





21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations: Geographical Perceptions

Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku (Eds.)

Preface by Elena dell'Agnese

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Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku *Editors* 





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Leonardo Mercatanti, Mariacristina Ruffo

# 3. The territorial challenge of the wine-growing system in Castiglione di Sicilia (Etna)

Leonardo Mercatanti, Mariacristina Ruffo 1

#### **Abstract**

For the past few decades, the slopes of Mount Etna have been characterised by a new interest in wineries. This research, largely carried out in the field, will focus on the northern slope of the volcano, whose municipalities have been plagued by an inexorable demographic decline for decades. The emblematic case of Castiglione di Sicilia will be developed to understand the extent of the phenomenon, recent and potential future directions in terms of territorial development, based on the policies implemented.

#### **Keywords:**

Etna, Sicily, Castiglione di Sicilia, wine-district.

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#### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the slopes of Etna have been characterised by a new interest in wineries that have chosen to settle in an area known for its fertility and microclimate. This characteristic was already known at the time of the geographer Strabo (around 64BC - 24 AD): "Now although the ash is an affliction at the time, it benefits the country in later times, for it renders it fertile and suited to the vine, the rest of the country not being equally productive of good wine" (Strabo, 1988, p. 69).

Today there are more than 70 wineries, most of them recently established. A new form of entrepreneurship has come forward. It is attentive not only to the quality of the product, but also to the defence and enhancement of the territory. Sometimes the fortunate combination of the vocation of the land and the territory for agriculture use, the liveliness of a young entrepreneurial class and the adoption of winning development paths can bring about a true territorial revolution in just a few years. An Etna DOC wine district has thus been established, which has contributed to creating a tourist offer focusing on landscape, traditional culture and food and wine. In addition to recovering traditional structures (lava stone walls, houses and rural buildings, ancient roads), the wineries have created unusual agricultural landscapes of great interest to every visitor. Attractiveness is favoured by typically slow mobility routes that cancel out the consequences of a hectic lifestyle and optimally connect people to cultural landscapes. This paper will focus on the Alcantara Valley, located in the north-eastern part of the volcano, and specifically in the territory of Castiglione di Sicilia.

### 2. Territorial framework and methodology

The area under investigation falls within a territory of great geo-cultural interest in north-eastern Sicily: the Alcantara Valley. It was formed by erosion due to the Alcantara river (approximately 53 km) and is bordered to the north by the Peloritani Mountains, to the north-west by the Nebrodi Mountains, and to the south by Mount Etna. The Alcantara river flows into the Ionian Sea near Giardini Naxos and marks the natural border between the metropolitan cities of Catania and Messina. Within the valley, the Alcantara River Park (just over 1,900 hectares) was established in 2001. The area, described by Pietro Bembo in his De Aetna (1495), is already visually recognisable in various maps from the 16th century. In the mid-20th century, geographer Francesco

Speranza provided an excellent description of it, highlighting how varied the origin and nature of the terrain is, and also providing details of climatic types and vegetation (Speranza, 1955). Today, the valley has some common features and uniform elements. Common elements include a weak economic structure and a demographic dynamic that reveals one of the area's most significant critical issues: a slow and general demographic decline that calls for novel approaches and innovative measures. This theme, associated with the increase in the elderly population, is intrinsically linked to highly topical issues in the scientific debate, such as the need to repopulate marginal places, to increase their attractiveness and, no less important, to reflect on aspects such as mobility and accessibility. The territory is also characterised by many cases of hydrogeological instability, often caused by the actions of man who over the years has failed to respect the nature of the soil and has illogically built everything, taking space away from nature itself and intensifying occupation with cement.

