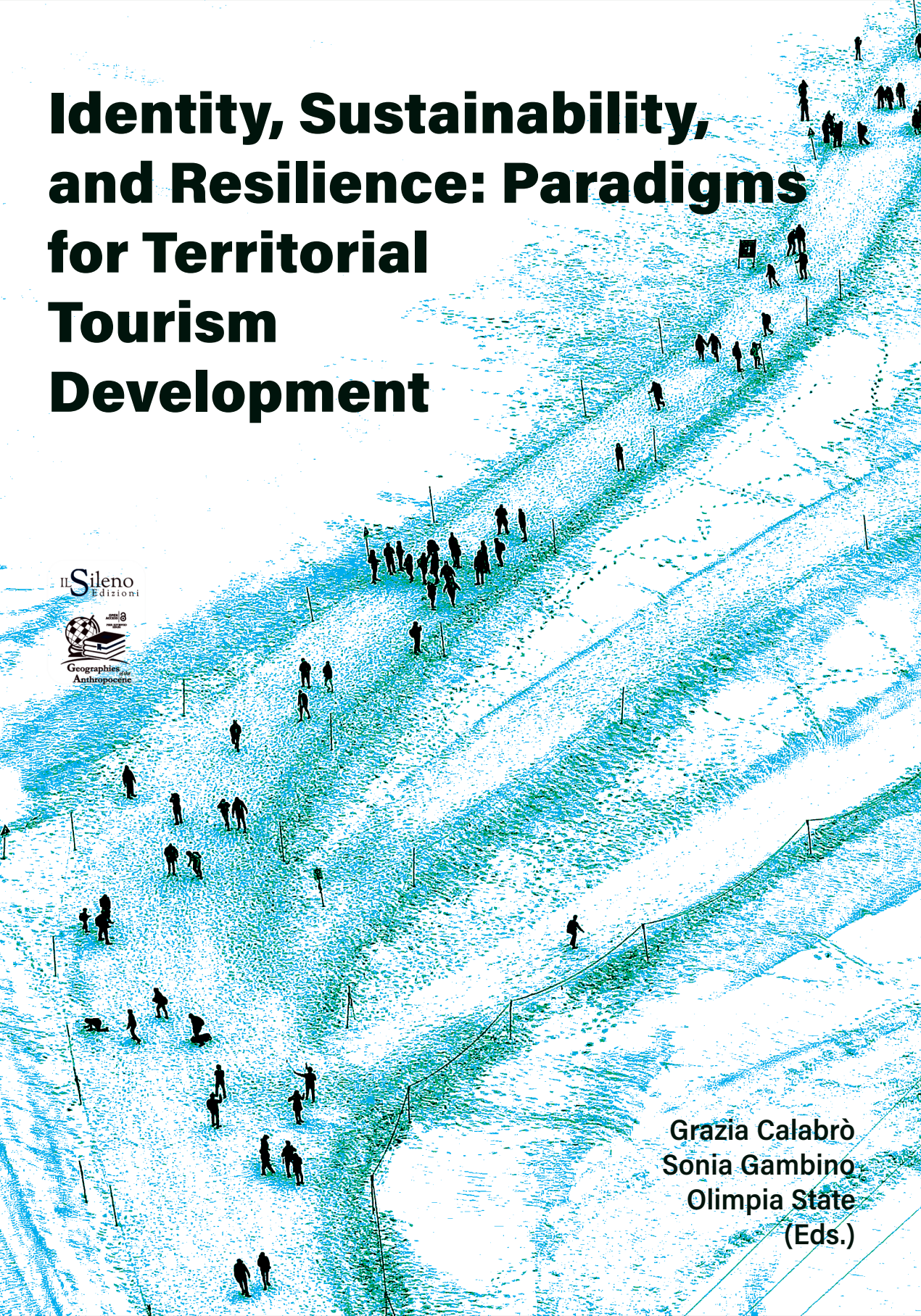
Identity, Sustainability, and Resilience: Paradigms for Territorial Tourism Development



Il Sileno Edizioni

Geographies of the Anthropocene

Grazia Calabrò
Sonia Gambino
Olimpia State
(Eds.)

Grazia Calabrò, Sonia Gambino, and Olimpia State (Eds.)

