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### The Sacred Landscape in Suburbs Space. The Path of the Bregoli (Italy)

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#### Introduction

Although, often boasting a valuable intangible heritage, peri-urban landscapes are neglected spaces that do not receive the attention they would deserve from the perspective of a cultural and social fruition. In most cases, they are still part of the local community and a significant tool supporting social participation where the heritage has a religious origin. Is it possible to say that these ancient landscapes provide evidence, with their endurance, of an environmental, social and cultural sustainability that characterise the Religious Heritage? The enhancement process, between knowledge and conservation, is absolutely instrumental, especially insofar as a new contemporary *inventio* of an ancient past can be rebuilt. Narration tries to provide a contribution to this issue starting from the knowledge of local history in the case of the Bregoli path, an itinerary bringing visitors to the Sanctuary of Beata Vergine di San Luca, in the outskirts of Bologna. Toponymy, spiritual places, chronicles, folklore and recent events are keys to understand the narration, or a storytelling for a new *inventio* of the territory.

#### 1. The name of the path

In the southern side of the Archpriest Church of S. Martino, in Casalecchio di Reno (Bologna), starts a mule track that clammers its way onto the flanks of Mount Castello, reaching the Sanctuary Beata Vergine di S. Luca, on the summit of the Colle della Guardia. With only 1.700 m in length, the path is averagely demanding and a little strenuous (the height difference is about 300 m). It is a very popular, year-round

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destination with the local population and has a precise place in the Bolognese history, religion and folklore.

The path winds along a shady wood and provides panoramic glimpses of Casalecchio, a small and ancient town, and the underlying plain, but also draws near impressive precipices like “El balz d’la Pizzacra”, “The leap of the woodcock”, from where the eponymous river Rio Pizzacra (Woodcock) originates. The river was so called after this fascinating bird, which used to stop and rest in this place during the autumn migration. Officially, the path is identified by the acronym C.A.I 112/A, although its historical name is “Brigoli” for the *Bolognesi* and “Bregoli” for the *Casalecchiesi*.

The citizens call it “Brigoli”, a term with a Mediterranean linguistic root, “bric”, indicating arduous and stony places, as we can see in Provençal, some dialects of northern Italy and ancient Italian words. Thus, for a Bolognese, walking along the “Brigoli” would feel like a bit of an adventure (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1:** Beginning of the Bregoli ascent, and religious procession with the children (the Parish of San Martino mid-50s).

Source: archive Cerioli family

On the other hand, the Casalecchiesi used to call this mule track “Bregoli” because people would come here to collect the “*bregguel*”, dry branches dropping from the trees – it was a sort of customary law, a right of “gleaning” assigned to the poorest and also cited in the Bible (Rt.2,1-23). Until the first half of the last century, when a tree was cut down, all wood splinters were left on the ground so that the needy could collect them. The same happened with dry woods dropping from the trees in the woods. The path leading to the Sanctuary of San Luca was a true reservoir of “*bregole*”. Either “*Brigoli*” or “*Bregoli*”, the two names reflect different visions of the world: an adventurous itinerary outside the city walls or a providential reservoir of wood for daily needs.

## 2. The story

The existence of this path was made official in the maps of the Pontifical Land Registry of 1780, although evidence is also provided by maps, documents and land registries of earlier times. From the Middle Age on, the Bregoli was the obvious route for all pilgrims heading to the Sanctuary of the Beata Vergine di San Luca from the valleys of the Reno river, as well as from the Lavino or Samoggia valleys (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2:** The beginning of the Bregoli trail (Casalecchio di Reno, 2017).

Source: archive Paolo Ceroni

In the medieval road network, the Bregoli was the natural junction between two important ridge itineraries: the so-called *Flaminia militare* (military Flaminia) that from Bologna, outside the San Mamolo gate, reached Fiesole and Firenze, and the other trans-appennine path that, between the Reno and the Lavino rivers, headed to Pistoia and Pisa. Although the two “roads” had different connections, the Bregoli was the most important one, as it led directly to Casalecchio, with its bridge on the Reno and the ford of the Canonica Pass, from where the roads to Pistoia or Modena branched off. In Casalecchio, the wanderer could rely on the S. Martino Church, the Monastery of the Canons of S. Maria di Reno and its hospital, as well as other three religious institutions: S. Maria della Neve, S. Maria della Vita and the *Ospitium Lunae*.

