The Cultural Value of the *Tratturi* in Molise (Italy)

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Abstract. This article deals with the subject of the tratturi (sheep-tracks) in Molise, and in particular Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera, with a detailed focus on the Campobasso-Torella del Sannio territorial system.

Starting from the reconstruction of the historical framework of the tratturi that crossed Molise, the article presents a mapping of the officially recognised cultural heritage located in the area between Campobasso and Torella del Sannio. This mapping has been carried out by means of archival research in open access digital archives, such as the database of the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation, with a particular focus on the General Catalogue of the Cultural Heritage. This archival research reveals a rich cultural heritage that is often little known and undervalued, even by the local communities themselves.

The aim of this paper is therefore to highlight this heritage in order to raise awareness of it as a first step towards its future valorisation.

Keywords: Tratturi (sheep-tracks) · Cultural Heritage · Open Access Digital Archives

1 *Tratturi*: an Historical Introduction

In the first tome of *Il Molise dalle origini ai nostri giorni*, Giambattista Masciotta reflected on the Roman and medieval road network in the Province of Molise, enumerating sheep tracks (henceforth *tratturi*) among the primary communication pathways. Masciotta highlighted that these "majestic routes" were preserved due to beneficial laws that accorded them "a sacred character of intangibility", and that they facilitated communication between people during the periods in which they were established. Masciotta also emphasized the undoubted economic advantage that the sheep tracks represented for Molise, whose singular fortune was that of being located between "the wild Abruzzo and fertile Apulia", since for this reason it was the obligatory zone of transit between the two regions [1]. Indeed, the *tratturi* functioned as the routes for the seasonal movement of animals from the pastures of the plain to the mountain pastures and vice-versa, and from the beginning they were privileged places for trade, creating a complementary interdependence between the economies of the traversed territories [2].

This distinctive road system, closely connected to the practice of transhumant sheep farming [3], involved not only Italy but also Spain, southern France, the Balkans and

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Greece [4] and can be read as a common economic denominator that, over a long period of time, interested the Mediterranean Europe [5]. In fact, this dense network of sheep tracks is still a tangible sign of the landscape of transhumant work, that the practice of sheep farming has fixed in the territory over the centuries [6] (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Ancient transhumance routes in the Mediterranean region of Europe. In: LA ROUTO Homepage https://larouto.eu/cartes-des-itineraires-de-transhumance/, last accessed 2025/03/28.

The regular migration of men and herd provided fiscal resources that no State could neglect, so the organisation and protection of the transhumance system became a public priority [7]. Among the systems of protection and regulation of transhumant sheepfarming, the Spanish *Mesta* is unquestionably one of the first of these institutions: the labour union of Spanish breeders, protected directly by the Crown, was born in 1273 with the clear aim of protecting and developing the national wool industry and managing the important economic flows deriving from the taxes paid for the passage of flocks over certain pastures [8–10]. The Spanish model was evidently adopted as a paradigm by Alfonso d'Aragona when, through the *Prammatica* of 1 August 1447 [11], he established a dedicated office to manage this business: the *Dogana della mena delle pecore di Puglia* [12–14], initially based in the village of Lucera and subsequently in the city of Foggia [15]. The initiative made transhumance compulsory for owners of at least twenty Gentile breed sheep [16–18]. This decision was motivated by the objective of revitalising the economy of numerous Apulian territories that had been paralysed by the war between the *Angioini* and the *Aragonesi* [19], as well as by the Abruzzi shepherds' need for areas with a temperate climate where they could breed and graze their flocks.

The fiscal and territorial structure of the pastoral system adopted by Alfonso d'Aragona, while allocating the majority of the land of the Apulian Tavoliere to grazing, deviated from the slavish imitation of the Spanish model by recognising the need to reserve a portion of the state-owned land for agricultural use.

The routes traversed by the herds exhibited a hierarchical organisation. The most important routes were the four *Regi Tratturi* that facilitated the movement of the herds from Abruzzo to the Tavoliere via Molise: L'Aquila-Foggia, Celano-Foggia, Pescasseroli-Candela, Castel di Sangro-Lucera [20–22]. The *tratturi* were also connected to the so-called *tratturelli*, tracks of lesser. The function of this road network extended beyond mere transportation, providing essential resting points for transhumant livestock during their nomadic movements, as well as offering designated grazing areas where herds could repose and await distribution of leased grazing grounds [23].

