

# Soaking in the thermal landscapes: a slow tour across the Italian inner territories

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**Abstract**

Attraversare i territori interni italiani offre un'opportunità per raccontarne non più la marginalità, ma le risorse umane e naturali e, tra le molte, l'acqua: in questo viaggio nei paesaggi termali italiani si comprende come il paesaggio sia un bene collettivo da tutelare, ma anche un'occasione unica di rigenerazione territoriale. La scoperta delle proprietà curative di alcune acque - che derivano dal loro scorrere profondo attraverso strati minerali - si perde tra storia e mito, ma la loro riscoperta è oggi più che mai attuale per una fruizione lenta, esperienziale, sostenibile e inclusiva. Nel sistema disconnesso dei territori interni rurali e montani, gli stabilimenti termali possono essere occasione di riscoperta e riconnessione con la natura e il benessere: luoghi di sosta, da raggiungere per il ristoro del fisico e dello spirito, per vivere paesaggi dove immergersi, restare e ritornare.

**Parole chiave**

Paesaggi del benessere, paesaggi termali, viaggio, vie lente, territori interni.

**Abstract**

*Crossing the Italian inner territories offers the opportunity to describe no longer their marginality, but to narrate their human and natural resources and, among many, the water: this journey through the Italian thermal landscapes aims to unveil how the landscape is a collective good to be protected, but also a unique opportunity for territorial regeneration. The discovery of the curative properties of some waters - which derive from their deep flow through mineral layers - is intercrossed by history and myth, but their rediscovery is nowadays more relevant than ever for a slow, experiential, sustainable, and inclusive fruition. In the disconnected system of inner rural and mountain territories, the thermal baths can be an opportunity to rediscover and reconnect with nature and wellbeing: they can be places to stay, to be reached for the physical and spiritual rehabilitation, to experience landscapes where to immerse, remain and return.*

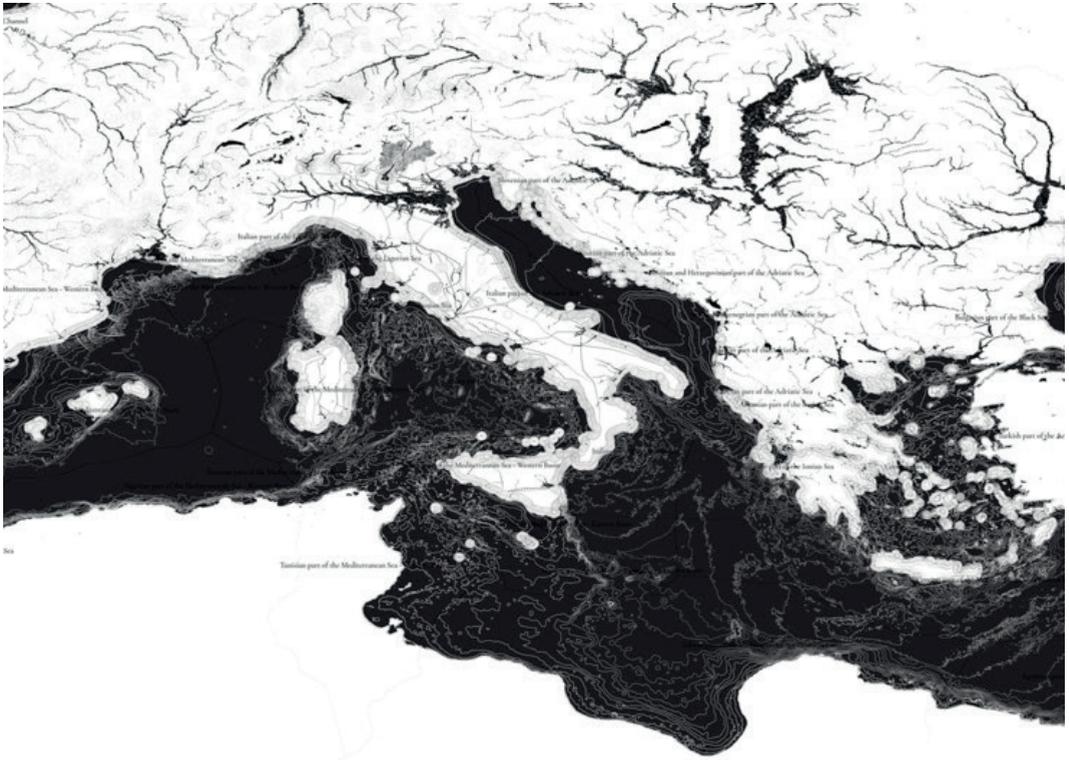
**Keywords**

*Wellbeing landscapes, thermal landscapes, travel, slow routes, inner territories.*

### **From the Grand Tour to the slow tour: Italy as a land of paths<sup>1</sup>**

In different epochs, many travelers have crossed great distances to reach Italy, sailing seas, climbing over high mountains and navigating rivers to finally visit its towns, to contemplate the beauty of sinuous hills, to reach the coast and rest on the Mediterranean shore. In his *The Voyage of Italy, or a Compleat Journey through Italy* (1670), the English Catholic priest Richard Lassels describes the places he visited during his five trips to Italy and finally coined the successful neologism 'Grand Tour'. With that expression and his attitude, he claimed that every upper-class young man – but also students of architecture, antiquity and arts – should undertake this cultural journey to visit and understand the political, social, and economic realities of Europe. Based on this impulse, many artists have crossed Italian lands, walking in idyllic landscapes to reach the main cities such as Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples, Palermo, and to remain in contemplation of the greatness and beauties of their monuments. Among the many experiences since the 17th century, retracing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Grand Tour in Italy (1786-1788) becomes a metaphor of our approach to describe a new geography where the novel contemporary 'monuments' are the inner territories within their unique thermal landscapes.