Identity, Sustainability, and Resilience: Paradigms for Territorial Tourism Development

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Grazia Calabrò, Sonia Gambino, and Olimpia State (Eds.)

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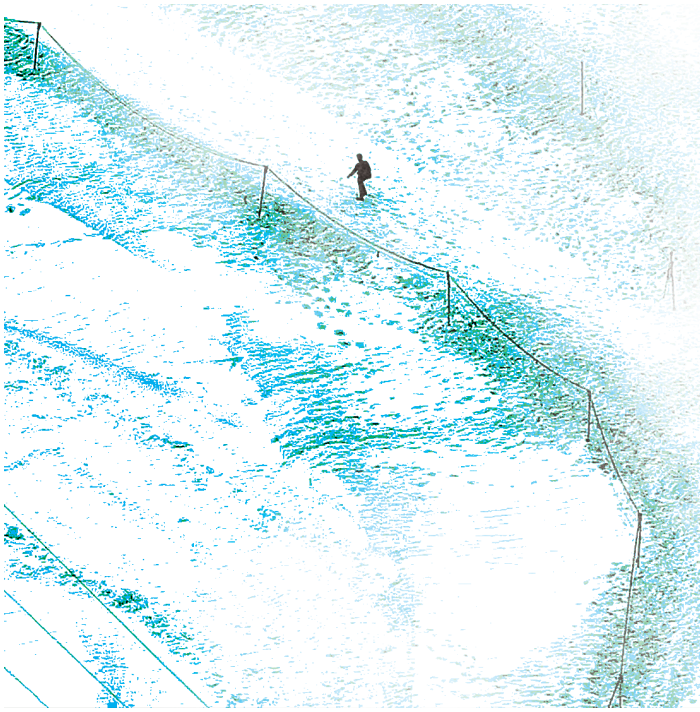

14. *Equestrian sport in Sicily. A geographical survey*[1]

Leonardo Mercatanti[2], *Giovanni Messina*[3], *Gaetano Sabato*[4]

Abstract

The spread of equestrian sport and activities linked to the presence of riding schools and stables in the area represent an unprecedented field of interest for geographic studies. In this sense, the contribution, divided into four sections, has several objectives: to carry out a first theoretical-analytical survey on horse riding in Sicily, to prepare a mapping of the structures present, to think about the territorial dynamics that this sport embodies. From a methodological point of view, the proposal is structured on the intertwining of statistical and documentary analysis and qualitative research on the ground at the Equestrian Institute for Sicily in Ambelia (Catania), considered the cornerstone of the strategy of strengthening the sector in the Region[5].

Keywords: *Sport, Horse Riding, Sicily, Tourism, Ambelia*

[1] This contribution is a reasoned, rethought and revised version of the original study *Lo sport equestre in Sicilia e il caso di Ambelia. Una prima indagine geografica* published in 2024 in issue no. 74 of the Italian class A journal «Geotema». In this version, the sections are attributed to their three authors as follows: Section 1 was written by Giovanni Messina, Section 2 by Gaetano Sabato, and the other sections by Leonardo Mercatanti; finally, conclusions are shared.

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[5] Here and below, especially when capitalised, the terms "Region" and "Sicilian Region" refer to the first-level administrative territorial entity into which the Italian State is divided. In this sense, there are 20 Italian administrative regions, and Sicily is one of them. Furthermore, as is the case for various reasons with four other Italian regions (Sardinia, Valle d'Aosta, Trentino Alto Adige and Friuli Venezia Giulia), Sicily, by virtue of its island status and its geographical and historical-cultural characteristics, has a degree of partial political and administrative autonomy in certain legislative and decision-making areas.

1. Introduction and methodology

This work, which falls within the scope of research in the field of sports geography, aims to fill a certain gap in geographical thinking about the importance of equestrian sports and their many spatial, economic, medical, social, and even geopolitical implications (Bale, 2003; Bale, Dejonghe, 2008; Pioletti, Bettoni, 2020; Raento, 2017).

