

## **Drovers' tracks and the ancient trails of the middle ground**

### ***1: The drover's way of life***

Transhumance is the practice of moving livestock from one grazing ground to another in a seasonal cycle, typically to highlands in summer and lowlands in winter. Good pastureland is of fundamental importance to the good health of the animals and the quality of the products derived from them. Herdsmen are well aware of this, of course: "Milk comes from the dish", the popular saying goes, reminding us that the quality of milk depends on what the animals eat. Grazing on mountains in summer and on the plains in winter ensures that livestock get a rich and varied diet, so that breeders do not have to use cattle feed and fodder, which are expensive and are of inferior quality.

Transhumance pastoralism, which makes the most of highland and lowland pasturelands, has centuries-old origins and has been practiced in many Mediterranean countries: Spain, southern France, Italy, the Balkans, Turkey, North Africa, and on most islands.

The drovers' tracks that many southern Italian herdsmen still use have been travelled for thousands of years by peoples of every race and language, all having the same need to face the challenges of geographical environment. It is a story that lends itself to the history of periods of "long duration", of those factors that are cyclical in nature and which influence the practical aspects of life as well as lifestyles.

### ***2: Pecus pecunia***

The character of the age in which we live makes it difficult to realise how important pastoral activities have been in human history, on both the economic and the cultural levels. In the ancient world, not only great cities and markets, but also sanctuaries and places of pilgrimage developed along the thousand-year-old trails. The Roman town of Saepinum, for example, was built on a much-used trail that became part of its main roads, and is used by livestock farmers and herds even today.

The Romans gave great importance to pastoral activities, which were widespread at the time, thanks to the political control they were able to exercise over great stretches of territory. *Pecus = pecuniary, sheep = wealth* was an equation destined to have long life.

But apart from the economic aspects, sheep-farming had a notable cultural significance, influencing as it did for many centuries myths, religious beliefs, and literary and artistic traditions. The motif of a man with a sheep slung over his shoulder was present in Greek art and passed into Roman art, later to become the Christian image of the good shepherd.

### ***3: The Aragonese sheep Customs***

Transhumance pastoralism has undergone great variations throughout history. In particular, so-called horizontal transhumance, which involves movement of hundreds of kilometres, has always been subject to radical state organization to maintain control over land, guarantee the security of livestock farmers and animals, carry out road maintenance and efficiently organise the collection of taxes.

Such were the conditions during the Roman Empire, and then, after a period of political instability between late antiquity and the Middle Ages, there was widespread transhumance from the reign of Frederick II, reaching the height of its development in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the Aragonese. It was in this age that a proper transhumance grazing industry was set up involving thousands of men and millions of heads of livestock. In order to manage this huge organization, Alfonso of Aragon introduced the *Dogana della mena delle pecore* (Customs duty on the

movement of sheep), with its headquarters first at Lucera and then at Foggia, which shared out the grazing grounds and collected the taxes due from them.

#### **4: *The main routes of transhumance***

During the reign of the Aragonese, the network of drovers' tracks that connected the summer to the winter grazing grounds, and in particular the Abruzzo mountains together with the plains of the Apulian Tavoliere, was organized and extended. The biggest tracks – the so-called royal tracks – were “60 Neapolitan paces” wide (about 111 metres). They were, to all intents and purposes, transhumance “motorways”. There were even roadside resting-places where the animals could feed and recover their energy, rather like modern-day motorway cafés, and there was no lack of toll booths because the herds were made to take certain directions in order to control the payment of taxes. The system necessitated a great deal of state organisation, but was incredibly profitable for the Kingdom. For a long time, in fact, grazing ground transhumance accounted for 10% of total state income.

The Foggia sheep Customs was suppressed in 1808 by Giuseppe Bonaparte, but the drovers' tracks continued to exist, and traces of them can still be seen today.

“[ ... ] that wide deserted road of grass and stones, uneven, as if printed with gigantic footprints, silent, whose origin was lost in the mystery of the faraway sacred mountains” (D'Annunzio, *Il trionfo della morte*)

#### **5: *Drovers' tracks of the middle ground***

Because of its geographical characteristics, Irpinia has always been a land of livestock farmers and transhumance. Its north-east part is on an ancient way that goes from the mountains of Abruzzo to the plains of Apulia. In modern times, this bearing developed into the Pescasseroli-Candela, one of the most important royal tracks of the Aragonese period. After going through Abruzzo, Molise and the Benevento Sannio, the tract crossed the Irpinian areas of Casalbore, Montecalvo, Ariano, Villanova del Battista and Zungoli, and then ran into Apulia and went as far as Candela.