Following the traces of Goethe's Grand Tour, the experience of travel became a way to appreciate natural and cultural heritage, to rediscover forgotten places, and to engage with local communities. Nowadays, the culture of slow traveling is emerging (Careri, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010; Pileri, 2020), as a reaction to the 20th century's myth of speed and because of new priorities (e.g., low impact tourism), and Italy maintains its character as a 'land of paths' (fig. 1), even more in the current pandemic era (Montaruli, 2021; Zanni, 2021). The majority of walkers (specifically the 43%) affirms that the main motivation for leaving and undertaking a slow journey is the need to search for a psychophysical health experience and a well-being environment (AA.VV., 2020). For the purposes of this contribution and the narrative journey, the overlay of ancient roman roads and religious pilgrim routes (such as *via Appia*, *via Francigena*, *via Romea Germanica*, *Cammino di San Francesco*) reveals the proximity with minor thermal centers often marginal, abandoned or obsolete in Italian inner territories. In these contexts, far from the urban conurbations, the beauty and the quietness of the landscape are the main values and attractions, offering a unique combination of historical, cultural and ecological qualities and traces. Shifting the perspective from the thermal centers to the thermal



**Fig.1** - Waterways and 'land of paths' in Europe. Sources: Geoportale nazionale, PAT, PUP, DIVA (Coordination Sara Favargiotti, data collection and graphical elaboration Margherita Pasquali, 2020).

landscapes centers, the water springs and the natural environment result as precious resources able to cure physical and spiritual illnesses but also as values to be protected and enhanced with a sensitive design approach. The cult of thermal water through Italy has always been present in the cultural behaviors and society, since the ancient time. From Greek and Roman times to the present day, thermal springs, water and baths have generated virtuous processes for the psychophysical personal wellbeing, for moments of socialization and conviviality, and for the transformation of landscapes and cities (Secchi, 1993). Designing a thermal center has always been a crucial landscape and architectural design topic. It entails the creation of a peacefully pulsating space that connects everything as it flows throughout the entire building but, at the same time, that incorpora-

tes and connects the surrounding contexts. Moving around these lands means making discoveries where everyone is looking for a path of their own. Nevertheless, the concept itself of *thermae* changed and evolved during time, acquiring new meanings and values (Albanese et al., 2011): the first recognition awarded to thermal water was made by the Greek Hippocrates and his disciples, who claimed the therapeutic purposes of immersions; then, with the Romans, the public thermal baths acquired a specific social dimension where to find moments of luxury, relaxation, and pleasure; during the modern time, the thermal bath had a decadency and often coincided with the vacation destination for welfare medical thermal care for the working and business classes; nowadays, the thermal landscape is a place where to pursue the wellbeing in both its meanings of care and recreation.

In Italy, since the second half of the 1990s the thermal-wellbeing combination has been conceived as thermal tourism associated with health welfare holidays. These dynamics have increased recently, with the purpose to rediscover and consolidate the connection of body-nature, through careful general regeneration and self-care natural treatments (Monti, 2006). Indeed, before this recent turn, the six generations of Italian thermalism (Rocca, 2009; Fiorentino, 2019), have referred to different models of the tourism-thermal systems (fig. 2) – the recreational tourism of the late 19th century, the welfare health tourism of the 20th century, the slow and wellbeing tourism of the 21st century – but nevertheless agree to consider the thermal-mineral waters, springs and landscapes as important and precious economic resources to be protected and managed.

