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Article

The Valorisation of an Ancient Traditional Practice for the Promotion of Rural and Sustainable Tourism: The “Tracing of the Straight Furrow” in Central and Southern Italy

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Abstract The aim of this original contribution is to present the procedures and process initiated by some municipalities in inland areas for the inclusion of an ancient rural tradition, practiced in south-central Italy—the “Tracing of the straight furrow”—in the “National Register of Rural Landscapes of Historic Interest, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge”. The registry proposes to identify and catalog in a database the rural landscapes, practices and knowledge worthy of importance to safeguard their integrity and vulnerability. The article describes the research activity that was implemented to record the practice, and also wants to show that the standard procedure prepared by the Ministry cannot consist only of desk analysis (data collection, and preparation of the required dossier). Indeed, there is a need to initiate a process that, starting with the proposing institutions, involves local actors and communities who are familiar with traditional places and practices. Citizen participation in this decision-making process that implements the area’s tourism-cultural development policies is also essential to consolidate intra-generational and local relationships: desk analysis is thus enriched by field analysis. This makes it possible to highlight problems/potentialities and help in the selection of contextualized solutions to encourage adherence to initiatives especially after recognition of traditional practice in the National Register.

Keywords traditional knowledge; agricultural practices; sustainable tourism; community-based tourism; Irpinia; tracciatura del solco dritto

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1. Introduction

The new models of tourism consumption have been calling the territories of the internal areas for some years now to the construction of tourist attractions based on experiential routes that start from places, identity heritages, and rural and agricultural landscapes. By favouring the slow approach, tourist consumption practices have reinforced and consolidated the sustainable and responsible approach [1]. It has characterized tourism over the last decade, even more so in the post-pandemic period, when attention to the subject of tourism sought to sustain a sector at risk of collapse, also focusing on inland areas and the opportunities offered by remote, often marginal places, with authentic, healthy and unspoiled heritage, to nonetheless live complete, fulfilling and safe tourist experiences.

Slow and sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, human-centred tourism [2], but also geotourism (which in some of these areas shows promising signs of development and has locations of high cultural potential [3–5]), roots [6] or return tourism, and thus routes, walking, cycling, historical railways [7], greenways and sustainable mobility, recovery of the traditions and flavours of one’s own land, typical food and wine itineraries for rural sustainability [8] are just some of the possible declinations of a tourist practice that starts from the local milieu [9,10], from the experience of places, from the recovery of traditions and historical memory, and aims at the exchange of knowledge, dialogue, intergenerational reciprocity and between different communities [11], but above all at renewing the use of territorial heritage as a resource [12,13]. The change of perspective sees the tourist/traveller of inland areas, no longer a mere user of resources,

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but a temporary citizen of the community [14] who wants to feel good in the community and who is good for the community as a value-generator.

Internal areas, beyond fragility, geographical marginality, socio-economic and cultural impoverishment, are marked by the widespread presence of environmental resources (water, agricultural systems, forests natural and human landscapes) and cultural resources (archaeological heritage, historical settlements, abbeys, small museums, trade centres) of considerable value even if little known, characterized by a strong historical, landscape and cultural identity, with tourism and production vocations that express a development potential that has yet to be fully explored. The presence of unused human, cultural and territorial capital, solid social communities, and quality production systems (agricultural, tourism, manufacturing), represent a starting point, through revitalisation and recovery processes, potentially capable of triggering sustainable growth in their territories. The stimulus of policies is to feed place-based development processes, according to an integrated approach oriented to local promotion and development [15].

This is even more true when referring to agricultural heritage. It is understood as “the totality of natural and cultural assets, tangible and intangible, generated or used for agricultural activity throughout history” [16] even as “physical elements that retain clear traces of their history” [17]. On the one hand, therefore, material knowledge such as tillage and land use, irrigation systems, terracing, rural buildings and villages, traditional cultivation and animal husbandry practices and techniques, tools and utensils are considered; on the other hand, intangible knowledge such as the customs and traditions of a territory, traditions and legends, rituals and festivals, harvest celebrations, food and culinary culture, handicrafts and craft techniques are considered.

In recent years, the intangible component has come powerfully into play in territorial patrimonialisation policies and processes. Article 2 of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage mentions: “Intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, know-how [...] that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” [18].

This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups. In rural areas, therefore, understanding the value of the agrarian heritage means recognising all its functions: the agricultural and food production function; the environmental function of sustainably protecting the territory, conserving and protecting the landscape and bio-diversity, and enhancing local resources; the economic function of offering other goods and services related to agriculture that increase the level of quality of life, food security, and social wellbeing, generating a higher level of income and employment; the social function of maintaining rural traditions and socio-cultural fabrics, fostering harmonious and balanced development of the territory [19].

It is therefore crucial, in a process of territorial patrimonialisation, to invest in the cultural and landscape value of the agricultural heritage and thus strengthen local identity. The latter must be understood as knowledge of the past, of local traditions and cultures, and of traditional agricultural systems. It must support the sustainable development of marginal areas through the knowledge and transfer of traditional cultivation and processing techniques; know and explore the opportunities deriving from new forms of tourism, both conscious and experiential, even in less frequented settings; provide for the creation of a network of initiatives and services on a larger scale capable of enhancing already existing but fragmented skills and activities.

In this context therefore, local communities wishing to undertake local development processes linked to the cultural enhancement of resources must play a driving role in strengthening territorial identities and proceed in a second phase to the implementation of an experimental, inclusive and integrated process of local development aimed at recovering and enhancing the material and intangible agricultural and rural heritage and enriching the traveller/tourist experience. They must become an active part of that collective actor working on a shared vision of the rural territory and its development, identifying and defining common objectives for change, implementing shared strategies to pursue them [10,20] and as envisaged by the Faro Convention, must operate as heritage communities, must discover, deepen, re-appropriate and regenerate their identity resources, and actively participate in the protection, management, and development of the common heritage as a new opportunity for territorial and tourism development [21].

There are many programs at national and international level dedicated to the preservation and protection of the agricultural and rural heritage, prompted and fueled by a recent scientific and institutional interest in cultural heritage, cultural landscape, and immaterial heritage at different scales: the UNESCO World Heritage List, the FAO's GIAHS—Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems, the Ministry of Agriculture's list of heroic and historic vineyards to be safeguarded, are just some of the protection and conservation policies from which rural and inland areas can benefit [22].

In Italy, in addition, the National Register of the National Observatory of Rural Landscape, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge (ONPR), can be included in the basket of territorial initiatives aimed at the conservation, protection and valorization of historical agrarian landscapes in Italy.