While the efficacy of the *Dogana* system established for the fiscal control and management of state-owned territory is indisputable, the inherent limits of this administrative structure soon became evident.

The forty-nine chapters of the *Prammatica* confirmed the primacy of "pastoral reason" [24] over agricultural reason, thus contributing to the aggravation of the different interests between agricultural and pastoral practices, especially with regard to the availability of land to be used. In fact, agricultural production activities were subordinate to pastoral ones: part of the land used for agricultural purposes had to be reserved periodically for grazing, and this, due to the need to cultivate larger areas and the difficulty of maintaining constant control over such vast territories, often led farmers to occupy illegally portions of *tratturo*, taking it away from grazing [25].

Therefore, the necessity to periodically verify the accuracy of the sheep-track system became increasingly apparent. Consequently, the so-called *reintegre*, precise measurement and thorough control operations, were initiated by specialized technicians known as the *regi compassatori* [26, 27]. These operations were undertaken with the objective of verifying the usurped portions of *tratturo* and re-assigning it to its original destination. Indeed, the relationships between farmers and stockbreeders were not at all idyllic. As has previously been indicated, the engraving that appears at the cover of the second volume of Stefano Di Stefano's *Ragion Pastorale*, depicting a shepherd playing the flute in the shade of a tree while watching over his grazing flock and a farmer ploughing the fields nearby, must be read more as an omen than as a true description of the relationships that existed between shepherds and farmers.

The numerous *reintegre* that took place in the more than three centuries of activity of the *Dogana* attest the continuous siege to which the Tavoliere state territory was subjected and the constant need for the government to intervene to restored the *status quo* [28–30]. This dynamic has contributed to fuelling a persistent state of perplexity regarding the validity of this particular system of fiscal management, which was regarded by somebody as obsolete, particularly from the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards. Nevertheless, the conflict between breeders and farmers did not subside with the suppression of the *Dogana*, which was formally abolished by Law No. 75 of 21 May 1806 [31]. The responsibility for the administration of state-owned land was passed to a newly constituted body, the Tavoliere Administration, which continued both the work of mediation between the various users of the land and the action of surveillance of

the sheep track network: the *reintegre* thus continued throughout the 19th century [32] (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Maps of *Tratturi* in Italy in 1959, Commissariato per la reintegra dei tratturi. In: Atti dei seminari di studi e catalogo della mostra itinerante, Fondazione Architetti Chieti Pescara (eds), Un Paesaggio senza confini: il tratturo. Edizioni Menabò, Ortona, p. 21 (2020).

2 Tools and Methods

The research was conducted as part of a detailed archival excavation, with the primary objective being to bring to light the rich documentary heritage of geo-historical sources (cartographic sources, documentary sources) that directly concern the *tratturi* as well as the *corpus* of documents useful for mapping the cultural heritage of the territorial area that was chosen for investigation. The methodology employed in this study comprised archival excavation and research in Open Access Digital Archives, in addition to an initial analysis of the reference literature.

The initial archival survey conducted for the *Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera* revealed significant insights into the historical development of this region. The survey encompassed a range of historical archives, including the Campobasso State Archives, the Foggia State Archives, the archive of the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation (*Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione*, henceforth ICCD). In particular for the *Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera reintegre* were carried out in June 1844 and between September 1881 and July 1883. The results of these operations,

which were produced in 1844 and 1881–1883 respectively, consist of 51 maps and 40 plates from the 1844 reintegration [33], and 90 maps and 74 planimetric plans from the 1881–1883 reintegration [33].

The research aims to gather data and knowledge on the historical landscapes of transhumance, with particular attention to their role as elements for understanding the relational and performative aspects of landscape. The project will entail an evaluation of various geo-historical sources (cartographic sources, documentary sources) for the purpose of mapping the cultural heritage associated with transhumance and *tratturi*, and the establishment of collaborative pathways for the valorization of geo-historical transhumance landscapes.

