feaci Aqueducts, which can still be observed today.

It is a site featured in historical-literary (3), sources, in the iconography of Grand Tour travelers, and in other stories and pictorial images throughout history. In more recent times the area was, for many decades, unused and left to itself and featured countless types of trash which reduced a part of the cultivated area to the function of a landfill (Fig. 2a&b). The thicket of weeds and thorns concealed a long history of agricultural production based on the fertility of the alluvial soil, the abundance of water and a mild microclimate provided year round by the walls of calcarenite.

The Mediterranean scrub was present with large myrtle and terebinth specimens, while the degradation concealed what was left of an ancient citrus garden and in non-irrigated areas, the dry arboretum of almond and olive groves (Barbera, La Mantia, Ala, 2005).

The Kolymbethra Garden was in danger of disappearing due to the abandonment of cultivation to which it seemed destined, until 1998 when the FAI (Italian Environment Fund) was granted use of the area for 25 years in return for environmental and landscape restoration, aimed at the conservation of soil and land-use, species, antique varieties, traditional farming techniques, the Mediterranean scrub and hydrophilic vegetation that follows the course of the Hypsas River.

Upon project completion, the Garden has been open to the public since 2001 with the aim of returning an invaluable agricultural and cultural landscape to visitors, and today, is included in a visit to the Valley of the Temples (Fig. 2c &d).

A vast green area that, because of its surprising fertility resembles - as described at the end of the nineteenth century by Abbot Jean-Claude Richard de Saint-Non (1782) - a *valley of Eden* or a *corner of the promised land*. A place of peace and serenity (*atarassico*), that recapitulates the agrarian and natural landscape of the Valley of the Temples, where immersed and inebriated by the perfumes of nature, it is possible to admire, together with the archaeological artifacts, the Mediterranean scrub, the extraordinary biodiversity of citrus (4) and other fruit-bearing trees. Among these, as testament to an elevated and specific biodiversity, we find: azerole, banana, carob, quince, fig, prickly-pear, white mulberry, black mulberry, persimmon, pomegranate, loquat, common medlar, pistachio, and service-tree.

Along the watercourse, which crosses the Garden, there is a large cane thicket, whose presence was described in an ancient parchment from 1225 (Collura, 1960), along with a vegetation of poplars, tamarisks and willows. On the steep calcarenite walls - which surround and protect the Kolymbethra - a Mediterranean scrub of rare beauty is represented by laurels with scented leaves and recognized antiseptic properties, olivastri (similar to olives but wild), mastic, phillyrea, Mediterranean buckthorn, dwarf palms and the tree spurge,

which gives the landscape unique color variations with its changing multi-chromatic hues.