The Italian National Observatory of Rural Landscape, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge (ONPR) was established in 2012 to elaborate general principles and guidelines for the protection and enhancement of the rural landscape through targeted interventions in agricultural policies [23].

ONPR is responsible for the census of landscapes, the conservation and valorisation of agricultural practices and traditional knowledge, for the preservation, management and spatial planning, also with a view to preserving bio-cultural diversity [23]. To this end, it identifies and catalogues in a dedicated Register the traditional or historically interesting rural landscapes, related practices and traditional knowledge present on the national territory, defining their significance, integrity and vulnerability, taking into account both scientific evaluations and the values attributed to them by the communities, subjects and populations concerned, collects the data, conserves them, and makes them openly accessible. Finally, it selects candidatures of rural landscapes for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage Representative List as well as agricultural practices and traditional knowledge for nomination on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Representative List [23].

As can also be seen from the *Carta de Baeza*, a document created with the intention of guiding the process of recognition and protection of agricultural cultural heritage in each country in a clear and objective manner, there are several reasons for the recognition of a landscape or practice in the rural sphere: the transfer of knowledge to present and future generations, the study and in-depth analysis necessary to make local players aware of the value of the asset to be protected, the opportunities in terms of resources and instruments for the protection and safeguarding of agricultural assets of heritage significance [24].

Given these premises, through our research we set out to describe an ancient traditional practice still active in some regions of central-southern Italy, the “Tracing of the straight furrow” (in Italian, the “Tracciatura del solco dritto”). As will be amply described below, it has been practiced for centuries in hilly and mountainous environments in the Apennines, in small towns with a predominantly agricultural-pastoral economy, and, in the authors' opinion, deserves the candidature described above, in order to preserve the age-old practice and promote it in the future, as a serial good, along the lines of the UNESCO serial sites that are made up of a set of homogeneous goods located within one or more country.

The request for registration of the agricultural practice aims to preserve and protect a practice that is widespread nationwide, but rather, starting from the practice itself, to trigger tourism-territorial development processes in fragile, marginal geographic areas, subject to depopulation and abandonment.

The study that follows, therefore, through an accounting of the process and procedures put in place for Ministerial Certification (which fits well with the many territorial initiatives aimed at the preservation, protection and enhancement of historic agricultural landscapes in Italy and responds to the new models of sustainable, community-based and human-centred tourism-territorial consumption), aims to emphasize the contribution that a high-level certification can make to the development of the areas concerned, generating value in the short and medium to long term, for the communities involved. Therefore, an approach, described in this article and also applicable in other territorial contexts, has been tested for other types of recognitions/certifications. This method has already produced positive results, detailed below: network building, reawakened interest in an ancient tradition that was in danger of disappearing, laid the foundations for future collaborations between public authorities, associations, businesses, and schools, even before obtaining the coveted recognition.

2. Materials and Methods

The approach followed by the authors was conditioned by the pre-selection procedure imposed by the ONPR. The report form of a traditional practice contains numerous items [23], which could be summarised in the scheme proposed in Table 1.

Table 1. The requests of the ONPR reporting schedule.

General Features	Technical Characters	Social Aspects
Typology of traditional practice	Description of traditional practice	Main maintenance threat factors
Name of traditional practice	Tools and objects related to traditional practice	Associations that promote/practise/safeguard traditional practice
Geographical area of diffusion	Use of local cultivars, varieties or breeds	Initiatives by communities, associations or public authorities to safeguard

Starting from the provisions of ONPR, we followed three research lines: the first, in a necessarily compilative manner, based on bibliographic research and dedicated websites [25–30]; the acquisition of photos and videos, both of past events and those in the field; historical archive documentation (parish, municipal).

The second, followed an analytical approach to defining some distinctive demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of small towns where this ancient practice survives, therefore referred to in this study as the “Villages of the Furrow” [31,32]. In fact, some geographic (administrative, elevation, municipal extent), demographic (change in the number of residents in the interval 1951–2022, Old Age Index, on the population over 65, in absolute value and as a percentage of the total), and distance from production centres were investigated. The in-depth study, not required by the ministerial procedure but useful in defining the geographical framework *sensu latu* of the territories under consideration, was conducted through data available online and made public by the Agency for National Cohesion in support of the SNAI (Strategy for Inner Areas) [33], and the National Institute of Statistics, ISTAT [34]. To complement the geographical analysis, some indications will be described in more detail in Section 3.2.

Finally, having concluded the ministerial procedure with the drafting of the Dossier that the Municipality of Sturno (province of Avellino) intends to present to the ONPR as the Lead Municipality, the process that accompanied the process of the two initial approaches will be described: these are the researches, meetings, initiatives, and involvements that the authors organized in parallel to the drafting of the Dossier. Thus, the Municipality of Sturno represents a focus area, in which the procedure was then followed by a process, applicable in any territorial context (Figure 1). All will be described in the Discussion section.