This ancient trail is still clearly visible, as are the remains of the numerous taverns that provided hospitality to the drovers as well as to the public officials responsible for collecting the taxes. They are to be found at Casalbore, Ariano, Zungoli and at nearby Buonalbergo, which is now in the province of Benevento, the location of the biggest in the area, the tavern of Montechiodo. This tavern was on two floors, with the kitchen and a few rooms for the baronial officials on the ground floor and rooms for any wayfarers who might wish to stay overnight upstairs.

Several roads and tracks led away from Pescasseroli-Candela. Of special importance was the Camporeale-Foggia, which ran through the areas of Ariano Irpino and Greci to Foggia, where the Customs was situated and where the annual fair was held for trading all the products of transhumance activity, especially wool and meat.

#### **6: *Cows to Apulia and sheep to the 'Terra di Lavoro'***

The Pescasseroli-Candela, however, was certainly not the only drovers' trail across the territory of Irpino. A network of minor trails connected the mountain pastures of Irpinia to those of the Apulian Tavoliere to the east, in the southern plain of the Salerno area in the south, and of the Terra di Lavoro in the west.

Connections to the eastern pastures were made possible by two main trails which ran through Irpinia longitudinally: one of these was further to the north and crossed the high plateau of Formicoso from Guardia Lombardi to Lacedonia, and then to Candela and the Tavoliere; the other

ran for some distance parallel to this and went further towards the south, following the direction of the Ofanto until it reached Monteverde and then going to Melfi in Basilicata, where it joined the Melfi-Castellaneta royal trail.

In the western area, these trails joined two important roads in the Salerno district, respectively across the Sella di Conza and the Croci pass of Acerno.

Other trails went west and connected the grazing grounds of the Picentini mountains to the plains of the Terra di Lavoro, in particular the areas of Nola and Aversa, across the Lauro Valley and the Baiano Valley. It seems, indeed, that the Irpino drovers of the Picentini mountains preferred this area as winter grazing for sheep, while the Apulian pastures were considered more appropriate for cattle.

### **7: *The regina viarum (the queen of roads)***

While it is true that the drovers' trails of the modern age mainly go back to the layout given to them by the Aragonese, their real origin is so far back that it is lost in remote times. It has been noted, for example, that some Roman consular routes traced parts of the more ancient trails of transhumance. On the other hand, the remains of Roman bridges and road paving can be seen along the modern trails. The present-day traveller going along these roads on foot feels that he is having the same experiences as Roman soldiers, merchants, drovers and pilgrims who, thousands of years ago, saw the same dawns and sunsets, stared at the same horizons, and walked over the same stones.

Since Irpinia was a natural connection between the Adriatic and the Tyrrhenian, in Roman times it had important main roads. In particular, the Appian Way, which for the Romans was the *regina viarium* (queen of roads), ran through it. It ran from Benevento to Aeclanum (in the vicinity of present-day Mirabella Eclano), then continued across the Formicoso plateau, passing through Sub Romulea (near Bisaccia) to Venusia in north-east Basilicata, and then on as far as Taranto and Brindisi. The modern roads that run horizontally through Irpinia and lead to Melfi before joining the Melfi-Castellaneta royal trail, in part trace the same ancient way.

### **8: *Historical roads and pilgrims' ways***

Further north was Via Traiana, an alternative route to the Appian Way built by the Emperor Traiano as a more effective and easier link between Benevento and Brindisi. Its first tract, from Benevento to Aecae (present-day Troia) ran through north-east Irpinia, passing through the Roman town of Aequum Tuticum, an important road junction of the time, and went straight on, like a modern motorway, as far as Bari and Brindisi. This enormous work involved significant feats of engineering, as can be seen from the numerous bridges, one of which is the superb *Ponte delle Chianche*, the remains of which are still visible in the Commune of Buonalbergo.

This was a very convenient road for the Empire and soon became a favourite route for pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. In an exceptionally interesting 4<sup>th</sup>-century document, a pilgrim from Burdigala (present-day Bordeaux) describes his journey to the Holy Land, and on the return journey he took the Via Traiana; he mentions the most important stop-off points, one of which was the *mansio* [at Equum Magnum] at Aequum Tuticum, a rest area where travellers of the time could find whatever they needed. During the Middle Ages, the section from Benevento to Aecae, which joined the so-called Via Sacra Langobardorum, was frequently used by pilgrims heading for the sanctuary of Monte Sant'Angelo in the Gargano.