Equestrian activities cover a wide range of areas, from sport—with various disciplines, horse trekking, riding lessons, competitive training, etc.—to health, given the recent recognition of the therapeutic value of various activities carried out in facilities, such as hippotherapy, equestrian rehabilitation, para-reining, psychomotor therapy, and physiotherapy with and on horses, but also other emerging practices (Frank, Dole, McCloskey, 2011; Ajzenman, Standeven, Shurtleff, 2013; Battagliese, Battagliese, 2021).

In the scientific field, the most detailed analysis, despite not focusing on strictly territorial applications, seems to be that put forward by Nosworthy (2013): it focuses in particular on the medical, rehabilitative, and psychological importance of equestrian practice and the sympathetic relationship between horse and rider. From a perspective more closely linked to tourism and horse racing events, we would like to mention the recent volume *Humans, horses and events management* edited in 2021 by scholars Dashper, Helgadóttir, and Sigurðardóttir.

With particular reference to Sicily, this contribution, based on data provided by the Federazione Italiana Sport Equestri-FISE (Italian Equestrian Sports Federation), aims to provide quantitative information on the number and distribution of equestrian sports clubs in Sicily, taking into account the main and diverse disciplines practiced, registered hippotherapy initiatives, and existing equestrian tourism projects.

As far as the density of facilities is concerned, as we shall see, the results are not uniform. The unevenness of the data obtained therefore triggers a reflection on the interactions between equestrian sports, developed in riding schools, and the connotations of specific spatial contexts.

However, the application of this reasoning will focus on equestrian sports in the broadest sense. In particular, we want to conduct an initial survey to hypothesize, including through a case study, how and whether the concentration of riding schools and equestrian sports clubs, especially outside urban areas, is connected to the material and planning infrastructure that supports sustainable forms of land use. So-called *equestrian tourism* represents a well-documented

area of research in the literature (Ollenburg, 2005; Helgadóttir, Sigurðardóttir, 2008; Castagnetti *et al*., 2012; Magalhães, Antunes, Barroco, 2014) as well as a defined classification of sustainable tourism products, sometimes in standalone form and sometimes integrated with additional eco-tourism and sports-tourism formulas (Singh, Dash, Vashko, 2016).

As part of its three-year tourism development program for 2022-2024 (2022), the Sicilian Region[6] has identified sports tourism, which explicitly includes equestrian sports, as a new avenue for local development capable of complementing the region's tourism offering (Regione Siciliana, 2022, p. 26) and pointed to the organization of a Prima Fiera del turismo sportive (First Sports Tourism Fair), the well-established Fiera Mediterranea del Cavallo (Mediterranean Horse Fair) in Ambelia (Catania), and the historic *Coppa degli Assi* ("Cup of Aces") show jumping competition as key events on which to base the sector's development strategy. Four horse trails were then identified on the island - from Cefalù to Taormina, through the Madonie mountains, from Sciacca to the Monti di Palazzo Adriano e Valle del Sosio and, in the Messina area, as far as the Peloritani mountains - as the backbone for enjoying the area on horseback.

From a methodological point of view, this contribution is based on a quantitative analysis of the primary data collected and on Document Analysis (Bowen, 2009) of institutional sources (see section 2). Furthermore, the case study integrates, from a qualitative perspective, the document analysis with an in-depth interview conducted in the field (cfr. section 3) (Baxter and Eyles, 1999; McCormack 2004; Kitchin and Tate, 2013): no questionnaire was used, but questions (open-ended and decided in advance by the authors) were asked to the interviewees during guided conversations on topics of interest related to the research topics developed here.

[6] See footnote n. 3.

2. Equestrian clubs in Sicily

To begin our analysis, we believe it is useful to provide a synoptic diachronic overview of the consistency of equestrian sports in Sicily (Table 1) which, despite a slight increase in the number of clubs, recorded a 57% growth in the number of licenses issued between 2017 and 2021, which are necessary to practice the sport even at a non-competitive level. The most likely explanation for this data is that, during periods of less intense restrictions, the pandemic has encouraged outdoor sports that do not involve gatherings and contact between individuals. However, between 2022 and 2023, the number of clubs experienced a slight decline, while the number of licences has decreased more significantly.