### **Surfaces, points and new lines:**

#### **a journey through the thermal landscapes of the Italian inner territories**

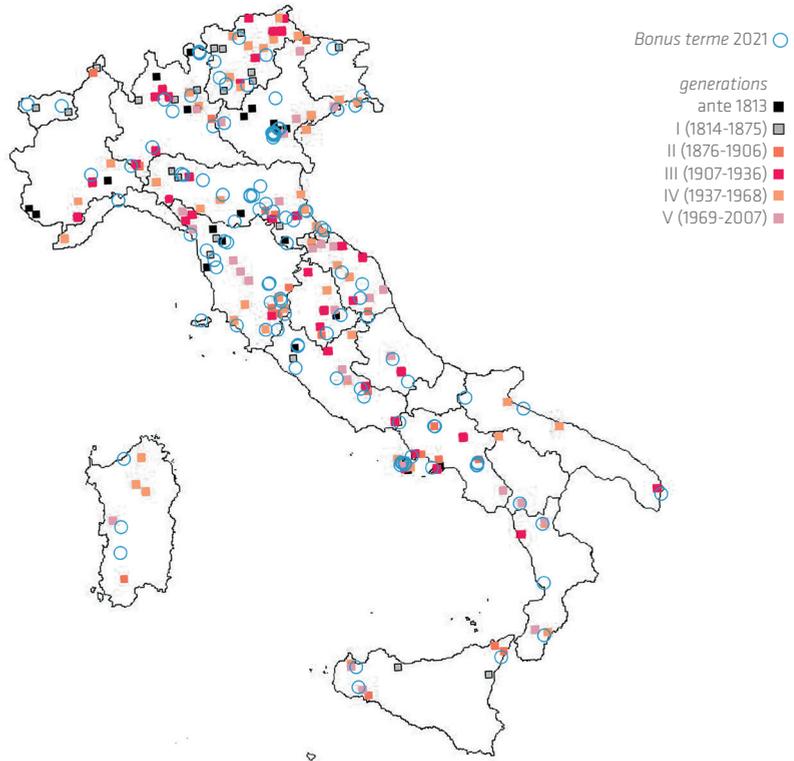
In the framework of two on-going research projects – *B4R Branding4Resilience<sup>2</sup>* and *MedWays Le Vie del Mediterraneo<sup>3</sup>* – the authors are investigating the inner territories of Italy and their thermal landscapes with the aim to create a methodological approach to understand and create awareness on the value of the water resources from the landscape design perspectives. This contribution intends to decline the increasingly topical themes of health, care and wellbeing through the lens of slow travel. The proposed slow tour along the Italian inner thermal landscape embraces those territories, rich in history, tradition and culture, very often marginalized, abandoned and forgotten. At the end, the method can become a tool to support and drive holistic and ecological territorial strategies.

Considering the dual nature of thermal baths – both as buildings strongly connected to their local dimension as well as the legacy of health and wel-

lbeing care – for many inner thermal areas seem necessary to enhance them by redesign networks capable to preserve the individual characteristics of each place and to give them new strength and visibility based on an interconnected system (cf. the European Historic Thermal Towns Association, the Italian National Association of Thermal Municipalities). The network illustrated as follows is the results of the observation and integration among different spatial entities, corresponding to as many geometric abstractions in the Italian peninsula:

- the surfaces of the 'inner areas' defined by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) as the marginal, disconnected territories through which the journey takes place. All over Italy – from the Alps, across the Apennines and to the islands – they are not residual, but account for almost 53% of municipalities, 23% of the population and about 60% of the entire territory (Dipartimento per lo Sviluppo e la Coesione Economica, 2013);
- the thermal springs as the points where to stop, pause and rest the body and the spirit and, after that, where to restart the journey towards other places. Although the Italian health facilities certified to provide hydrothermal care are 315 (Boldrini et al., 2019), the thermal baths applying for the *Bonus terme 2021* initiative have been only 192 (Invitalia, 2021) and provide medical treatments, diagnostic examinations, specialist visits, and beauty and wellness treatments.
- lastly, among the about 150 existing paths – including those listed in the *Atlas of Ways* and those that have applied for admission (Zanni, 2021) – can be identified as the connecting lines between the 'inner' thermal landscapes.

The output of this exploratory journey made along Italy is a critical mapping and redesign process regarding some of most marginal and inner territories with the aim to trace a slow route of minor thermal landscapes (fig. 3). These destinations were visited and experienced by the authors, du-

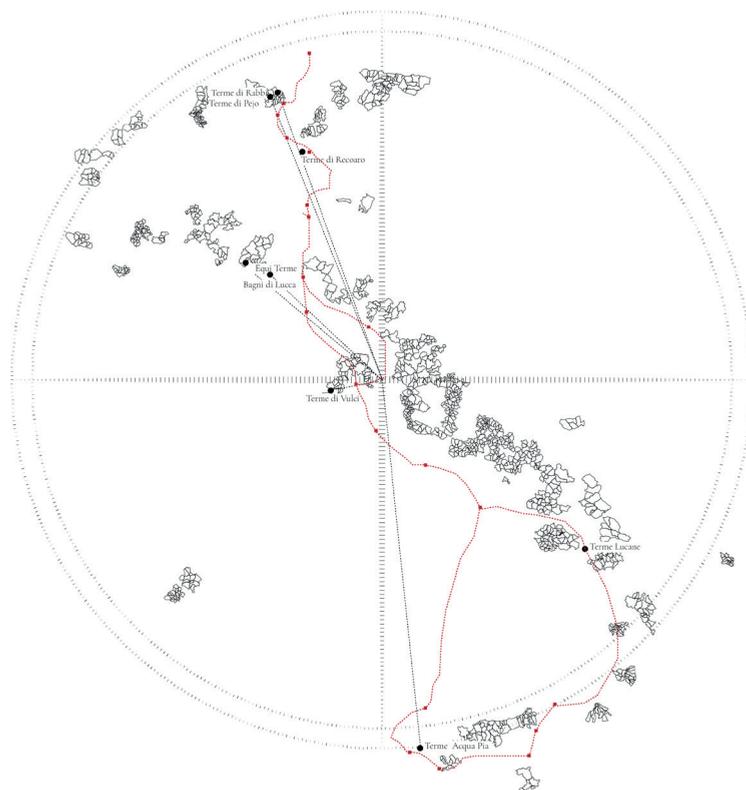


**Fig.2** –The Italian active thermal complexes divided in the six generations of thermalism (squares) combined with the ones applying to the *Bonus terme 2021* initiative (circles). Sources: Rocca, 2009; Agenzia nazionale per l'attrazione degli investimenti e lo sviluppo d'impresa, 2021 (Coordination Sara Favargiotti, data collection and graphical elaboration Chiara Chioni, 2022).