Of course, the Bregoli looked very different from today. The current appearance dates

back to 1860, when, after the Second War of Independence, General Manfredo Fanti, in order to defend the territorial integrity of the new Reign of Italy from possible Austrian invasions, had transformed Bologna in a fortress, of which Casalecchio was a cornerstone. The Mazzacavallo fort was built on the summit of Mount Castello, from where it overlooked the underlying plain and the entrance to the Valley of the Reno, while the Bregoli was enlarged and made accessible to vehicles in order to allow the transit of supplies of arms and ammunitions intended for the artillery deployed in the valley floor. This strategy only lasted a few years, and the Bolognese stronghold was soon dismantled. With the end of the military purpose, the enhancement of the Bregoli path went, as it still happens today, to the benefit of pilgrims and excursionists.

In 1870 the name “Bregoli” was officialised in the cartography of the Military Geographic Institution.

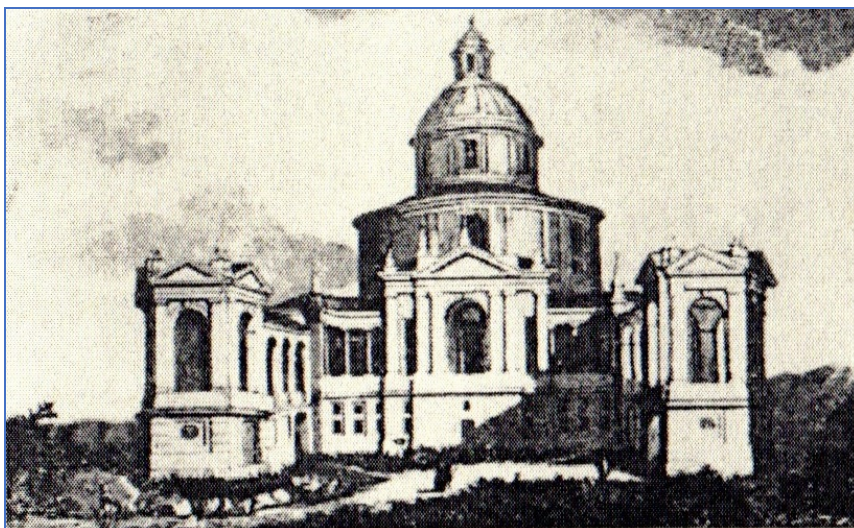
In 1926, Monsignor Filippo Ercolani, who was parish priest of S. Martino at the time, had a Via Crucis built along the path, with small pillars and holy images according to the project by Cavalier Primo Menzani. In this way, previously randomly chosen stopping points were clearly defined, so that the pilgrims could recite the Holy Rosary.

### 3. Two spiritual places

The “Bregoli” path connects the Sanctuary of the Beata Vergine di S. Luca, on the Colle della Guardia, to the Parish S. Martino in Casalecchio di Reno. These two churches, each in its own way, have had a very important role in the popular devotion of both citizens and rural populations; besides, they were also linked by a legal bond in the past.

The story of the Sanctuary of Beata Vergine di S. Luca is well known. In 1182, a young Bolognese woman, Angelica, daughter of Caiole Bonfantini, and her cousins Azzolina and Beatrice decided to enter into hermitage life. Since their families owned some lands on the Colle della Guardia, Angelica, Azzolina and Beatrice chose this place to build their hermitage due to its isolation. Although quite far away from the city walls, the area, patrolled by Bolognese guards (the occurrence also provided a name for the Colle) ensured a certain level of safety. The possible arrival of potential enemies could be detected with the help of a sophisticated optical telegraph system (**Figure 3**).





**Figure 3:** Church of San Luca Virgin Mary on the Monte della Guardia (Bologna).

Source: G. Ferrdis - F. Franceschini inc. – 1828.

In order to receive the necessary acknowledgment from the small monastic community Angelica Bonfantini relied on the Canons of S. Maria di Reno, whose seat was then located in Casalecchio (*Canonica*, to be precise), and said the vows as “Renana Sister”. In 1193 Pope Celestine III sent Angelica a blessed stone for the foundations of the hermitage church. The works began the following year. As soon as the church had been completed, the Bishop of Bologna, Gerardo di Gisla, gave Angelica and her sisters an icon of the Beata Vergine painted by St. Luke the Evangelist. According to the legend, a Bolognese nobleman, who was in Rome on a diplomatic mission, had received the painting from a Greek man who had undertaken the task to move it from Byzantium, where it was previously held, to its ultimate seat, on the “Colle della Guardia” (that is in Bologna).