The area is culturally relevant. Hundreds of rural dwellings, factories, mills, masseries and palmenti are spread throughout the Alcantara Valley. Scholar Lucia Militi, through long and meticulous field research, has carefully surveyed them (Militi, 2023). The area is also characterised by some important geosites, endowed with high educational, as well as scientific and environmental value. Geosites consist of landscape components thanks to which it is possible to study and understand the evolution of the territory. Specifically, they may consist of sedimentary rocks in which fossils or minerals may be present, basaltic outcrops, peculiar landscape forms, etc. (Mercatanti, Privitera, 2020, p.57). Accessibility appears to be one of the area's weak points. In reality, a lower level of accessibility is consistent with the impervious nature of the area and is by no means a weakness if one reflects on the new opportunities and attractiveness of so-called 'slow travel' or 'slow tourism'. In recent years, Sicily has received unprecedented attention in terms of territorial reorganisation aimed at the local development of marginal areas. On marginal areas, geographers themselves are making the scientific debate of great interest (Battisti, 2017; Sommella, 2017; Cerutti, De Falco, Graziano, 2022, just to mention a few articles). There are indeed many marginal territories whose cultural heritage deserves to be enhanced, also through the promotion of so-called slow tourism, a possible new paradigm for bottom-up territorial development policies (Lavarini, 2008; Nocifora, de Salvo, Calzati, 2011). In a society increasingly oriented towards speed, synthesis and synthetic and often trivial information, slow travel offers the opportunity to return to the past, to enjoy the landscape and its elements, as well as an unprecedented confrontation with nature. Slow travelling offers the visitor a better insight into places and landscapes while respecting the timeframe of optimal learning and experience. The same rural buildings, even when they are not in the best condition because they are abandoned, retain an intrinsic beauty and a double meaning: that of a cultural asset and the testimony of the existence of a strong identity in an area with great potential. The encouraging statistics on visitors corroborate these elements flows in the study area, which are slowly and steadily increasing.

The landscape is therefore a cultural landscape, rich in elements that hark back to the area's past, but also skilfully shaped to meet the area's new development needs.

The research was largely conducted in the field through various onthe-spot inspections and the testing of several tourists' itineraries and events, with visits to some representative wineries in Castiglione di Sicilia. The preliminary phase of the study was initiated through extensive bibliographic research. During the visits, informal discussions were held with privileged players in the wine-growing and wine-producing sector, and the main strategies for promoting products and places were noted.

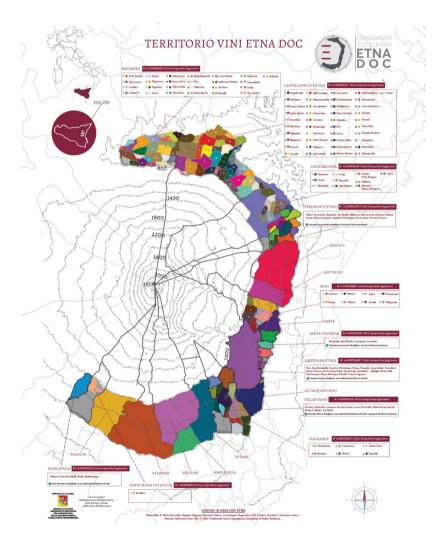
The creation of a wine district of excellence offers an opportunity for development, also through tourist routes characterised by slow mobility and experiential practices, starting precisely from the regeneration of the landscape. A case study consistent with the idea that environmental sustainability actions can effectively integrate local development paths. This work will focus on the emblematic case of Castiglione di Sicilia, with its 46 districts, already mapped as Additional Geographical Units (UGA), to understand the extent of the phenomenon and potential future developments in terms of territorial development on the basis of the policies implemented.