ring the last year and a half: from the hot springs of the Peio and Rabbi valleys in Trentino, through the Tuscan thermal villages of Equi Terme and Bagni di Lucca, to the *thermae* of Latronico in Basilicata. The thermal landscape heritage is the object of the mapping action to collect and transmit knowledge about the most precious ecological, natural and cultural resources of the explored territories: their waters. Indeed, the crossed landscapes are not only valuable and worthy of study because of the measurable physical and chemical properties of their waters, but also because of other types of intangible stratifications.

In the attempt to bridge *Sciences* and *Humanities*, the quantitative (i.e., the compositions of the different thermal waters) and qualitative (i.e., local culture, myths and legends about the waters' genesis)

data collected are spatialized, mapped and integrated in a conceptual 'humboldtian' section of thermal landscapes. Indeed, the way in which Friedrich Heinrich Alexander Freiherr von Humboldt represented the landscape reveals «not only the material (ecological) but also the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humanity's relationship to the natural world» (Buttimer, 2012). Moreover, Buttimer pointed out that while the main challenge for Humboldt was the integration of all the knowledges analytically acquired, the 'solution' came in the form of an exchange of letters with Goethe himself who brought his own experience in recounting voyages, suggesting a sort of enriched cross-sectional diagram. So, in one of his most celebrated representations (fig. 4), Humboldt successfully summarized lessons on the interconnectedness of terrestrial phe-



**Fig.3** – The journey across the Italian thermal landscapes in the Italian inner territories  
(Coordination Sara Favargiotti, data collection and graphical elaboration Margherita Pasquali, 2021).

nomena: the central mountains show the altitudinal zonation of vegetations, while the parallel columns, marked off by altitude, contain other relevant information (i.e., air temperature, chemical composition of the atmosphere, zones inhabited by various animals, description of rock types). The fact that the main cultural references for this contribution are Humboldt (1769-1859) and Goethe (1749-1832), who were contemporaries and knew each other, leads to emphasize the importance – acknowledge by both of them and embraced by the authors – of the «direct, sensory experience of nature, the intimate connections between reason and emotion, poetics and aesthetics in the conduct of science» (Buttimer, 2012). This seems to be the meeting point between the culture of thermalism in the inner territories of Italy and the increa-

singly widespread trend towards slow and ecological tourism. According to this perspective, thermal landscapes can offer a renovated way to embrace and understand the cohabitation among humans and nature.

### **Soaking in the thermal landscapes**

The points where to stop, pause and rest along our route coincide with the primary resource of thermalism: a fracture in the surface of the ground from which thermal water flows. Precisely, *thermae*, a hydrothermal spring, is a naturally existing source of geothermally heated water which, under pressure, escapes from the earth's surface; it is usually found at correspondence of faults or near volcanically active areas (Forace, 2014). Crossing and traveling along the paths that connect the cultu-

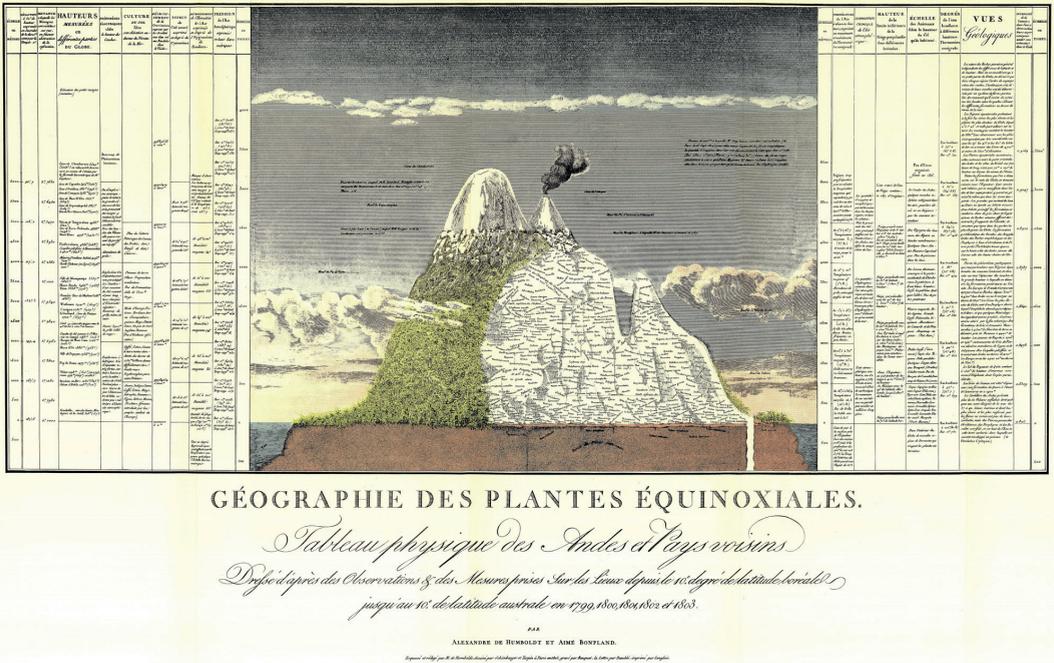


Fig.4 – Geography of plants in tropical lands. A tableau of the Andes and neighbouring regions (Friedrich Heinrich Alexander Freiherr von Humboldt, 1805).