Although the tale is quite improbable the locals welcomed the icon with devotion and enthusiasm. They began to climb the hill, barefoot and praying, to reach the little church of the Guardia hermitage.

Over the centuries, the Sanctuary faced several vicissitudes and underwent renovation works. It was given the appearance it has today by architect Carlo Francesco Dotti (1670 – 1759) who devoted himself to the religious complex from 1722 to the last days of his life, also connecting it to the city with a bold and elegant portico made up of 666 arches. The people were so delighted to see how much the revered image of the Beata Vergine was honoured that, with the help of the guilds of arts and professions, human chains were organised to pass from hand to hand the construction materials that had to be transported from the city to the Colle (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 4:** Old women climbs on foot, in the 30s, on the Colle della Guardia to pray to the Blessed Virgin.

Source: archive Gian Franco Guerzoni.

On the other side of the Bregoli path, in Casalecchio, we find the S. Martino Church (elevated to archpriest status on May 7, 1920). The Church boasts ancient origins: according to a tradition unconfirmed by official sources, the Martiniani monks between the 6th and 7th century founded it. Such tale is likely to be true due to several factors: the place was at the time quite isolated but at the same time close to the road junction of Casalecchio, so that the Monastery could be useful to the wanderers traveling across the area. The distance between Casalecchio and Bologna is similar to that of the Monastery of Marmoutier from Tours. For this reason, the place could have been chosen by the Italian Martiniani to follow the example of their Master. The Church was mentioned for the first time in a Papal Bull issued by Pope Gregory VII in 1074, to be followed by other pontifical documents. The religious building is also listed in the renowned “Register of 1300”. In this period, the parish church entered the sphere of influence of the closeby Canons of S. Maria di Reno, who held its *giuspatronato* (alongside the earls of *Castelli* and others) through the 18th century (**Figure 5**).





**Figure 5:** Ancient image of the Church of San Martino in Casalecchio as it was in an engraving by Corty dated 1849. Next to the sacred building is the beginning of the Sentiero dei Bregoli, on the right the gate of the Marchesi Sampieri estate where, in a farm model, administered by British agronomists, there were two villas with an Italian garden and a magnificent English park

Source: archive Gian Franco Guerzoni.

The current appearance of the church is due to the work carried out by architect Edoardo Collamarini who superseded its renovation in 1926 (**Figure 6**).

Previously, the building consisted of three parts, as the result of different enlargements. The entrance featured a portico intended to provide shelter and protection to the pilgrims. The portico was an element that couldn't be found in other religious buildings of the area, as it was the sign of the presence of pilgrims who stopped and rested here before climbing to the Sanctuary of Beata Vergine di S. Luca, or tidied up after the descent - in more ancient times, they also found shelter here in case they arrived at night.



**Figure 6:** Postcard of 1937 with the archpriest Church of San Martino di Casalecchio after the renovation and expansion designed by the architect. Edoardo Collamarini  
Source: archive Gian Franco Guerzoni.

The Sanctuary of the Beata Vergine and the parish Church of S. Martino had both a close relationship with the Canons of S. Maria di Reno, who had settled in Casalecchio, in the locality called Croce, on the right banks of the Reno river, between 1130 and 1136. Here, they established a canonical complex in the surroundings of a chapel located at the most important ford of the Bolognese area (“Canonica Pass”). The seriousness and commitment to the religious life had earned the Canons of S. Maria di Reno (also called Reno Canons) the trust and respect of the people. They stayed in Casalecchio until the 14th century; as the area was too exposed to military raids, the religious men moved solemnly to their urban seat, the complex of the SS. Salvatore Church (**Figure 7**).

In 1823, they were united with the Lateran Canons and are even today part of the Bolognese clergy.





**Figure 7:** Vitale da Bologna: “L’Incoronazione della Vergine”, table commissioned by the Canonici Renani for their Church of the Canonica di Casalecchio and now kept in Bologna in the transept of the S.S. Salvatore. Among the characters painted there is also S. Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury (1117 - 1170), who entrusted to the Renans the English students who attended the University of Bologna

Source: archive S.S. Salvatore Church.

#### **4. The Bregoli path, between chronicles and folklore**

Until the last years of the last century, the inhabitants of Casalecchio and the surrounding areas felt the need to climb, at least once a year, to the Sanctuary of Holy Virgin of S. Luca. The Bregoli was the shortest – although not the easiest way. With the advent of motor vehicles, things obviously changed. The older people will surely recall families, groups of friends and parish pilgrimages meeting outside S. Martino catching breath before starting the climb (**Figure 8**).



