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vision of an ‘unchanging’ Italian South**

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# **Reconsidering the Mediterranean ‘agro-town’ model and escaping a vision of an ‘unchanging’ Italian South**

Daniel R. Curtis, Utrecht University

## **Abstract**

The Mediterranean landscape is today characterised by large concentrated settlements known as ‘agro-towns’, often melancholically depicted as grim and impoverished. Their persistence and proliferation is not yet well explained. In this article, by focusing on Southern Italy it is suggested that they can be associated with high economic polarisation consolidated over the long term. However, far from subscribing to a view of Southern Italian society as something that was completely unchanging from the medieval period right up to the twentieth century, it is argued that this continuity was only possible because dominant social groups used a number of very dynamic and flexible methods to maintain the status quo.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean, agro-town, Italy, *latifundia*, polarisation, underdevelopment

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*“What do people do here? I once asked at a little town between Rome and Naples; and the man with whom I talked, shrugging his shoulders, answered curtly, ‘c’è miseria’, there’s nothing but poverty... I have seen poverty enough, and squalid conditions of life, but the most ugly and repulsive collection of houses I ever came upon was the town of Squillace”.*<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Introduction**

George Gissing’s ‘rambles’ through Southern Italy at the turn of the twentieth century led him to remark extensively on the topography. In particular, he frequently mentioned the miserable living conditions of the people he encountered; who tended to live huddled together in large impoverished towns. His account is made all the more interesting by the fact that (a) Southern Italy is still today far poorer than Northern Italy, and furthermore, includes some of the poorest regions in Western Europe, and (b) this habitation pattern within large towns has been retained in large parts of modern Southern Italy. This settlement structure, often melancholically depicted as grim and bleak, dominates much of the Mediterranean landscape today. These large agglomerated settlements are often referred to as ‘agro-towns’, and while many in the second half of the twentieth century came to incorporate a more commercial character, a large proportion still retain an essentially agricultural function. In fact, Mediterranean agro-towns have been linked with six characteristic features.

1. Large populations of agricultural wage labourers are densely packed into the town, while the surrounding countryside is largely deserted of habitation.<sup>2</sup> Agricultural labourers can walk great distances to work the fields.<sup>3</sup>
2. The towns support grain-focused cultivation exploited through a series of large estates (*latifundia*) with minimal capital investment.
3. The inhabitants exhibit a culturally ingrained distaste for the countryside, and instead exalt the virtues of town life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea: notes of a ramble in Southern Italy* (Teddington, 2007 [1901]), 65.

<sup>2</sup> B. Salvemini, ‘Prima della Puglia. Terra di Bari e il sistema regionale in età moderna’, in P. Villani & F. Macry eds., *Storia d’Italia. Le regioni dall’Unità ad oggi. La Puglia* (Turin, 1989), 120; G. Labrot, ‘La città meridionale’, in G. Galasso & R. Romeo eds., *Storia del Mezzogiorno*, viii (Rome, 1984), 221.

<sup>3</sup> A. Serpieri, *La struttura sociale dell’agricoltura italiana* (Rome, 1949), 280; R. Rochefort, *Le travail en Sicile. Étude de géographie sociale* (Paris, 1961), 166.

4. The inhabitants have high levels of local patriotism and identification with their town of origin.<sup>5</sup>
5. The towns lack urban functions or municipal institutions<sup>6</sup> (where the people have no concept of 'citizenship' or civic traditions),<sup>7</sup> lack a commercial or industrial character, and have no jurisdictional control or autonomy over the rural hinterlands (in the sense of a *contado*).<sup>8</sup>
6. The towns (certainly of the twentieth century) are home to hostile entrenched class attitudes between landowners and labourers.<sup>9</sup>

The prevalence and persistence of agro-towns across the Mediterranean is curious, but as yet is not well explained in the literature. This is unfortunate, because understanding the roots behind the agro-town structure may shed some new light on

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, A. Blok & H. Driessen, 'Mediterranean agro-towns as a form of cultural dominance; with special reference to Sicily and Andalusia', *Ethnologia Europaea* **14** (1984), 111-24; J. Schneider & P. Schneider, *Culture and political economy in western Sicily* (New York, 1976), 66, 151; S. Silverman, *The three bells of civilization: the life of an Italian hill town* (New York, 1975); J. Davis, *The people of the Mediterranean: an essay in comparative social anthropology* (London, 1977); M. Kenny & D. Kertzer eds., *Urban life in Mediterranean Europe* (Chicago, 1983). Also in Africa, see K. Kooijman, *Social and economic change in a Tswana village* (Leiden, 1978), 65.

<sup>5</sup> As seen in D. Gilmore, *The people of the plain. Class and community in lower Andalusia* (New York, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> S. Silverman, 'Agricultural organization, social structure, and values in Italy: amoral familism reconsidered', *American Anthropologist* **70**, 1 (1968), 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> A thesis famously put forward by R. Putnam, *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> A. Musi, 'Piccole e medie città nella storia moderna del Mezzogiorno continentale', *Rassegna Storica Salernitana* **10** (1994), 156-7; C. Vivanti, 'Città e campagne', in R. Romano ed., *Storia dell'economia italiana. L'età moderna: verso la crisi*, ii (Turin, 1991), 267-70; M. Berengo, 'Città e 'contado' in Italia dal XV al XVIII secolo', *Storia della Città* **36** (1986), 107; G. Galasso, 'Gli insediamenti e il territorio', in *L'altra Europa. Per un'antropologia storica del Mezzogiorno d'Italia* (Milan, 1982), 58; E. Di Ciommo, 'Piccole e medie città meridionali tra antico regime e periodo napoleonico', in *Villes et territoire pendant la période napoléonienne (France et Italie)* (Rome, 1987), 357. Although there is now some literature on the Southern Italian town and its hinterland; for example, A. Spagnoletti, *L'inconstanza delle umane cose. Il patriziato di Terra di Bari fra egemonia e crisi* (Bari, 1981); G. Delille, 'Migrations internes et mobilité sociale dans la Royaume de Naples (Xve-XIXe siècles)', in P. Macry & A. Massafra eds., *Fra storia e storiografia. Scritti in onore di Pasquale Villani* (Bologna, 1994), 559-70.

<sup>9</sup> D. Gilmore, 'Class, culture, and community size in Spain: the relevance of models', *Anthropological Quarterly* **49**, 2 (1976), 100; T. Greaves, 'The Andean rural proletarians', *Anthropological Quarterly* **45**, 2 (1972), 65-83; S. Mintz, 'The folk-urban continuum and the rural proletarian community', *American Journal of Sociology* **59** (1953), 136-43; J. Caro Baroja, 'The city and the country: reflections on some ancient commonplaces', in J. Pitt-Rivers ed., *Mediterranean countrymen: essays in the social anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Paris, 1963), 38.

the so-called economic underdevelopment in Southern Italy and Spain, especially given an explicit link has often been made between these grim towns and poverty.<sup>10</sup> The aim of this paper is to examine the causes behind the perpetuation of this distinctly Mediterranean settlement development, by focusing explicitly on parts of Southern Italy.

Early work on agro-towns saw their formation as a logical grouping together of people in what was an essentially harsh environment including poor access to water, the threat of malaria, and widespread lawlessness and perpetual insecurity.<sup>11</sup> These arguments were not convincing at all. Many of these same conditions are found all over the world even today, in places not necessarily characterised by agro-towns. Later scholars added some sophistication to these environmentally deterministic interpretations, however, and the current consensus seems to be that agro-towns are somehow linked to specific social and economic conditions such as polarised distribution of property, large estate agriculture (*latifundia*), and large surpluses of labour (perhaps with widespread unemployment).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, unequal land distribution has long been associated with the Mediterranean (particularly in

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<sup>10</sup> An explicit link made in, for example, J. Boissevain, 'Poverty and politics in a Sicilian agro-town: a preliminary report', *International Archives of Ethnography* **50** (1966), 198-236.

