

Honors theses

Images from the territory. The Imaginary as a reading key to the territory in the Valle di Susa (Susa Valley)

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This thesis aims to provide a continuous interpretation of the relevant territory revolving around the Imaginary and especially its traditions and folklore.

As this study proposes a "fantastic" vision of the territory as a possible exploitation device, the landscape element is seen as an "imaginary net" consisting of intertwining tales telling an alternative history of the Valley.

The research was carried out in the middle area of the Bassa Valle di Susa (Lower Susa Valley), and was basically based on field-work. It soon turned out to be more problematic than expected as this project required a kind of exploration that usually characterises the work of the archaeologist. The tales were selected and organised according to thematic paths or plots of this "fictional land", which on the one hand are multifaceted, but on the other hand are discontinuous in their correlation.

Owing to the absence of particular interesting places and routes in the Valle, tourists have not been greatly attracted by its cultural heritage, which is unfortunately inhomogeneous and scattered all over the territory.

This is the reason why one of the possible purposes of this work should be the elaboration of thematic maps and the subsequent identification of a series of routes connecting interesting places in terms of landscape and architecture. Similarly a "fantastic map" should be drawn, highlighting any territorial "singularities" in view of a "qualified tourism as well as socially extended too".

Our analysis of the relevant beliefs based on pure imagination showed that the mountain represents a particular universe regulated by its strict natural laws. And the mountain dweller, who instinctually has to act in symbiosis with nature, must also "develop a good rapport" with something that is so impersonal and still pervasive. Experience has shown that he eventually tries to transform his gloom and fears in myths and legends.

Sometimes the characteristics of a site contribute to the legend. In the surroundings of Villarfocchiardo, there is a place called "*Cara du ciat*" because the landscape looks like the back of a cat (in fact, *Cara du ciat* means *the back of the cat*).

Sometimes the legend provides the toponym. In the surroundings of Cresto di Sant'Antonino, we can find the "*Pera d'le Faje*" (*the Fairy Rock*), an ancient refuge where witches were supposed to take shelter.

In Borgone there is a site called the "*Bosco di Maometto*" ("*Muhammad's Forest*") and the name derives from an anthropomorphic sculpture located in an aedicule, where there is also a male figure near a dog.



Muhammad's Forest)

In Villarfocchiardo there is an irregular rock divided in two parts, locally called "*Masso di Orlando*" (*Orlando's Rock*). Legend has it that when the paladin Orlando found out that Angelica had betrayed him, he had an outburst of anger and split the rock in half.

The territory also reveals that fear was a pervasive feeling and influenced everyday life. Whenever certain events showed that nature prevailed, the mountain dweller did not interpret such occurrences as natural catastrophes, but deemed them supernatural or evil events.

For example, natural disasters like avalanches, or, more ordinary events like cheese with worms, milk curdling were not seen as natural phenomena but as the devil's handiwork.

Fabulous explanations were usually attributed to ordinary life events. This is the reason why fairies, spirits and dead people returning to Earth with luminous little fingers are the protagonists of these tales.



Montebenedetto Charterhouse

Processions of hooded monks at the Certosa di Montebenedetto disturbed the people of the Valle; the old church of Chianocco was considered a meeting site for spirits.



Chianocco, the old church

Every village has a "*Pian d'le masche*" (*Plain of the witches*"), a place where farmers do not plough, which is situated in an area in the middle of other fields. And such fields are positioned and ploughed in the four opposed perpendicular different directions. Any village has also its own "*Sentiero dei Morti*" ("*Path of the Dead*"), that used to be the route followed by its inhabitants when they attended a funeral service.

Sometimes the house was built and orientated in a peculiar way and this depended on certain traditions or beliefs.

The front could not be exposed to the dominant winds in order to avoid the negative spirits. Planning hypotheses were greatly influenced by supernatural beliefs. At the same time, these were usually supported by simply empirical considerations.

White quartzite on top of the roof is a custom characterising most villages of the alpine regions. This stone kept spirits away from the house because its colour and shape were associated with abhorred salt and consequently with the christening rite, where salt and water are employed. A large number of etiological legends romanticise natural events that took place near the villages of the Valle and provide explanations of eventual landscape transformations. As a consequence, merciless behaviours like the refusal of hospitality to a mendicant became the causes of terrible catastrophes. For example one of the two lakes of Avigliana, the small one, points to the submersion of a part of the ancient village Viliiana, where Jesus, supposedly disguised as a beggar, was not given hospitality.

The Imaginary is a form of territorial knowledge, and together with the Symbolic, should be considered a useful reading key to the material culture of a specific environment.

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