re of thermalism of health in Italy does not only mean retracing the internal Italian areas but also diving in the thermal culture. The tour offers an immersive experience: to reveal the thermal landscapes by making visible the invisible traces inside the ground (fig. 5).

Although the concept of curative wellness, *salus per aquam* (lit. health by water), due to thermal waters began to emerge around the fifth century B.C., *Corpus Hippocraticum* was the first medical treatise in history which described in detail the hygienic and curative effects of thermal waters and wellness on the human body (Masetti, 2011). Natural hot springs were considered the best cure for wounds and tired muscles: these baths were called *aquae* while the treatments were known as *thermae*. The custom of soaking in hot or cold water, according to different modalities and habits, is already found in the most ancient populations, such as Egyptians,

Phoenicians, Etruscans, Hebrews; moreover, baths and ablutions were prescribed by the religious rules of oriental cultures (Forace, 2014).

As humans immerse themselves in thermal waters, so the water of hot springs immerses itself in the soil: during this process, minerals and metal traces are dissolved from the parent rocks into the hot water, which returns to the surface enriched with minerals and other elements (Forace, 2014). The processes of alteration of rocks in the soil release compounds and elements that dissolve in surface and in the formation of thermal groundwater. The qualities and properties of the waters depend on the combination of multiple factors as the contact with the rocks, the time of permanence in the subsoil, the temperature and pressure of the flows. So, the journey of water through the various constituents of the rocks allows the thermal water to enrich itself with many benefi-

