

# LOST AND FOUND

Processes of abandonment of the architectural and urban heritage  
in inner areas. Causes, effects, and narratives (Italy, Albania, Romania)

Edited by Annunziata Maria Oteri

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## L'abbandono in prospettiva. Interpretazioni e nuove aperture

Annunziata Maria Oteri (Politecnico di Milano)

*Il saggio sintetizza e fa il quadro dei temi aperti dalla ricerca Lost and Found, partendo da una riflessione su quanto, in generale, la narrazione degli eventi che hanno generato l'abbandono abbia influenzato il senso di appartenenza delle comunità che hanno subito la perdita e come ciò possa influenzare le possibili strategie di recupero del patrimonio costruito. Si tratta di delineare le premesse per la definizione di quell'“indicatore di vitalità” per il quale la ricerca ha posto le basi e che sarà oggetto di approfondimento in un prossimo futuro. Questo aspetto è poi strettamente legato a uno dei principali temi di ricerca: la propensione alla cura del patrimonio culturale e naturale che queste comunità sviluppano o mancano di sviluppare e la loro capacità di sostenerlo nel tempo. Le pratiche di cura di questi luoghi sono infatti il punto di partenza di qualsiasi strategia di riutilizzo che si possa immaginare. Nella cornice dei risultati raccolti, il saggio infine segnala le questioni aperte dalla ricerca che riguardano la necessità di trovare, in alcuni casi, una via di alternativa al riuso dei patrimoni abbandonati o al loro completo abbandono. Tempi della ricerca, linguaggi e modalità di comunicazione tra i soggetti coinvolti e definizione di strumenti di “misura” dei risultati che si intende ottenere sono nodi sostanziali nella strutturazione di un modello interpretativo per la definizione di strategie a lungo termine.*

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aree interne. Cause, effetti, narrazioni (Italia, Albania Romania)

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# Abandonment in Perspective. Interpretations and New openings

Annunziata Maria Oteri

«The world in itself is [...] the immense archive of itself [...] After all, nothing can be lost from this archive because its energy quantity is constant, and everything seems to leave a trace somewhere»<sup>1</sup>

Is it possible to repopulate the Grecanica and Locride areas in Calabria, the abandoned villages of the Drino Valley in Albania, or the rural villages in the Argeş County, in Romania? Indeed, responding to the question was not the aim of the *Lost and Found* study. As already mentioned, the main goal of the research was to test a history-based method to study the effects of architectural heritage abandonment in marginal areas affected by depopulation. Analyses and considerations that have been gathered in the volume are the result of this approach, which is also territory-based, and adopted by the research group to portray the current conditions of the studied areas, mainly focusing on causes, effects, and narrative. As will be seen later, the research outcome is a significant proposal of new themes that must be addressed to move to the operational phase. However, as always happens when dealing with territories, especially with a multidisciplinary approach, the desire to at least attempt a methodological and critical reflection on the future of the studied villages and settlements is great.

This concluding essay, rather than taking stock of what has been done in the two years of research, attempts to outline the themes unearthed by the *Lost and Found* research, starting from the impact of the narrative of abandonment (and how it affected the sense of belonging of communities who suffered the loss) and how it influences possible strategies for built heritage recovery, hence the

1. SCHALANSKY 2020, p. 21 (translation by the author).

assessment of a “potential vitality” that remains an open question in the research. An attentive study of the narrative surrounding abandonment processes in the studied areas is helpful if it relates to the sense of belonging to those places that the involved communities develop or maintain over time. This aspect is closely connected to one of the leading research topics: A propensity for the care for cultural and natural heritage these communities lack or develop and their ability to sustain it over time. Caretaking practices of these places are indeed the starting point of any reuse strategy one can imagine. An additional premise is necessary for grounding any possible discourse on the destiny of abandoned heritage in inner areas: Looking at abandonment in perspective means becoming aware of the fact that, aside from the natural disasters that have variously affected these places, one cannot ignore that their crisis is a faithful, but often invisible, reflection of the decline of the rural world and the parallel rise of the urban myth to those studying these phenomena.

When discussing returning or hindering the abandonment, this significant paradigm shift cannot be overlooked, – the “depeasantification” quoted by Agostino Petrillo in this volume – that occurred in the past century, which is, in many ways, irreversible.

### *1. Abandonment and relocation in Calabria from the historical chronicles*

In an interesting report from 1954, Umberto Zanotti Bianco affirmed that «disasters do not justify the relocation of entire populations from their native places. These populations must be immediately settled, even temporarily, while waiting for permanent housing in safe areas near their work lands»<sup>2</sup>. He reached these conclusions after having studied the problem of floods in Calabria, particularly the case of Africo (fig. 1), for a long time, along with the governmental strategies for forced relocation of the communities involved far from their native places.