The geographical area studied is the territory of the Molise municipalities that have signed the Institutional Development Contract - Tourism Development along the Sheep Tracks (*Contratto Istituzionale di Sviluppo - Sviluppo turistico lungo i tratturi,* henceforth CIS), an agreement for tourism development along the sheep trails. The present research, in particular, concerns the Campobasso-Torella del Sannio territorial system of the *Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera*, with a detailed focus on the events related to the municipalities of Campobasso, Campodipietra, Castropignano, Civitanova del Sannio, Duronia, Froso-lone, Oratino, Ripalimosani, Torella del Sannio (Fig. 3).

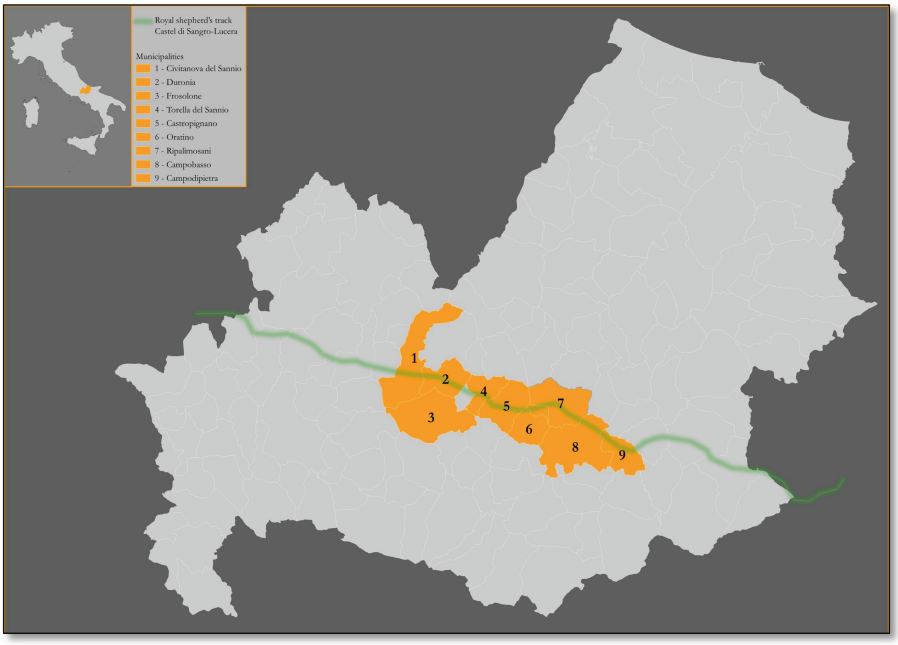


Fig. 3. Location of study area. The Campobasso-Torella del Sannio territorial system of the *Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera* with a detailed focus on the municipalities of Campobasso, Campodipietra, Castropignano, Civitanova del Sannio, Duronia, Frosolone, Oratino, Ripalimosani, Torella del Sannio. Authors' elaboration with dr. Giuseppe Di Felice, March 2025.

It is important to note that some of the municipalities in the study area «find their main reference in the Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (SNAI; in English, Inner Areas National Strategy)» [34–38].

In particular, the municipalities of Civitanova del Sannio, Duronia, Frosolone and Torella del Sannio are part of the Molise SNAI area designated as Alto Medio Sannio [39]: it is evident that this aspect constitutes a significant benefit for the implementation of a revitalization strategy for the area, with a particular emphasis on cultural heritage (Fig. 4) [40–43].

