

The historical and environmental characterization of local foodways: “applied historical geography” case studies in Liguria (NW Italy).

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Background

In 2013, the Mediterranean diet - or a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions concerning crops, harvesting, fishing, animal husbandry, conservation, processing, cooking, and particularly the sharing and consumption of food - has been listed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. The importance of characterizing and maintaining the 'traditional' and local foodways have been emphasized and promoted also during EXPO 2015 in Milan.

Methodology

Since the 90s, the **Laboratory of Environmental Archaeology and History (LASA)** of the University of Genoa, has developed a multidisciplinary and multi-proxy approach to the study of past agro-sylvo-pastoral practices, as well as of their ecological effects in current landscapes (Cevasco, 2007). This method can be applied to the study of local food production systems, or “foodways”, localising the historical relationship between local producers and environmental resources.

This allows us to extract a more precise meaning of the “*liens aux lieux*” (Bérard, Marchenay, 2004) in use to define the geographical relationship among “*terroirs*” and their products.

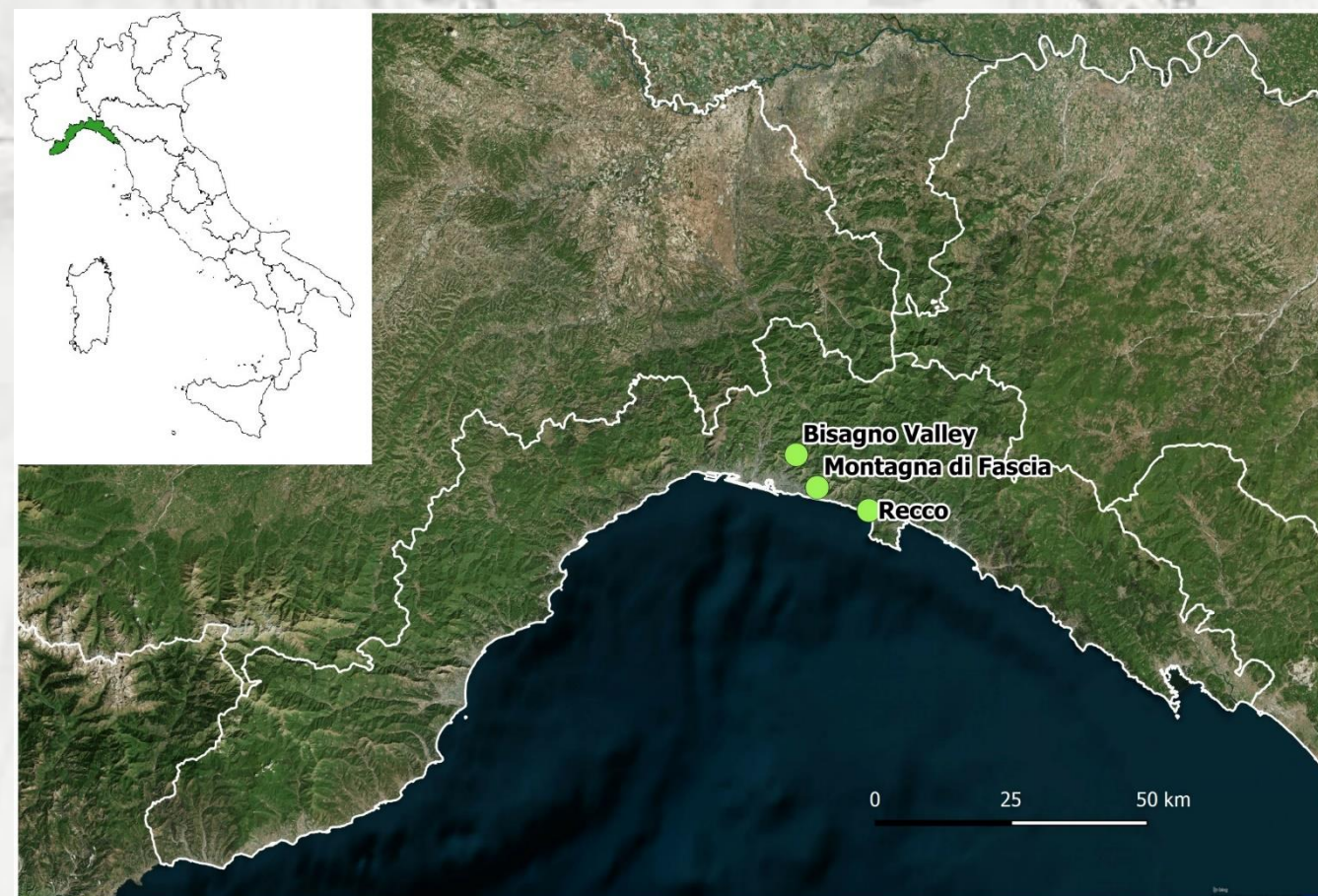


Fig. 1: Case studies location map

This system characterizes the entire ligurian coast until the beginning of 20th century and it is now disappeared (Moreno, Raggio, 1990).