There is a gap between the official narrative of those years<sup>3</sup>, which announced the relocation of the populations along the coast, and the reflections of figures like Zanotti Bianco, who insisted on the necessity of investing in the safety of the territory and keeping the communities in areas close to the original ones. As Agostino Petrillo rightly points out, the political choice to relocate the

2. «Disasters in no way justify the relocation of entire populations from their native homes. These populations must immediately be settled, even temporarily and while awaiting permanent housing, in safe areas close to their working lands.», ZANOTTI BIANCO 1954, p. 462 (translation by the author). On the origin of the discourses about Africo see also SANSA in this volume, pp. 90-105

3. Chronicles from the national and local newspapers are greatly helpful in this sense; see SCAGLIA, VALIANTE in this volume, pp. 324-351.

settlements struck by floods along the coast reflects the effects of rapid industrialization processes, which regard the "old village" as the legacy of a backward and conservative peasant world<sup>4</sup>. It is also demonstrated by the portrayal of poverty and despair that emerges in newspaper narratives, contrasting with the hope and optimism expressed by those who wanted to return to their places of origin following the event. According to the press at that time, which recorded the conditions of the Calabrian towns after the 1951 flood, Africo – one of the small inner villages most affected by the flood – represented «a silent reproach to society» already before the catastrophic event. However, journals often emphasised that although the flood had swallowed Africo, some lands were said to be still restorable,

«but the relative expense would be [...] extremely burdensome both due to the lack of labour and the difficulty of transporting materials, and would far exceed the value of the lands themselves. On the other hand, the owners express a certain reluctance to spend large sums on restoring lands that, regardless of the work done, would still yield the same meagre income as before and from which the new urban centre is over 20 km away on an inaccessible road»<sup>5</sup>.

The other issue that was raised by the national and local press concerned the fact that, after the flood, pastoralism could no longer be practiced as in the past due to the reduction of pastureland caused by the flood<sup>6</sup>, the instability of the terrain between landslides, and the protective restrictions that the Forestry Corps would sooner or later have to impose for the management of the basins<sup>7</sup>.

Two years after the flood, the situation was still at a standstill, as evidenced by local chronicles which highlighted the drama of Africo's «shepherds without a nativity scene»<sup>8</sup> - while also drawing a somewhat victimized comparison with what had simultaneously happened in Polesine<sup>9</sup>. A few

4. See PETRILLO in this volume, pp. 354-373. On the topic see also KEALY 2020.

5. LICONTI 1953a (no pagination).

6. According to the reports of the time, the estimate from the Ministry of Agriculture indicated that 65% of the cultivated land was destroyed or otherwise not restorable, and 35% was recoverable; about 600 families were displaced out of a total population of 2,970; LICONTI 1953, (no pagination). To address the employment issue of Africo's inhabitants resettled on the coast, the government had introduced a measure that provided for the transfer of ownership of the land destroyed or damaged by the flood to the State Forestry Agency - the purchase of the land by the Sila Land Reclamation Agency to be assigned to the families of Africo resettled in the new coastal centre - this was done to ensure the continuation of traditional activities; *Ibidem*.

7. B.P. 1953.

8. LICONTI 1953b (translation by the author).

9. «For those advanced and fortunate lands, everything has returned to normal thanks to the government's vigilant, constant [...] involvement. [...] However, very little has been done for the poor and bleak people of the forsaken Calabria»; *Ibidem* (translation by the author).

families had already settled in the new village. Still, most displaced people lived in neighbouring towns in the province of Reggio Calabria, essentially dependent on the State, creating significant economic and social problems. The tone of the requests made by local politicians and the intellectual and expert community was different, at least in the early stages. Among the documents from the State Archives of Reggio Calabria, fragments reveal a desire to stay or at least to move closer to their native land:

«Regarding the relocation of Africo – reads a letter addressed to the Undersecretary for War Damage<sup>10</sup> – I must inform you that [...] contrary to the decisions made by the authorities under the Ministry of Public Works, which would like to rebuild the new town in the territory of Bianco, I found that such reconstruction is feasible in the same mountainous area as the old municipality, right near the municipality of Bova Superiore. This solution would be more in line with the wishes of the majority of Africo's inhabitants and would meet the criteria of social necessity»<sup>11</sup>.

Fuelled by the national press, the prevailing narrative suggested a "tug of war" between nature that destroys and the state that intrepidly rebuilds what has been destroyed. This effort was considered by many to be useless, given that these partial and unsystematic investments, as well as being disconnected from an overall vision of the problem, did not generate any new wealth but, ultimately, merely restored what had been lost<sup>12</sup>. In short, as Francesco Saverio Nitti and Giustino Fortunato had already pointed out half a century earlier, Calabria was a «crumbling landmass hanging over the sea»<sup>13</sup>, and, in 1953, Corrado Alvaro defined it as a «collapsing land, constantly under repair»<sup>14</sup>.

These feelings then became a certainty when a new flood in October 1953, which partly struck the same areas already destroyed by the previous one, revealed the fragility of the little that had been done so far. In a lucid reflection on the damage caused by the 1953 flood, Alvaro reflected on the long-standing bad habit, rooted in the past, of viewing public works in Calabria as a remedy to counter seasonal unemployment, a social palliative to which both businesses and workers had adapted over

10. The author signs with initials and tracing their identity has not been possible.

11. Archivio di Stato di Reggio Calabria, Prefettura di Reggio Calabria, Fondo Ufficio provinciale di assistenza post-bellica, *Trasferimento e costruzione di Africo Nuovo del 1952-1953*, fascicolo 96, Lettera al Sottosegretario di Stato ai Danni di Guerra, on. Gennaro Cassiani, Roma 29 settembre 1952. See also BUTTIGLIONE in this volume, pp. 106-125.

12. *Un discorso* 1954.

13. The expression «a crumbling landmass hanging over the sea» is quoted by a Member of Parliament, Mario Alicata, in session of Atti parlamentari, Legislatura II, Discussioni, seduta pomeridiana, 29 October 1953, p. 3840 (translation by the author).