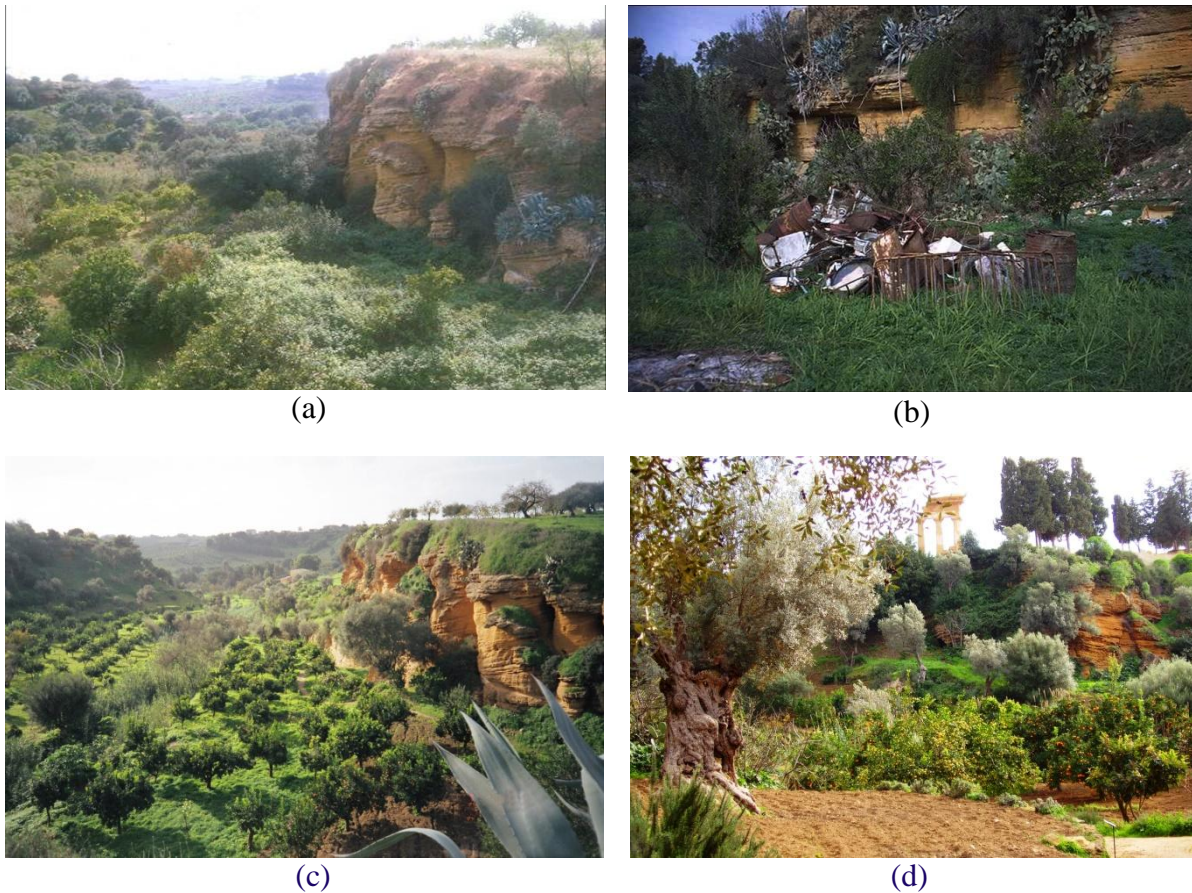


Figure 2. a&b) The Kolymbethra Garden: prior to environmental recovery operations; c&d) After FAI intervention.

The myrtles, which typically fall into the shrub category among the scrub species, have been listed as monumental trees in the catalog “*Great Trees of Sicily*” for their exceptional sizes and shapes, together with the gigantic “*Saracen*” olive trees, by Pirandello mentioned (Fig. 3). And still we see the traditional landscape of irrigated arboriculture, the vegetable garden - with its antique varieties of vegetables - the underground or hypogean caves, which are particularly suggestive for the fact that they were dug by humans in the fossiliferous calcarenite from the Pleistocene. Accessibility to the site is guaranteed by an easy-to-use network of dirt paths, that can be traveled on foot or by bicycle - rebuilt thanks to the historical memory of older farmers and the discovery of the original traces in the ground. The paths are included in the planning of the environmental itineraries recently developed by the Valley of the Temples Archaeological and Landscape Park, called “*Environmental Routes*” and “*Green Ways*”.

The latter are connected to different parts of the garden and lead the visitor to scenic or significant places from a cultural and landscape point of view

(hypogea, monumental trees, archaeological remains). Additionally, with the idea to make better use of the Kolymbethra landscape, and to better promote tourism and socio-cultural events, the antique railroad line between Agrigento and Porto Empedocle (Cilona, 2016) has been reactivated, which crosses the southwestern part of the Archaeological Park and stops at the Temple of Vulcan, giving us the possibility to arrive directly inside the Valley with the historic train (5).



Figure 3. The gigantic “Saracen” olive trees.

3. An exemplary environmental regeneration experience: a dynamic and attractive landscape to “listen, live, and taste.”

The descriptions made thus far identify the Garden as a beautiful outdoor museum, to “look at” and not to “touch;” something static and immobile in its perfection.