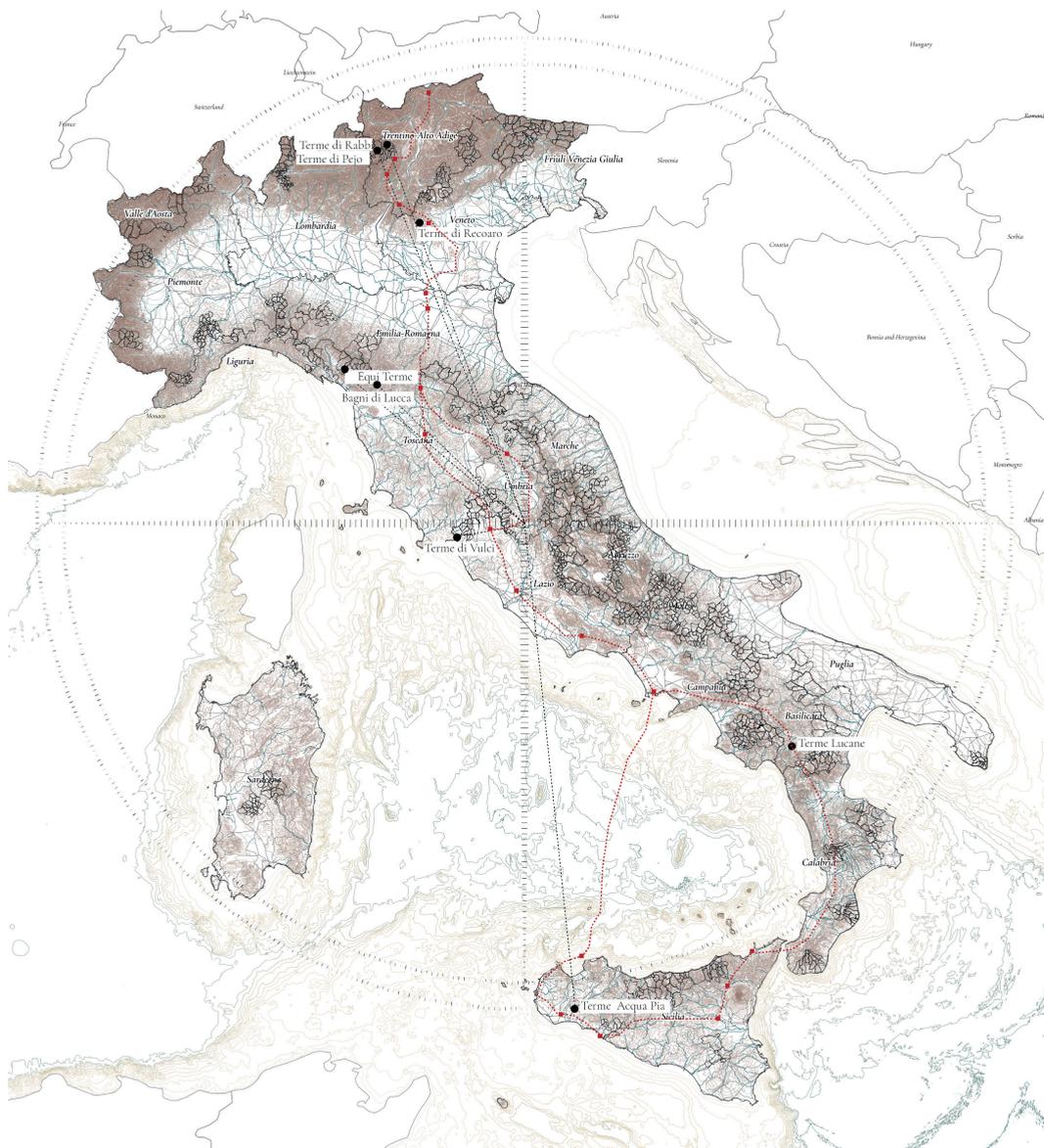


Fig.5 -The thermal journey across the thermal landscapes in the Italian inner territories. Sources: Geoportale nazionale, Openkit area interne (Coordination Sara Favargiotti, data collection and graphical elaboration Margherita Pasquali, 2021).



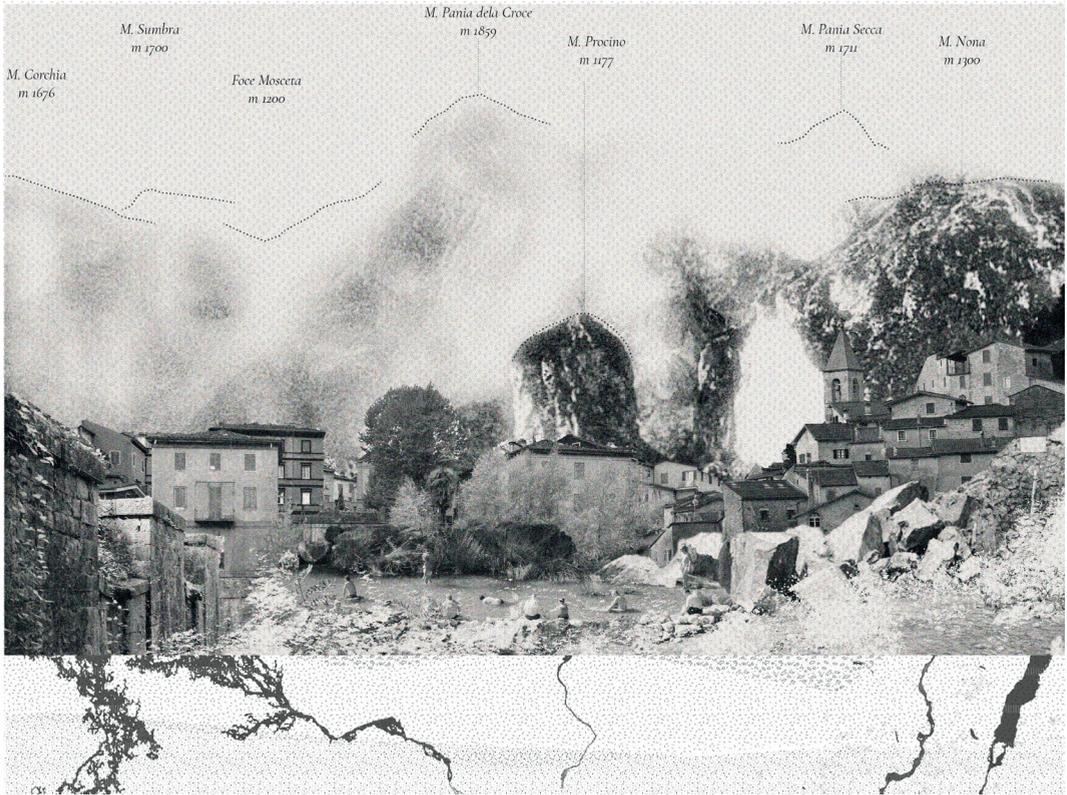


Fig.7 - Soaking in the slow thermal landscape of Val di Sole  
(Coordination Sara Favargiotti, data collection and graphical elaboration Margherita Pasquali, 2022).

### Slow landscapes in the Trentino highlands: Rabbi and Peio valleys

Since the end of the 19th century, thermal towns in Trentino have reached a fair level of notoriety and have undergone significant and radical transformations of their urban and landscape structures: facilities to host the guests were built as well as large parks and new social spaces were designed. In some cases, the marketing of mineral water was very successful, leading to industrial bottling processes that are still active today. This is the case the of Val di Sole - whose toponym meaningfully derives from *Sulis*, the Celtic water goddess whom the Romans identified with Minerva - where the unique and powerful qualities of the natural and water features are contrasted by an uncontrolled urbanized territory. The thermal springs located at the end of the two dead-end si-

de valleys of Peio and Rabbi become the access for a symbiotic human-nature relationship (fig. 7): on the one hand they are the destination points to be reached where to stop, abandoned the frenetic urbanized world and embedded in the nature of the Stelvio National Park. On the other hand, they are the starting points for the slow discovery - by bicycle or on foot - of the surrounding alpine thermal landscape. Here, the rock curtain of the Ortles-Cevedale mountain group gives the water its particular and precious chemical structure that can be visible from the reddish color of the rocks. The Peio thermal baths use three different springs: the *Fonte Alpina*, the *Antica Fonte* and the *Nuova Fonte*. The first historical evidence of the Peio springs dates back to 1549, but only in 1660 Alessandro Colombo describes the curative properties of the ferruginous wa-