14. ALVARO 1953.

time<sup>15</sup>. Alvaro also reflected on the fact that, since the last report on the Calabrian economy, written by the Bourbon government in 1834, the problems outlined had remained essentially unchanged. What had to be added, in his view, was «the destruction carried out by speculators lacking civic responsibility and by needy and inexperienced municipalities, of its forest cover, that is its natural defence»<sup>16</sup>. The consequences of this destruction – as Alvaro sustained – were not clearly perceived except when devastating floods created a cataclysm «that changes [...] the configuration of the land, levels mountains, covers valleys, and prepares the collapse of villages on the slopes». It is only then that the state intervenes, spending large sums to reinforce crumbling villages, but after a few years «cracks already mark and break the bastions holding back the land»<sup>17</sup>.

The issue of land protection and the ineffectiveness of state action mostly aimed at solely repairing damage resurfaced not only in the local press but also in parliamentary discussions and debates where, even in 1957, the government's inability, especially in Calabria, to make land protection a central issue in policies for the future of the country, rather than an emergency issue, was criticised<sup>18</sup>.

On the other hand, from the debates arising around the laws promoted by the government to reclaim southern areas affected by floods in Calabria, some scholars and even the opposition pointed

15. «Half a century of such practices in allocating state money has created a mentality in which it is no longer clear who is the deceived and who is the deceiver. The state has not gained prestige from it, and the governments have never acquired solidarity; they lose it» («Mezzo secolo di una tale pratica nella destinazione del denaro dello Stato ha creato una mentalità per cui non si sa più chi sia l'ingannato e chi l'ingannatore. Lo Stato non vi ha guadagnato in prestigio, i Governi non vi hanno mai acquistato solidarietà. La perdono»), ALVARO 1953, (no pagination) (translation by the author).

16. *Ibidem*.

17. *Ibidem*.

18. «Perhaps - denounced Mario Alicata - in certain old leadership groups of our country, confidence in themselves has waned, and they have shrunk into greedy and selfish inertia [...] no longer believing in the possibility of economic development and the entire fabric of life in our country, and they are only seeking to extract the maximum immediate profit from agriculture. However, the homeland [...] is something entirely different [...]; the homeland is made up of the people; and today, not only is there confidence in the future among the people, moreover, there is broad and bright confidence in the future. For this reason, they demand that the state intervenes in defence of this primordial good, which is the land on which they must work and produce» («Forse - denunciava Mario Alicata - in certi vecchi gruppi dirigenti del nostro paese è venuta a mancare la fiducia in loro stessi, ed essi si sono ristretti in una inerzia avida ed egoistica [...] non credendo più alla possibilità di uno sviluppo dell'economia e di tutto il complesso della vita nel nostro paese, e cercano soltanto di spremere anche dall'agricoltura il massimo profitto immediato? Ma la patria [...] è tutt'altra cosa [...]; la patria è costituita dal polo; ed oggi ne popolo non solo non c'è sfiducia nell'avvenire, ma c'è al contrario un'ampia luminosa fiducia nel futuro; ed è per questo che esso chiede che lo Stato intervenga in difesa di questo bene primordiale che è costituito dal suolo sul quale esso deve lavorare e produrre»), Speech given by the member of Parliament, Mario Alicata, Atti parlamentari, Legislatura II, Discussioni, seduta pomeridiana, 29 Ottobre 1953, p. 3478 (translation by the author).

out that the Calabrian mountains had been supporting «many more people than their resources could allow; and thus it becomes necessary that the progressive reclamation of the plains draw a portion of the population living in higher areas down to the valleys so that the mountains can lie fallow and be covered with the healthy mantle of forests, where possible»<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, many emphasised that the fragility of the mountains could not be addressed merely by focusing on technical, hydraulic, and forestry aspects to be solved through state intervention<sup>20</sup>. Attention was also drawn to the simultaneous need for agricultural use of the slopes, which would regulate the flow of surface water. Thus, for the reclamation work to be effective, it was necessary to involve the farmers with a «unified *local* approach to the problem»<sup>21</sup> that could not be achieved by massively relocating them to the coast. To conclude, the political debate also stressed the importance of not separating mountain recovery from that of the plains, as the former was the «completion and prerequisite» of the latter. On this last point, the discussion shifted to the theme of industrialisation and the state's strong push toward "productivism" at any cost, which to many seemed incompatible with Calabria's physical, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics. Among the many highlighting this issue, Senator Tommaso Spasari pointed out the senselessness of investing in industry in a region that «is dissolving into the sea» and where «a single night's storm is enough to make entire towns disappear, collapse bridges, and sink kilometres of roads»<sup>22</sup>.

In short, first, the reclaiming of rivers and streams, followed by investments in agriculture and industry, seemed to be the necessary steps, which, in fact, did not happen. This would have required

19. CAPUTO 1954, (no pagination) (translation by the author).

20. «Technology is not an abstract, metaphysical entity with unchangeable laws; technology always adapts to the political framework of a problem, not the other way around», Discourse of the Member of Parliament, Alicata, Atti parlamentari, Legislatura II, *Discussioni*, seduta pomeridiana 29 Ottobre 1953, p. 3840 (translation by the author).

21. «Because, without intending to interfere with the criteria and broader programs that drive state interventions in the formulation of laws and the frameworks of plans, it is precisely here, among us, that the lack of an organic vision and simultaneous, concrete implementation of the legislative provisions is evident. These provisions exist and, if honestly applied, with uniformity of criteria and interventions, could be decisive» («perché, senza volere interferire nei criteri e nei programmi generali, di più vasta portata che muovono gli interventi statali, nella formulazione delle leggi e nelle impostazioni dei piani, è proprio qui, da noi, che si nota il difetto di una visione organica e di un attuazione simultanea e concreta delle provvidenze legislative, che pure ci sono e che, se veramente applicate con univocità di criteri e di interventi potrebbero essere risolutive»), Ibidem (translation by the author).