<sup>11</sup> E. Semple, *The geography of a Mediterranean region. Its relation to ancient history* (London, 1932), 539-40; H. Ahlmann, 'Etudes de géographie humaine sur l'Italie subtropicale. Calabre, Basilicate et Apulie', *Geografiska Annaler* **8** (1926), 113-5; G. Kish, 'The marine of Calabria', *The Geographical Review* **43** (1953), 496; F. Compagna, *La questione meridionale* (Milan, 1963), 78; C. Maranelli, *Considerazioni geografiche sulla questione meridionale* (Bari, 1946), 26-8; C. Colamonicò, 'La distribuzione della popolazione nella Puglia central e meridionale secondo la natura geologica', *Bollettino Reale della Società Geografica* **5** (1916), 201-34, 274-305, 403-29; M. Weber, *The city* (New York, 1962), 82; L. Unger, 'Rural settlement in Campania', *The Geographical Review* **43**, 4 (1953), 506; P. Schneider, 'Coalition formation and colonialism in western Sicily', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* **13**, 2 (1972), 257.

<sup>12</sup> A. Blok, 'South Italian agro-towns', *Comparative Studies in Society & History* **11**, 2 (1969), 121-35; F. Snowden, *Violence and great estates in the south of Italy: Apulia. 1900-1922* (Cambridge, 1986); T. Tentori, 'Social classes and family in a southern Italian town: Matera', in J. Perstiniány ed., *Mediterranean family structures* (Cambridge, 1976), 273-85; D. Mack Smith, 'The latifundia in modern Sicilian history', *Proceedings of the British Academy* **51** (1965), 87-93; M. Rossi-Doria, 'The land tenure system and class in southern Italy', *American Historical Review* **64** (1958), 46-53; R. King & A. Strachan, 'Sicilian agro-towns', *Erdkunde* **32** (1978), 111-23; H. Mørch, 'Rural landscapes in Puglia – on the functional relationship between agriculture and natural resources', *Geografisk Tidsskrift* **87** (1987), 36-41.

Southern Italy), continuing into the twentieth century and revealed by the (largely failed) attempts at land reform.<sup>13</sup>

Although there is some logic to the association of agro-towns and economic polarisation, a causal link between the two is unclear. Research into these agro-towns has been hindered by a number of traditions. First, one of the problems is that the literature is rarely historically rigorous. Indeed, much interest in the subject has fallen within the domain of ethnographers or anthropologists, more interested in the so-called 'Mediterranean mindset' or imbedded cultural values. The long-term processes which led to the appearance of the agro-towns have rarely been considered.<sup>14</sup> In fact, from the literature we cannot easily discern whether agro-towns are a recent phenomenon, only emerged within the past couple of centuries, or have medieval or even ancient antecedents.<sup>15</sup> There needs to be a more explicit focus on chronology. A second reason for this unclear development over time may be the fact that the history of Southern Italy and the Kingdom of Naples has often been dominated by this perception of unchanging feudal structures. There is almost a sort of perception that there is no need to look at the development of agro-towns because Southern Italy was throughout the pre-industrial period mired in antiquated feudal relations which left no room for dynamic changes in the social structure.

In this article, these inconsistencies are addressed in order to gain some new light into the perpetuation and proliferation of the agro-town model across the Mediterranean. First, some of the basic conditions which have been associated with agro-towns in the literature are reexamined. This section is split into two parts: first we explore the relationship between agro-towns and economic polarisation, and second we look more closely at the link between agro-towns and grain-based monocultures, large estate agriculture (*latifundia*), and labour-intensive capital-intensive modes of exploitation. After this section, it is argued that the link between agro-towns and economic polarisation is a convincing one; however, the link between

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<sup>13</sup> A. Blok, 'Land reform in a west Sicilian Latifondo village: the persistence of a feudal structure', *Anthropological Quarterly* **39** (1966), 1-16; R. Dickinson, 'Land reform in southern Italy', *Economic Geography* (1954), 157-76.

<sup>14</sup> Even the best work on Southern Italy which has identified many different 'types' of Mezzogiorno fails to go back much before 1860; for example, see the otherwise excellent P. Arlacchi, *Mafia, peasants, and great estates: society in traditional Calabria* (Cambridge, 1983). There are cases where historical sources are not employed at all, for example, in J. Broegger, *Montevarese: a study of peasant society and culture in southern Italy* (Oslo, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Very rarely does the literature on agro-towns adequately mention the chronology. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been cited as important formative periods in N. Antonacci, 'Le città rurali nell'Italia meridionale nel XIX e XX secolo. Rassegna critica e prospettive di ricerca', *Società e Storia* **71** (1996), 109-31.

*latifundia* and agro-towns is much more dubious. In the second half, some thought is given to (a) the causal relationship between the polarised distribution of property and the proliferation of agro-towns, and (b) why polarisation was so endemic and established itself over the long term in the Italian South. In the concluding remarks, it is noted that while polarisation and inequality may have been indicative of an unchanging and conservative Italian South, actually these continuous structures sometimes got their durability through dynamic responses to changing conditions by dominant interest groups in the short-term.

### *Agro-towns and economic polarisation*

In the literature, a link has been suggested between high levels of inequality in the Mediterranean and the perpetuation of the agro-town model. However, this link has rarely been tested systematically. In this section, a comparative approach is taken to further explore this relationship. One thing the literature on agro-towns certainly does not do (with the notable exception of Arlacchi), is appreciate the diversity of settlement structures in Southern Italy. Agro-towns may dominate the landscapes, yet there are many areas which do not conform to the agro-town model.<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, a simple question we can ask is whether the areas which did not conform to the typical pattern of agro-towns were less economically polarised than those agro-town areas. In reference to the social and economic development of the Mediterranean, noted anthropologist John Davis has noted the absence of ‘a single study which says resources are more equally distributed in this society than in that, still less one that draws out the consequences’.<sup>17</sup>

By taking some comparative examples from across the Mediterranean, it is clear that those ‘exceptional’ areas that support small village or dispersed settlement patterns are generally more equitable than those areas characterised by the agro-town. The Gini-coefficients for the distribution of land in the agro-town areas are much higher, suggestive of higher polarisation.

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<sup>16</sup> See R. Dickinson, ‘Dispersed settlement in southern Italy’, *Erdekunde* **10** (1956), 282-97; Arlacchi, *Mafia*; Broegger, *Montevarese*; A. Galt, *Far from the church bells: settlement and society in an Apulian town* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, 88.

Table 1: Gini-coefficients for various places in the Mediterranean, twentieth century

Place	Region	Agro town or not	Gini-coefficient	Year
(Genuardo)	Sicily	Agro-town	88	Pre-1966
Trapani	Sicily	Agro-town	76	1947
Pisticci	Basilicata	Agro-town <sup>18</sup>	81	1972
Alcala	Andalucia	Agro-town	87	1970
Vila Velha	Castelo Branco	Agro-town	75	1970
<i>Sicily Province</i> <sup>19</sup>	Sicily	Agro-town (mostly)	82	1947
Conversano	Apulia	Not	57	1972
Locorotondo	Apulia	Not	55	1972
Pantelleria	Sicily	Not <sup>20</sup>	52	1947
Alberobello	Apulia	Not	63	1972
Castellana Grotte	Apulia	Not	64	1972
Cisternino	Apulia	Not	52	1972
Monopoli	Apulia	Not	65	1972
Zumpano	Calabria	Not	59	1972

Sources: Galt, *Far from the church bells*, 28-9; A. Blok, *The mafia of a Sicilian village, 1860-1960* (Oxford, 1974), 251; INEA, *La distribuzione della propriet  fondiarie in Italia* (Rome, 1947); ISTAT, *Secondo censimento generale dell'agricoltura, 25 ottobre 1970* (Rome, 1972); Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, table 6; A. Galt, 'Social stratification on Pantelleria, Italy', *Ethnology* **19**, 4 (1980), 410

From the table above a basic connection between polarisation and agro-towns is confirmed. The agro-town areas in the table had on average a Gini-index of 82 per cent, while the non-agro-town areas came to 58 per cent. The levels of polarisation were probably even higher than the figures suggest in the agro-town areas, given that most of the figures come after the mid-twentieth century land reforms.

However, as mentioned already, one of the problems with the previous approaches to agro-towns is that the research has not been historically rigorous. We have plenty of data from the twentieth century on land distribution, but the point is that agro-towns did not suddenly appear in the twentieth century. Furthermore, the

<sup>18</sup> On this settlement pattern, see J. Davis, 'Town and country', *Anthropological Quarterly* **42**, 3 (1969), 171-85.

<sup>19</sup> Whole province included because most of Sicily conforms to a concentrated town model (with some limited exceptions).