Edible grass from sheep pasture

In the **winter quarters** (locally called “marina”) the coastal cultivated areas were guaranteed by **fertilization of ovine transhumance flocks**. The pastoral resource in this area consisted mainly in ancient grassland lying on common lands set on the slopes and along the rivers (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Hand-drawn military map “*Carta di Genova e dei suoi dintorni*”, (1815-16). Ancient grasslands and meadows along the Bisagno river and on the common lands slopes.

“Praebuggiun” salad and “Mollana” fresh cheese

The traditional dish of Liguria named “**praebuggiun**” (dial.) is a herbs salad, commonly consumed boiled adding garlic, oil and mashed potatoes. In the study area *praebuggiun* is also used to fill, added with the soft cheese “*prescinseua*”, the pasta called “*pansotti*”; when fill a fried wheat pastry it is called “*figaçette*” (Andrews, 1996).

Taxa	Vernacular name
<i>Urospermum dalechampii</i>	Bell'ommu
<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>	Papavau
<i>Sanguisorba minor</i>	Pimpinella
<i>Taraxacum officinalis</i>	Piscialettu, Dente de can
<i>Ranunculus ficaria</i>	Pren
<i>Campanula rapunculus</i>	Rampunzi
<i>Silene vulgaris</i>	Scipuelli
<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	Scixerbua
<i>Leontodon hispidus</i>	Spaisina
<i>Reichardia picroides</i>	Talaegua, Rattalaegua
?	Denti de cuniggiu
?	Radiciun sarvaegu

Fig. 4: list of present herbs species composing *praebuggiun* in the Recco valley

Even if *praebuggiun* continues to be eaten in eastern Liguria, **practices associated with herbs collection, the activation effects of grazing and the ancient grasslands have now almost disappeared**. Cartographic analysis (study of the historical land use changes, 1798-1994) and historical ecology observation (list of present herbs species see Fig. 4) done in the Recco valley (Poggi, 1997) helped to characterize environmentally and historically the local *praebuggiun* production systems.

In the Recco valley the **collection of *praebuggiun* was part of a multiple land use system characterized, in different periods of the year, by different practices** such as: bovine grazing (until '60), the use of controlled fire and the mowing of the grass (Fig. 5 and 6).