22. «What trust can there be for new investments in agriculture and industry if we cannot guarantee the very existence of the Calabrians and Calabria? » («Quale affidamento può aversi per nuovi investimenti nell'agricoltura e nell'industria se non si riesce a garantire ai Calabresi e alla Calabria la vita stessa?»), Ibidem (translation by the author).

coordination between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Public Works<sup>23</sup> and a broader vision of the issue. In this context, it is neither the technicians nor the politicians who show the most forward-thinking ideas, but rather some intellectuals who, without falling into victimhood, see the possibility, amidst the immense tragedy, of changing the course of environmental history in Calabria: «In the face of the enormity of the accumulated damage, it is astonishing that no state budget would be sufficient to remedy the harm done to the region's infrastructure. But one day we will have to start, and that day can be today», wrote Corrado Alvaro, who also pointed out that the geographical and physical characteristics of the region, rather than being a problem, could become a resource for the entire country. The vast torrents, though requiring great expenditure of energy and money, could have been transformed from destructive monsters into reservoirs of energy for all southern Italy if only people had gone beyond mere displays of solidarity and if only Calabria had been offered «a task and a hope»<sup>24</sup>. Alvaro anticipated a current, noteworthy idea that the crisis of inland areas could be solved, but not for all of them, only by removing these areas from their isolation and starting to view “empty Italy” as an important resource for “full Italy”, for example, as a source of crucial ecosystem services also in the context of climate change.

However, the press, politicians, and local communities lamented that the government appeared uninterested in the matter. It is a fact that in 1957, the special law for Calabria (November 26, 1955, n. 1177) for the recovery of the mountains had still not been applied, as denounced by local politicians<sup>25</sup>, who also highlighted a certain reluctance on the part of the government to intervene in the province of Reggio Calabria. Evidence of this, according to the member of parliament Eugenio Musolino, was the poor territorial distribution of funds — very little for the mountain areas — and the reluctance of the coordination committee to intervene «more decisively and substantially in the execution of forestry work», along with a «resistance on the part of the Public Works Authority towards Reggio Calabria». This recalled a hypothesis by scholars some years earlier, who suggested abandoning the Reggio mountains to their fate<sup>26</sup>.

23. Lack of coordination among the various ministries involved is a recurring theme in the parliamentary debates of those years; see, in particular, *Atti parlamentari, Assemblea costituente, Interrogazione del parlamentare Eugenio Musolino sui tagli forestali in Calabria del 6 novembre 1948*.

24. ALVARO 1953.

25. See the speech of the Honorable Musolino from *Atti parlamentari, Legislatura II, Discussioni, seduta antimeridiana del 24 ottobre 1957*.

26. The reference is to a hypothesis put forward during a conference held in Crotona on these topics, as reported by Honorable Musolino; *ivi*, p. 37171.



Figure 1. Africo, Reggio Calabria (photo A.M. Oteri, 2022).

The final document published by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Poverty in Italy<sup>27</sup> highlights the severity of the situation for Calabria: «The long neglect of this and other regions of the South, the continued absence of external aid and initiatives capable of promoting development in such areas, have only compounded the already unfavourable natural conditions, leading to a process of progressive deterioration of economic activities and the very "habitat" in which they take place»<sup>28</sup>. This situation along with the failure of the agrarian reform in the South caused an incredible wave of migration towards the North between the 1950s and 1970s, leading to the abandonment of the inner rural areas of Calabria. This phenomenon had significant consequences for a region that had primarily been a region of inland areas, mountain villages, and small settlements perched in the hinterland for many centuries.

## 2. *The decline of the rural world and the destiny of villages and communities*

The floods of 1951 and 1953 were a missed opportunity for Calabria to systematically address the problem of land protection, both in the mountains and the plains. As a result, the debate about the fate of the villages in that area, most of which were abandoned<sup>29</sup>, and the prospects for the new villages being settled along the coast did not yield significant outcomes. Indeed, the situation reflected the failure of post-war agrarian policies, which could not curb the depopulation of these areas<sup>30</sup>. The relocations to the coast were aimed more at promoting new forms of industrialization, rather than agriculture, which never took off<sup>31</sup>. In this general political push towards the modernization of production, and consequently a disregard for the fate of the peasant world, not so much in economic but rather in socio-cultural terms, it is not surprising that there was a lack of debate regarding

27. The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Poverty in Italy and Means to Combat It (*Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sulla miseria in Italia e sui mezzi per combatterla*) was established in 1952 to estimate the size of the population living in conditions requiring state support. The results of the inquiry were published in *Atti della commissione 1953-54*.

28. *L'evoluzione economico sociale della regione nel decennio di attuazione della Legge Speciale (The socio-economic evolution of the region in the decade of implementation of the Special Law)*, Report of the special Commission chaired by Deputy Francesco Curato, in GRECO 2013, p. 161.

29. See Sulfaro in this volume, pp. 44-89.

30. When politicians became aware of the dramatic consequences of rural depopulation, they tried to promote some initiatives, such as renewing crops on abandoned estates or reviving new forms of cooperation in the tradition of collective leases, but it was already too late; GRECO 2013, pp. 162-163.