<sup>20</sup> On the island's settlement structure, see A. Galt, 'Exploring the cultural ecology of field fragmentation and scattering on the island of Pantelleria', *Journal of Anthropological Research* **35**, 1 (1979), 93-108.



polarisation of resources was not a modern phenomenon – it probably had existed over a long period. Unfortunately given the paucity of sources and the lack of attention devoted to this subject, reconstructing the chronological development of agro-towns and the distribution of resources is difficult. However, some light is shed on this issue by my own more detailed comparative case study performed on two regions in Apulia (Ascoli Satriano and Locorotondo) in Southern Italy (located on the map below).

The divergence between those agro-town areas with more polarised distribution of landownership and those areas without agro-towns with more egalitarian distribution of landownership went much further back than the twentieth century. Indeed, Ascoli Satriano, situated on the northern plains of Apulia (the Tavoliere) alongside other similar large concentrated towns, certainly was characterised by extreme economic polarisation in the eighteenth century. The Catasto Onciario (a fiscal survey of property in the Kingdom of Naples) of 1753 recorded an astonishing 97 per cent on the Gini-index for distribution of land.<sup>21</sup> One per cent of the households listed held claim to 58 per cent of the resources. Furthermore, 93 per cent of the land was in the hands of feudal lords such as the Duke of Ascoli, lesser aristocratic families, or absentee ecclesiastical institutions. Three-quarters of the population had no access to land at all; a phenomenal amount when one considers that in another well-known area of economic polarisation (the plains of Campania to the north of Naples), the proportion of inhabitants of Crispano who had no land came to just over 55 per cent.<sup>22</sup> In fact, most of the Ascoli residents did not even own houses, often renting a room from ecclesiastical institutions or wealthy aristocrats who monopolised the real estate in the town. In Ascoli only a quarter of the population owned their houses, which contrasted with a place like Zumpano (a small village in a part of Calabria not conforming to the agro-town model) where two-thirds of the population owned their own houses.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Calculation taken from a database of A. Ventura ed., *Onciario della città di Ascoli 1753* (Foggia, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Archivio di Stato di Napoli, Catasti Onciari, vols 44-50.

<sup>23</sup> Archivio di Stato di Cosenza (hereafter ASC), Onciario con collettiva e tassa del Comune di Zumpano, no. 732.

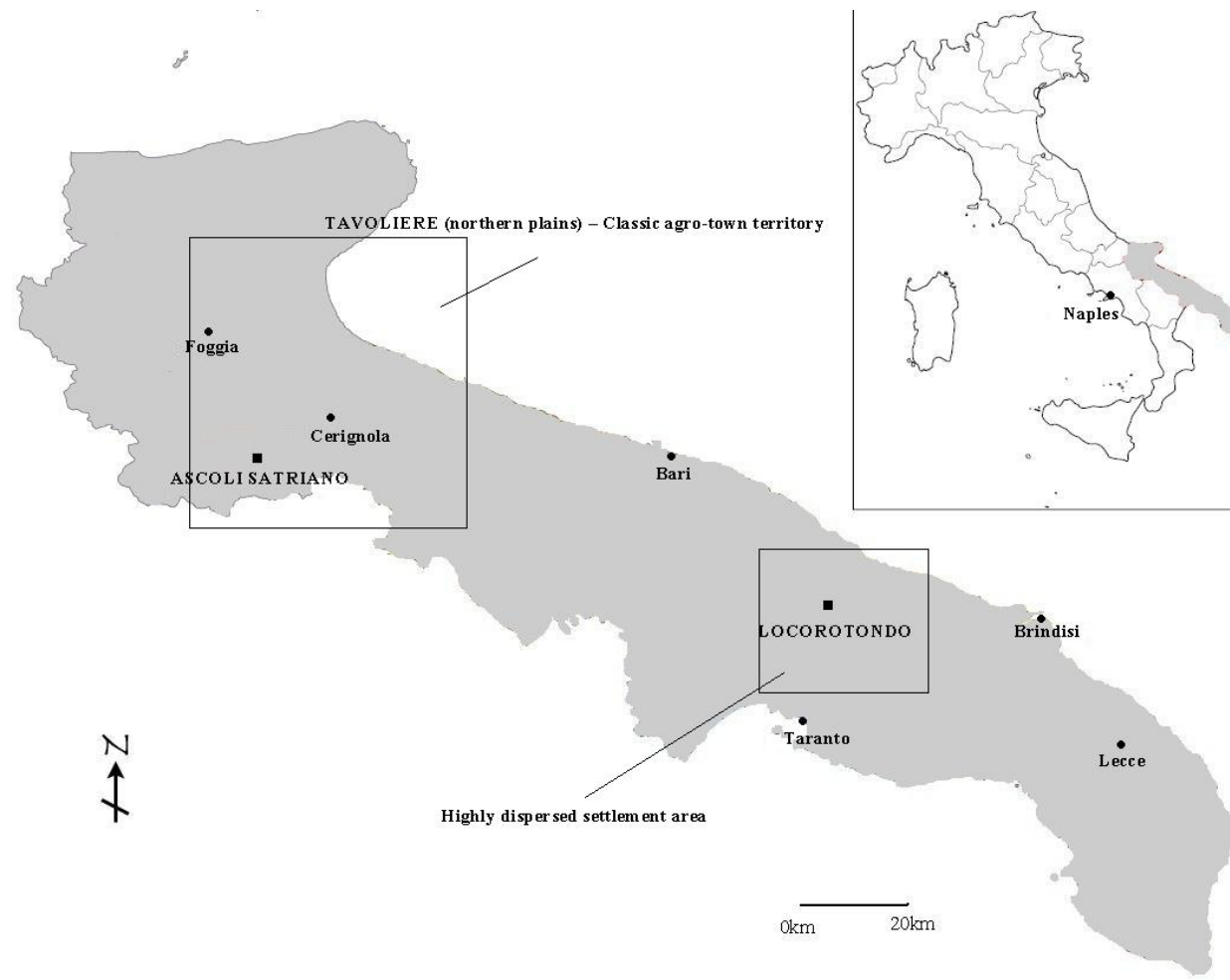


Figure 1: Map of Apulia

In contrast to the concentrated towns on the north Apulian plains, Locorotondo does not conform to the agro-town structure, instead representing an entirely scattered network of conical stone houses (known as *trulli*) where over half the population live out of the town and in the fields.<sup>24</sup> Locorotondo and the areas around it did not have such a disparity in the distribution of land in the eighteenth century. In Locorotondo, well over half of the land was in the hands of local traders, artisans, and farmers. The nobility held just 15 per cent of the land, most of which was in the hands of the feudal lord of Locorotondo, the Duke of Martina Franca.<sup>25</sup> The Gini-index was much lower than Ascoli at 77 per cent. By the eighteenth century, Ascoli and Locorotondo, separated by a number of kilometres, were worlds apart.

So it is confirmed that Ascoli Satriano was far more economically polarised than Locorotondo by the eighteenth century (and perhaps earlier than that), however; how do we know whether Ascoli was a concentrated town and Locorotondo a dispersed settlement by this point? The Kingdom of Naples was decimated by pestilence and plague in the mid seventeenth century, which reduced population right across the board.<sup>26</sup> Ascoli constituted a rough population of around 4350 in 1648,<sup>27</sup> but after the plagues, it lost more than half of its inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> After that shock, Ascoli (like other Apulian towns) showed demographic growth – and grew into the town structure that we know today. By 1753, it had surpassed the number of houses recorded in 1648, and nearly every house was recorded within the town centre or a *contrada* just outside the walls.<sup>29</sup> The only houses a long way from the walls were the large farms (*masserie*) belonging to elite landowners, whose locations can be plotted through a series of excellent maps produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the Royal Customhouse of Naples.<sup>30</sup> Many of these *masserie* were located in exactly the same

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<sup>24</sup> A. Liuzzi, *La Murgia dei Trulli: lineamenti caratteristiche, sviluppo economico e civile* (Martina Franca, 1981), 150.

<sup>25</sup> Archivio di Stato di Bari (hereafter ASB), 1749 Catasto Onciario di Locorotondo.

<sup>26</sup> For the overall Kingdom of Naples figures, see J. Marino, *Pastoral economics in the Kingdom of Naples* (Baltimore, 1988), 65-6.

<sup>27</sup> L. Giustiniani ed., *Dizionario geografico ragionato del Regno di Napoli di Lorenzo Giustiniani*, ii (Naples, 1797), 8-9, 282.