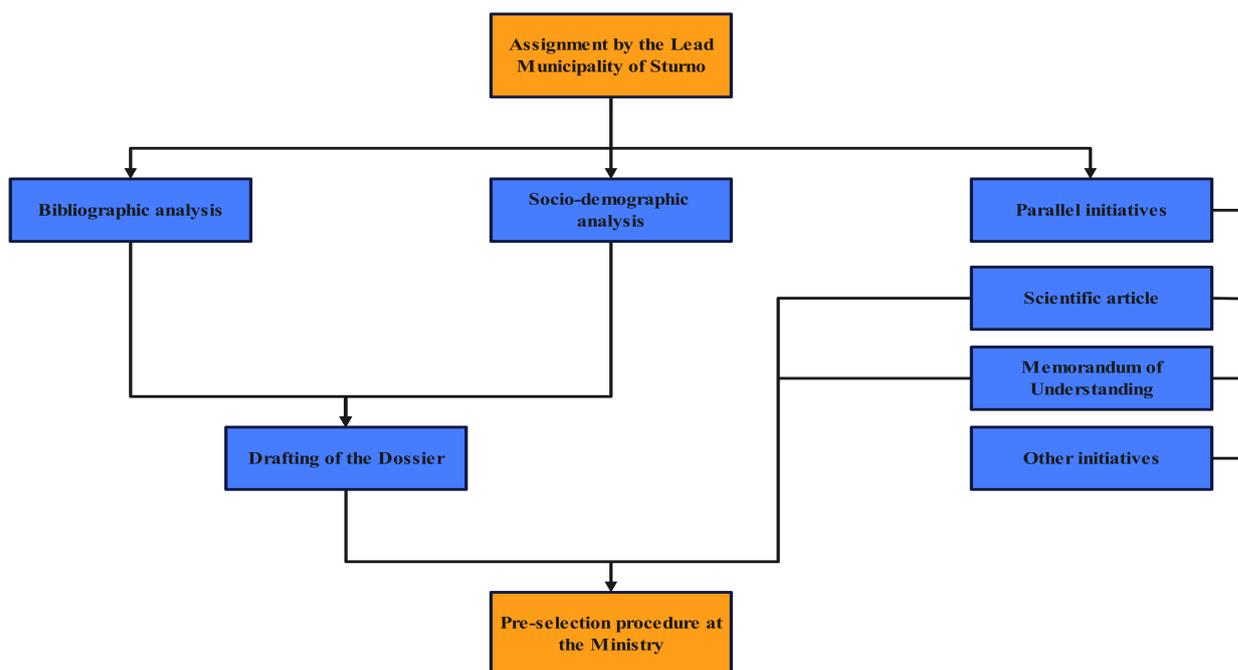


Figure 1. Flow chart of lines of research.

3. Results

This section will briefly list the results of the research, detailed for each point required by the Ministerial Schedule shown in [Table 1](#).

3.1. Typology and Name of Traditional Practice

The tracing of the straight furrow is a traditional practice with deep roots in the farming world, handed down from father to son, with great attachment and faith as an act of thanksgiving for the agricultural year that has just ended and an auspice of fertility for those to come.

It consists of tracing, by means of oxen and, today, by modern agricultural means, one or more votive furrows dedicated mainly to the Virgin Mary, using various techniques that refer to ancient practices of the Etruscan and Roman religious' world ([Figure 2](#)), later passed on in Christian rituals.

Different typologies are adopted locally: a single team or several teams; competitive and non-competitive aspects; a single furrow or very many: in each case, the trackers offer their physical vigor and technical skill in tracing these miles-long straight paths. They repeat age-old gestures that take into account the skill of making furrows in fields now at rest after the grain harvest. A joyous final celebration enshrines the sacred offering and cements the spirit of the communities.

Picking up on the concepts expressed by anthropologist Alfonso Maria di Nola [35] on the “religious and cultural significance” of the practice, it can be stated: “The perfectly traced furrow constitutes itself in a sacred prototype of all the furrows that the plough will trace in the coming year, it is configured as a “model” of the favourable outcome of the ploughing work. [...] We are faced with one of the magical-religious examples of prototypical agricultural work [...] That is, it is like fixing in a historical non-time what will then be the realisation of a human work aimed at the production of concrete commodities” [35].

And again: “This type of ceremony has profound archaic characteristics since the main subjects, simple but fundamental and I would say unique, are man, animal and earth, indispensable for creating the whole ritual [...]. Veneration towards the deities was also an interpretation of thanksgiving in which man’s labour was repaid with the harvest. The ceremony consists of: 1) pulling of the straight furrow; 2) consumption of agricultural products, wine, etc.; 3) sacred ritual with the veneration of the saint or Marian figure; 4) blessing of the ploughs. This clot of rites, while having a Christian depth, has particular archaic pagan veins” [29] ([Figure 2](#)).



Figure 2. Bas-relief on a funerary sarcophagus, 3rd century AD. Museum of Sannio, Benevento, Italy (Ph.: M. Sisto, verbally authorised to photograph, 2022).

As for the name of the practice, it is generally referred to as “furrow tracing”, to which the adjective “straight” is added in various contexts ([Figure 3](#)).

Sometimes, the appellation of the practice takes on a more specific declension, as it refers to the sacred dedication to which the offering is destined.

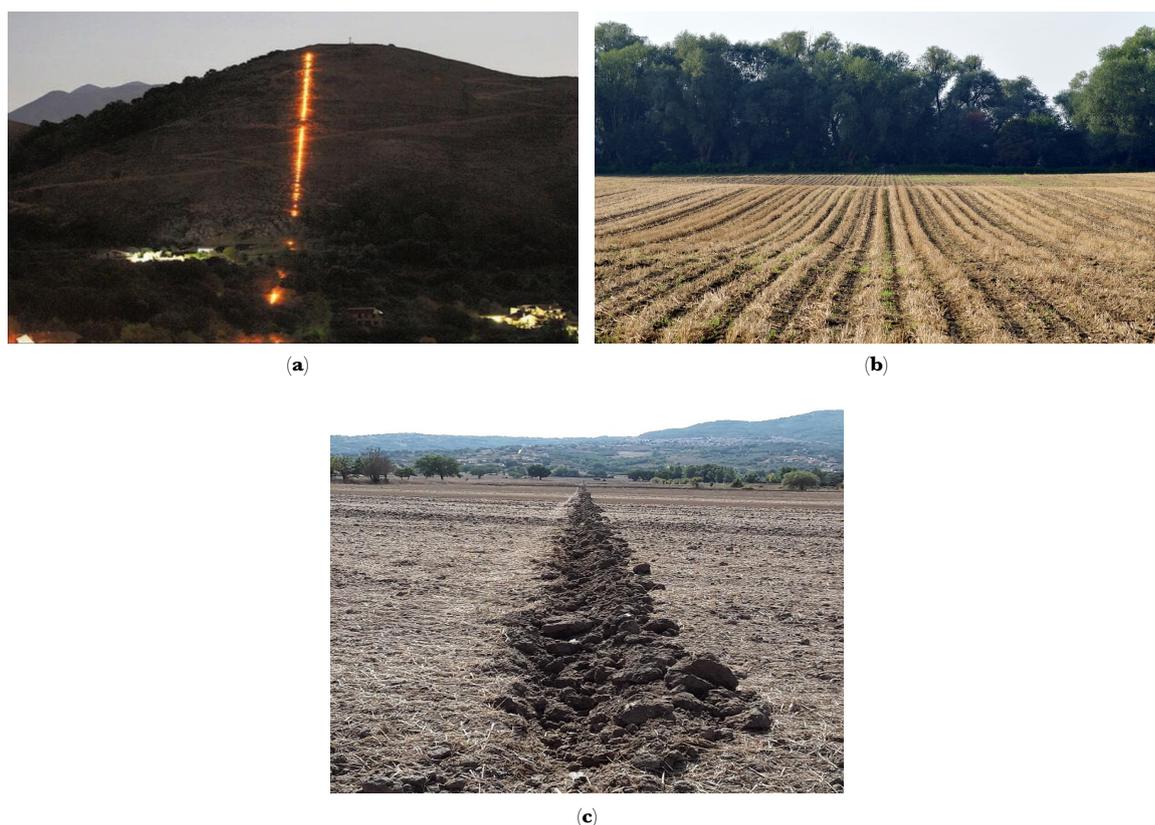


Figure 3. Some pictures of the “solchi” (grooves) in different contexts (a) Castel Morrone, Caserta Province, Campania Region (Ph: <https://casertaweb.com>); (b) Rocca di Mezzo, l’Aquila Province, Abruzzo (Ph: <https://abruzzoturismo.it>); (c) Sturno, Avellino Province, Campania Region (Ph: M. Sisto).