31. TINO 1985.

the formal and settlement aspects of the new villages and the absence of any consideration or reflection on the settlement features, the types to be established, and especially the relationship of the new villages with the context in which they would be inserted. Furthermore, the natural disaster was a missed opportunity to reconsider a new destiny and a new role for these villages, from an urban and socio-economic perspective. Regarding the examples quoted in the volume, excluding the case of Canolo<sup>32</sup>, more information needs to be found concerning a possible debate on how these villages should have been transformed. Indeed, the future emerging for these new places was not a rural one, and perhaps politics, fully engaged in consolidating the country's industrial future, had already accepted the decline of rurality as irreversible. As Marco Mareggi documented in his paper, the relocation of Canolo had different results mainly due to the involvement of local communities. The decision not to relocate the settlement to a place far from the original and not to abandon Old Canolo (fig. 2) entirely was not made by the central government, thus by an external entity, but rather by a prominent group of active local citizens supported by the technical opinion of the Civil Engineering Corps. The reasons behind the choice reflect a familiarity with the site and many expectations about the availability of transportation infrastructure, sufficient agriculture, and tourism potential<sup>33</sup>.

While the processes of abandonment and resettlement in Calabria were a missed opportunity to reflect on the validity of socio-economic choices, they were equally so concerning planning themes and dialogue with the environment. The result was the creation of featureless settlements lacking any formal quality that would have allowed them to impose themselves in areas often of great environmental value, reaffirming an idea of temporariness that had little to do with the "rebirth" objectives that the relocations aimed for, at least on paper. As Mareggi rightly points out, planning new centres has never been an occasion for collective debate, not even among experts. It has mostly been a design process that took place exclusively on a technical level, the outcomes of which are thus tied to the skills and culture of the appointed architects and engineers. In the case of Canolo, for example, the discussions were limited to a debate among the designer, the mayor of Canolo, a few local parliamentarians, and the Civil Engineering Corps<sup>34</sup>.

From a comparison with the Romanian and Albanian cases, significant differences emerge, not so much in the outcomes of these processes of "de-ruralisation" or "urbanisation" of the peasant

32. See MAREGGI in this volume, pp. 152-201.

33. *Ibidem*.

34. *Ibidem*.



Figure 2. Canolo, Reggio Calabria (photo A.M. Oteri, 2022).

world, but rather in the premises that have determined the phenomenon. In the three cases, starting from the crisis of the early twentieth century, the rural issue is indeed a "matter." At this point, the narrative becomes central concerning the anti-population decline and anti-abandonment strategies that have been implemented. In Italy, as we have seen, the post-war process of industrialization almost entirely absorbed the debate on the socio-economic future of the country, and only the catastrophes that periodically affected rural and inner areas compelled reflection on their fate<sup>35</sup>. For the Italian peasant world, particularly in the South, the post-war reconstruction was definitively a point of no return when agricultural work ceased to be a "migrant practice"<sup>36</sup> and instead marked the ultimate departure of peasants from the countryside towards urban and metropolitan areas. The "peasant issue", which was addressed systematically in the post-war period, was mainly tackled from an economic perspective, neglecting the cultural and social aspects of that world<sup>37</sup>. Despite the differences in views between right-wing and left-wing cultures, during those years in Italy, there was an intolerance for that "rural nostalgia" which saw peasant society as the guardian of traditional balances. In general, the rural hinterland of the South was seen as a place of backwardness, to be overcome only by investing in the modernization of cities<sup>38</sup>.

In Romania, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, much had already gone into thinking about the modernisation of rural life and the peasant world became instrumental in defining policies to revive rural areas. After the Second World War, «the peasants with their "ancestral creative genius" played a significant role. Nevertheless, they were quite frequently used as a political planning tool»<sup>39</sup> if we consider the colonialization of new Romanian territories during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, relocation due to hydrogeological risks during the 1930s, socialist collectivisation after 1945 or further socialist territorial "systematisation" processes. Studies by sociologist Dimitrie Gusti on the social reform of rural villages, understood as the fundamental social units of the country, are of great interest in this regard<sup>40</sup>. Even more interesting is the question of how, after the Second World War, the

35. This is not the place to delve into the complex causes that led to the abandonment of the rural world in Italy after the Second World War. However, it is helpful to note that the post-war policies in Italy regarded the exodus from the countryside to the cities as an inevitable price to be paid for rebuilding the country and starting the process of industrialisation. Regarding Calabria see GRECO 2013.

36. BEVILACQUA 2001, p. 98.

37. GRECO 2013, p. 156.

38. *Ivi*, p. 157.

39. See MINHEA *et al.* in this volume, p. 399.

40. *Ivi*, p. 410.

theme of modernising the rural world intertwines with processes of industrialisation. Romania also experienced the abandonment of villages lacking economic potential and the partial reconversion of those affected by depopulation, caused, as in the rest of Europe, by the growth of large industrial centres. Compared to the Calabrian case, the debate in Romania includes interesting reflections not only on social aspects but also on urban planning and the layout of new settlements, with at least a theoretical desire to maintain some traditional characteristics. As described by MINHEA *et al.* in this volume, there are interesting attempts to define typologies inspired by tradition. However, in the end, the design carried out on paper was essentially a forced approach when applied to small rural centres, which, by tradition, were the result of spontaneous growth, albeit never random. Furthermore, the transformation of the peasant into an “urban worker”, hoped for by sociologists, effectively accelerated the dissolution of the rural world.