<sup>28</sup> The proportion of survivors was suggested as just one-sixth of the former population in a later chronicle, although this may have been exaggerated. See L. Todisco Grande, 'Memoria dell'antichità del sito del governo di Ascoli Satriano', in A. Silba ed., *Frammenti di storia nella città dei tre colli: Ascoli Satriano in tre antiche documenti* (Ascoli Satriano, 2007), 131.

<sup>29</sup> Despite the obvious concentrated structure of the town, the Onciario probably did conceal a level of settlement in the countryside not systematically recorded by the assessors. See N. Colclough, 'Famiglie catastali – la dinamica delle relazioni di parentela e dell'organizzazione familiare nella Ascoli dell'ancien régime', in Ventura ed., *Onciario 1753*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the *masseria* of the 'Magnificent' Potito Romani in the Locazione di S. Giuliano. Archivio di Stato di Foggia (hereafter ASFO), Dogana delle Pecore di Foggia, no. 20. Also see P. Di Cicco, *Il Tavoliere di Puglia nella prima metà del XIX secolo* (Foggia, 1966), 199-209.

spots as former Roman *fattorie* and villas, or failed villages from the late Middle Ages).<sup>31</sup> A nice visual illustration of the fact that Ascoli had already grown into a concentrated town structure however, is shown through a sketch produced at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Figure 2: Ascoli Satiano in 1703



Source: G. Pacichelli, *Il Regno di Napoli in prospettiva...* (Naples, 1703).

Locorotondo became more dispersed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although it certainly did not conform to the typical Southern Italian agro-town structure in the eighteenth century – and probably never did. Certainly there was a town centre tucked away behind the walls; home to the church, taverns, and artisan shops. However, this co-existed with a level of dispersed settlement, as we can make out from indirect evidence. Clusters of *trulli* known as ‘jazzeleri’ were mentioned by notaries, which were clearly out in

<sup>31</sup> R. Licinio, *Masserie medievali. Masserie massari e carestie da Federico II alla Dogana delle Pecore* (Bari, 1998), 13-25. It has been suggested elsewhere in Apulia that *masserie* were situated on the same sites as former Roman villas. See A. Ambrosi, ‘Schemi propositivi per lo studio dell’architettura della masseria pugliese’, in *Contributi allo studio del paesaggio urbano e rurale della masseria in Puglia; quaderni della scuola di perfezionamento in pianificazione urbana e territoriale* (Bari, 1983), 7-20; L. Mongiello, *Le masserie di Puglia* (Bari, 1984). The fortified *masseria* of Torre Alemania near Ascoli has been shown to have had a small nucleus of settlement at least as early as the thirteenth century. See R. Licinio, *Castelli medievali: Puglia e Basilicata, dai Normanni a Federico II e Carlo I D’Angiò* (Bari, 1994), 145.

the countryside.<sup>32</sup> By the census of 1811, 37 per cent of inhabitants were living outside the walls and in ‘*nuovi borghi*’.<sup>33</sup>

In this section, we have learnt a number of things. First, there appears to be a general relationship between economic polarisation and the proliferation of agro-towns across the Mediterranean. Second, economic polarisation was a feature of Southern Italian society at least as early as the eighteenth century, but probably even earlier (in the absence of good data). Third, the large concentrated town structure had also emerged in Southern Italy by at least as early as the eighteenth century (though it may have appeared much earlier but was disrupted by earthquakes and the great pestilences of the seventeenth century). It seems that agro-towns and inequality do not just go together with the modern twentieth century data, but have had an association together much further back in history. This phenomenon is supported from elsewhere in Southern Italy, where the eighteenth century concentrated town structure of Calopezzati in Calabria knew a Gini-coefficient of 87 per cent for distribution of landownership in the eighteenth century.<sup>34</sup> This can be contrasted with my own database for a number of small villages and dispersed settlements in the Cosentino area of Calabria (surrounding Cosenza) which had an average Gini-index of 60 per cent in 1747.<sup>35</sup> This chronological point not only strengthens the association of agro-towns and polarisation in a longer-term perspective in Southern Italy, but has relevance for the following section on *latifundia* and modes of exploitation.

### *Agro towns and latifundia*

In the literature, as well as an association between inequality and the proliferation of agro-towns in the Mediterranean, scholars have also tended to link this characteristic settlement structure with certain modes of exploitation: in particular, large estate agriculture with monoculture grain-cultivation (*latifundia*), operated by former feudal lords or absentee speculators, and working a system of low capital investment and high labour intensity.<sup>36</sup> Probably this association has been widely accepted because so little of the research has been historically rigorous. A connection is drawn between the latifundist agriculture which swept across large parts of Southern Italy in the nineteenth century and the large towns which housed the impoverished wage workers. These towns have even been referred to as ‘Company

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<sup>32</sup> Galt, *Far from the church bells*, 76-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

<sup>34</sup> F. Assante, *Calopezzati: proprietà fondiaria e classi rurali in un Comune della Calabria (1740-1886)* (Naples, 1964), 41.

<sup>35</sup> My database taken from ASC, Catasto Generale Onciario, vol. 17 (various).

<sup>36</sup> A link noted in A. Ciufredda, ‘Massari e mercanti di piazza. Storie di famiglie e percorsi individuali nelle medie città pugliesi tra sei e settecento’, *Mélanges de l’Ecole Française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* **112** (2000), 176.

Towns'; places like Cerignola or Andria where poor people were crowded into rented hovels, with the worst of living conditions, often with no windows, and located underground.<sup>37</sup>

While the association of agro-towns with economic polarisation was supported by going back in time, the historical perspective makes the link between agro-towns and *latifundia* less convincing. It is a simple case of chronology. In Apulia, latifundist exploitation of large grain estates did not take off until the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet large concentrated towns had appeared certainly on the vast northern plains by the eighteenth century, and who knows – without the earthquakes and the pestilences perhaps this town structure would already have been crystallized before the mid seventeenth century? It could be said that in some parts of Southern Italy, the large concentrated town structure was already set in place, well before the emergence of *latifundia*. In the case of Ascoli Satriano, the (re-) emergence of this town after the demographic crisis of the seventeenth century occurred in a surprising context of a mixed-focus on arable and pastoral enterprises, high levels of capital investment in large flocks and herds of animals, and its establishment as a commercial or trading centre.<sup>38</sup>

In northern Apulia, the pestilences of 1656 halted any trend towards arable cultivation on large estates.<sup>39</sup> The large elite landowners quickly shifted investment strategy towards sheep farming with smaller labour intensive demands.<sup>40</sup> It is thus curious that demographic recovery at the end of the seventeenth century coincided with high capital investment in pastoral farming. In Ascoli, the Catasto Onciario recorded nearly 30,000 animals, a significant amount in comparison to the 2000 found in Locorotondo. Almost 95 per cent of these animals were of the type associated with pastoral farming (sheep or goats, for example), while the small remainder were subservient to arable tasks (for example, donkeys for carting and oxen for ploughing). The pastures had the most inequitable distribution of all the land – only three per cent of the population had access to grazing in the eighteenth century. The average size of a pastoral landholding belonging to an individual or institution was over 200 hectares. Only 15 per cent of the population had access to an animal, and it was only this high because some of the impoverished labourers had a donkey to carry goods from the fields.

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<sup>37</sup> Snowden, *Violence*, 41-61.

<sup>38</sup> N. Colclough, 'Variation and change in land use and settlement patterns in South Italy: Ascoli Satriano 1700-1990. The making of a southern agro-town', *History & Anthropology* **21**, 1 (2010), 9-11.

<sup>39</sup> See the descriptions in P. Ardoini, *Descrizione del Stato di Melfi (1674)*, ed. E. Navazio (Lavello, 1980). Also see J. Marino, 'I meccanismi della crisi nella dogana di Foggia nel XVII secolo', in A. Massafra ed., *Problemi di storia delle campagne meridionali nell'età moderna e contemporanea* (Bari, 1981), 309-20.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the case of the Prince of Melfi in S. Zotta, 'Momenti e problemi di una crisi agraria in uno 'stato' feudale napoletano (1585-1615)', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* **90** (1978), 717-96. Prior to the pestilence, investment was more restricted to arable farming. See A. Lepre, *Feudi e masserie, problemi della società meridionale nel '600 e nel '700* (Naples, 1973), 85-123.