Kolymbethra, on the other hand, following the project of environmental regeneration, is an evolving and constantly changing landscape.

In fact, it allows visitors to interact and dialogue with the surrounding area as well as to enjoy the beauty of a changing place throughout the various seasons of the year.

In spring, the citrus and other fruiting trees are covered with thousands of flowers that give off a unique aroma, where the inebriating perfume of the *zàgara* (orange) flower prevails.

In summer, thanks to the evergreen foliage of many cultivated species, it is one of the few places in the sunny Valley of Temples where it is possible to enjoy the shade and cooler temperatures.

In autumn and in winter, however, it is a triumph of colors with fruiting citrus with shades ranging from orange to deep red.

It is a place where you can “listen” (Cilona, 2017) to the sounds of nature, the humming of the bees during pollination, the chirping of birds, the flow of water,

the sound of the wind rustling the leaves of the different herbaceous and shrubby species, changing from time to time.

Users enjoying the garden enjoy the charm and sense of wellbeing, assisting with various operations necessary for its maintenance and preservation, participating in cultural events organized in different periods throughout the year.

All this creates a *vitality* characterized by the multi-functionality typical of traditional agrarian landscapes, where not only the productive functions but also the environmental, cultural, social, ethical and aesthetic features are included.

Indeed, the Kolymbethra Garden's valorization initiatives are numerous, as a dynamic tourist attraction with more than 80,000 visitors annually, and include:

- Scientific work to disseminate knowledge about the biodiversity of the garden;
- Production of informational materials that accompany the sale and processing of citrus fruits in jams and confectionery products(6);
- Pomological exhibitions on the ripening times of fruit trees;
- Contracts and agreements with other associations for the valorization of the place and of products grown within the area;
- Creation of teaching paths(7) to help future generations become aware of the great value of the landscape, home of an extraordinary biodiversity and a material culture on the path to extinction;
- The opportunity to live a rich experience of cultural, educational and sensory stimuli and to rediscover the ancient farming culture, the traditional uses of many species, and the classic myths related to cultivated plants, archaeological artefacts (hypogea, latomies, etc.), and those related to the old irrigation system.

In fact, users have the opportunity to “live” the garden through a series of activities that pass through direct observation of the places and events: the fruit harvest, pruning, dry stone construction, ordinary maintenance and extraordinary work, traditional irrigation.

Of particular interest is the moment of irrigation of the garden cultivated under the citrus trees and conducted according to ancient agronomic practices inherited from Islamic civilization.

The water coming from several hypogee, which still function perfectly after 2500 years, is accumulated in the “gebbie” (ancient collection pools), and from these passes into “saje” (masonry or beaten earth pipes open to the air), and then arrives at the “cunnutti” (earthen channels) that bring water into the “casedde” (basins made around the trunk of the tree) and from here to the “vattali” (earthen embankments) which are important for increasing efficiency of the irrigation (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. a) Schematic drawing, b) Irrigation system.

Among the various activities to be done within the garden are also the didactic workshops dedicated to school children (Fig. 5a). Painting experiences *en plein air*, clay modeling, simulated archaeological excavations, visits in typical costumes (fig. 5b), botanical workshops in order to develop greater sensitivity, skills, a knowledge of the historical-artistic and natural heritage, a culture of beauty, a sense of legality and environmental protection. For some years, you can explore one of the most fascinating tracts of the hypogee network (or underground galleries) excavated by Carthaginian prisoners for the creation of the Kolymbethra.



Figure 5. Moments of the didactic workshops dedicated to school children.

Accompanied by expert speleologists who illustrate the ancient techniques of gallery excavation, and equipped with helmets and torches, it is possible to observe the traces left in the calcarenite, the presence of marine fossils in the rock and many other curiosities that make the visit a real adventure (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. a&b) Panoramic view of the hypogee, c,d &e) Details the hypogee system.