#### 3. The 'Etna Nord' wine district

As Fabrizio Meli well explains, the slopes of the volcano were already cultivated with vineyards in ancient times. After the Second World War, due to the economic and agrarian crisis, Sicilian viticulture went into a period of sharp decline. Several vine diseases (mainly due to phylloxera) also contributed to the sector's collapse. Thus began a widespread substitution of crops: for decades hazelnut, chestnut and citrus trees characterised the Etna landscapes. On the other hand, abandoned crops allowed nature to restore the Etnean woods. In the last two decades, the recovery of terraces, small roads,

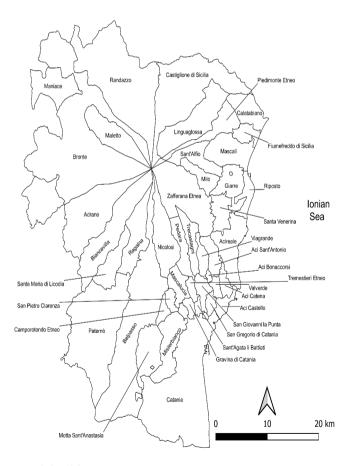
and rural buildings has allowed a return to the past since, as already indicated, the land is particularly suited to the cultivation of vines (Meli, 2016, p. 214).

The Consorzio Tutela Vini Etna DOC (Consortium for the Protection of Etna DOC Wines), in agreement with the Sicilian Region, has drawn up a thematic map identifying the 133 Districts (Contrade) of Etna (**Figure 1**). A further nine Contrade were identified in 2022. Belonging to one of the identified Contrade certifies the presence of certain organoleptic qualities in Etna DOC wines. The new thematic map highlights, through colour gradations, the characteristics of altitude, exposure, ventilation, rainfall, temperature range and soil type.



**Fig. 1**: Set of municipalities in the Etna DOC area Source: Consortium for the Protection of Etna DOC Wines

Since 2011, the production regulations of the Etna Controlled Denomination of Origin, born in 1968 and thus the oldest in Italy, recognise the presence of 133 contrade (districts) within its area, which covers the territory of 20 municipalities, legally equivalent to Additional Geographical Units (UGA). In the long work of reconnaissance of the territory, updating the boundaries led to the identification of 9 new contrade, thanks to the collaboration of the Consortium's member producers, which will be officially included in the next update of the production regulations. The new Contrade Map also takes these into account, bringing the number to 142 Contrades, which are divided into the territory of 11 municipalities. The northern part of the surveyed territory holds the largest number of Contrade: 25 are in Randazzo, 46 in Castiglione di Sicilia, 10 in Linguaglossa and 13 in Piedimonte Etneo (Figure 2). This map represents an important step towards the zoning of the DOC area.



**Figure 2.** The Etna municipalities Source: Created on QGIS by L. Mercatanti

The recent identification of the Contrade (districts) was obtained thanks to new topographical surveys that were superimposed on cartographic layers, created through repeated surveys using Geographic Information System-GIS instruments. In this way, the old cadastral maps - which no longer correspond to a rapidly changing territory, at least from the point of view of agricultural production - were updated.

Since the 1990s, a true wine district has been formed, located on the slopes of Etna on the northern slope, from Randazzo to Linguaglossa, between 400 and 800 metres above sea level. The northern slope of the volcano is characterised by higher rainfall. This district, characterised today by a multitude of high-quality wineries, the recovery of ancient farmhouses transformed into agritourism structures and the presence of a large Golf Resort & SPA, is of great interest for geographical research. Among the most important sites for viticulture are Passopisciaro, Rovittello and Solicchiata, hamlets of Castiglione di Sicilia. Starting in the mid-19th century, residents settled in these hamlets and specialised in the production of an excellent wine, exported to cut prestigious national and French wines (Meli, 2016). The morphology of the Etnean territory was tamed by building terraces that still clothe the surfaces of the Etnean reliefs today. The skilful winegrowing techniques and traditions of an area particularly suited, thanks to an advantageous pedoclimatic environment, have been preserved through various generational relays. Since the 1990s, entrepreneurs from other regions and abroad have been "attracted by the production potential of terraced vineyards, but also by the beauty of the landscape and the black magic of Etna volcano" and have introduced modern techniques and practices (Militi, 2016, pp. 72-73).