Thus, definitions of the rite can coexist, such as the “Tiratura del Solco dritto” in Valentano (Viterbo Province, Latium Region), the “Gara del Solco dritto” (Straight furrow Race) in Rocca di Mezzo (L’Aquila Province, Abruzzo Region) and Castel Morrone (Caserta Province, Campania Region) or the “Festa dei Solchi” (Feast of Furrows) in San Pio delle Camere (L’Aquila Province, Abruzzo Region) [25–27].

More specific are Sturno’s definitions (Avellino Province, Campania Region: the *Angel’s Furrow*, dedicated to St Michael) or the Madonna delle Cappelle and the straight furrows in San Bartolomeo in Galdo (*Our Lady of the Chapels*, Benevento Province, Campania Region) or the more complex one of Bacugno (Rieti Province, Latium Region), known as the feast of *St Mary of the Snow, the obsequious bull, the Furrow and the Manocchio*, a large sheaf of wheat symbolising a wish for prosperity and abundance for the harvest.

3.2. Geographical Area of Distribution of the Practice and some Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the “Villages of the Furrow”

The geographical area of distribution of the traditional practice covers a more or less extensive part of five current Italian regions (In central Italy and the northernmost part of southern Italy). No historical texts or news found on the web testify to the implementation of the practice in northern Italy. As is well known, the Italian regions are subdivided into provinces: in 10 of them, the current presence of the tracing rite is ascertained (Figure 4).

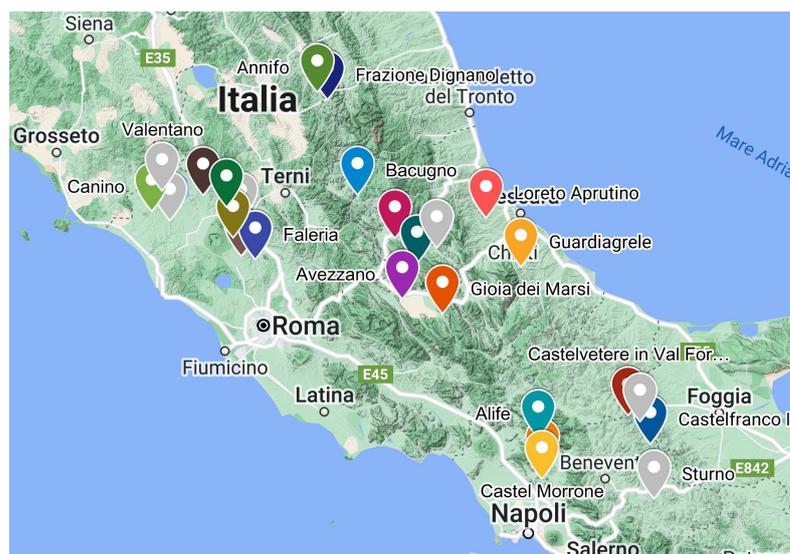


Figure 4. Map showing the location of the tracing locations.

From North to South, these provinces are: Macerata (in the Marche Region), Perugia (Umbria Region), Viterbo and Rieti (Latium Region), L'Aquila, Chieti, Pescara (Abruzzo Region), Caserta, Benevento and Avellino (Campania Region).

In Table 2 below, the complete list of so-called “Villages of the Furrow” and some geographical features are presented.

Table 2. Geographical-administrative indicators of the “Villages of the furrow”, sorted alphabetically.

“Villages of the Furrow”	Italian Region	Province	Altitude (m a.s.l.)		Area (total, sq. km)
			min	max	
Alife	Campania	Caserta	66	1265	64.32
Annifo (hamlet of Foligno)	Umbria	Perugia	195	1250	-
Antrosano (hamlet of Avezzano)	Abruzzo	L'Aquila	652	1398	-
Bomarzo	Latium	Viterbo	55	327	39.65
Caiazzo	Campania	Caserta	22	472	37.04
Canino	Latium	Viterbo	19	436	124.04
Castel Morrone	Campania	Caserta	21	620	25.34
Castelfranco in Miscano	Campania	Benevento	409	950	43.4
Castelvetere in Val Fortore	Campania	Benevento	245	988	34.58
Dignano (hamlet of Serravalle di Chienti)	Marche	Macerata	517	1499	-
Fabrica di Roma	Latium	Viterbo	170	445	34.79
Faleria	Latium	Viterbo	55	295	25.68
Fastello (hamlet of Viterbo)	Latium	Viterbo	86	896	-
Gioia dei Marsi	Abruzzo	L'Aquila	674	1998	63.44
Guardiaregre	Abruzzo	Pescara	150	1750	56.4
Loreto Aprutino	Abruzzo	Pescara	90	450	59.5
Nepi	Latium	Viterbo	87	404	83.71
Posta	Latium	Rieti	557	2081	66.01
Rocca di Mezzo	Abruzzo	L'Aquila	925	2271	86.95
Roio (hamlet of L'Aquila)	Abruzzo	L'Aquila	575	2635	-
San Bartolomeo in Galdo	Campania	Benevento	231	954	82.67
San Pio delle Camere	Abruzzo	L'Aquila	743	1384	17.26
Sturmo	Campania	Avellino	369	849	16.67
Tuscania	Latium	Viterbo	23	324	208.69
Valentano	Latium	Viterbo	364	620	43.5
Vasanello	Latium	Viterbo	180	317	28.96

Other villages are known where the traditional practice was active until a few years ago (not mentioned in this study).

As [Table 3](#) clearly shows, the municipalities where the practice is attested are concentrated in three well-defined areas of Central and Southern Italy: Province of Viterbo, which is the most geographically represented (34.6 percent), a value that rises to 38.5 percent for the Lazio Region; Abruzzo (in particular, in the Province of L'Aquila); the Upper Campania region, north of Naples. The percentage values of the municipalities represented are displayed in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Diffusion of traditional practice in some current Italian administrative subdivisions.