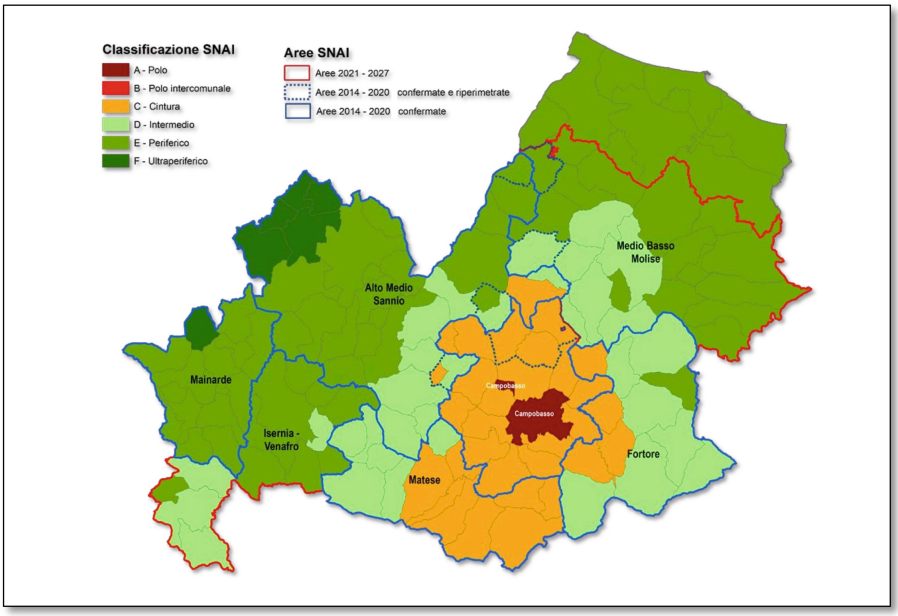


Fig. 4. Classification of SNAI Areas: A – Pole, B – Inter-municipal pole, C – Urban belt, D – Intermediate, E – Peripheral, F – Ultra-peripheral. Specifically, SNAI areas 2014–2020 confirmed, SNAI areas 2014–2020 confirmed and replanned, SNAI areas 2021–2027. In: FomezPA Segreteria Aree Interne: La Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne. Regione Molise Programmazione 2021–2027, Dossier regionale, May 2022, p. 5.

3 Knowing to Protect: The ICCD Open Access Digital Archive

There are many studies that provide important information on the possible perspectives for recovery and reuse actions of the sheep track heritage [44, 45]. If recovery and reuse can be understood as the final stages of the heritage conservation process, it is only by recourse to the databases of the institutions officially responsible for census and cataloguing that one can get an idea of the "volume" of the officially recognised heritage and the actual patrimonialization process that has affected it over time.

In terms of cultural heritage, the web accelerates access to several digital OA platforms: authentic open digital archives that can be referenced for research.

The ease of access to and open dissemination of scientific research, the availability of open data and metadata to be consulted and referenced for studies and insights are an integral part of what the *UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science* (2021) [46] defines as Open Science Infrastructures; these are the shared research infrastructures (virtual or physical) of which, together with open access publication platforms, the archives and databases of the different scientific domains are an integral part.

This UNESCO Recommendation is the expression of a process formally initiated in 2002 by the *Budapest Open Access Initiative* (BOAI 2002) [47], one of the milestones for open access to scientific resources and the dissemination of knowledge. The Budapest Declaration emphasises the great potential of the web in providing the definition of Open Access, i.e. the possibility of free and open access to scientific studies and research available in electronic format. Twenty years later, while the above concepts are well established, the *BOAI20 Recommendations*, published in 2022, reaffirm some of the principles already expressed, stating that «open access is not an end in itself, but a means to further ends. Above all, it is a means to the equity, quality, usability, and sustainability of research» [48].

The *Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities* (2003) also recognises that «the Internet has fundamentally changed the practical and economic realities of the dissemination of scientific knowledge and cultural heritage». It sets out a number of actions to be taken to support the transition to the electronic open access paradigm, by encouraging scholars to publish research and scientific works in an Open Access environment, and by encouraging cultural heritage holders to support Open Access by making their resources available online [49].

The promotion of open data policies stimulates the distribution of scientific research, the encouragement of multidisciplinary collaboration, the initiation of virtuous mechanisms of collective growth. These policies are capable of activating and implementing actions for the protection and enhancement of the cultural heritage. The knowledge of this cultural heritage is undoubtedly instrumental in its design.

Considering the cultural heritage linked to the *tratturi* in Molise, we have chosen to conduct a first quantitative and qualitative exploration starting from the database of the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation, specifically searching the General Catalogue of Cultural Heritage. The open data available in this digital archive of cultural heritage provides at different levels of detail directly proportional to the degrees of depth of the catalogue sheets that make accessible information concerning the geographical-administrative location of the catalogued cultural properties, the historical information concerning it (architectural modifications, uses and/or changes of intended use), the legal status and the protection restrictions.