Polarised access to pastures and animals was testament to the pattern of high capital investment in large flocks and herds. Eight-five percent of all animals were consolidated in the hands of the top 10 landowners in Ascoli. Some of these landowners had extremely large herds, such as the Marquis of Basilicata, Don Alessandro Rinuccini, who by himself owned a third of all animals listed in whole Catasto including 10,000 sheep amongst others. These animals were grazed out on *masserie* belonging to the Locazione del Feudo, west of Ascoli and centred on the present-day hamlet of Palazzo d'Ascoli. Until the late seventeenth century, these enterprises were run by the Crown, which specialised in horse-breeding for the army; however it had come into the hands of the Marquis through royal debts.<sup>41</sup> These large pastoral enterprises were frequently in the hands of absentee institutions since 80 per cent of the pastures belonged to non-residents, often ecclesiastical institutions.

This is all very curious. Why did places like Ascoli grow into large towns when in theory, pastoral enterprises were supposed to be more labour extensive and support less employment than grain estates? How can we account for the large inward migration into Ascoli in the eighteenth century and where was the attraction? Indeed, 32 per cent of the households in the Onciario of 1753 were living in Ascoli as immigrants, and this mobility was seen all across Southern Italy.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately while we know the place of origin for all of these people (people came from all over Apulia and Basilicata to live and work in Ascoli),<sup>43</sup> the *Catasto* did not record occupations for immigrants. They were not all poor labourers looking for work, though. Some were referred to as 'magnificent', indicative of elite status, while others were doctors, clerics, and widows.<sup>44</sup>

Neville Colclough has contributed to our understanding of occupational structure in Ascoli in the eighteenth century by using a list of hearths from 1728; the results of which support the notion that Ascoli hardly fitted into the perception of the stereotypical agro-town. Only about 35 per cent of the population worked on large estates, and these were not always grain. Agricultural labourers made up a minority of the population. In fact, Ascoli had a high amount of inhabitants working outside agriculture, either in professional or clerical roles, or in mercantile or industrial roles as craftsmen or apprentices. These seem to cut against the

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<sup>41</sup> Giustiniani ed., *Dizionario-geografico*, ii, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Most famously in the work of W. Douglass, *Emmigration in a South Italian town: an anthropological history* (New Brunswick, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> The wide geographical span of origin for immigrants into Ascoli has also been suggested in S. Russo, 'Uomini e colture: questioni di carte', in R. De Lorenzo ed., *Storia e misura. Indicatori sociali ed economici nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia (secoli XVIII-XX)* (Milan, 2007), 81.

<sup>44</sup> The diverse status of eighteenth and nineteenth century immigrants in the Capitanata has been addressed in S. Russo, *Storie di famiglie. Mobilità della ricchezza in Capitanata tra Sette e Ottocento* (Bari, 1995); 'La cerealicoltura del Tavoliere e la montagna appenninica (secoli XVIII-XIX)', in A. Calafati & E. Sori eds., *Economie del tempo. Persistenze e cambiamento negli Appennini in età moderna* (Milan, 2004), 117-25.

general works which suggest agro-towns possessed minimal urban economic functions. Colclough's figures from 1728 suggested that almost half the people in Ascoli worked in the 'urban sector',<sup>45</sup> and this is supported by my data from 1753 which recorded 40 per cent of the inhabitants in urban occupations – still a high figure. The rural economy of early modern Holland has been characterised as being highly 'industrialised' with 45 per cent of the population in non-agricultural occupations, to add some perspective.<sup>46</sup>

Thus certainly the growth of Ascoli, and in all likelihood many of the agro-towns within its vicinity, was able to occur in the context of the pastoral economy dominated by a select few absentee (often ecclesiastical) landlords and institutions because there were enough industrial and commercial opportunities for the inhabitants to pursue. Although some of the inhabitants worked on the large estates, most of this work was actually taken on by temporary seasonal workers from the south of Apulia and the central uplands, who did not own property in Ascoli and rented rooms from wealthy aristocrats in the town and took up notarized six-month contracts to work the estates.<sup>47</sup> It seems then that these so-called agro-towns may have emerged through a context of economic polarisation – but it did not necessarily mean that had anything to do with *latifundia*.

## **2. Agro-towns, economic polarisation and causality**

Large concentrated towns grew and proliferated in much of the Mediterranean, often under conditions of exceptionally high economic polarisation. Even other places well-known for high differences between rich and poor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as the parts of the central river area or parts of east and north Groningen had lower Gini-indexes (85 and 81 per cent respectively) than the 97 per cent calculated for Ascoli.<sup>48</sup> The question still remains, why did this extreme consolidation of property in the hands of a few dominant interest groups lead to the establishment of concentrated towns in the Mediterranean?

Probably the answer is very simple. The consolidation of land into very few hands meant that a wide proportion of the population had no access to land, which in turn meant

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<sup>45</sup> Colclough, 'Variation and change', 5.

<sup>46</sup> J.L. van zanden, 'A third road to capitalism? Proto-industrialisation and the moderate nature of the late medieval crisis in Flanders and Holland, 1350-1550', in P. Hoppenbrouwers & J.L. van Zanden eds., *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages – 19<sup>th</sup> century) in light of the Brenner Debate* (Turnhout, 2001), 85-101; 'Taking the measure of the early modern economy. Historical national accounts for Holland in 1510/14', *European Review of Economic History* **6** (2002), 135-9.

<sup>47</sup> As in Cerignola. See S. Russo, 'I lavoratori delle masserie: geografia della provenienze', in *Il paesaggio agrario di Cerignola fra Settecento e Ottocento* (Cerignola, 1999), 29-31.

<sup>48</sup> MY OWN THESIS (hidden for peer review)



that very few people had the opportunity to permanently settle out in the countryside. It was not as if the large absentee landlords were ever willing to divide up some of their landed estates to lease to local people as farmers. Whether they were arable or pastoral estates, it did not matter. In Southern Italy there was consistently a culture of direct farming in hand. Landlords were not directly involved in the management (some of the lay aristocrats probably were resident in Naples), but instead entrusted their massari or stewards with the tasks. Even when land was conceded to local people, for example when large landlords tried to get colonists to bring wastelands into cultivation in Sicily in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the resulting settlements were all concentrated towns.<sup>49</sup> Colonists were not granted their own plots with favourable jurisdictions as what happened from the high Middle Ages onwards in Northern Europe. The property structure did not change at all since all the concessions were largely temporary.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of access to land to actually settle upon being the causal link between economic polarisation and agro-towns can be highlighted by looking at a reverse case. Why did Locorotondo not develop the same concentrated-town structure as most other parts of Apulia? The reason surely must be found in the fact that 82 per cent of its population in the eighteenth century (a key settlement development phase) had access to land, in comparison to just 26 per cent in Ascoli. Furthermore, the Ascoli figure was only this high because many of its inhabitants managed to scrap together some tiny morsels of vineyards, attached to the town walls. Either through outright ownership or emphyteutic concession, the inhabitants of Locorotondo were able to build their stone trulli out in the countryside, simply because they had the physical and practical means to do so. These peasants built their trulli next to their plots. To strengthen the point, it is no coincidence that in the Cosentino area of Calabria with its small villages and scattered farmsteads, land was accessible to a relatively high (relative to the agro-town areas) proportion of the total population (around 70 percent of the inhabitants).<sup>51</sup>

### **3. Agro-towns and economic polarisation: the long term perspective**

So far it has been argued that economic polarisation and the proliferation of the large towns in Southern Italy is a causally connected phenomenon, while latifundist agriculture only

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<sup>49</sup> F. Benigno, *Una casa, una terra: ricerche su Paceco, paese nuovo nella Sicilia del Sei e Ottocento* (Catania, 1985); T. Davies, 'Village-building in Sicily: an aristocratic remedy for the crisis of the 1590s', in P. Clark ed. *The European crisis of the 1590s. Essays in comparative history* (London, 1985), 191-208.

<sup>50</sup> V. Riccioni, 'Della proprietà fondiaria privata nel Mezzogiorno avanti le riforme francesi', in *Studi storici di economia dell'agricoltura meridionale* (Florence, 1952), 39-42.

<sup>51</sup> My database taken from ASC, Catasto Generale Onciario, vol. 17 (various).

added to an already existing structure. Although interesting, still this conclusion is not satisfying. Why did this sort of economic polarisation manifest itself in Southern Italy, and why was it prolonged over the long term? The answer to this question is the ultimate answer to why the agro-towns have become such a characteristic feature of the Mediterranean landscape.