Year	Clubs	Licenses issued
2017	87	4,479
2018	81	4,302
2019	79	4,384
2020	84	5,701
2021	95	7,826
2022	94	5,986
2023	90	5,460

Tab. 1: Equestrian sports in Sicily between 2017 and 2023

Source: FISE a, www.fise.it/federazione/i-nostri-numeri.html

The difficulty in finding reliable quantitative data for Sicily, due to the scarcity of specialized sources outside those of the Italian Equestrian Sports Federation, would make it problematic to map the centers where equestrian activities are practiced on a regional scale. For this reason, it was considered useful to collect and organize data from FISE relating to the island (FISE b), in order to work on a basis that was as reliable as possible.
Using the data provided by FISE for Sicily, it is possible to reconstruct a detailed picture of the geographical distribution of the clubs/facilities affiliated with the Federation and, therefore, recognized by it. In 2021 there were a total

of 94[7] clubs operating in the region (and in 2022 the situation was almost the same). Tables 2, 3, and 4 show that the spatial distribution by province is varied but consistent with the size and centrality of the main Sicilian cities (already provincial capitals). Considering the total number of facilities, the top four places are occupied by Palermo (24), Catania (22), Messina (16), and Syracuse (10). However, if we consider the municipal territories of the island's top four cities, Palermo ranks first with 16 recognized clubs, followed by Messina with 8 facilities, Syracuse with 6, and Catania with 3. The provincial figures vary greatly from the municipal ones because, for example, in the territory of Catania, the vast majority of equestrian clubs are scattered throughout the territory, with a widespread presence in various municipalities of the province: out of 22 surveyed, 19 are located outside the municipal territory of Catania. On the contrary, in the Palermo area, almost all of them are concentrated in the municipal territory (16 out of 24). Based on the presence of equestrian clubs, the other provinces can be listed in this order: Trapani (9), Ragusa (6), Agrigento and Caltanissetta (both with 3 units), Enna (1). Another fact is also worth considering: the areas where most of the clubs active in equestrian sports are concentrated are often affected by the main tourist flows on the island. The consistency of the research hypothesis set out in the opening section therefore seems to be confirmed; it would therefore be appropriate to investigate, in future studies, the connections between the spatial distribution of facilities where equestrian sports can be practiced and its implications in terms of tourism supply/demand.

[7] The data on the FISE website contain slight discrepancies: the pages and online documents consulted show two different figures for the total number of facilities in Sicily, namely 94 and 95. In Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, we have reported the figures that can be obtained from the sources cited, in the belief that this is a minimal discrepancy, probably due to a failure to update or a mere typographical error.

Province of Palermo		***Province of Catania***		***Province of Messina***		***Province of Siracusa***	
Municipality	Club	Municipality	Club	Municipality	Club	Municipality	Club
Palermo	16	Catania	3	Messina	8	Siracusa	6
Cinisi	1	Misterbianco	2	Tremestieri	1	Floridia	1
Terrasini	1	Ramacca	1	Villafranca Tirrena	1	Solarino	1
Misilmeri	1	Caltagirone	2	Nizza di Sicilia	1	Avola	1
Bagheria	1	Aci Castello	1	Giardini Naxos	1	Augusta	1
Casteldaccia	1	Acireale	1	Gaggi	1		
Sciara	1	Valverde	1	Milazzo	2		
Cefalù	1	S. Giovanni La Punta	1	Torrenova	1		
Castellana Sicula	1	Tremestieri Etneo	1				
		Mascalucia	1				
		Belpasso	3				
		Viagrande	1				
		Santa Venerina	2				
		Linguaglossa	1				
		Bronte	1				
Total	24	Total	22	Total	16	Total	10

Tab. 2: Distribution of Sicilian equestrian clubs by province in 2021 (I)

Source: FISE b, www.fise.it/sicilia/it/home/circoli.html; our elaboration.

Province of Trapani		*Province of Ragusa*		*Province of Agrigento*	
Municipality	Club	Municipality	Club	Municipality	Club
Trapani	1	Ragusa	2	Favara	2
Erice	1	Modica	1	Sciacca	1
Valderice	1	Vittoria	2		
Marsala	1	Ispica	1		
Alcamo	2				
Castelvetrano	3				
Total	9	Total	6	Total	3

Tab. 3 - Distribution of Sicilian equestrian clubs by province in 2021 (II)

Source: FISE b, www.fise.it/sicilia/it/home/circoli.html; our elaboration.