4. Scientific research and actions to utilize an illustrious archaeological site

The Garden lends itself to several studies: historical, literary, iconographic, urban planning, archaeological, naturalistic, geological, botanical. Numerous analyzes have been carried out for scientific research, protection, conservation, and the utilization of the resources present.

In this regard, in the botanical field, we would like to point out the pomological exhibition on citrus biodiversity, organized within the *Plant Genetic Resources Project of Sicily* - carried out in 2006, in the Garden, in collaboration between the Department of Agricultural Sciences and Forestry in Palermo, the DO.FA.TA Department in Catania, the Research and Experimentation Council in Agriculture (CRA), the National Research Council (CNR), the Agriculture and Forestry Department of the Sicilian Region, and the Decentralized Development Services of the territory.

After the exhibition, a PhD thesis - entitled "*Restoration, Conservation and Characterization of the Citrus Garden of the Kolymbethra Historical Garden*"

(Ala, 2010) - highlighted the ancient genetic richness of the garden that risked disappearing due to decades of abandonment and neglect.

A risk that, unfortunately, has been recorded and recorded even in other parts of the island where citrus systems are present. The citrus varieties, together with many other species, that are not adapted to dominant global market necessities and by now overcome as a result of an increasingly dynamic varietal update, can only be found as plants strewn about in areas of old citri-culture, in amateur gardens or in collections held at public institutions. The genetic erosion to which they are subjected is the prelude to their definitive disappearance, and concerns precisely the genetic entities that possess a high historical-cultural value that must be preserved, maintained and utilized.

Unfortunately, in Italy, over the past 50 years, many of the landscapes of the Italian agricultural tradition have disappeared because they are based on agronomic techniques and genetic resources that are not suited to the dominant global market needs and to a more efficient production.

The landscapes of historic agriculture have undergone extensive transformations due to the productive intensification of specialized fruit-growing processes, and their abandonment has had negative consequences in terms of environmental risk, loss of territorial identity and peculiarities of the landscape. These are landscapes that are naturally and historically linked to fruit trees, whose productions represent a living testimony to local history and culture, which are not homogeneous to others (12). Along with them, ancient biological diversity often disappears, as well as ancient material cultures that are difficult to reproduce, landscapes that have characterized the identity of an entire geographic region. That is why we are led to support the thesis that the ancient citri-cultural heritage of the Kolymbethra Garden is an important part of the Sicilian landscape and cultural mosaic to be protected, safeguarded, and utilized. The Garden recognizes the value of beauty linked to the shape of the trees, the color and flavor of fruits, the fascination that comes from the phenomenon of continuous flowering (fruits and flowers that occur uninterrupted throughout the seasons, the shade and coolness assured by the evergreen tree cover).

Archaeological and city planning studies are expected in the coming months for further excavation campaigns to bring to light the dense network of irrigation channels that unfold in the Garden - using non-invasive techniques like magnetometry - to reveal parts still hidden in the ancient urban facility, such as the recent find of the theater that represents a turning point for scientists, especially in the fields of urban planning and archeology.

In addition to scientific research, the Garden is a source of interesting cultural, social and tourist projects. Among these we mention the convention signed in May 2016, with the "Temenos Space" - within the former Church of St. Peter (no longer consecrated in the old town of Agrigento) - which joins together in network two of the most important assets of the city.

To the many socio-cultural initiatives organized there (conferences, book presentations, movie projections, thematic concerts, etc.), is added the adoption of the Kolymbethra Garden, the products of which are directly used in the kitchens of the “Terra Cotta Restaurant”, situated in the rectory of the former Church of St. Peter. In this way you can taste dishes with authentic flavors characterized by the genuineness of raw materials coming directly from the Garden of Kolymbethra.

And finally, in 2017, the tourist-cultural partnership with Farm Cultural Park of Favara (a contemporary cultural center for aggregation and conceptual projects) that organizes innovative events several days of the year that bring forward the feelings and creativity of Garden users.