The decree of the President of the Republic no. 805 of 3 December 1975 about the organisation of the Ministry of Cultural and Environmental Heritage, formally established the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation (art. 12). Article 13 of the regulatory provision clarifies its functions in the field of cataloguing and documentation of cultural heritage of archaeological, historical-artistic and environmental interest [50]. The ICCD was entrusted with a number of tasks, including the formulation of

general cataloguing programmes for cultural heritage, the establishment of the methodological guidelines to be followed, the establishment and management of the General Catalogue of Cultural Heritage, and the promotion and coordination of the executive activity of cataloguing.

The ICCD web portal offers open access to a very rich documentary heritage. The Historical Archive of Catalogue sheets which preserves the records from the first cataloguing campaigns conducted between 1889 and 1969 (the year the Central Office for the Catalogue was established), contains 21.914 sheets [51]. Meanwhile, the database of the General Catalogue of Cultural Heritage makes accessible 3.044.862 sheets [52].

It is precisely the ICCD sheets that allow an initial evaluation of the cultural potential of this inner area connected to the *tratturi* under examination. Specifically, the data collected concern three categories of cultural heritage: movable properties, immovable properties, intangible heritage. Movable properties are objects and artefacts which can be moved, including those currently immobilised by installation. By this we mean that they are currently incorporated in a given context, but could theoretically be dismounted and moved. Examples are frescoes, lapidary works, or inscriptions inserted in structural walls. Immovable properties are sizeable properties, attached to or incorporated in the earth's surface. Examples are buildings, monumental complexes, and territorial areas. Intangible heritage is cultural heritage in the form of traditional events, techniques, and knowledge, in examples are village festivals, choral, instrumental and theatre performances, artisanal techniques and oral literature [54]. However, particular attention has been paid to the immovable heritage in the areas of architectural, landscape and archaeological heritage, which are undoubtedly the most immediately tangible cultural features and which can be experienced first-hand by travelling along these areas crossed by the *tratturi*.

For the Campobasso-Torella del Sannio segment of the *Tratturo Castel di SangroLucera,* which we have chosen to study, the data achieved revealed the abundant presence of cultural heritage: the sheets compiled over the years by the ICCD attest an undoubted historical value. Specifically, out of a total of 27.482 cataloguing records in the ICCD's Open Access Digital Archives relating to the municipalities that have joined the CIS 22.657 relate to movable properties, 17 to intangible heritage and 2404 to immovable properties; furthermore, in the latter category, 2.301 sheets relate to the sector of architectural and landscape properties, 103 records to that of archaeological properties [53].

With regard to enhancing the *tratturi*, which also involves cultural heritage more or less known, cultural assets present in the territories and along the track itself, it seems interesting a comparison between the ICCD sheets concerning the whole of Molise, those relating to the municipalities belonging to the CIS and those relating to the municipalities crossed by the section of the *tratturi* chosen as a case study (Fig. 5, Table 1). In addition, the specific details of the type of properties identified by the ICCD for each municipality are also interesting in order to reflect on possible actions for their protection and valorization from a touristic perspective.

There is no doubt that the area under investigation also has a conspicuous cultural heritage that has already been surveyed and that represents a first performative aspect of the landscape, as well as a starting point for the inhabitants to become more aware

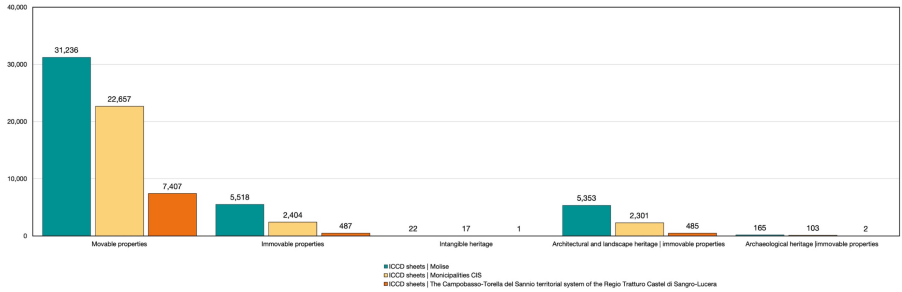


Fig. 5. ICCD sheets | comparison between Molise, municipalities CIS, Campobasso - Torella del Sannio territorial system. Author's elaboration, May 2025.