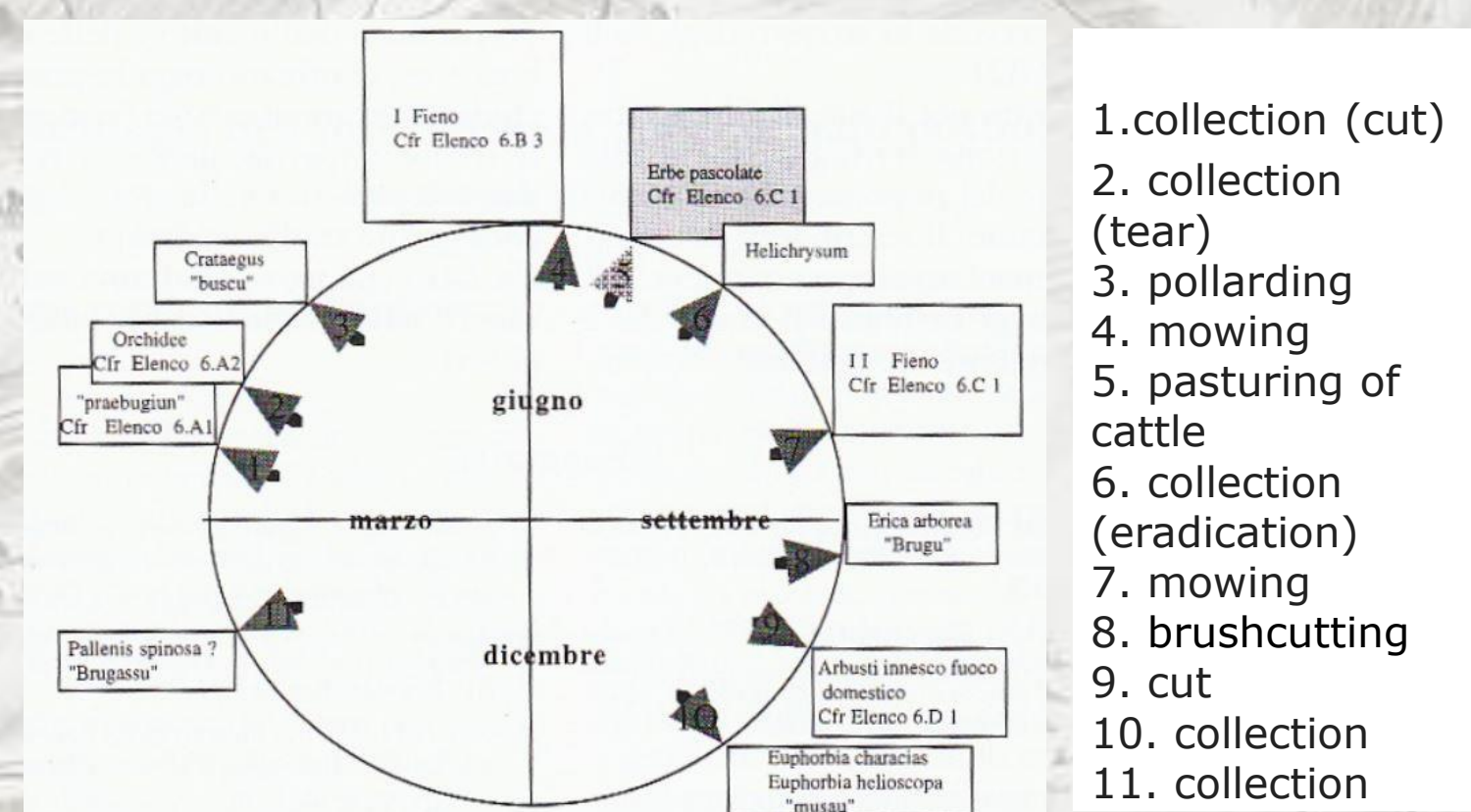


Fig. 5: Annual cycle of activation practices and of herbs and shrubs production in the Recco valley (Poggi, 1997)

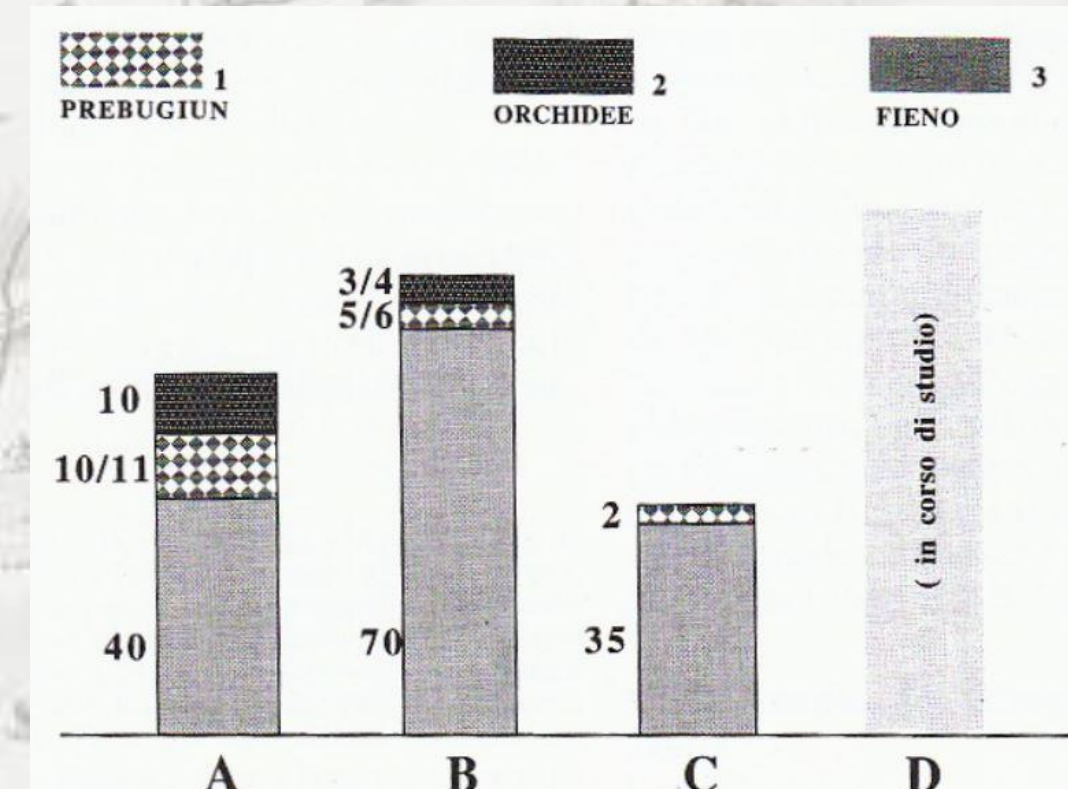


Fig. 6: variation in the number of herbs species detected during the annual production cycle. A: *praebuggiun* collection period; B: mowing period I; C: mowing period II; D: rest period

As showed in picture 7 **the abandonment of such practices caused the loss of Montagna di Fascia ancient grassland biodiversity**.

