LANDSCAPE AND CHANGE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ITALY

This innovative environmental history of the long-lived European chestnut tree and its woods offers surprising perspectives on the human transition from the Roman to the medieval world in Italy. Integrating evidence from botanical and literary sources, individual charters, and case studies of specific communities, the book traces fluctuations in the size and location of Italian chestnut woods to expose how early medieval societies changed their land use between the fourth and eleventh centuries, and in the process changed themselves. As the chestnut tree gained popularity in late antiquity and became a valuable commodity by the end of the first millennium, this study brings to life the economic and cultural transition from a Roman Italy of cities, agricultural surpluses, and markets to a medieval Italy of villages and subsistence farming.

PAOLO SQUATRITI is Associate Professor of History and Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan. He specializes in the study of the pre-industrial environment and has published on ecological and landscape change in the "Dark Ages."

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Chestnuts, Economy, and Culture

PAOLO SQUATRITI

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For Cristina

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MAPS

PREFACE

> Above the olives began the woods. At one time the pines must have dominated the whole area, for they still intruded in pockets and tufts of woodland down the slopes as far as the beaches, just like the spruces. The oaks then were more frequent and thicker than appears today, for they were the first and most valuable victims of the axe. Further uphill pines gave way to chestnuts, the woods climbed the mountain, and you could not see their bounds. This was the world of sap within which we, inhabitants of Ombrosa, lived, almost without noticing it.
>
> Italo Calvino, *Il barone rampante* (1957)

Since 2006, the year when I began to study the history of chestnut trees, many people have asked me why I was doing it, or how I came to such study. The answers are various and complicated and perhaps not fully satisfactory. To begin with, as one ages one finds oneself increasingly in sympathy with *all* trees, and a growing admiration for how trees endure life's indignities may well be where this book began. No other organism has trees' stolid grace, their capacity to weather adversity. No other organism manages to stay in one place and become part of the place, generally improving it, quite like trees. Their stoical resolution and indifference to the toing and froing of mobile life become more appealing when one's own mobility declines. One begins to notice and to appreciate more deeply what Calvino called the "world of sap" ("universo di linfa") and the quiet dignity that keeps the sap circulating, often for the benefit of other organisms, year after year, rooted in one locality.

But beyond this all too personal attraction to trees (and to chestnut trees in particular), I have found that chestnuts are an excellent field of study for historians interested in how past environments in Italy evolved. In the peninsula, chestnuts retain peculiar ecological and economic importance still today, even if over the past few human generations their profile has changed rapidly in response to new diseases, global market demands,

and local labor conditions. As this book argues, such shifts are inherent in all Italian environmental histories. Italy's sharp relief, its fragile soils and wobbly tectonic plates, its mosaic of climatic zones, all contribute to pronounced environmental instability. Yet in the long, meandering, and necessarily dynamic history of environment in Italy a decisive conjuncture took place during the early Middle Ages, the period on which this study focuses, and involved chestnut trees, whose special ability to grow wood fast and regularly to make fruit people like to eat became trump cards at that time. Thus if one notices them, as Calvino urged, trees that might seem mere curiosities, marginal to the grander flows of history, begin to look like protagonists in the Italian theater of the great transformation that fashioned a medieval world out of an ancient one.

Early medieval chestnuts furthermore facilitate good thinking about one of the great preoccupations of the twenty-first century, environmental change, and not just in Italy. Chestnuts permit the realization that not all was a hoary wilderness in the post-Roman world, and that early medieval woodlands included carefully stewarded chestnut stands that stabilized land- and waterscapes while delivering "sustainable" sustenance to people, something no other tree could do as well. In this way, chestnut history corrects overly catastrophist versions of the end of antiquity. It also suggests how medieval environmental history might contribute to current debates about land use in areas where depopulation has brought drastic changes in the past two generations.[1] For the hillsides of the Mediterranean, but also for other wooded areas, the story of post-classical chestnut woodlands suggests that the outcome of human involvement with trees is not always deforestation, erosion, and destruction. The latter are, naturally, always possible, but chestnut history, and particularly medieval chestnut history, offers some important correctives to environmental narratives that too starkly distinguish between nature and culture and imagine the relations between the two as inevitably corrosive.

Chestnuts furthermore satisfy the microhistorian's requirement of a seemingly small and particular subject that opens unexpected vistas onto supposedly familiar historical terrain, and locates agency where none had been seen.[2] European chestnuts are thus a peculiarly useful lens through which to observe the early Middle Ages. They reveal the most basic workings of early medieval societies and show changes in their productive landscapes to have been less purely human than we imagined. This

[1] On the ecological effects of the emptying of Mediterranean mountain regions after 1945, see J. McNeill, *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge, 1992). But the desolation of late-twentieth-century Detroit is also relevant here.

[2] See J. Brooks, C. DeCorse, and J. Walton, "Introduction," in *Small Worlds: Method, Meaning, and Narrative in Microhistory* (Santa Fe, 2008), 3–6.

unfamiliar, slightly less anthropocentric version of early medieval history is one benefit of noticing what can seem a mere tree. But the historiographical utility of chestnuts transcends this microhistorical surprise. For, more even than olive trees, European chestnuts live phenomenally long lives, sometimes thousands of years. Thanks to this unique long duration that binds past, present, and future together, chestnuts also allow us to see things from a different perspective than the ephemeral ones of armies and emperors, or monks and conversions.[3] From the point of view of chestnuts, late antiquity and the early Middle Ages are times of transformation, perhaps more than most times are, but the changes are part of a longer story of ecological shifts and thus look much less abrupt and cataclysmic than do shifts measured in purely human terms.