Table 1. Comparison between the ICCD sheets concerning the whole of Molise, those relating to the municipalities belonging to the CIS and those relating to the municipalities crossed by the section of the *tratturi* chosen as a case study. Author's elaboration, January 2025.

Properties	ICCD sheets | Molise	ICCD sheets | Municipalities CIS	ICCD sheets |The Campobasso-Torella del Sannio territorial system of the *Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera*
Movable properties	31.236	22.657	7.407
Immovable properties	5.518	2.404	487
Intangible heritage	22	17	1
Architectural and landscape heritage | immovable properties	5.353	2.301	485
Archaeological heritage | immovable properties	165	103	2

of the cultural value of their territory, which can trigger practices of protection and enhancement (Fig. 6, Table 2).

From the typological plurality of the cataloguing forms of the census, it is immediately clear that, for the territorial area under consideration, we are encountering a complex heritage corpus, in relation to which the interdisciplinary perspective is essential and the variety of cataloguing forms used and to be used according to the specific cases to be studied appears immediately understandable and explainable.

A careful analysis of this rich documentary heritage, integrated with the multiplicity and typological variety of sources that are emerging and will emerge from the subsequent phases of research, will make it possible to provide a detailed picture of the cultural heritage linked to the *tratturi* that crosses these municipalities, to examine the economic

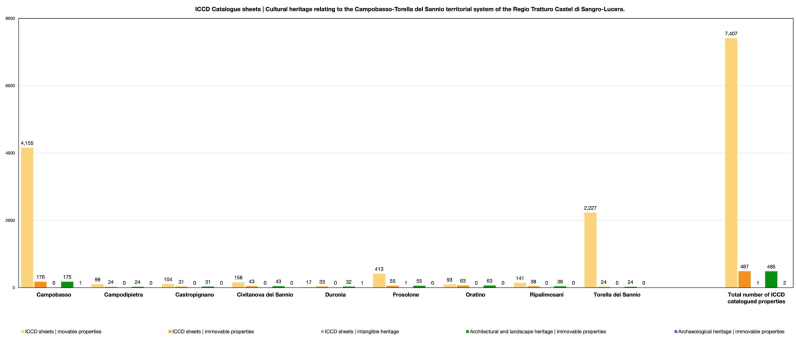


Fig. 6. Bar chart titled "ICCD Catalogue sheets | Cultural heritage relating to the Campobasso-Torella del Sannio territorial system of the Regio Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera." It displays data on cultural heritage properties across various locations. Key data points include Campobasso with 4,155 properties, Torella del Sannio with 2,227, and a total of 7,407 ICCD catalogued properties. Categories are color-coded: movable properties, immovable properties, intangible heritage, architectural and landscape heritage, and archaeological heritage. Author's elaboration, March 2025.

and social transformations that have affected this area in the long term, and to understand how the landscape is used today. Furthermore, adopting a historical perspective will facilitate a reflection on the long-term role of these territories, which are neither nor fragile. This will enable the laying of the knowledge base for implementing appropriate strategies for cultural and economic revitalisation.

4 Towards the Complete Patrimonialization Process of the *Tratturi*

The recurrent measurements and controls carried out over a long period of time, from the 15th to the 19th century, testify the great attention paid to the entire system of *tratturi* in southern Italy and to the public land that the government protected as a source of considerable economic income. The importance of protecting this fiscal heritage is underlined by the body of legislation that, from the 19th century and for most of the 20th century, concerned the *tratturi*. The concepts of preservation and conservation are present both in Decree no. 1057 of 5 September 1811, concerning the decree containing provisions for the preservation of sheep routes in the Tavoliere of Apulia [54], and in Royal Decree no. 196 of 5 January 1911 that approves the regulations for the preservation, management and custody of *tratturi* [55]. In both cases, the articles that regulate the activities of conservation and protection refer to the safeguarding of the *tratturi*, which are considered as assets that are part of the financial activity of the State in terms of taxation and the collection of fees for the use of public land.

The same perspective can also be found in Royal Decree no. 2801 of 29 December 1927 [56] whose Chapter III, on the implementation of plans for the maintenance of sheepfolds, provides for their possible preservation, but only with a view to the economic protection of State property. However, in a regulatory provision dating back a few years before that mentioned above, we can already read about one of the first measures taken

Table 2. Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation | ICCD Catalogue sheets | Cultural heritage relating to the Campobasso-Torella del Sannio territorial system of the *Tratturo Castel di Sangro-Lucera.* Author's elaboration, January 2025.