Conclusions

The investigations discussed thus far describe an exemplary intervention of environmental and cultural requalification, available in other territorial contexts, carried out thanks to the FAI and collaboration with the Park Authority through a series of emotional activities and experiences aimed at the recovery of the historical memory of the traditional farming landscape and the production of exceptional quality food. Interventions aimed at produce physical and psychological well-being for visitors, as well as contributing to the economic development of the city. A multifunctional model has been outlined in the "active" preservation of the landscape in order to maintain a harmonious interaction between nature and culture through landscape protection:

- To ensure the traditional use of the soil, preserving artifacts and social and cultural expressions; to support a lifestyle and economic activities in harmony with nature as well as the culture of the communities concerned;
- To maintain the diversity of the landscape and habitat; to preserve intra-species biodiversity, between species and between ecosystems; to avoid inappropriate land use and activities;
- To create opportunities for the public related to appropriate recreational and leisure activities; to create economic opportunities linked to local products and tourism services;
- To develop cooperation between public and private actors as a force for active landscaping and environmental regeneration.

In summary, these are elements aimed at sensitizing the community to a site of unparalleled beauty that combines the natural features of the landscape with man's wisdom.

Summary

Sicily is endowed with a great variety of natural and cultural landscapes. This study examines the magical landscape of the Kolymbethra Garden in different forms and typologies, according to different points of view and different types of technical and scientific expertise.

Our aim is to raise awareness the people to rediscover a Sicilian landscape - the historic agrarian landscape of the Garden - through a series of emotional experiences and activities that only this place can offer. The garden is a place of cultural development and tourist attraction where between myth, nature and archaeology you can admire and rediscover a patrimony of unrivalled value.

Notes

- (1) The project is based on cooperation between the Park Authority and some public and private partners (Palermo Agricultural and Forestry Sciences Department, Val Paradiso Company, the FAI - Kolymbethra Garden, Kaos Railways and the CVA Company of Canicattì) with the aim of sustainable development of the resources present. Actions among these subjects generate high quality products of a traditional nature through the use of agronomic practices of the antique Sicilian tradition in order to combine production, protection and enjoyment of the territory. Also important is the recovery of the historical railroad line between Agrigento and Porto Empedocle, unused for many years and resumed in 2010 by the State Railways Foundation and the Kaos Railroad Association.
- (2) In Sicily, traditional citrus groves are called “gardens” to emphasize the usefulness and beauty they enclose.
- (3) Among others: Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe in 1817, Gaston Vuillier in 1896, Luigi Pirandello in 1913, Ernest Jünger in 1929, Andrea Camilleri in 2004.
- (4) One of the last Sicilian “gardens” characterized by ancient varieties of lemons, mandarins and oranges, irrigated according to water saving techniques.
- (5) Tourists on board self-propelled cars in the 1970s, moving slowly along the historic Kaos railway, enjoying the scenic landscapes, visiting the Valley of the Temples Archaeological Park, the Kolymbethra Garden, through Kaos land, until reaching the Turkish Steps, the impressive white cliff overlooking the sea.
- (6) Citrus fruits are transformed into high-quality jams, highly appreciated by many garden visitors, and are sold or shipped, often with crates of citrus. The visitor has the opportunity to “taste” various types of jam and citrus-based confectionery products directly on the benches set up at the Kolymbethra ticket office bookshop. Since 2011 part of the lemon production of the Garden, is transformed into special sweets called “Foglia Allegra” (Happy Leaf): a lemon leaf to which is added a crunchy treat consisting of almonds, walnuts, raisins and honey.
- (7) Particular attention is paid to young students, in order to raise awareness amongst them about the protection and preservation of the artistic-environmental heritage and biodiversity of the garden. Experience underlines how the Garden stands out against the modern, intensive monoculture fruit systems, which, though more productive and efficient, are devoid of the smells, flavors, colors and shapes that only the landscapes of traditional agriculture can conserve, as depositors of ancient knowledge, productive and environmental values.

Attributions. This work is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration of the authors.

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