In Albania, the socialist regime exerted a significant impact on rurality. This transformation specifically materialized in a shift from a feudal system to the gradual collectivization of property and the reorganization into state farms and agricultural cooperatives. The transition was gradual but significantly altered not only the economic structure but also the physical landscape and settlement patterns.

«Many new rural residential centres were designed ex-novo, to serve the new economic structures. Particularly after the 1970s, the tendency to preserve mountainous and remote areas from depopulation was expressed in planning strategies for rural settlements. These strategies aimed at intensifying areas inhabited near natural resources, forests, energy sources, etc., facts reflected in the urban consolidation of existing villages in these areas, as well as in the planning of new ones»<sup>41</sup>.

Even in this case, the theoretical debate on the construction methods of the new villages could have been more effective. The outcome was a significant transformation of the traditional villages, featuring a compact, family-based structure in new settlements characterized by a rigid geometrization of building blocks, indicating a lack of sensitivity to the contextual environment: «Contrarily, socialist villages lack a clan-based structure and instead feature heterogeneous neighbourhoods that often exude an urban rather than a rural atmosphere in terms of composition»<sup>42</sup>.

The impressive wave of emigration following the fall of the communist regime in Albania mainly affected inland areas and the rural world, with depopulation rates reaching about 37% of the population. The end of the cooperative system and the subsequent sale of state-owned land led

41. See ISLAMI, VEIZAJ in this volume, p. 457.

42. *Ivi*, p. 458.

to fragmentation of the agricultural structure, causing significant subsistence problems and the abandonment of many inner rural settlements.

Despite political, geographical, and economic differences, a common thread connects the cases studied: the view of the small rural centre as a world that has now been surpassed. This is evidenced by the revitalization attempts carried out in the three cases, which, despite their differences (the 'displacement' — with the relocation — or reorganization into a system that is not urban but no longer rural, etc.), only confirm an increasingly unstoppable crisis of the rural world and its tangible (the small centres) and intangible (traditions) legacy. In all cases, from the Calabrian to the Romanian and Albanian ones, the models adopted for the new centres diverge from the spontaneous and compact structure of the rural village in favour of urban types and layouts more aligned with emerging city models: a looser relationship between streets and homes; the presence of a civic (or religious) centre as the focal point of the entire layout, and so on. These models are more reminiscent of garden cities than small mountain rural centres. A paradox arises in which the aim was to revive the fortunes of the peasant world by using models and tools inherent to the urban environment and culture, namely, that world which had been the main cause of the dissolution of the peasant world.

Furthermore, in all three cases, the issue of abandonment and how to counter it has become a dominant theme in contemporary debate.

### 3. *Memory and care. An antidote to abandonment*

«Why does an abandoned centre attract interest?» Monica Musolino asks in her essay *Territories of abandonment*, even becoming the subject of multi-scale planning (social, cultural, architectural, restoration, etc.) beyond the common nostalgic rhetoric<sup>43</sup>. The crux, Musolino further argues, lies in the memorial relationship between the place and the community, understood not only as the community that inhabited it but also as the one that has experienced and continues to experience it in narrative forms from the time of abandonment to today<sup>44</sup>.

Sociologists and anthropologists who study the phenomenon of abandonment base their research primarily on the theme of narration. From their point of view, it testifies to the persistence of an emotional bond with the place, thus indicating the potential vitality of an inhabited area. Therefore, repopulation or at least revitalisation can only occur when physical abandonment, whether partial

43. See MUSOLINO in this volume, p. 376.

44. *Ibidem*.

or total, has taken place, and an emotional bond persists. In such cases, as Musolino writes, citing Paolo Jedlowski, «entire generations can inhabit that place in memory and narrative alone» and the relationship with the place persists if there is a group who can still share its reminiscence. However, this is not enough. According to Martin Heidegger, quoted by Musolino<sup>45</sup>, dwelling begins with the act of building and includes taking care of what has been built. An abandoned or depopulated place is still alive if someone takes care of it whether one is an “insider” or an “outsider”. Therefore, care and memory are two necessary conditions for dwelling and, thus, for the existence of a place. It means that a place can preserve traces of life even if completely abandoned and ruined (figs. 3-4). What happens in Ferruzzano Superiore, as Agostino Petrillo details in his essay<sup>46</sup>, clearly explains this idea. Ferruzzano is an abandoned centre, but in the summer, a festival attracts many emigrants who return there for the holidays. The open spaces that characterise this settlement, stubbornly clinging to a rocky hill, come alive like in the past. Many houses are abandoned, but walking through the streets of Ferruzzano, one gets the impression that the centre is not entirely devoid of life. Two reflections can be helpful in the reasoning followed here: the first is about the bond that even those who have left maintain with the small settlement, a bond that does not seem to exist with the new settlement on the coast; the second reflection concerns the fact that care for this centre is focused on some particular elements: In this case, the urban spaces, the areas around the houses, which today as in the past are used to “build community”. Something similar happens in Africo Vecchio, as narrated by Musolino. Compared to Ferruzzano, old Africo – located in the heart of the Aspromonte mountains in a difficult-to-reach position – is entirely in ruins. However, there is a strong bond between the old, abandoned site and the inhabitants who live in the new Africo built on the coast after the 1951 flood, which contrasts with the disregard for the new site. The bond is mainly related to the devotion to Saint Leo and the small sanctuary dedicated to him. The celebration of Saint Leo every May connects the new generation of Africesi with the original settlements they never inhabited: among the ruined buildings, it is still possible to experience the past. The rubble of buildings, streets, and squares that existed before the disastrous event, often takes on a sacred character in the collective representation, and what remains, including the natural heritage, becomes an intangible trace of the past. These are places which hold a special “aura”. Even if the old inhabitants, who were children when the flood happened, clearly remember the living conditions and the isolation they were in, still, the mythicized beauty of the original village remains as an identity trait, compensating for what the new landscape

45. *Ivi*, p. 377.