Municipalities	ICCD sheets | Movable properties	ICCD sheets | Immovable properties	ICCD sheets | Intangible heritage	ICCD sheets| Architectural and landscape heritage| Immovable properties	ICCD sheets | Archaeological heritage | Immovable properties
Campobasso	4.155	176	0	175	1
Campodipietra	99	24	0	24	0
Castropignano	104	31	0	31	0
Civitanova del Sannio	158	43	0	43	0
Duronia	17	33	0	32	1
Frosolone	413	55	1	55	0
Oratino	93	63	0	63	0
Ripalimosani	141	38	0	38	0
Torella del Sannio	2.227	24	0	24	0
Total number of ICCD catalogued properties	**7.407**	**487**	**1**	**485**	**2**

to protect the historical value of the heritage associated with *tratturi*. Article 12 of Royal Decree no. 3244 of 30 December 1923 applied to the archive of the *Dogana* all the organic regulations governing the archival service in the State Archives, underlining that this included all the ancient and modern documents relating to the technical, economic and legal aspects of the *tratturi* [57]: this was the formal recognition of the historical value of the documentary heritage, made up of iconographic and catographic sources, accounting records, annual accounts and civil proceedings, that the archive preserved. However, the process of transforming the heritage of the *tratturi* into a heritage site was far from immediate: it was only in 1976, with the decree of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and the Environment of 15 June, that the historical, testimonial and cultural value of this heritage was officially recognised [58, 59], whose considerable interest was recognised from a composite point of view for its archaeological, political, military, economic, social and cultural history. Molise, a land crossed by numerous *tratturi,* was the first to have its heritage linked to the *tratturi* protected; this protection was extended to the *tratturi* of Abruzzo, Puglia and Basilicata through the decree of 22 December 1983 [60].

The fiscal perspective has certainly played a very important role in the protection and conservation of what is now recognised in all respects as a cultural heritage, as well as the undeniable importance of the ministerial decree of 15 June 1976, which represents an essential turning point in the affirmation of "the patrimonial-cultural value" [61] of traditional agricultural assets. However, much remains to be done in terms of both protection and valorisation. We need to start again from the historical research which, by deepening the exploration and the analysis of the rich documentary heritage available, would allow us to actively recover the paths of men and animals, and perhaps even overcome "the paradox of the *tratturi* heritage" [61]: a heritage that too often oscillates between protection and oblivion, or that is divided between immaterial practices (transhumance), whose value is universally recognised, thanks also to its inclusion in the *Liste représentative du patrimoine culturel immatériel de l'humanité* (December 2019), and the territorial infrastructures (*tratturi*) which are still (and since 2006) included in the UNESCO Tentative Lists [62], that is the list in which States indicate the cultural heritage properties that they wish to propose for inclusion in the World Heritage List.

5 Conclusions

It is evident that, over an extended period, the network of *tratturi* has played a pivotal role in connecting the entire southern region of Italy. This network has not only facilitated the establishment of urban centres along the routes frequented by shepherds but also fostered the development of commercial hubs for the marketing of sheep farming products. Furthermore, it has also led to the emergence of various structures and infrastructure essential for the management of flocks and the facilitation of shepherds' mobility, including taverns and mills. The significance of these transhumant spaces in terms of history and culture is evident. The mapping of these areas is a crucial step in understanding, valuing and promoting the inner sections of the territory traversed by this infrastructure [59].

However, despite the formal precautionary measures implemented by the property, the protection regulations issued by local authorities are often perceived as a restriction on action rather than an effective tool for valorisation. Consequently, the preservation methodologies employed are deemed to be neither comprehensive nor proactive, thereby engendering a state of limbo for cultural heritage, which persists in a state of flux between the realm of memory and the threat of oblivion [64].

The value of historical research is not to provide "recipes" on what to do, but to provide adequate tools and knowledge so that choices can be made on what to actually preserve and recover. These choices should be made on the basis of studies and research to support cultural planning appropriate to specific territorial areas considered fragile.

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