Italy	Region		Province	
Central	Latium	38.5%	Rieti	3.8%
			Viterbo	34.6%
	Abruzzo	26.9%	L'Aquila	19.2%
			Pescara	7.7%
			Macerata	3.8%
Umbria	3.8%	Perugia	3.8%	
		Avellino	3.8%	
Southern	Campania	26.9%	Benevento	11.5%
			Caserta	11.5%
			Total	100.0%
			Total	100.0%

Although not required by the ministerial form, the socio-demographic analysis helps to conote the areas where the ancient rite survives.

The areas where the practice is widespread are fragile transhumance territories, characterised by hilly and mountainous areas, physical and settlement fragmentation into small and very small nuclei, geographical marginality because they are distant from large centres and the supply of essential services ([Table 4](#)). Their development paths appear very unstable due to the declining and ageing population and the constant migration and contraction of the working-age population, in almost all centres where the ancient tradition is still practised (some of them, for reasons related to industrial and settlement factors, show a rare tendency towards an increase in residents).

An analysis of the population density data shows that only one centre exceeds 200 inhabitants/km² but the range is quite wide (10–234); however, the average remains very low, at around 87 inhabitants/km². The figure for the Old-Age Index also appears to be very variable (min 148.4, with a peak of no less than 806.7). The values are, however, very high and the incidence of the over-65s in the total population sometimes takes on dramatic values (three centres exceed 30% and one even 45%).

The distance to the most important centres, producers of services, averages 33 km, with values ranging between 19 and 45 km: taking into account the state of the roads, these values could also indicate the difficulties of the population in reaching their respective centres of gravitation.

These are complex territories that are too often left to their own devices, expressing the dynamics of various and diverse natural systems and processes of anthropisation and depopulation, which are now being strongly focused on by SNAI (Italian acronym of Strategia Nazionale delle Aree Interne, Italy's National Strategy for "Inner Areas") [[33](#)]¹. However, today it follows the typical trend of inland areas, which is characteristic of many European areas; the average of the recorded values reflects the decline in 1951–1981, which in most centres continues to the present day (note the trend of the curves especially in small towns with fewer than 4000 inhabitants, [Figure 5a](#)). More articulated is the trend in centres with a larger population, where the average curve presents concave-convexities influenced by the general trend but also by some population

¹ The general definition of Inland Areas as "that majority part of the territory Italian territory characterized by significant distance from the centers of supply of services essential services" does not lend itself to unambiguous identification. Therefore, having identified the 107 Italian provincial capitals as "centres", the remaining municipalities were classified into four bands: belt areas; intermediate areas; peripheral areas and ultra-peripheral areas (minutes of travel time to the nearest pole). The Inland Areas thus identified, resulting from the sum of intermediate areas, peripheral areas and ultra-peripheral areas, account for about 53 percent of the municipalities Italy, with 23% of the national population. Other indicators (agricultural land abandonment, population density, average income, elevation, mobility services, health and education, environmental/cultural heritage, seismic/hydrogeological risk) resulted in the identification of 72 pilot areas in all Italian regions.

increases due to local causes (industrial settlements). In any case, from 2011 to 2022, even in these relatively larger centres a phase of demographic decrease is evident (Figure 5b).

Table 4. Demographic-economic indicators relating to the “Villages of the furrow”, sorted by population density. Sources: <https://www.istat.it> [34]; <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne> [33].

“Villages of the Furrow”	Population density (Istat, 2017–2021)	Old-Age Index (Istat, 2020)	Population > 65 y (Istat, 2022)		Journey times from the service provider pole (in minutes) (SNAI, 2020)
			a.v.	%	
Posta (Latium)	10	451.2	173	30.5	33.5
Dignano di Serravalle di Chienti (Marche)	11	310.3	330	31.7	26.6
Rocca di Mezzo (Abruzzo)	16	380.4	405	30.1	33.3
Castelfranco in Miscano (Campania)	22	242.2	195	23.8	45.0
Gioia dei Marsi (Abruzzo)	36	295.8	488	28.5	27.7
San Pio delle Camere (Abruzzo)	37	148.4	140	21.4	26.3
Tuscania (Latium)	39	211.1	2073	25.2	22.4
Castelvetere in Val Fortore (Campania)	40	806.7	458	45.4	52.3
Canino (Latium)	42	230.0	1365	26.9	41.8
Bomarzo (Latium)	46	207.6	437	26.1	21.5
San Bartolomeo in Galdo (Campania)	62	296.7	1340	30.4	45.6
Valentano (Latium)	67	316.2	771	28.4	34.7
Faleria (Latium)	82	219.1	465	23.4	43.5
Nepi (Latium)	112	163.0	1964	21.3	38.7
Alife (Campania)	119	156.1	1505	20.8	46.3
Loreto Aprutino (Abruzzo)	128	185.8	1794	25.2	29.1
Vasanello (Latium)	144	188.4	944	23.9	32.1
Caiazzo (Campania)	153	191.6	1305	25.3	26.9
Castel Morrone (Campania)	155	220.3	893	24.7	19.3
Guardagrele (Abruzzo)	166	255.8	2458	28.7	26.2
Sturno (Campania)	188	207.6	710	25.2	34.4
Fabrica di Roma (Latium)	234	163.1	1782	21.9	28.0
Arithmetic mean	86.8	265.8	999.8	21.3%	33.4

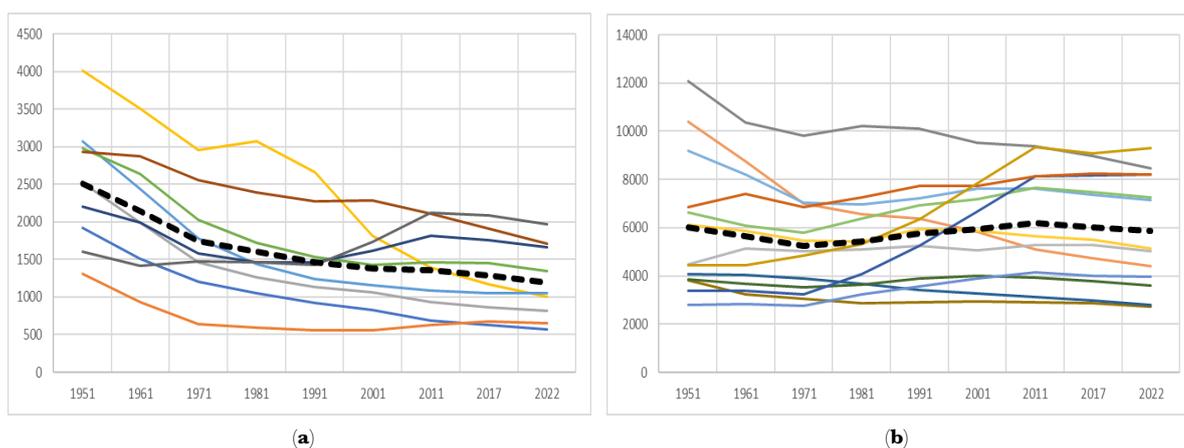


Figure 5. Trends in the number of residents in 22 “Villages of Furrow”. Sources: <https://www.istat.it> [34]: (a) the trend in the nine municipalities with fewer than 2000 inhabitants in 2022, where the decline is sometimes dramatic; (b) the most articulated in centres with a larger population.