46. See PETRILLO in this volume, pp. 354-373.



Figure 3. Ferruzzano  
Superiore, Reggio Calabria  
(photo A.M. Oteri, 2022).  
On the next page, figure 4.  
Ferruzzano Superiore, Reggio  
Calabria. Interior of the old  
school (photo F. Vigotti, 2022).



and new place have not yet been able to offer. In this perspective, the ruins which characterized these abandoned villages can be considered, quoting Petrillo again, as “non-uments”<sup>47</sup>. Contrary to “monuments”, which are symbols of power (religious, civil, cultural, etc.), "non-uments" are the silent witnesses of a power vacuum and a warning against the long sequence of defeats suffered by these territories, which seem difficult to stop. Perpetually poised between architecture and ruin, they suggest the end of something, and, at the same time, they are the symbol of a memory that persists as long as someone takes care of them. Memory and care processes are activated similarly, selecting traces and elements from the past and bringing them into the present through storytelling (narration of events over time) and restoration (acting on spaces and built heritage). The potentiality of possible dialogue between narrative and restoration (time and space) has been highlighted in the Riba research. If it exists, the relationship between "non-umental" and the potential vitality of an abandoned place is one of the lines of inquiry that the *Lost and Found* research proposes for the future. Here, however, the focus is on emphasizing the close relationship between memory and care, also considering the fact, as Petrillo again points out, that the process of dissolution of the peasant world's imagery – which is the origin of the settlements we are dealing with – is much faster than that of its material traces, which often one does not know what to do with. The studied cases show that ruins have a fundamental role in hindering abandonment and paradoxically, the more the settlement is in ruins, the more memory is preserved, and practices of care are implemented. This suggests that abandonment – gradual, accompanied, in some cases even "touristified" – may be a possible way for places like Africo or the old and ruined part of Canolo (figs. 5-6).

#### 4. *Old problems, new issues. Latest challenges from the “Lost and Found” research*

The dilemma between abandonment and reuse of depopulated heritage and settlements remains an open question that the research has only touched upon, aiming to lay the methodological groundwork for future reflection on this topic<sup>48</sup>.

If one looks at the problem from a humanistic perspective, abandonment is not the right choice as it implies a definitive severance of ties with memory, leading to wilderness in the communities that experience it. This idea of abandonment is valid only if we consider that physical abandonment (the lack of use) must necessarily coincide with the end of that place. «After all – writes Judith

47. *Ivi*, p. 363. The idea of "Non-ument" quoted by Petrillo is from Gordon Matta Clarke.

48. See OTERI in this volume, pp. 8-39.



Figure 5. Canolo, Reggio Calabria (photo A.M. Oteri, 2022).



Figure 6. Canolo, Reggio Calabria (photo N. Sulfaro, 2022).

Schalansky – everything that still exists is simply what remains [...] and the difference between presence and absence can be marginal as long as memory exists»<sup>49</sup>. Thus, the “survival” of a given place is not necessarily tied to its permanent reuse but to the possibility of experiencing it in various ways. «Memories – writes Petrillo – are proustianally attached to places, to ruins, and it is not only a matter of re-establishing a link with past forms of life, with its lost habits and customs, but also, [...] in some cases the challenge is to resurrect the dead, evoking them through places they lived, to make them appear in the form of an oneiric image or ghost»<sup>50</sup>.

The abandonment of a place also has significant physical consequences, as with abandonment, maintenance and care of the land cease, leading to increased risks. However, in many cases and particularly in Calabria, the abandonment of the inland areas seems to have been a necessary step if we only consider – quoting the words by Giuseppe Isnardi – that «the villages are mostly very distant, not in a straight line, but follow the rugged and broken nature of the terrain. They look at each other indifferently, like poor people who know they cannot even lend each other a hand»<sup>51</sup>.

Repopulation is not feasible in many cases, as for Africo, where the relation between memory and care still exists, and so must be nourished in other ways. In other cases, abandonment is not always permanent, as for some villages in Albania here documented by Islami and Veizaj or in the case of Ferruzzano, where some signs of a possible return can be perceived among the abandoned alleyways: «Here the feeling – writes Petrillo – is that not much would be needed to repopulate: it would be enough to simply reconnect that which has been disconnected, creating transport lines, services, in a natural reality of astonishing beauty»<sup>52</sup>.

As we have seen, a history-based approach has been at least helpful in defining the terms of the issue, acquiring knowledge, and ultimately attempting to decipher the vocations of a given place. The first step, however, in this process is to let go of the idea – consistently proposed since the post-war policies – that the revival of these places is only possible by looking to the city model. In short, as Petrillo also states, defining what is urban and what is not is essential. In Albania, for example, the program “100 villages” proposed by the government for the “rural renaissance” of the country after the collapse of the agricultural system in the 90s has been grounded on the awareness of an impossible repopulation *tout-court*, but at the same time, being aware that the contribution

49. SCHALANSKY 2020, p. 15 and p. 26.

50. See PETRILLO in this volume, p. 362.

51. ISNARDI 1965, pp. 12-13.

52. See PETRILLO in this volume, p. 364.

of the agricultural sector to the Albanian economy is still significantly higher than the EU average. The proposal for the “renaissance” of the Drino Valley starts from this awareness, based on the regenerative capacity of the area, as documented by history; the gradual and integrative approach aimed at strengthening local resources using efficient instruments for rural territorial planning and management. It is not a matter of building false identity and activating folkloristic scenarios for tourists based on the rhetoric of identity but on the reinforcement of the natural inclinations of the settlements, resulting in a balanced development of the landscape through the idea of “locality”<sup>53</sup>.