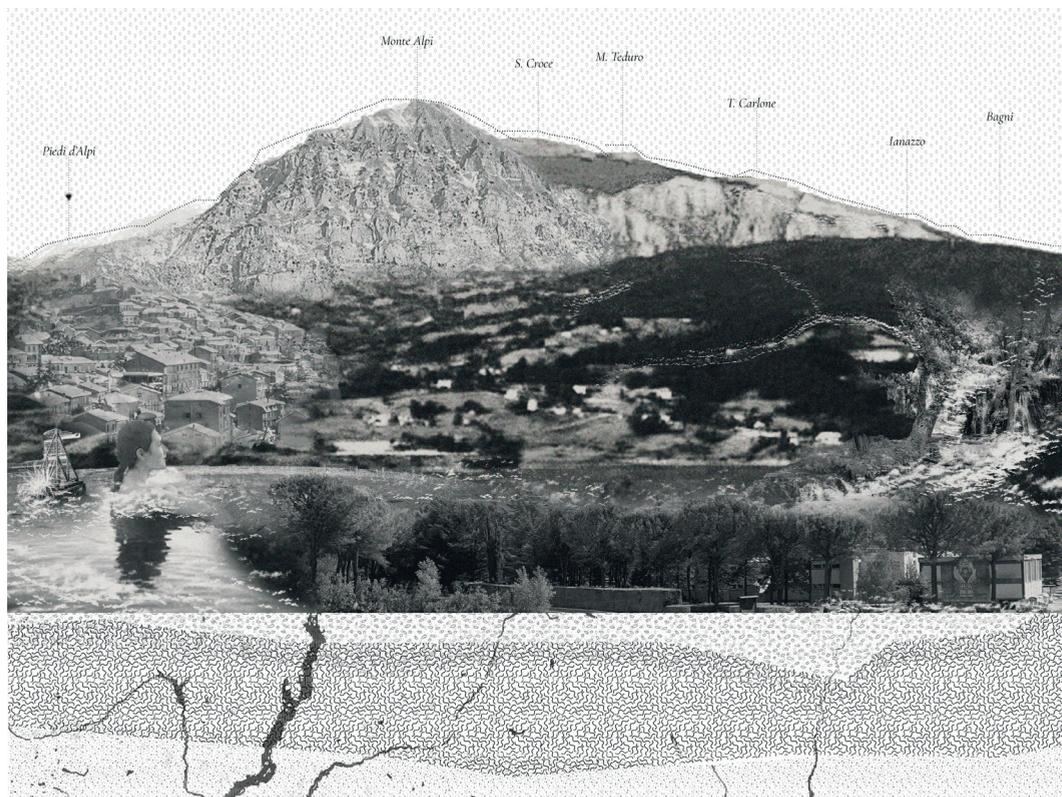
**Fig.8** - Soaking in the hidden thermal landscape of Equi Terme and Bagni di Lucca.  
(Coordination Sara Favargiotti, data collection and graphical elaboration Margherita Pasquali, 2022).

ters and exhorts not to leave them hidden from the population (Dai Pra, 2013). Similarly, the Rabbi's thermal landscape arises its water from three different springs: the *Fonte antica*, the *Fontanin del Coler* and the *Tof dell'acqua forta*. The legend tells that, back in the 17th century, the young shepherd Bastianel observed his goats, greedy for this water, producing more and better milk than the others. From that moment on, various doctors illustrated the beneficial and therapeutic properties of the Rabbi's water, defined as a 'natural elixir' because of its high content of free carbon dioxide (Dai Pra, 2013). In order to preserve the unique values of the waters but offering a multi-sensorial experience – the colors of the rocks and of the plants, the metallic taste and the sourish smell of the water – Peio and Rabbi become the shifting point from a fast to a slow way

of living in and caring for the territories. In doing so, the thermal landscapes offer holistic experiences based on the performative and sensitive features of these territories.

### **Hidden landscapes of the thermal baths in Garfagnana-Lunigiana: Equi Terme and Bagni di Lucca**

Descending along the peninsula and crossing the Apennines, the second stop of the journey passes through upper Tuscany – also intercepting the historic Francigena route – in the inner area of Garfagnana-Lunigiana, delimited by the Apuan Alps whose marble heart is the source of the curative and beneficial waters. The geological, almost tactile, character of both of these thermal baths, so intertwined with their underground landscape, constitutes a unique landscape feature.



**Fig.9** - Soaking in the creative thermal landscape of Latronico.  
(Coordination Sara Favargiotti, data collection and graphical elaboration Margherita Pasquali, 2022).