3.3. Description of the Traditional Practice and Related Tools and Objects

Unfortunately, ancient documents attesting to this ancient votive practice are few. In some cases, such as in Rocca di Mezzo (Abruzzo Region), a document dating back to 1625, the year of a plague epidemic, has survived: on that occasion, there was with certainty an offering of the ritual to Our Lady of Pity, to implore her help against the disease. A few decades later, in 1661,

another valuable document attested to the practice in Castel Morrone (Campania Region) [25,26].

In any case, the existing bibliography on the subject [25–29] agrees in underlining the presence of constant ritual elements that characterise the ancient practice and it is plausible that they have remained almost intact over the centuries.

In the fields resting after the harvest, groups of farmers in a single team or in several groups, begin as early as night or dawn the tracing of long straight furrows, with the help of simple tools to ensure that the furrow is as straight as possible.

In many local realities, the ritual aspect is combined with the competitive aspect, so that an evaluation by experts, appointed as necessary, must also follow. The modern award ceremony will close the ritual, together with the final celebration, a thanksgiving for what has been received and, at the same time, a wish for well-being, health, and prosperity for the future.

In this sense, the celebratory moment of ritual relates to the higher purposes of human existence (rebirth, change, renewal, regeneration) and is “an excess permitted, indeed offered” as Freud puts it [36].

Research has shown that, in every geographical area of Italy, the “tracing of the straight furrow” represents a particular gratulatory act that refers to a centuries-old clot of codified rituals, in which ancient pagan veins can be discerned, resemantised in Christianity [25,29].

The way this practice is carried out requires complex organisation, the planning of routes to be followed, the management of men and means, and a system of interpersonal relations that are sometimes hierarchical and regulated by tradition.

Ancient, well-established gestures and techniques, involve a target to aim at (a tree cut for the purpose—Figure 6a—a bell tower, the top of a mountain) and the use of simple tools such as a plumb line, aligned for what in Sturno is called “piombatura”, namely “sealing” (Figure 6b), even if today modern agricultural means help the tracers (Figure 7).



(a)



(b)

Figure 6. Some moments of the preparation of the rite: (a) the cutting of a large beech trunk in the woods, which was then carried on the shoulders of dozens of people in Bacugno, Rieti Province, Latium. (Ph.: <https://www.sabinamagazine.it/la-tracciatura-del-solco-dritto-a-bacugno-rieti-ed-a-valentano-viterbo>); (b) the “sealing” (“piombatura” in local dialect) in Sturno, Avellino Province. Ph. M. Sisto).

The various techniques used are reminiscent of the very ancient work of the *gromaticus*, the land surveyor of the Roman era, skilled in tracing dividing alignments (in Latin, *rigores*), boundaries, and rectifications on the field, with the *groma* (in Latin, the Roman surveying instrument) and its plumb lines used to mark [26].

How can we not think of ancient techniques common, for example, in foundation rites or centurions, with the sacredness of the Etruscan and Italic ritual of the *sulcus primigenius* (Latin for “very first furrow”, is a furrow traced with a plough, representing the first symbolic wall surrounding a city to be founded) and the ploughing that delimited the *pomerium* (the sacred open space ground in ancient Rome)?



Figure 7. The ancient and the modern in the tracing of the furrow: (a) a millennia-old practice, Valentano, Latium, Ph.: <https://marem-macastrenseilentschi.blogspot.com>; (b) from Frigento to Sturno, Campania, Ph. M. Sisto; (c) use of mechanical means, headed by an image of St Michael, in Sturno, Campania, Ph.: M. Sisto.

3.4. Use of Local Cultivars, Varieties or Breeds

Being a traditional practice closely linked to the man-animal relationship, the fundamental role in the ritual of the many cattle breeds used in local contexts in the various parts of Italy should be emphasised.

These are not appearances: oxen are an integral and fundamental part of the ritual of tracing, which often crosses paths with another very ancient traditional practice, typical of the Alpine region and of Mediterranean nations such as Spain, France, Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Romania, etc.: transhumance, which, as we know, has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site as of 2019.

Cattle, festively harnessed, take part in the ritual even today, in the age of mechanisation; animals retain a central role, albeit smaller than in the past (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Animals harnessed for tracking (Valentano, Viterbo Province, Latium Region. Ph: <https://www.tusciafotografia.it>).

Just as in transhumance, in a riot of decorations and fantasies, in which the colour red seems to dominate, in both types of transhumance (horizontal transhumance, in lowland or highland regions, and vertical transhumance, typically in mountain regions).

Other similarities between tracing and transhumance include the relationships between people, animals, and the environment: shared rituals and social practices, animal care and breeding, land management, in-depth knowledge of the environment and agricultural practices, as well as particular technical skills [26]. Celebrations at departure and arrival, spring and autumn timing of rituals, transmission of specific knowledge to younger generations through activities, thus ensuring future continuity of practices.

Milk, cheese, meat, and superior quality foods now also protected by valuable certifications, are part of the rituals. The oxen of the tracing rite cross Lower Etruria (central Italy) and descend from the Abruzzi, Molise, Campania, and Lucania mountains towards the plains of Apulia, travelling along the same roads as sheep transhumance, which is even more widespread in the same geographical areas of Italy.

3.5. Main Threat Factors for Maintaining the Practice

Modernity and development have failed to erase the ancient traditions of rural culture, often portrayed as a legacy of backwardness and cultural subjugation. Having survived sometimes in “borderline conditions”, and in some contexts abandoned for years, these ancient practices are now being rediscovered and valued even by the younger generations, in the more or less conscious view of the patrimonial paradigm, as an intrinsic value [37].

One may ask: “Why to exalt a ritual that in the first instance may mean little or nothing?”, why to continue with “a simple ritual that may originally conceal a great cultic value [...] where all subjects were an integral part of the ritual. They are actors and spectators of the ritual, the earth, the water, the animal, the sky, man [...]. The gesture in itself was already sacred, being a ritual” [29], which links elements that predate Christianisation and have their remotest origin in the cult of the Mother Goddess, the Earth Goddess [29].