To take seriously the conditions that cause this plant to flourish or wilt, and to consider them historically relevant, turns out to be a powerful investigative tool. Pondering the chestnut, a plant with quite strict requirements for health and growth, as it diffused itself across Italian and European landscapes in late antiquity, raises the question of how social and cultural conditions came into being that were so perfectly congruent with the ecological needs of this species. Study of chestnuts, in other words, reveals important clues about important transformative mechanisms at work among human communities of the first millennium AD.

Considering the role of a particularly productive tree like the chestnut clarifies first-millennium patterns of economic change most of all. Fluctuations in the size and location of Italian chestnut woods remind us of how dynamic landscapes are, but understanding what drove fluctuations in land use between the fourth and eleventh centuries, and popularized chestnuts, uncovers the fundamental productive processes whereby people lived. It turns out that chestnuts grow mostly where and when people have them grow, so chestnuts are a very useful indication of the strategies and choices of people, especially of those who worked on the land: in the early Middle Ages, the vast majority. Chestnuts, and human willingness to tend to them, illuminate the economic reorientations whereby a Roman Italy of cities, agricultural surpluses, and markets turned into a medieval Italy of villages and subsistence farming. Chestnuts therefore indicate how people actually may have coped with the decline and fall of the Roman empire, and permit much less lachrymose versions of early medieval history to emerge than those Gibbon made canonical.

These are some of the reasons that brought me to consider chestnuts, and finally to write a book about them. Writing any book, perhaps more

[3] Microhistory generally eschews longues durées: E. Muir, "Introduction," in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. E. Muir and G. Ruggiero (Baltimore, 1991), vii–xxviii (vii).

so a book like this (despite kindly curiosity about its motives), is a solitary exercise, but the writer's solitude elicits so much solidarity and companionship that one can sometimes forget it. I am very thankful to many people who helped me understand chestnuts better, and write more clearly about them, over several years. After enquiring about why I was doing research on the history of chestnuts, some actually read portions of this book, and generously suggested numberless improvements to it. Among them, in alphabetical order, are Bill Bamberger, Sueann Caulfield, Alison Cornish, Hussein Fancy, Richard Hoffmann, Sue Juster, Rick Keyser, Val Kivelson, Peggy McCracken, Massimo Montanari, Leslie Pincus, Helmut Puff, Ray Van Dam, and Chris Wickham. Oliver Rackham and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press read the whole manuscript and contributed signally to making it a better book than it would have been.

I am grateful to Hendrik Dey, Joachim Henning, Helena Kirchner, Federico Marazzi, Fabio Saggioro, and Robyn Veal who kindly supplied useful references; to Ben Graham for rewarding conversations about trees and history; and to Noah Blan for teaching me about the Plan of St. Gall. Many inspiring botanical conversations with Jack Ullman, and many trips among trees with him, contributed much to this book. So did Vangelis Zournatjis, who drew the maps with care and flair. My comprehension of ancient chestnuts was enriched both by Mimmo Piegari who in 2007 took me for a memorable visit to a chestnut grove in the Alburni mountains above Buccino (and to an equally memorable lunch afterwards), and who sadly has died since, and by the Santini family, who took time off from their busy lumber business at Santa Restituta to instruct me in the niceties of modern chestnut-husbandry.

Audiences at York University, Western Michigan University, and the University of Michigan heard attempts to make sense of the chestnuts with unwarranted benignity, and pointed me in useful directions with their questions, including the usual one about how I had gotten interested in the nuts to begin with.

I am also grateful for support from the University of Michigan's Humanities Award, and to the local history department, which allowed me time to write about chestnuts. The Ecole française de Rome and the Istituto storico italiano per il medioevo deserve my thanks for providing excellent places in their libraries to read and write about chestnuts. Further thanks are due to the staff at the University of Michigan's Hatcher Library, who efficiently procured materials, no matter how obscure, when I needed them, including when I was not in Ann Arbor.

Finally, I dedicate the book to Cristina, who did very little for it, beyond always noticing trees and being an avid consumer of chestnuts. But she asked for it, and for her that is enough.

ABBREVIATIONS

CDA	*Codice diplomatico amalfitano*, 2 vols., Vol. I, ed. R. Filangieri di Candida (Naples, 1917)
CDB	*Codice diplomatico del monastero di S. Colombano di Bobbio*, 3 vols., Vol. I, ed. C. Cipolla (Rome, 1918)
CDC	*Codex diplomaticus cavensis*, 10 vols., ed. M. Morcaldi, M. Schiani, S. De Stefano, *et al.*, Vols. I–III, VIII (Naples, 1873; Milan, 1875–76, 1893)
CDL	*Codice diplomatico longobardo*, 5 vols., ed. L. Schiaparelli, C. Brühl, and H. Zielinski (Rome, 1929–33, 1981, 1983)
CDLang	*Codex diplomaticus Langobardiae*, ed. G. Porro Lambertenghi (Turin, 1873)
CDV	*Codice diplomatico verginiano*, 13 vols., Vol. I ed. P. Tropeano (Montevergine, 1977)
CISAM	Centro italiano per lo studio dell'alto medioevo
CLA	*Chartae latinae antiquiores*
CP	*Il codice Perris, cartulario amalfitano*, 5 vols., Vol. I, ed. J. Mazzoleni and R. Orefice (Amalfi, 1985)
CSMN	*Le carte dello archivio capitolare di Santa Maria di Novara*, 3 vols., ed. F. Gabotto (Pinerolo, 1913)
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae historica
MPL	Patrologia latina, ed. J.-P. Migne