Province of Caltanissetta		*Province of Enna*	
Municipality	Club	Municipality	Club
Caltanissetta	1	Leonforte	1
San Cataldo	1		
Niscemi	1		
Total	3	Total	1

Tab. 4: Distribution of Sicilian equestrian clubs by province in 2021 (III)

Source: FISE b, www.fise.it/sicilia/it/home/circoli.html ; our elaboration.

The greater or lesser prevalence of equestrian clubs in the area is relevant to our investigation because it has an indirect impact on the protection of all areas outside the facility (internal roads, trails, and tracks) that are consistent with equestrian activities. The facilities themselves are usually located in areas

characterized by high-profile natural and landscape features. In this sense, equestrian activities contribute, albeit marginally, to the control of areas that are difficult for public administrations to manage and increasingly subject to degradation due to littering. Equestrian activities carried out outside the facilities—excursions, rides, and trekking on horseback—require an ideal landscape that is not compromised by environmental offenses of any kind. In this regard, we can mention the possibility that illegally or improperly discarded waste may be found along equestrian tourism routes. In such cases, it is the primary responsibility of the equestrian club itself to report the matter to the competent authorities or to notify the most active environmental associations in the area, such as Legambiente, which often organize environmental volunteer campaigns to remove waste. The case of hazardous waste (e.g., corrugated asbestos sheets or asbestos containers) is more complex, as the disposal procedure is lengthy and costly and can lead to a stalemate between the need to make the landscape fully accessible and the need to ensure safe disposal (Chaudhary, Polonsky, McClaren, 2021). it is also worth mentioning the work of the National Association of Environmental Equestrian Guides (Guida Equestre Ambientale-ENGEA), which since 1997 has been responsible for training Environmental Equestrian Guides, who play an important role in promoting natural environments and in protecting and monitoring them.

3. The case of the Ambelia Mediterranean Equestrian Center

In the heart of Sicily's largest plain, specifically in the territory of Militello in Val di Catania, lies Tenuta Ambelia, an important center for equestrian activities managed by the Istituto Incremento Ippico per la Sicilia (Sicilian Horse Breeding Institute). The facility, which has been the subject of several inspections and an in-depth interview with two privileged witnesses who manage it, is significant from a historical, cultural, social, educational, sporting, and tourist point of view. Accessibility to the facility is guaranteed by excellent signage and a series of directions.

The sparse literature on the origins and evolution of the area, based essentially on the precious 17th-century manuscripts of Filippo Caruso, attests that the current structure boasts historical origins of great interest, since its use as the summer residence of Francesco Branciforte Barresi (1575-1622), Marquis of Militello, and Giovanna d'Austria, granddaughter of Charles V of Habsburg. Here, the two nobles not only held cultural gatherings attended by famous guests, but also refined their passions, including equestrian art, facilitated by the geographical characteristics of the area. For centuries, this area has been predominantly dedicated to wine production, as evidenced by both its first name, Vignazza, and its subsequent variation, refined by the priest Don Nicolò Colosso: Ambelia, from the Greek ἀμπελος, vine. The sixteenth-century farmhouse of Ambelia was also part of the Rasinech fiefdom, which refers to the word *racina*, meaning grape. Upon the death of Francesco Branciforte, the property passed to the Benedictine Fathers, but only until 1866. With the enactment of Royal Decree No. 3036 of July 7, 1866, religious orders and congregations were abolished. Law No. 3848 of August 15, 1867, provided for the confiscation of all agricultural real estate owned by various religious entities (Natale, 1837, p. 100; Majorana, 1913, pp.119-120; Abbotto, 2008, p. 77). The facility was thus entrusted to the Ministry of War, established in the aftermath of Italian unification. In the meantime, the landscape was partly transformed by the decision to allocate large areas of the surrounding land to olive groves, partly due to the changing production needs of the area.

In 1884, a branch of the Regio Deposito Cavalli Stalloni (Royal Stud Farm) of Catania was established with the aim of promoting the breeding of horses with characteristics suited to military needs (in particular the Oriental Thoroughbred). With the end of the Second World War and the abolition of the Ministry of War, the Istituto Incremento Ippico per la Sicilia di Catania (Catania Horse Breeding Institute for Sicily) was founded in Catania in 1959.