Despite modern society’s attempts to uproot many traditions rooted in a rich past, continuity is something people feel the need for: the spiritual, moral, and cultural values deposited in the mind and heart of a people can also be symbolically represented, as is the case with tracing, and therefore there is an important recovery of popular traditions as “sedimented memory”.

From the concept of “heritage” descend the construction of identities and collective commitment, which today are more and more successfully practised. Therefore, the recovery of memory and popular traditions is also linked to the future preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage, also from a tourism perspective (from an evolved and sustainable perspective).

3.6. The Role of Associations and Territorial Networks

The definition of Article 2 is perfectly fitting with the characteristics of the traditional practice of furrow tracing, the pre-selection path that is intended to be practised, and especially with the role played by citizens and communities [18]. And precisely to prevent disinterest from prevailing over tradition, in many “Villages of Furrow” young people from local communities have taken up the ancient practices, learning the age-old techniques from their elders and in turn involving

their peers who had never approached the ritual. In various realities, young and old work together, in association form, to keep alive the tradition, and the continuity of the practice and initiatives aimed at enhancing it cements the sense of community, the acquisition, and transmission of technical skills, ultimately projecting the tradition into the future. In this perspective, it would be desirable as a future goal to establish an “association of associations,” between “Villages of Furrow”, a federated form whose main interest would be the preservation and promotion of the “Tracing of the straight furrow” but also the promotion of exchanges and relationships among all the villages involved (as well as the promotion of other surviving traditional activities as well).

To a regional scale, the interest of the Institutions in this ancient tradition comes to us from the Campania Region, which launched a unitary “Programme of cultural, naturalistic and food and wine tourist routes of national and international scope” some time ago, with the strategic line “Urban Regeneration, Tourism and Culture Policies” (POC Campania 2014–2020, Italian acronym of Programma Operativo Complementare or Complementary Operational Programmes) [38].

Among the various objectives of the Programme is that of “identifying thematic or territorial itineraries to emphasise the peculiarities of the territories—from places of art to natural beauty and landscape, from traditions to typical and food and wine production—on the basis of routes that build relationships between territories, strengthen their identity and broaden the knowledge of residents and visitors”. Each proposed action is part of the “Campania. Divina” brand identity and both the Municipality of Castel Morrone (Inter-municipal Project “Feast of Saint Anthony Abbot, edition 2022. Race of the Furrow”) both the Municipality of Sturno (Project “Furrows and Ecosentiers. The ways of faith and nature. The furrow of Saint Michael” have received regional funding that recognises the value of ancient traditions related to furrow marking.

There are also numerous thematic conferences held over the past few years in the areas involved (Sturno, Valentano, Castel Morrone, etc.), with speakers having different backgrounds such as historians, anthropologists, geographers, and politicians. Further proof of how heartfelt and shared this ancient traditional practice is, which still inspires books, documentaries, and even sports games (Figure 9).

Ministerial certification, with inclusion in the “National Register of Rural Landscapes of Historic Interest, Agricultural Practices, and Traditional Knowledge”, may prove to be a powerful incentive to keep the ritual alive, to enrich the initiatives of citizens, associations, and communities directly or indirectly linked to the rite. It can also be a driving force to build and consolidate over time a local network (in the single community) and extra-local (among “Villages of Furrow”), that encourages dialogue between territories, the exchange of experience and expertise, contributes to a shared vision of the rural territory and its development, defines common goals and strategies of change and implements planning to achieve them.



Figure 9. Some posters relating to the furrow festivals: (a) Valentano, Latium; (b) Sturno, Campania; (c) Castel Morrone, Campania, and (d) the record-breaking 394th edition of the Race of the Furrow, with the presence of the permanent representative of the United States FAO in Rome and a senator from Texas (Ph: <https://www.ilcapoluogo.it>).



(d)

Figure 9. (Continued)

3.7. Photographic Material and Videos

As required by the protocol of the National Observatory, several films were retrieved, also available on web platforms, as well as an abundance of photographs (some even ancient, [Figure 10](#)), which will be transmitted for pre-selection.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 10. Tradition over the years, deep and heartfelt: (a,c,g) Sturmo (Ph. M.Sisto); (b,f) Castel Morrone (Ph: <https://www.ondawebtv.it>); (d,e) Valentano (Ph: <https://www.lacitta.eu>; <https://casertaweb.com>).



Figure 10. (Continued)

4. Discussion

The previous paragraph described the contents of the Dossier required by the ministerial procedure for the application/registration of the traditional practice in the National Register of Rural Landscapes of Historic Interest, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge. In this section, however, beyond the drafting of the Dossier, the authors want to deepen the process implemented by the Municipality of Sturno (leader of the initiative) to strengthen and support the application. This process has seen numerous initiatives, not required by the ministerial procedure, of information, deepening and research, networking, which have primarily involved the community of Sturno, but also the communities of the neighboring territories, the “Villages of the Furrow”, the educational institutions, the academia.

For several years, the promoters of the registration have felt the need to recover this ancient tradition and to involve the farmers who are guardians of tradition and of the practice, through cognitive and in-depth interviews with the practitioners of the ancient rite. While on a practical level the techniques were already known, the interviews aimed to investigate the will to continue the rite, to promote it with greater involvement of the local population and to pass it on to future generations.

The POC 2014–2020 announcement of the Campania Region on “Cultural, naturalistic and food and wine tourist routes” has been a useful initiative in this regard: the Municipality of Sturno, in fact, obtained funding for the project “The Furrow of San Michele, furrows and eco-paths, the ways of faith and nature” for the period October 2021–December 2022, a project that involved four municipalities in the area (Frigento, Castel Baronia, Melito Irpino, and Sturno), with the aim of transferring knowledge of tradition to young people.

Among the various activities of the project are the sporting event of the Olympics of the Furrow with the involvement of local school institutions of all levels and a final conference for further study with representatives of the University of Sannio, the local Archdiocese, the Sistema Irpinia Foundation, with the presentation of a book on the ancient traditional practice and the communication of the will of the local institution to draw up the Dossier for the application to the National Register.