The thermal spring of Equi Terme in Lunigiana – already known to the ancient Romans – began to be exploited in 1890: the chemistry of this water consists in the concentrations of calcium and bicarbonate. Several other springs with cold water are in the immediate surroundings, but the ‘salty’ spring of Monzone offers unique sensorial conditions by belonging to the same thermal system as Equi (Mantelli et al., 2014). In Garfagnana, the characteristic feature is the presence of two natural steam caves – the *Grotta Grande* and the *Grotta Paolina* (named to celebrate the Napoleon’s sister, an assiduous visitor to these baths) from which the water – characterized by a chloride sulfate calcium composition – rises naturally at around 50°C (Mantelli et al., 2014). Here the adaptive transformation through time of the thermal landscapes genera-

tes conditions of hybridization and coexistence among natural and mineral elements. This stop allows the traveler to change the direction of its slow movement, no longer on the earth’s surface, but within its crust, penetrating underground into the caves between whose walls of living rock the water is enriched with its precious properties (fig. 8).

### **Creative landscapes in Lucanian lands: Latronico and its waters**

In the upper Sinni valley, Latronico hosts a thermal complex embedded in a thermal park with over 200 vegetation types.

Surrounded by the Pollino National Park and at the base of the Monte Alpi, the park is a natural well-being oasis that establishes its uniqueness in the relation among nature, wellness, culture and art.

The etymological origin of Latronico is uncertain: perhaps from the Greek 'hidden place' or from the Latin *Latomia*, referred to the presence of a stone quarry. Despite the uncertainties, both etymologies arise the marginal condition of the territory and leave a glimpse of the productive mineral values of the lands which still characterize the place (fig. 9). From the 19th century, Latronico became known as a health and commercial center. The Lucanian thermal baths, established in 1994, are located at the outcrop point of the mineral springs near Calda. Here, in the early 1900s, archaeological studies highlight votive shrines considered to be sacred deposits of the 'cult of healing waters'. The waters of the three springs – *Grande*, *Media*, and *Piccola* – are classified as medium mineral waters with a temperature higher than 20°C: in particular, they can be classified respectively as bicarbonate-calcic waters and as bicarbonate-calcic sulfurous water. This is possible thanks to the geological characteristics of the stalactite near the springs in the Calda caves. The uniqueness of staying in this place is the interlink among natural and cultural features expressed by the land-art work "Earth Cinema" by Anish Kapoor: a cut in the earth that invites people to find a sound – the echo of Mother Earth – and an image – the shadows of the vegetation above. Embracing this approach, the entire thermal park opens a new

artistic viewpoint on the land, inviting the travelers to stay, experience, and observe by opening a renovate dialogue among human, culture, and nature.

### **Final considerations and outlook**

The images traced through our slow tour across the thermal landscapes of the Italian inner areas contribute to envisioning a sensitive planning approach and design solutions for the renewal of these territories. From one hand, the map illustrates the overall network, while the conceptual sections – in the wake of the joint reflections of Humboldt and Goethe – show the complex stratifications of the thermal landscapes. The proposed route is an open and ongoing exploratory and mapping process. So far, it identifies only a part of the inner thermal centers and landscapes that can be connected and crossed. It offers a performative procedure for a new narrative of the thermal landscapes based on the unique combination of natural, cultural and ecological resources, reading the relationship between the composition of the soil, the thermal spring and the cult of thermalism in Italy. Shifting the perspective from the thermal centers to the thermal landscapes means to consider the thermal systems as a networked pattern that interconnects different tangible and intangible elements of the inner territories. Accordingly, designing *in* and *for* the landscape means

thinking about flexible and sensitive solutions that adapt to phenomena, creating spaces that are performing and beautiful, but also resilient, responsive, and adaptive. Further explorations and visits will extend and enrich this slow tour to discover other thermal landscapes and to let the landscape tell what we are and, in many ways, what we will become.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The thematic proposal, presented at the MedWays research cluster, is conceived and coordinated by Sara Favargiotti with Margherita Pasquali and Chiara Chioni. This paper and research topics, positions, discussions and conclusions have been collectively elaborated by the authors. The graphical elaborations have been realized by Margherita Pasquali (Figures 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) and Chiara Chioni (Figure 2) under the coordination of Sara Favargiotti.

<sup>2</sup> *B4R Branding4Resilience. Tourist infrastructure as a tool to enhance small villages by drawing resilient communities and new open habitats'* is a research project of national interest (PRIN 2017 - Young Line) funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) with a three years duration (2020-2023). The project is coordinated by Prof. Maddalena Ferretti (Università Politecnica delle Marche) and it involves as partners the Università degli Studi di Palermo (local coordinator Prof. Barbara Lino), the Università degli Studi di Trento (local coordinator Prof. Sara Favargiotti) and the Politecnico di Torino (local coordinator Prof. Diana Rolando).

For more information: [www.branding4resilience.it](http://www.branding4resilience.it).

<sup>3</sup> *MedWays Le Vie del Mediterraneo* (lit. Mediterranean Ways) is a three-year research cluster (2019-2022) awarded by the Accademia dei Lincei Centro Interdisciplinare Beniamino Segre and coordinated by Prof. Mosè Ricci with Silvia Mannocci and Margherita Pasquali.

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