Consequently, ovine and bovine grazing disappeared between 1900-1960 and within the related product (“*mollana*” fresh cheese): nowadays it resists only in few local family households.

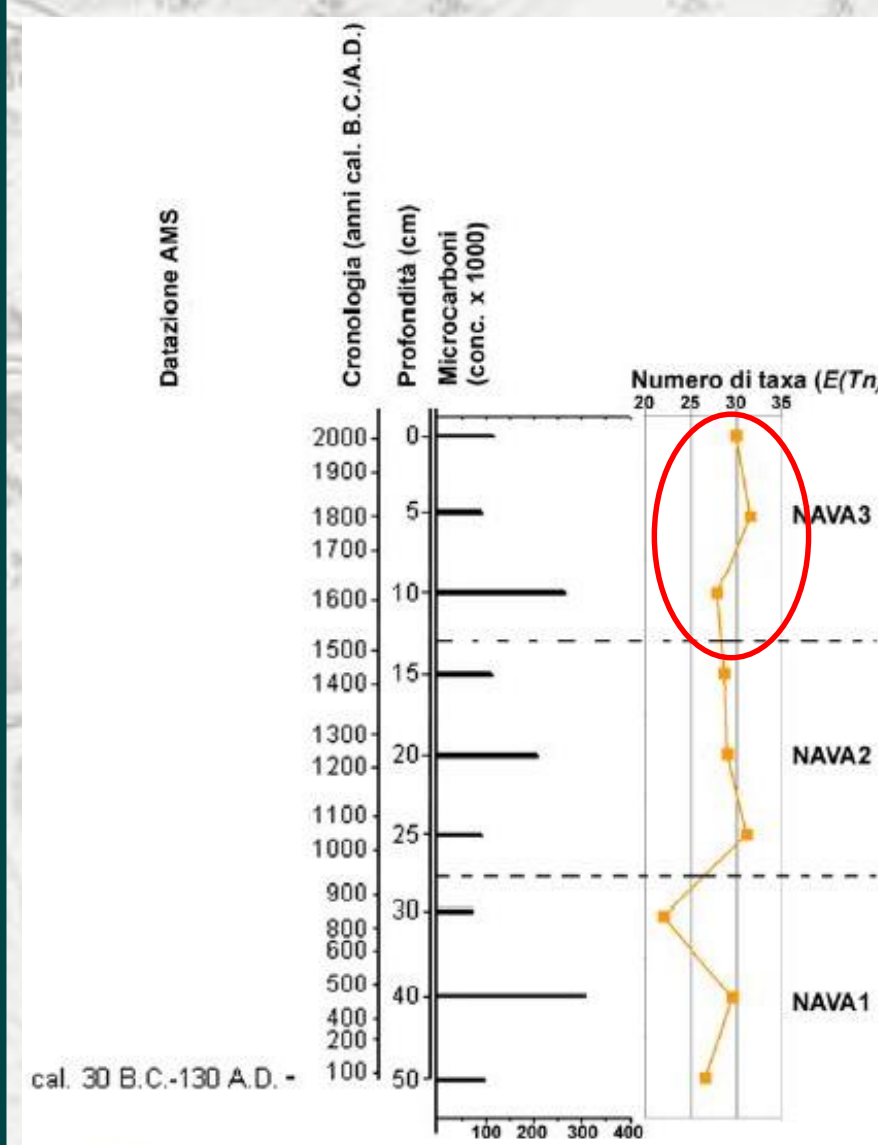


Fig. 7: graph showing the estimate of the degree of biodiversity based on pollen analysis in a grassland site of the winter quarters (Lago della Nava) (Molinari, 2010) Circled in red species decrease between 1800-2000 AD. See the relation with microcharcoal decrease assumed as indicator of pastoral system abandonment.

Conclusion

1)The complex relationship spatial and temporal between site, terroir and products can be identified through an applied historical-geographical analysis (in a multi-proxy perspective);consequently, 2)so called “traditional foodways”can be precisely characterized in their own historical process.

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