It was an organization that now operates within the Regional Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, and Mediterranean Fisheries and manages the Ambelia Estate, its territorial offshoot and complementary structure, as well as serving the objective of offering a wide range of services. One of the main aims of the Institute and the Estate is to preserve certain Sicilian horse breeds, such as the Oriental Thoroughbred, the Anglo-Oriental, the Sanfratellano horse, and the Ragusano and Pantelleria donkeys, the latter of which is at high risk of extinction. The Institute arranges for the periodic transport of stallions to regional public breeding stations (known as 'erariali'), about five times a year, and private stations, about a hundred times a year. It also issues five-year authorizations for the management of public or private breeding stations and handles the formalities related to mandatory periodic inspections. The protection of the territory finds one of its most concrete rewilding actions in the preservation of native horse breeds (Naundrup, Svenning, 2015).
The estate, covering approximately fifty hectares, features two dressage arenas, the renovated buildings of the small 16th-century village, covered stands (seating approximately 700 people), horse stables, and parking, as well as other multifunctional spaces where cultural events can be held or exhibition stands can be set up. The historical and cultural aspect, as confirmed by the results of the interview, is the basis of any educational and tourist experience hosted in the area.

3.1 Tourism and educational visit

The following information emerged from the interview conducted in December 2022. The staff of the Institute and the Estate have been trained to ensure an adequate visitor experience of the facilities. Visits are mainly aimed at school groups from the metropolitan city of Catania and enthusiastic tourists. As far as schools are concerned, the Institute's premises have been constantly promoted for several years. The educational program highlights the wide range of places (both at the Catania headquarters and on the estate), techniques, oral tradition, customs, and traditions of a rural world inextricably linked to the presence of horses and donkeys. The landscape of the estate plays a fundamental role in the educational visit, with centuries-old olive trees, vineyards, pasture land for horses, and rural houses. All this, together with the timeless sounds of nature, adds strength and value to an all-round sensory experience.
The small 16th-century rural village on the estate is of ethno-anthropological interest and is a typical architectural example of what was not destroyed by

the 1693 earthquake in the Val di Noto. In recent years, the estate has seen a growing number of visitors, both because the buildings have been undergoing redevelopment for some time and because it is a complementary stop on a visit to Militello in Val di Catania, a town included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2002 (The Late Baroque Towns of the Val di Noto). An important role is played by tourist guides, tour operators, and independent tourists themselves who are looking for new destinations. In this sense, it is believed that communication about the site and the various activities should be implemented on specific web channels. Tourist flows are increasing, although the numbers are not yet significant. Admission requires a ticket, the price of which varies according to the day of the week, the number of participants, and any events taking place.

The offer is truly extensive: at the headquarters of the Istituto Incremento Ippico, in the historic center of Catania, the MusCa-Museo delle Carrozze (Carriage Museum) has been established, with its vehicles and objects related to the world of horses that hark back to a time when horse management was accompanied by rituals and a way of life that has now almost completely disappeared, but which is highly evocative for tourists. The same institute also organizes conferences, seminars, and exhibitions on various topics. In 2022, the photographic exhibition Blocco 200. Anime sospese (Block 200. Suspended Souls), the result of a photography course for inmates at the Caltagirone Prison, was particularly successful. The multifunctional activities implemented ensure a level of use of the two structures that can be described as growing and constant. The need to record the number of visitors, their origins, and other information has been reported, in order to have a minimum annual statistical picture on which to reflect in order to implement improvements.

3.2 La Fiera Mediterranea del cavallo (The Mediterranean Horse Fair)

The most important event organized and funded by the Sicilian Region at Tenuta Ambelia is undoubtedly the Mediterranean Horse Fair. The event, which reached its fourth edition in May 2022, was held for the first time in the same month at the Favorita racecourse in Palermo. This created a useful synergy between Sicily's two main urban centers. The event is aimed at both professionals in the sector - athletes, judges, race directors, hippotherapy instructors, equine veterinarians, farriers - and tourists, families, and curious visitors. It followed two main themes: the main equestrian disciplines (driving, endurance, western gymkhana, and show jumping) and the presence of stands,

