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Recovery and conservation of old water mills in Central Sicily

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Abstract

Established on the analysis of an area dotted by interesting anthropogenic and natural elements, this paper focuses on the recognition of the cultural value of Central Sicily's river landscape. In the territory of Piazza Armerina (Enna) the presence of streams full of water allowed, since the 14th century, a significant production cycle mainly related to the wheat cultivation and grinding. Of the related watermill system, abandoned as any longer functional, today remain little traces, which are, however, important source of cultural identity. This heritage, if rediscovered, conserved and enhanced, may play an essential role in the area's socioeconomic regeneration.

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1. Introduction

The numerous and continuously increasing chronicles on ecological and hydrological disasters added, on the other hand, to those relating to severe problems of supply and drought, shown the imprudent management and the inadequate attention towards water, an essential resource for human life and important to many sectors of the economy.

At a time when the contemporary environmental crisis had been already triggered, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger asserted that we must “build” to dwell. He also added: “the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve. Mortals dwell in the way they preserve the fourfold in its essential being” [1]. Established on these assumptions, this paper originates from reflections and analysis carried out on a territory - the province of Enna in the

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heart of Sicily - littered with isolated goods and places, associated in the past with the exploitation of natural resources, but today not anymore functional and deserted.

The *status quo* emerged from an extensive research still in progress, allowed to understand the widespread manner with which, a number of important presences from the past branch out and, at the same time, to assess their identity value and to define those homogeneous characters resulting from the interrelations between nature and human history in the area. In particular, the interest was focused on the system of water mills. Nowadays, of these hydraulic machines - the outline of a structure of great economic importance as well as a constant resource from the Middle Ages until the advent of industrialization - remain little traces, which however deserve to be re-discovered, protected and returned to the community as an important part of its culture.

As a pilot project, the territory of Piazza Armerina - famous for the presence of the downfalls of the Villa Romana del Casale (one of 51 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Italy) and thus affected by significant tourist flows - was particularly studied. The historical fluvial network of mills, currently little known, could become a real asset for the area. However, to this end, it should rely on processes able to make known the history of these sites. It should stimulate the interest and curiosity of visitors, today largely taken from the frantic need to quickly escape to the next stage of a touch-and-go tourism.

In this sense, this study has aimed to bring out the historical origins of this heritage, to identify its typological and building characteristics and, therefore, to assess the state of conservation. Simultaneously, the analysis of archival sources and of the territorial planning instruments into force has helped to provide a comprehensive knowledge framework. This set of information, implemented and optimized for the establishment of a web platform for data sharing, has been an essential tool for the development of recovery, re-use and promotion proposals.

The program, admittedly sensitive to the preservation of these pre-existences and encouraging practices founded on the concept of “minimum intervention”, intends to establish specific guidelines. It aims at enhancing the tangible and intangible components of this legacy, providing an instrument for its active safeguarding which should improve the dialogue between the memory of the landscape – today profoundly altered – and its current perception. It, therefore, addresses the issues of conservative restoration, fruition and valorisation of a rural heritage, which is relevant from the architectural and natural points of sight, but also a strategic asset for the growth of tourism and leisure industry.

In this sense, it is significant the combination of the words “design and build” with the term “care” proposed by Nicola Emery [2]. Today, more than ever, we must design “to care” what survived to the outcomes of policies hurtful and disrespectful to the cultural and natural heritage. In this way, the word “resilience” has to be considered: not only related to physical assets, but also to the identity values of which they are harbingers.

2. Ancient water mills in Central Sicily

As known, the adequate availability of fresh water is one of the basic requirements for the life and the socio-economic development of a civilization. Over the centuries, every culture has assigned to water a religious importance: the ancient classical writers associated the presence of a source of the precious liquid to the sacredness of a place.

The Sicilian inland testifies the presence of a past characterized by cultures extremely respectful of water resources. In particular, this part of Sicily is plentiful of places characterized by the constant presence of water, consecrated to Demeter and Kore goddesses, with a clear propitiatory purpose related to land fertility. Several difficulties were encountered by the Catholic Church, to redeem the bond of the people who lived and worked these lands, with pagan rituals so ingrained in their culture. Even today, in many rites used in the province of Enna, in which water is a constant presence, there is a fusion of pagan and Christian cultures.

This is the case, for example, of the pilgrimages against drought documented in Assoro since ancient times to the *Grotta della Madonna dei Miracoli* and the hypogeum of St. Elena; the sacred processions dedicated to the *Madonna della Visitazione* in Enna and to St. Filippo in Agira; and the cult of St. Vito in Regalbuto that, according to some historians, is related to that of the God Adranos [3].

The apotropaic ceremonies connected with agricultural production show how the land, in particular the cultivation of wheat, is rooted in the local tradition. Avoiding drought was not only necessary to irrigate the fields and ensure abundant crops, but from water derived the essential energy to activate the grinding machines. The diffusion of watermills is proved in the first century BC by Vitruvius [4], parallel to the development of millstones, which took advantage of the use of human (*mola trusatilis*) or animal (*mola asinaria*) powers. The growing and milling of cereals

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