The *Lost and Found* research did not define an interpretative model of abandonment, but it grounded the premise for further improvement on the matter: the choice between repopulation (reuse) and abandonment must be based on a history-based approach; the sum of history-based and site-specific approach is a necessary premise for the definition of the potentiality for the reuse of abandoned villages and heritage or, namely, the “vitality indicator”; between abandonment and reuse, other approaches can be explored.

Something more can be said on this last point. Anthropologists have demonstrated that the “myth” of abandonment can produce more destruction: «Abandonment elevated to beauty produces a host of ruinologists» writes Rizzo<sup>54</sup>, that has nothing to do with the idea of preserving the history and narrative of a given place. If abandonment reaches deep, the risk leaves room for scavengers who roam these villages, plundering private homes, warehouses, small churches, and cemeteries<sup>55</sup>. The only defence against “ruinology” is knowledge and awareness about the processes which caused the abandonment along with the potentiality of a given place: strategies that preserve the idea of abandonment without necessarily repopulating a place, which could work in the case of Africo, or, conversely, new forms of use – not necessarily based on tourism – that gradually reverse the trend of abandonment, that could be suitable in the case of Ferruzzano or some villages in Albania and Romania. The time might be right for such a new perspective thanks to some principles like circularity and sustainability which open a new way of looking at cultural heritage as something that can produce more than “simple” economic values (new uses to fit our needs), but broader and more inclusive cultural values derived from the idea of what that complex system of heritage, whether at the architectural, urban, or territorial scale, can offer us. This change opens the reuse and

53. See ISLAMI, VEIZAJ in this volume, pp. 450-477.

54. RIZZO 2022, p. 63.

55. *Ivi*, p. 163.

abandonment of historical sites to a new relationship between cultural heritage and society (social values) or, more in general, to a broader human scale dimension<sup>56</sup>.

Once the methodological platform for the future definition of an interpretive model of abandonment is established, outlining the necessity of understanding the architectural heritage abandonment processes (including the interconnections with socio-economic and planning aspects<sup>57</sup>), at least three questions remain open, which we will only mention here, deferring the possible answers to a subsequent phase of research. The first is a matter of time. History-based and site-specific research requires a significant amount of time (e.g. archival research, collection and elaboration of multiscale data, definition of a proper multidisciplinary methodology according to current policies and economic constraints), which rarely fits with the time and urgency of local administrations and communities who many times have had to face numerous kinds of risks and, not secondarily, have to chase funding and pass measures with tight deadlines.

Time is also a crucial factor in the choosing between abandonment and reuse because while the former occurs slowly, the latter requires rapid action.

The second issue is related to languages, namely the fact that often, in academia and between academics and communities (intended in the broader sense of people, administration, and rules), words can assume different meanings, causing problems in understanding and dialogue. At least a preliminary agreement on words and concepts would be necessary before starting any collaboration.

Finally, measurements. What is the reference point for evaluating the effectiveness of a “revitalization” process? For example, if one considers the socio-economic aspects, effectiveness can be measured in terms of well-being and improved quality of life for local communities or in increasing tourist flows, which rarely align. If we look at the material aspects, the reference point could be the highest achievable level of preservation of the built heritage or, conversely, with an entirely different outcome, the degree of transformation (modernization) one can achieve for that particular settlement or territory. Of course, answering this last question would mean having already defined a strategy for repopulating or abandoning lost places. However, it is feasible or at least desirable to imagine the chance of defining a flexible interdisciplinary decision support method, based on multicriteria analyses, as part of the interpretative model for evaluating the potentiality of abandoned or depopulated settlements. This multidimensional approach to investigating whether the abandoned settlements and heritage in inner areas are still vital or not would require a significant

56. See ROSSITTI *et al.* 2022, particularly p. 183.

57. See ROSSITTI, OTERI, TORRIERI 2024b, p. 5.

opening, hence a dialogue, with politicians, economists and planners. Before that, a change in attitude is required regarding the possibility that abandonment processes, often irreversible, can be governed (countered or accompanied) starting from the territory itself, which, with careful listening, can sometimes suggest spontaneous and unexpected solutions. Adopting a history-based approach to reading these processes does not mean confining them to a timeless dimension, thus unchangeable or fixable only with a profound break from their history (“touristifying” a territory with little hospitality propensity might be a significant example). On the contrary, it means accepting the complexity of emerging phenomena and turning them into resources for the future, even in the case of abandonment, which sometimes must be considered a natural phase in the life cycle of a place<sup>58</sup>. Therefore, from this perspective, revitalising a given settlement or territory is not an act of “redemption” but an opportunity<sup>59</sup>, and abandonment is not a surrender but an awareness of the impossibility of returning.

58. ROSSITTI, OTERI, TORRIERI 2024b, p. 13.

59. ROSSITTI, OTERI, TORRIERI 2024a p. 624.

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