The next step of the Lead Municipality was the assignment to the authors of the drafting of the Dossier to be sent, through the official channels, to the competent Ministry. Be aware that to strengthen its value and the opportunities for territorial impact, the practice had to be registered as a serial practice, the authors, with the local institution and with the support of legal experts, have prepared a Memorandum of Understanding to be submitted to all the other “Villages of the Furrow”, and involved the Campania Region, the Province of Avellino, the Union of Local Municipalities, and the Archdiocese of the area in Patronage the candidacy. The regional section of:

- Coldiretti (the leading Organization of agricultural entrepreneurs at the national and European level, about 1.5 million members);
- Confagricoltura (the oldest Organization for the protection and representation of agricultural enterprises);
- Casartigiani (Italian organization whose purpose is specifically to represent traditional, family and micro business craftsmanship), support the initiative and have also granted their Patronage.

And other initiatives have been initiated and planned:

- public meetings with farms and local businesses with awareness-raising activities, animation and involvement;
- Memorandum of Understanding with local associations and businesses for the creation of a permanent oversight of tradition and coordination of all future events necessary to enhance the ancient practice;
- Twinning with the Municipality of Castel Morrone, Province of Caserta, with the aim of strengthening the cohesion between the “Villages of the Furrow” also through participation in events on the “furrow” organized by the two Municipalities;
- the strengthening of relations with the world of education (academy and local schools): future projects are envisaged for other conferences and greater awareness of traditional practices among the younger generations (knowledge, skills, identity, shared heritage).

And, in the “furrow” of the promotion, this article too will represent a further enrichment for the community: after publication, it will be officially forwarded to the competent Ministry.

5. Conclusions

The “Tracing of the Furrow” is a ritual linked to agricultural and rural traditions, with a strong identity connotation, a legacy and presidium of a rurality that has been transformed over time, in the face of the increasing specialisation of the agricultural space and the diversification process of the rural space, which is increasingly multifunctional and integrated. It can be rightfully included among the new tourism themes and products that emerged before the pandemic and consolidated afterwards. As already mentioned, the request to register the practice as a serial good, aims to preserve and protect a widespread practice at national level, but also to trigger tourism-territorial development processes in fragile, marginal, areas subject to depopulation and abandonment, from short- and medium-long-term impacts for individual communities and the entire network.

Analysing the short-term effects, the pre- and post-processing phase of the application certainly stimulates the launch of new research initiatives, in-depth studies, and studies not only of the rite of tracing, but also of the communities that practise it, and of the historical rural landscapes of which they are an expression [39]. Therefore, the involvement of cultural associations is necessary in this regard, but above all, schools are indispensable in order to keep alive not only the knowledge of the practice but the perpetuation of it according to an approach of valorisation of regeneration spaces.

Recognition, moreover, could have the immediate effect in individual municipalities of safeguarding and protecting areas affected by potentially impactful building and infrastructure programmes, or more generally by advanced anthropization processes in already fragile ecosystems. And the protection and preservation of valuable territorial resources could even more act as a driving force for excursion-territorial valorisation initiatives: guided walks and hikes, promotions and tastings of typical products, valorisation of intangible cultural heritage, organisation of events and shows, etc.

Regarding the medium- to long-term effects, local communities, in the front line for the protection and preservation of ritual and tradition, will acquire a new awareness of the value of their identity heritage, also favouring a shift from excursionist tourism to a more sedentary one based on identity culture. Again, with a view to sustainability, this can generate greater diversification of the activities of local farms, as well as an increase in the value and attractiveness of the products and resources of historic rural landscapes. In a network perspective, in the long run, the “Villages of the Furrow” will benefit from the implementation of collective, shared, synergetic initiatives, in a “positive sum game” that generates exchange of knowledge, culture, development models, rites and traditions, values and ideas, resources and investments, overcoming any parochial logic and becoming what the Faro Convention defines as *communities of inheritance*.

Currently, the authors and the Municipality of Sturmo cannot know if the ministerial procedure will be successful and if the recognition will produce the effects described above, but it is fundamental to emphasise here that the process of involving the actors and the local community it has already produced results and spillovers in the preliminary investigation and application phase, above all for a community in the internal areas.

First of all, the animation activities of the local community registered the participation of citizens (especially young people), but also a broader involvement of local actors directly and indirectly linked to the practice and initiatives of rural tourism, made or planned for the near future; secondly, the intra-generational knowledge transfer through initiatives with local and neighbouring schools under the POC 2014–2020 is a fact; the “Villages of the Furrow” are trying to network and the Municipality of Sturmo has initiated a dialogue with 15 municipalities willing to sign the Memorandum of Understanding, pending a response from all other municipalities.

The research undertaken by the authors for the drafting of the application documents has produced a scientific deepening, with wide visibility of the practice (of the territory that expresses it) through conferences and publications.

From this evidence, the authors can strongly state that, the recovery and enhancement of ancient and strongly identity-based practices, such as “Tracing of the furrow”, especially if supported by formal recognition such as precisely registration in the National Register of Rural Landscapes of Historic Interest, Agricultural Practices and Traditional Knowledge, can help, in rural, marginal and fragile areas, to reduce the risk of abandonment. This risk is not only understood as physical estrangement, but also as distance from the history and culture of the place, as distance and thus disinterest in rituals and traditions, agricultural and craft practices, an attitude that more than actual separation undermines the roots of social cohesion of local communities.

The pandemic experience has taught us that local communities have not only not collapsed in the face of emergency and crisis but, debunking the accepted and taken for granted idea of the ineluctable defeat of fragile and vulnerable territorial systems, have demonstrated their ability to be responsive, resilient and enterprising. They have been able to rebuild and reinvent themselves by mobilizing human and economic resources and to invest in a welcoming and sustainable territory by working on two fronts, that of restraint for individual citizens, and that of slow and sustainable attractiveness for travellers/tourists [40].

In this context, the path undertaken by the Municipality of Sturmo and the countries that are adhering to the “process” beyond the “procedure”, is the demonstration that the local communities, properly solicited, involved, stimulated, are still willing to invest in the future of their territories, starting from the historical memory, patrimonial resources, sense of belonging; the first results of the “process”, beyond the “procedure” must be read as an opportunity for redemption for the communities involved, as the possibility and the will to react to the territorial vulnerability resulting from depopulation, abandonment, demographic, social and cultural ageing.

Starting from the value of intangible heritage—combined with the invaluable material heritage—as a resource to be shared and investing on innovative experiences and participatory processes, of community and then of the network, are the first steps of an experimental project of tourist-territorial valorization to be shared and co-constructed with all the municipalities of the tracing, with the aim of triggering processes of development, regeneration and cultural and social revitalization.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology: M.S., & A.C.; Supervision, Validation: A.C.; Writing – original draft: M.S.; Writing – review & editing: A.C.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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