The problem is, as noted in section 1b, that agro-towns did not all emerge in the same social and economic contexts, and thus by the same token, different regions and societies took different routes towards their own economic polarisation. There was not one Mediterranean path towards inequality. The economic polarisation that led to the development of some of the most 'classic' agro-town territory on the northern plains of Apulia, for example, was reinforced and locked in place over the long term by some very specific institutional and political power constellations.

One of the key differences between agro-town areas such as Ascoli on the northern plains of Apulia and the scattered trulli of the inland Murgia where Locorotondo was located was the divergent colonisation conditions each region experienced, a long time prior to the eighteenth century. In Locorotondo, local peasants were by the sixteenth century colonising the woodlands and wastes with their own private enclosures. At the time when the town of Locorotondo bought its hinterlands from the Royal Court in 1566 (establishing its territorial borders),<sup>52</sup> the settlement was located in the middle of a large common territory which ran from Monopoli on the coast to Ostuni in the south-east.<sup>53</sup> The communities of nearby Martina Franca, Fasano, Cisterino, as well as Locorotondo, benefited from the common rights of grazing and collection of wood.<sup>54</sup> Around the mid sixteenth century, however, inhabitants began to encroach into the commons, something which the Royal Court struggled to prevent. It was noted in the document from 1566 that much of the land was now enclosed and had vineyards belonging to farmers from Locorotondo and Martina Franca.<sup>55</sup> The document also mentioned two *jazzèleri*, Tritto and S. Marco, showing how the seeds of dispersed settlement had already been laid. It was also noted that it was now legal to plant vineyards and gardens under private ownership, which effectively meant that by the eighteenth century, all common land ceased to exist in Locorotondo.<sup>56</sup> This early

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<sup>52</sup> G. Sampietro, *Fasano: indagni storiche* (Fasano, 1922), 254-63.

<sup>53</sup> Galt, *Far from the church bells*, 69.

<sup>54</sup> On the early rights, see B. Cascella, 'I magistri forestarii e la gestione delle foreste', in R. Licinio ed., *Castelli, foreste, masserie: potere centrale e funzionari periferici nella Puglia del secolo XIII* (Bari, 1991), 47-94; R. Travaglini, *I limiti della foresta oritana in documenti e carte dal 1432 al 1809* (Oria, 1977).

<sup>55</sup> D. Chirulli ed., *Istoria cronologica della Franca Martina cogli avvenimenti piu notabili del Regno di Napoli* (Martina Franca, 1982), 217-41.

<sup>56</sup> See the reports on the condition of the commons in ASB, Atti Demaniali (1809), no. 69.

encroachment by local farmers allowed them to build up a firm property base by the eighteenth century, which gave them stronger foundations in opposition to feudal lords.

Ascoli, like similar settlements on northern plains such as Cerignola, Troia, Foggia, Lucera, Candela, and Andria, had an entirely different situation. These settlements all lay within the Tavoliere; a plain that was rigorously managed by the Royal Customhouse of Naples, which supervised a system of transhumant pastoral sheep farming between Apulia and the mountains of the Abruzzo.<sup>57</sup> Transhumance between the two regions probably had Roman origins, though the system retracted in the early Middle Ages with the collapse of the long-distance trading networks.<sup>58</sup> When the Normans arrived in Apulia, transhumant farming probably picked up again (from around the eleventh century onwards), although the Royal Customhouse only formalised the institutions necessary for its management in 1447.<sup>59</sup>

The rationale behind the Royal Customhouse of Naples was to create a balance between arable and pastoral land on the Tavoliere.<sup>60</sup> Alongside the Castilian *Mesta*, it was Europe's largest managed pastoral economy.<sup>61</sup> Privately owned arable land was grazed during fallow periods, while royal pastures were never cultivated. Wool and wheat were cash products which were to be sold in Naples<sup>62</sup> (the most populous city in Western Europe before the plagues of 1656);<sup>63</sup> therefore the ratio between arable and pasture fluctuated with the trends of demand and prices for agricultural goods. Grain fed the kingdom while taxes on

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<sup>57</sup> For a superb explanation of how it worked see Marino, *Pastoral economics*. The plain measured 397,336 hectares in 1806. See ASFO, Tavoliere, i, no. 67, fos 57-64.

<sup>58</sup> G. Barker, 'The archaeology of the Italian shepherd', *Proceedings of the Philosophical Society* 25 (1989), 13; M. Corbier, 'La transhumance entre le Samnium et l'Apulie: continuités entre l'époque républicaine et l'époque impériale', in G. d'Henry ed., *La romanisation du Samnium aux IIe et le siècles av. J.-C.* (Naples, 1991), 161. Some argue for an even earlier date, for example, see K. Lomas, *Rome and the western Greeks 350 BC – AD 200. Conquest and acculturation in southern Italy* (London, 1993), 122-3.

<sup>59</sup> The founding charter from Alfonso of Aragon who conquered the Kingdom of Naples in 1447 has been printed in S. Grana, *Istituzioni delle leggi della Regia Dogana di Foggia* (Naples, 1770), 72-9.

<sup>60</sup> For an explanation of the rationale, see S. Di Stefano, *Della ragion pastorale* (Naples, 1731).

<sup>61</sup> For a comparison with the *Mesta*, see J. Klein, *The Mesta: a study in Spanish economic history, 1273-1836* (Cambridge Mass., 1920); R. Pastor de Togneri, 'La lana en Castilla y León antes de la organización de la Mesta', in M. Spallanzani ed., *La lana come materia prima. I fenomeni della sua produzione e circolazione nei secoli XIII-XVII* (Florence, 1974).

<sup>62</sup> Fortunate for Ascoli, it was situated on a key overland transport link with Naples. See A. Massafra, *Campagna e territorio nel Mezzogiorno fra Settecento e Ottocento* (Bari, 1984), 199.

<sup>63</sup> See C. Petraccone, *Napoli dal Cinquecento all'Ottocento. Problemi di storia demografia e sociale* (Naples, 1975).

sheep provided its riches.<sup>64</sup> Cultivation on the Tavoliere was not 'forbidden' as suggested by Frank Snowden, but merely strictly regulated.<sup>65</sup>

With such a rigorous management of the Tavoliere from its base in Foggia, building and cultivation became extremely restricted out on the plains. In that respect the Tavoliere became depicted as a barren wilderness, comparable to the Steppes of Central Asia.<sup>66</sup> The land became divided into *locazioni*, each comprised of a number of isolated farms known as *masserie*. Livestock farms were more complex than grain farms, took up more space, and included a wider range of buildings such as dog kennels, animal stables, sheep pens, cheese processing sites, and threshing floors.<sup>67</sup> In particular the complex belonging to the abbey of S. Leonardo di Siponto at their Feudo di Torre Alemanna had all these things as well as taverns, olive presses,<sup>68</sup> and bakeries inside an almost fortified design.<sup>69</sup> *Locazioni* were also subdivided between smaller huts (*capanne*), which belonged to shepherds and often included a church nearby.<sup>70</sup> In sum, the potential for acquisition of land by local inhabitants such as those at Ascoli Satriano was severely restricted by the institutional management of the plains, thereby restricting settlement out in the countryside also. The point is reinforced by the fact that on the Tavoliere lays the remnants of a host of former villages, abandoned between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Up to around the fifteenth century, this sort of settlement structure was possible on the plains of the Tavoliere, but was quickly destroyed under the

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<sup>64</sup> Apulia accounted for over a fifth of total grain imported into Naples between the mid sixteenth and mid seventeenth centuries. G. Coniglio, *Il vicereame di Napoli nel secolo XVII. Notizie sulla commerciale e finanziaria secondo nuove ricerche negli archivi italiani e spagnoli* (Rome, 1955), 37.

<sup>65</sup> F. Snowden, 'The city of the sun: Red Cerignola, 1900-15', in R. Gibson & M. Blinkhorn eds., *Landownership and power in modern Europe* (London, 1991), 201.

<sup>66</sup> The second biggest province in terms of area in the Kingdom of Naples and frequently the least populous in the early modern period. See A. La Cava, 'La demografia di un comune Pugliese nell'età moderna', *Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane* **25** (1939), 25-66.