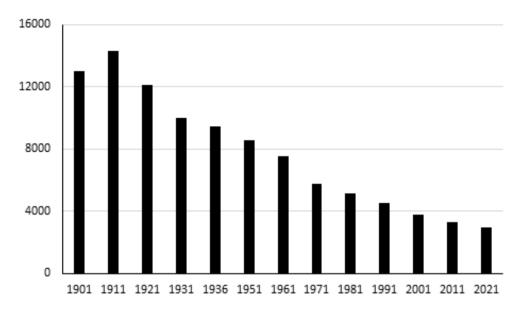
In just a few years, an area that has been able to enhance factors such as territorial identity, hospitality, taste, genuineness and authenticity of traditions, thus providing valid elements for its recognisability, has gained importance. Dozens of districts are characterised by tidy vineyards and refurbished masserias and rural houses, inside which can be admired the palmenti built in lava stone. Due to the subdivision of the latifundia, manor houses of absolute landscape-architectural value were built between the 17th and 19th centuries, which still adorn the Etnean landscape today (Cascone, Pennisi, di Fazio, 1997). Some of them are ruins, but their recovery is not excluded, given the growing interest in the area. Farms, wineries and accommodation facilities in the district are now associated thanks to the experience known as the Etna Wine Route, which offers events, wine tourism tours and short trips aboard the Circumetnea Railway train or "Littorina of Etna", a true food and wine

tourism product (Cannizzaro, Corinto, 2012). In 1994, the Consorzio di tutela vini Etna Doc was founded, committed to promoting the brand and overseeing compliance with the production regulations in defence of consumers and producers. In addition to the initiatives of individual producers and actors in the area, the rebirth of this territory and the interest of a lively entrepreneurial class, which has given rise to concrete and effective territorial initiatives, as well as clear benefits for the local community, has certainly been benefited by specific measures that the Sicilian Region, through the Regional Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Mediterranean Fisheries (Regional Department of Agriculture), has favoured, albeit following EU-initiated guidelines such as the Common Agricultural Policy-CAP. In particular, we refer to the Common Market Organisation - Single CMO (EU Regulation 1308/2013). The restructuring and reconversion of vineyards measure, for example, implemented through various wine-growing campaigns, has granted economic aid to those who produce DOC and DOCG wines regarding varietal reconversion and vineyard restructuring. These subsidies facilitated, through the provision of a 50% non-repayable contribution, the restructuring of wineries and estates, obviously in cases where the authorisations were present. In 2021, Decree 1897/2021 of the Regional Councillor for Productive Activities concluded the process that established the Distretto Produttivo Vino di Sicilia for five years. The main objective is to promote strategic planning. At the moment, none of the companies on the volcano's northern slope are involved in the District, but the initiative is destined to spread. The Region, thanks to its autonomy, does not make a significant contribution to the growth of the sector. Still, it does, however, assist and support the various local initiatives and EU strategies, probably in the conviction that local entrepreneurial forces, certainly of quality and aware of their own capacities and ambitions, are capable by themselves of self-determination (Mercatanti, Pioletti, Sechi, 2022).

### 4. Castiglione di Sicilia

Castiglione di Sicilia is a municipality of just under 3,000 inhabitants located in the centre of the Alcantara Valley, between Randazzo and Taormina at an altitude of about 600 metres above sea level. It is a fortified medieval centre located on a rocky buttress defending the Alcantara Valley. Founded by the Greeks in 496 B.C., it reached a certain importance under the Norman and Swabian dominations and became a fief of Ruggero di Lauria in 1283.

Like most of the municipalities in the Alcantara Valley, the population of Castiglione di Sicilia is constantly and significantly decreasing (**Figure 3**).



**Fig. 3**: Demographic dynamics in Castiglione di Sicilia. Years 1901-2021 Source: National Institute of Statistics (www.demo.istat.it).