food and wine tours, exhibitions, parades, and shows. The fourth edition of the event, with around 40,000 visitors, recorded a higher number of visitors than previous editions and involved around 500 professionals, 700 horses, and 60 exhibitors. The facility often hosts national and international competitions. The calendar of events, available on the facility's website (www.cavallisicilia.it/30/news) or on the FISE website, is always packed with events. In September 2022 alone, at the end of this field survey phase, both the FISE international competition *Ambelia Internazionali di Sicilia* - Gran Premio Coppa degli Assi (show jumping) and the MIPAAF competitions for the classic show jumping circuit and breeding circuit took place. The Institute sponsors various regional events and conferences. Several television crews (in 2022 Mediaset, Rai, Sky) visited the Institute's premises to make documentaries and conduct interviews.

3.3 Discussion

As described in the previous sections, Ambelia is a complex and spatialized hub for policies aimed at promoting horse culture in conjunction with the local area. The term 'policies' in this case is also used in the most literal sense: in recent years, although not without controversy - arising from the alleged territorial link in the promotion of the area by the previous President of Sicily, Sebastiano Musumeci, who is from Militello in Val di Catania - the Sicilian Region has invested considerable resources in the redevelopment of the estate and in financing various activities. Leaving the political controversy in the background, it is clear that, in accordance with the programmatic documents referred to at the beginning, the focus on the development of horse culture and the promotion of new ways of enjoying the territory are, in the governance of regional tourism, a very coherent part of the overall strategy for promoting local tourism. The very location of the estate, at the crossroads between several highly attractive macro-systems—the Etna area and the Val di Noto, both UNESCO sites—seems to underline the intention to insist on the promotion of new practices of sustainable tourism, far from the logic of mass tourism. This impression will certainly have to be verified in subsequent work.

4. Conclusions

This contribution aims to provide an initial critical overview of the spread of equestrian sports in Sicily and the role they play or could play in tourism-driven development, as envisaged in the Region's strategic documents. Spatial analysis of the data seems to confirm the hypothesis of a link between equestrian sports and tourism, which, along with other aspects, will certainly be explored in greater depth in future work.

Instead, we chose to focus on the case study of the Ambelia Estate because the facility, which is a point of reference not only at the regional level but also for the entire South, represents a significant example of a successful initiative that started with the public (specifically, the Sicilian Region) and is part of the discourse on the eco-sustainable enhancement of the territory. The latter is particularly suited, as we have seen, to equestrian activities in all their facets. It has been established that the structure under consideration plays an important role within the territorial context in question and acts as an intermediate stop that facilitates connections with Militello in Val di Catania, but also with Mineo, Grammichele, and Caltagirone. A strategic stopover offering new ideas for forms of integrated tourism.

There are high expectations for the facility and challenges related to its development. The economic aspect is no less important in this regard. The facility has a significant impact on the regional coffers. In 2022, costs (not only energy costs) increased significantly. Several initiatives are underway, such as the enhancement and completion of the area dedicated to sports activities. Over €1 million has been committed in 2022 to the construction of a new area for horse shelter, a necessary flagship for such a facility, especially with the arrival of the many participants in sporting competitions that increasingly see the estate as a protagonist, even at an international level.

For the Sicilian Region, the strategic objective is to become a destination of excellence for equestrian sports in southern Italy, capable of creating a tourist industry that can extend the island's tourist season and therefore its use, especially during the months less crowded by summer tourism. In this sense, the characteristics of the offer are consistent with the objective of deseasonalizing tourism.

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The combination of natural, anthropological, economic, social and cultural elements defines a tourist area. Tourism represents a significant opportunity for territorial redevelopment and greater economic and employment prospects, with considerable potential to contribute to various aspects of sustainability. It plays a pivotal role as an instrument for the promotion and development of the territory. The range of economic activities that constitute the tourism offer is therefore expected to adopt behaviors guided by a common interest, identifiable not only in the conservation but, above all, in the sustainable use of resources resulting from the interaction between human activity and the natural environment. The aim of this book is to encourage reflection on the analysis of current realities and future opportunities for a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable tourism model. Through selected case studies, the authors, adopting a critical approach, a multidisciplinary outlook, and methodological rigor, assemble a mosaic that reveals the complexity of the issues examined in the contributions gathered in this volume.

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