<sup>67</sup> S. La Sorsa, 'La pastorizia pugliese e le sue costumanze', *Archivio 'Vittorio Scioioja' per le Consuetudine Giuridiche Agrarie e le Tradizioni Popolari Italiane* **8** (1941), 8-11; A. Bissanti, 'Il Tavoliere di Puglia', in C. Colamonico ed. *La casa rurale nella Puglia* (Florence, 1970), 70-91.

<sup>68</sup> Olive tree cultivation was labour and capital intensive, thus mainly ecclesiastical institutions constructed olive presses in the Terra di Bari and the Capitanata. See R. Licinio, 'L'organizzazione del territorio fra XIII e XV secolo', in C. Fonseca & D. Blasi eds., *La Puglia tra medioevo ed età moderna. Città e campagna* (Milan, 1981), 215; G. Poli, *Territorio e contadini nella Puglia moderna. Paesaggio agrario e strategie produttive tra XVI e XVIII secolo* (Galatina, 1990), 65.

<sup>69</sup> G. Laurenti, 'Visita dell'abbazia o precettoria di S. Leonardo di Puglia e dell'abbazia di S. Maria di Banzi', in A. Massafra & A. Ventura eds., *Il patrimonio dell'Abbazia di S. Leonardo di Siponto: illustrazione e trascrizione del manoscritto di una visita pastorale di fine secolo XVII conservato nella Biblioteca provinciale di Foggia* (Foggia, 1978), 43-89.

<sup>70</sup> For example, see the map of the Locazione d'Orta in ASFO, Dogana delle Pecore di Foggia, i, no. 20.

emergence of state-organised transhumance practices.<sup>71</sup> The polarised landholding structure also had roots in this early institutional control of local resources. From the sixteenth century onwards Naples favoured the large landowners and those with the larger flocks, and were often given the best grazing lands.<sup>72</sup> The best grazing lands were very close to Ascoli, especially the *locazioni* of Orta and Ordona, because they had previously gone under the plough.<sup>73</sup> The skewed property distribution came to be locked-in over the long term (and further polarised from the sixteenth century onwards),<sup>74</sup> with smallholders put at a constant disadvantage.

The second reason for the perpetuation of the polarised property structure in much of Apulia lay in the modes of exploitation, which were informed by the particular balances of political power. Indeed, the fact that a wider section of the population in Locorotondo received access to land through emphyteutic concessions was down to the fact that the elite landowners in Locorotondo were a lot weaker than to be found in other parts of Southern Italy such as Ascoli. In Locorotondo, there was a greater power struggle between social groups than seen in typical agro-town areas.

The fee of Locorotondo had belonged to the Duke of Martina, Francesco Caracciolo I, since 1645; bought from another noble family of the town of Monopoli.<sup>75</sup> The Duke was the largest landowner in Locorotondo in 1749 with 355 hectares to his name (seven per cent of the territory). Proportionally, the Duke of Ascoli, Don Sebastiano Marulli did not hold much more; around nine percent of the total. However, the territory of Ascoli Satriano was a lot larger than that of Locorotondo (the nine per cent corresponded to 3290 hectares); thus comprised an estate around 10 times the size of the Duke of Martina Franca. Furthermore, the quality and fertility of the Locorotondo land was significantly lower than the lush plains

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<sup>71</sup> See R. Licinio, *Uomini e terre nella Puglia medievale. Dagli svevi agli Aragonesi* (Bari, 1983); *Masserie medievali*; C. Delano Smith, 'Villages désertés dans les Pouilles: le Tavolière', in *I paesaggi rurali europei* (Perugia, 1975), 125-40; C. Klapisch Zuber, 'Villagi abbandonati ed emigrazioni interne', in *Storia d'Italia. I documenti*, v (Turin, 1973), 345-9.

<sup>72</sup> See the abuses of power and concessions to favourites listed in F. De Dominicis, *Lo stato politico, ed economico della Dogana della Mena della Pecore di Puglia*, iii (Naples, 1781), 37-9.

<sup>73</sup> A. Gaudiani, *Notizie per il buon governo della Regia Dogana della mena della pecore di Puglia*, ed. P. Di Cicco (Foggia, 1981 [1715]), 100.

<sup>74</sup> M. Nardella, 'Terre di portata e terre salde di Regia corte: le aree di cereali-coltura estensiva nei territori soggetti alla giurisdizione della Dogana', in *Decimo convegno sulla preistoria, protostoria e storia della Daunia* (San Severo, 1989), 187-92; 'Produzione mercantile e intervento dello Stato nella seconda metà del Cinquecento: le terre a cerealicoltura estensiva della Dogana delle pecore di Foggia', in *Undicesimo convegno sulla preistoria, protostoria e storia della Daunia* (San Severo, 1990), 279-90.

<sup>75</sup> M. Capograssi, 'Due secoli di successioni feudali registrati nei cedolari di Terra di Bari', *Rivista Araldica* (1956), 192; A. Carrino, *La città aristocratica. Linguaggi e pratiche della politica a Monopoli fra Cinque e Seicento* (Bari, 2000), 253-61.

around Ascoli. The Caracciolo family did have estates outside Locorotondo in the nearby regions, but at the same time the Marulli family of Ascoli similarly had *masserie* in other parts – particularly to the south.<sup>76</sup> The landed weaknesses of the large landowners in Locorotondo in comparison to the agro-town regions of Apulia is shown by the fact that the top 10 Locorotondese landowners only comprised 14 per cent of the total land; palling in comparison to the 58 per cent in the hands of the top 10 Ascoli landowners. The Duke of Martina Franca (lord of Locorotondo) had all things one would associate with feudal estates: a castle, a tavern, a butchery, craft shops, furnaces, and a mill – even underground snow-storage facilities.<sup>77</sup> The Duke of Ascoli, however, had all these things but in greater quantity.

As mentioned already, the power of the elite landowners in Locorotondo was likely curtailed by the high levels of local farmer or peasant landownership, which had its roots in the early colonisation of the common woods. The weak position of the Locorotondo landlords translated itself into jurisdictional problems, especially for the feudal lord, the Duke of Martina Franca.<sup>78</sup> The relationship between the local municipal authorities (*università*) and the aristocratic elite was symptomatic of the general weakening of large landlords' power. Before 1550, the municipal government tended to support the prevailing aristocratic and baronial groups. However, as the woodlands began to be cleared and more investment was put into agriculture, the municipal authorities instead began to align themselves away from the barons and more towards serving the interests of the local community which was expanding in size and influence.<sup>79</sup>

A document from 1605 mentions an agreement between the local municipal authorities and the barons over recognized privileges in Locorotondo.<sup>80</sup> Even though it was created before the Caracciolo family purchased the fee of Locorotondo, it turned out to be an imported and controversial piece. As the Duke of Martina Franca began to see his jurisdictional powers over Locorotondo waning in the eighteenth century, he increasingly took recourse to ancient rights found in old documents in an attempt to stem the general trend towards heightened municipal autonomy. In 1754, conflict had led the Duke to make

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<sup>76</sup> E. Papagna, *Sogni e bisogni di una famiglia aristocratica: i Caracciolo di Martina Franca in età moderna* (Milan, 2002), 67. The distribution of these lands is mapped in E. Papagna, 'Dimensione territoriali e rappresentazione cartografica di una signoria feudale in età moderna', in G. Giarrizzo & E. Iachello eds., *Le mappe nella storia. Proposte per una cartografia del Mezzogiorno e della Sicilia in età moderna* (Milan, 2002), 33-43.

<sup>77</sup> G. Guarella, 'Niviere e vendita della neve nelle carte del passato', *Riflessioni Umanesimo della Pietra* 11 (1988), 117-24.

<sup>78</sup> On this process see A. Cofano, *Storia antifeudale della Franca Martina* (Fasano, 1977).

<sup>79</sup> V. Di Michele, 'Fermenti di rivolta antibaronale nella Locorotondo della prima metà' del Settecento', *Locorotondo, Rivista di Economia, Agricoltura, Cultura e Documentazione* 4 (1988), 113.