The hamlets of Castiglione di Sicilia are Gravà, Mitogio, Passopisciaro, Rovittello, Solicchiata and Verzella. The most important and well-known for wine production are Passopisciaro, Rovittello, and Solicchiata. The territory of Castiglione di Sicilia today has about 800 hectares under vine and is therefore one of the most important on Etna. Around 34,000 hectolitres of wine are produced annually (Militi, 2023, p. 142). As a result, Castiglione di Sicilia is known as the 'Wine Capital of Etna'.

Vine cultivation has been one of the economic activities that have characterised Castiglione di Sicilia for centuries. Since the mid-19th century, phylloxera, a parasitic aphid that attacks the roots of the plant and quickly causes its death, spread throughout Europe (and at the end of the same century in Sicily).

After several years of crisis in wine-growing, the problem was solved by using, limited to the root system, certain varieties of American vine, completely immune to the parasite. Thanks to this intuition, it was decided to create a plant with an American foot and European leaf apparatus. In general, the soils in the districts of Castiglione di Sicilia consist of alluvial soils, with a permeable, deep and porous sandy texture. They are therefore ideal for the circulation

of oxygen, even in the deep layers. Their predisposition to be penetrated by plant roots allows the plant to find water even in the driest years, which are increasingly frequent due to climate change (Militi, 2016, pp. 68-69). While the nature of the soil and climate is favourable for planting a vineyard, it is also unfavourable. The soil itself is in fact rich in lava stones, which means that the land must first be well tilled in order to accommodate the plants. Moreover, the presence of slopes often forces operators to the only possible solution: terracing. The terracing system is a working technique whose origins go back a long way and allows steep terrain to be enhanced. This technique was created to accommodate the need to make sloping areas cultivable by increasing the surface area of land that can be worked flat and reducing rainwater runoff. Terraces are very useful for preventing and combating soil erosion, they prevent hydraulic and hydrogeological instability, they have a microclimatic function and are silent witnesses of an agricultural culture that has positively modified the rural landscape. Some terraces are even part of the tourist offer: well-known cases are the Cinque Terre in Liguria, the Douro River Valley in Portugal or the picturesque terraced rice fields in Vietnam (Mercatanti, Privitera, 2022, pp. 51-52). As the geographer Domenico Ruocco has well pointed out, cultural heritage includes also the "terraces and other traces of the conquest of the land for land-grabbing and cultivation [...] are authentic testimonies of civilisation" (Ruocco, 1979, pp.4-5). Terraces are, therefore, rightfully part of the cultural heritage and an integral part of Etna's agrarian landscape.

Terraces have been built in abundance in the past and many of them have been recovered. However, they require constant maintenance (e.g. to avert the danger of their disruption or landslides) and certainly plant care operations (soil cleaning, fertilisation, pruning, fruit picking) are more complicated, since they are not an open field on a single level of altitude.

In the territory of Castiglione di Sicilia, the main cultivars are Nerello Mascalese, cultivated since time immemorial, from which red and rosé wines are obtained; Nerello Cappuccio - increasingly rare due to a slow abandonment by wine-growers - from which red wines suitable for ageing are obtained; Carricante, a white grape variety. In addition to these, Catarratto, Minnella, Grecanico, Alicante, Cabernet and Chardonnay are also cultivated. In 1968 (Presidential Decree of 11 August 1968) Castiglione di Sicilia was included in the production area of DOC Etna.

The harvest takes place between September and October (Militi, 2016, pp. 71-72). It is precisely during the harvest months that many accommodation facilities and wineries organise educational days for visitors,

offering days in contact with nature in which they can become protagonists in the harvesting and pressing of grapes according to traditional methods.

Castiglione di Sicilia hosts various events of viticultural interest. Among them is "Le contrade dell'Etna", in its 15th edition in 2024 and an unmissable event for local producers and many visitors (https://lecontradedelletna.com). The events "Cantine aperte" (Open Cellars) and "Calici di stelle" (Goblets of stars), between May and August, also have great resonance in Castiglione di Sicilia, thanks to guided tours of the vineyards.