### ***9: Herdsmen of the D'Ansanto Valley***

At the centre of Irpinia, where the present-day Rocca San Felice is situated, the D'Ansanto Valley was another important transit area. Volcano-associated phenomena, especially a lake boiling with gas and sulfur, have given this area a supernatural aura. Latin writers such as Virgil, Cicero and Pliny often mention it as being the entrance to the Underworld. Archeological digs carried out on the site have brought to light exceptionally interesting finds relating to the cult of the mysterious goddess Mefitis, such as sacred statues, the *xoana* of the 6<sup>th</sup>-fifth centuries BC which are in an astoundingly good state of conservation.

An aspect of this area that is perhaps less well-known is the importance it had for transhumance pastoralism. Up until recent ages, livestock breeders found in these sulfurous springs effective remedies for certain animal diseases, and in particular scabies. Sulfur, in fact, kills certain parasites. Santoli, Archpriest of Rocca San Felice, recorded the curative effects of the sulfurous waters of Mefites, and even invented a substance against scabies which he sent to be experimented by the Ospedale degli Incurabili in Naples.

### ***10: The navel of Italy***

Herdsmen have been in the Mefitis area since ancient times in order to take advantage of the curative properties of the sulfur springs. They also used the "macra" that was found here, a special clay that was used to mark the ownership of cattle. Today, *carmasciano*, one of the best Pecorinos of the area, is produced here, since the pastures are rich in sulfur minerals.

The centuries-old fame of Mefitis site is partly due to its position. The site was not only close to the Appian Way but also part of the network of Irpino trails. The area was connected on one side to the eastern routes to Apulia and Basilicata, and on the other could be reached from Benevento by the so-called "Via Beneventana" (Benevento Way) and from Naples and Avellino by the "Via Napoletana" (Neapolitan Way). There was also a drovers' track that connected the Valley of D'Ansanto to the Valley of Ufita and the Ariano area, as well as to the Pescasseroli-Candela, which was the main route of large-scale transhumance. No wonder, then, that the ancient geographers called this place *umbilicum Italiae*, the navel of Italy.

### ***11: The crisis in transhumance pastoralism***

The sheep Customs Point was abolished by the French in 1808. The famines of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had fuelled the debate on the need for agrarian reform, and livestock farming began to be regarded by the economists of the Kingdom as a curb to agricultural development, as a kind of symbol of a backward economy which privileged the few and deprived the masses of resources.

Nevertheless, transhumance pastoralism continued to prosper for more than a century, and has left traces even today because, in spite of the illuminists' criticisms, it was in fact an efficient way of making use of marginal areas (cfr. Marino: 420).

The real crisis came towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was due to a series of factors. A decisive factor was the conflict with agriculture, especially of the intensive kind characterized by frequent crop rotation, which left less and less available pastureland. In addition, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the appearance on the European market of Australian wool, which was a severe blow to one of the main sources of income from the national pastoral economy.

Many livestock farmers had to abandon their work and often had no other choice but to emigrate. "Now that there is no more transhumance, you either have to become a brigand or an emigrant" according to a bitter saying of Abruzzo. The drovers' trails began to be deserted, and most of them

were illegally incorporated in the adjacent privately-owned land. The state often had to intervene to reclaim the main trails, which continued to have an important function.

## ***2: A future for the drovers' trails***

Few traces remain of the transhumance pastoralism that for many centuries conditioned human history. The main trails, once over 200 kilometres long, can now be used for only 10% of their original distance. And yet, from the point of view of a renewed economy mainly based on tourism, these trails are an immense patrimony offering a real prospect of growth. Pastoral landscape, with its grassy lanes, its inns, resting-places, fountains, chapels, milestones, the remains of Roman bridges and roads, is a great natural and cultural attraction.

State legislation now protects the trails as being national cultural heritage, and above all in recent years there have been more and more development measures. The transhumance routes are becoming cycling tourism and trekking routes. Pastoral farming, too, is beginning to pick up again, with high quality dairy products such as Carmasciano and Bagnolese Pecorino, as well as Caciocavallo Podolico, which are the best types of cheese in Irpinia.

However, the protagonists of this world, the livestock farmers, are often forgotten. Their work is insufficiently protected, the effort and sacrifices they make are not properly rewarded, and the social role they play is by no means recognized. If, through eco-tourist activities, we intend to re-launch those areas that were historically important for livestock farming, much more attention has to be paid to their protection and development.

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