<sup>80</sup> G. Guarella, 'L'università di Locorotondo: i Borassa e le capitolazioni del 1605', *Locorotondo, Rivista di Economia, Agricoltura, Cultura e Documentazione* 4 (1988), 28.

three demands on the municipal authorities, arguing that they owed him three sums annually.<sup>81</sup>

- 1 A sum of 48 ducats for ovens, mills and herbage, on the basis that this was agreed in 1502 and 1509 with previous barons Alberico and Alessandro Carafe. The municipal authorities refuted this by arguing that this was only signed by the barons.
- 2 A sum of 200 ducats as a tribute for autonomy afforded the municipal authorities by the barons.
- 3 A sum of 50 ducats as a direct charge to the municipal authorities covering a fine for the marriage of sisters in the territory, and also to readdress perceived underpayment by the municipal authorities for half of the lands bought from former barons, the Loffredo family.

The weak position of the feudal lords was highlighted by the fact the *università* refused outright to pay these sums, and in fact, turned the claims on their head by suggesting they themselves had been overcharged over the years. By this time all the feudal lords had left was physical bullying tactics and desperation: when a local chapter built a mill in 1754, the Duke appealed to the Bishop of Ostuni (unsuccessfully) to prohibit the building of mills outside his domain. Eventually the Duke lost his tithes of a twentieth,<sup>82</sup> and while the feudal lords renewed their complaints in 1785, by this time they were well beaten.<sup>83</sup> During the course of the eighteenth century, the municipal authorities stopped paying rent to the Duke, the *decime* and twentieth had disappeared, and total income in 1794 was down from its level in 1667.

Thus, in sum, the high levels of local access to land in Locorotondo, the proliferation of emphyteutic concessions, and the lack of grain-based large estate agriculture, was linked to the landed and jurisdictional weaknesses of the lords there – exacerbated by more difficult environmental conditions and the early encroachment of farmers into the forests. In Ascoli, as in many of the agro-town regions of Apulia, more land stayed in the hands of a dominant elite, because this property structure (at least on the plains) had been crystallized in place by the Royal Customhouse management of agriculture, but also because the elite landlords were stronger and did not face many jurisdictional battles and local challenges to their power. In

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<sup>81</sup> F. Fumarola, 'Appunti della storia di Locorotondo', in *Società ed economia a Locorotondo attraverso i bilanci comunali (1817-1842)* (unpublished thesis); accessible at <http://digilander.libero.it/locomind/storia/fumarola%201.htm>.

<sup>82</sup> Although refusal to pay this onerous twentieth was common in Apulia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. L. Masella, 'Decime e demani: l'eversione della feudalità in terra d'Otranto', *Quaderni Storici* (1972), 284-301.

<sup>83</sup> G. Baccari, *Memorie storiche di Locorotondo* (Fasano, 1869), 90-1.

fact, local communal and civic unions from the bottom-up appear to have been entirely weak in the agro-town areas.

Emphyteusis was actually attempted in some parts of the agro-town areas in the north of Apulia. From Cerignola to Bitonto in the nineteenth century, attempts were made to plant vineyards by enticing labour through improvement contracts; especially by the great landowners such as the Pavoncelli family. In the first phase of Pavoncelli planting, 1022 tenants were created, each with small plots of one to five hectares.<sup>84</sup> In this situation, however, once the terms of the lease had ended after 27 to 29 years and improvements had been made, the land reverted back into the hands of the landlords, who retained a strong grip on property and agricultural production.<sup>85</sup> This contrasted with Locorotondo where the emphyteutic leases had become almost heritable, and landlords lost their grip on property.

#### **4. Escaping perceptions of the ‘unchanging’ Italian South**

By approaching ‘agro-towns’ in a comparative light, it has been confirmed that the proliferation of this settlement structure across much of the Mediterranean was likely down to the high levels of polarisation in the distribution of land, which furthermore, was crystallized in place through developments much earlier than the eighteenth century. However, this does not mean that we need to subscribe to a very narrow view of Southern Italian society as something that was completely unchanging from the medieval period right up to the twentieth century. Yes, there was a great continuity in polarised property structures across many centuries, but at the same time, this continuity was only possible because dominant social groups used a number of very dynamic and flexible methods to maintain the status quo. Feudal structures could co-exist with capital investment; structural continuity with elements of dynamism.<sup>86</sup> We need to move away from viewing the development of Southern Italian towns with simple recourse to latifundist estates and homogenous pools of labour.<sup>87</sup> The roots of the ‘agro-town’ in Ascoli (if we can still call it that) were actually laid down in a more commercial-pastoral context, as the town developed into a real trading post between Apulia and the city of Naples. It was only in the late nineteenth century that Ascoli, like many other towns around it, began to morph into the ‘classical’ picture of the agro-town

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<sup>84</sup> G. Pavoncelli, *Un'azienda vinaria in Capitanata* (Cerignola, 1897), 16.

<sup>85</sup> Snowden, *Violence*, 35-40. Similarly land returned to the hands of large landowners in Calabria. See E. Sereni, *Il capitalismo nella campagna (1860-1900)* (Turin, 1968), 171-2.

<sup>86</sup> As seen in C. Rasmussen, ‘Innovative feudalism. The development of dairy farming and ‘Koppelwirtschaft’ on manors in Schleswig-Holstein in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, *Agricultural History Review* **58**, 2 (2010), 172-90; B. van Bavel, ‘Land, lease and agriculture. The transition of the rural economy in the Dutch river area (fourteenth - sixteenth centuries)’, *Past & Present* **172** (2001) 3-43.

<sup>87</sup> A call made in Ciuffreda, ‘Massari e mercanti di piazza’, 176.



supported by latifundist grain agriculture. By this time, the seeds of the town-structure had already been laid-down, and labourer immigration merely added to the pattern. Indeed, the disintegration of the Royal Customhouse did nothing to change the property distribution in Apulia, since this 'communal' land was simply sold to the highest bidders at auction, and was consolidated into the hands of a property speculators, former feudal lords, and urban entrepreneurs – the so-called grain-barons.<sup>88</sup>

This research focusing on settlement structures within Southern Italy has more than anything, reminded us that we cannot continue to keep approaching the Italian South (a) non-historically, but more significantly (b) as an unchanging society unable to escape its feudal past. We do need to go further into the past to seek the roots of more recent developments and divergences, and it is true that certain power and property structures may be locked in place over long periods of time. However, we must also be aware that sometimes these continuous structures sometimes actually got their durability through dynamic responses to changing conditions by key protagonists, sometimes in the short-term. The task for the future is to extend our historical enquiry into the 'agro-towns' of Southern Italy (and the Mediterranean, in general) with (a) a better understanding of the chronological development of concentrated towns, and (b) an appreciation of the fact that while agro-towns and economic polarisation are undoubtedly linked, the processes which maintained and reinforced inequalities in Southern Italy could be diverse and dynamic responses. By doing this, we may begin to nuance populist views on the origins of so-called 'stagnation' and 'backwardness' in the Italian South.

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<sup>88</sup> For the land sales after 1806 see A. Massafra, 'Equilibri territoriali, assetti produttivi e mercato in Capitanata nella prima metà dell'Ottocento' in *Produzione, mercato e classi sociali nella Capitanata moderna e contemporanea* (Foggia, 1984), 40-44; S. Russo, *Grano, pascolo e bosco in Capitanata tra Sette e Ottocento* (Bari, 1990); 54; S. d'Atri, 'Censuazione del Tavoliere e proprietà fondiaria a Cerignola', in *Il paesaggio agrario*, 33-46. For the ideological reform of the system in the Tavoliere see R. Colapietra, 'Gli economisti settecenteschi dinanzi al problema del Tavoliere', *Rassegna di Politica e di Storia* **58** (1959), 24-32; 'Riforma e restaurazione del sistema del Tavoliere di Puglia', *Rassegna di Politica e di Storia* **74** (1960), 26-32; 'L'Unità d'Italia e l'affrancamento del Tavoliere di Puglia', *Rassegna di Politica e di Storia* **76** (1961), 22-32; P. Di Cicco, 'Il problema della Dogana delle Pecore nella seconda metà del XVIII secolo', *La Capitanata* **4** (1966), 63-72; 'Censuazione ed affrancazione del Tavoliere di Puglia (1789-1865)', *Quaderni della Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato* **32** (1964). For the wider European context of the ideological move away from communal property forms, see M-D. Demélas & N. Vivier eds., *Les propriétés collectives face aux attaques liberals (1750-1914). Europe occidentale et Amérique latine* (Rennes, 2003); R. Congost & J. Miguel Lana eds., *Cerrados, debates abiertos. Análisis histórico y propiedad de la tierra en Europa (siglos XVI-XIX)* (Pamplona, 2007).