In 1989, Castiglione di Sicilia was the site of the first major Sicilian golf club, now one of the most popular on the island: Picciolo Etna Golf (www. ilpiccioloetnagolfresort.com/it) with 44 hectares of land on which various courses are laid out over a distance of around six kilometres. The golf course has 18 holes. Rows of vineyards, together with lava flows, oaks and hazelnut trees, are part of the landscapes visible during golf tournaments. These landscapes are recognised as unique by visitors and give uniqueness to the playing experience (Mercatanti, 2017, p. 76). In addition to the agrarian landscapes, which, as mentioned, are to be understood as cultural landscapes, there are many other cultural assets in the territory of Castiglione di Sicilia. Field research has shown that they can be of great interest to visitors and for educational visits. The following is a brief outline of some of them.

The highlight of the urban cultural offer is certainly the imposing Lauria Castle, probably of Norman origin. It is located at the top of the urban centre of Castiglione di Sicilia, recently restored and fully open to visitors, and is often the venue for events, conferences and various events.

Between Castiglione di Sicilia and Motta Camastra there is an important geological site called 'Basalts of the Larderia Gorge in the Alcantara River', established by Decree D.A. 238/2018. The basalts of this gorge, about 12 kilometres from the mouth, are characterised by their typical columnar appearance and were formed following the rapid cooling of lava that came into contact with the waters of the Alcantara river. They offer a rare spectacle of natural curiosity with their multiple prism walls of varying stratification.

Castiglione di Sicilia was once rich in Cube, typical three-lobed religious buildings erected between the 6th and 7th centuries (but also later), cubic in shape, with a central plan, surmounted by a depressed dome. Few remain today, but their charm is intact. In Castiglione di Sicilia, the remains of the Cuba of Santa Domenica (**Figure 4**), surrounded by the countryside of Castiglione di Sicilia a few hundred metres from the Alcantara river, can be visited, at present externally (Virgillito, 2023, pp. 273-275).



**Fig. 4**: Cuba of Santa Domenica with rows of vines, visible only in autumn. Source: Photo by Maria Virgillito, september 2022.

#### 5. Conclusions

In the title of this contribution we spoke of challenges. Why challenges? Because there are so many threats facing the territory. Among them is depopulation and the consequent abandonment of the urban and surrounding territory. It is precisely the birth of new economic activities linked to the world of wine production and connected to tourism that could lift the demographic fortunes of the territory. The many guided wine tourism itineraries - to discover vineyards, wineries, wine museums, wine shops and agritourisms aimed at promoting and enhancing the territory - are of great interest to tourists who are already present in the surroundings of Castiglione di Sicilia due to the proximity of the volcano, the sea and Taormina, one of Sicily's most important destinations. As we have briefly described, there are many other attractions. The challenge lies in the ability to know how to promote an area that is already rich in resources, some of which are very different from each other.

An area that could further benefit from the recovery of rural buildings with high potential and architectural and historical interest, but also from the establishment of mill roads, rural paths and ecomuseums. All these resources, both internal and external, if suitably valorised by private individuals and actors involved in the governance of the territory, can contribute to relaunching the economy through the promotion of wine-growing, which could prove to be a driving force for the affirmation of forms of cultural and food and wine tourism.

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Territories continue to transform due to endogenous and exogenous development drives. The thickening of logistics and transport networks, large commercial hubs, energy supply options, agricultural and industrial policies, tourism and migrations constitute then, individually and in a systemic sense, some of the lenses available to read the transformative dynamics of territories in the crucial current geopolitical context. In addition, the increasing reach of digital technologies in the spaces and practices of our daily lives, has changed the way we perceive and use the landscape. These transformations find a reified outcome in landscape transitions, becoming a foothold for a trans-scale geographical reflection. We therefore want to insert this volume on this horizon. In fact, we have wanted to stimulate the geographical community to try their hand at landscape analysis to identify, through methodological and/or applied research contributions, problems, practices and trajectories inherent in the transformative dynamics of territories, compressed between the urgency of development and the need to change the energy and consumption paradigm.

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