**Figure 8:** The path at the beginning of the last century.

Source: Postcard Ed. Mengoli, Bologna, sent in 1917

Indeed, it was the Church of S. Martino to organise, every Good Friday, the most evocative procession, which started at 3:00 p.m. (the “ninth hour”, when our Lord died). In early spring, the group of devotees clambered the mountain whilst chanting and praying. The altar boys carried a bare cross, to be followed by the parish priest, wearing the black vestments of the Passion, praying loudly in Latin. The people also responded in Latin (with a few inaccuracies). After about 100 metres, the procession would stop, and the priest, with thundering voice, explained a Sorrowful Mystery, then the walk resumed accompanied by the prayers of the Holy Rosary. The chanting echoed in the surrounding woods and hills. In this way, men and women, boys and girls living in Casalecchio slowly reached the Sanctuary to honour the so-called “Sepulcher”, rich in flowers, candles and plants, who had hosted the body of the Most Holy. The descent was informal, with people gathering in small groups and walking fast along the steep mule track.

At the end of the 19th century, a new life was given to the Bregoli path. In those years, the Bolognesi acquired a taste for outdoor activities and day trips outside the city walls on Sundays. The favourite destination was, of course, the Sanctuary of Colle della Guardia. Families and groups of friends would start the itinerary in Porta Saragozza early in the morning, counting the 666 arches of the portico and stopping at the stations to pray the Rosary. Once reached the top, they entered the Church and listened to the mass in front of the image of the Virgin Mary. After that, people looked for a free spot for a pic-nic on the lawn in front of the church (**Figure 9**).





**Figure 9:** Small hut for the refreshment of the pilgrims at the end of the Bregoli near the Sanctuary.

Source: Umberto Malaguti 1929.

The surrounding view was breathtaking, with the peaks of the Appennines and Mount Cimone on one side, and the plain and the Prealps – only visible with clear skies on the other. To the East, sometimes, one could also see the Adriatic Sea. This beautiful natural scenery encouraged to continue the excursion descending the Bregoli path to reach Casalecchio, finally returning to the city along the usual road. It was a time of big changes for the small town that was also called “the Bolognese Switzerland” or “the little Paris” as it was a very popular holiday destination with the city middle classes. Elegant villas were built in Alpine or Tuscan renaissance style, with many green areas, gardens and vegetable gardens.

In 1883 a steam tramline-connecting Bologna (Malpighi square) with Casalecchio, Bazzano and Vignola was built - it was a true “monster of modernity” for the time. From that year on, it became quite natural for local citizens who had reached the Sanctuary along the porticoed street to descend along the Bregoli and go home with the so-called vaporino. Groups of trippers met on the Bregoli, greeted each other, joked and sang along the way. Even if they had never met before, the natural environment and the woods allowed a certain degree of freedom and informal behaviour. Engaged couples would fall behind and take the wrong way... this is the origin of a dialect expression (“*Ander pr’i Brégguel*”), which means “Flirting”.

Easter Monday (when the day trip became necessary), the Sunday in Albis (the feast of Casalecchio, when carousels also came to town), Corpus Domini Thursday and August 14 were the busiest days.

With modern times also came cars: in 1929, the path hosted a peculiar motor vehicle challenge. Giuseppe Giuliani, the owner of a local cab company, had purchased a new car of which he was very proud. One night, at the Caffè Margherita (the elegant one in



town) he had an argument with his brother and competitor Ruggiero over the car performance.

The two bet 250 lire (a considerable amount of money for the time). The competition took place immediately, on a dark night, at the presence of all local night birds. The only condition was that a specific section of the route required stopping the car and seeking help from the bystanders. Giuseppe Giuliani, accompanied by his trusted driver, won the bet, but had to spend his winning to fix the damages the car had suffered.

## 5. The most recent events

In 1940, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the Municipality of Casalecchio devised a detailed plan concerning air-raid shelters to protect the local population. The most important one was excavated in the mountain, along the flanks of the Bregoli path, between the first and the second curve. The horse-shoe-shaped shelter - ample, with a double exit and equipped with an electrical system was quite safe, at least to provide a protection against the weapons used at the time. The Municipality dedicated it to Ettore Muti, one of the most complex and controversial personalities of those years – not to be confused with the crimes committed in his name after his death (**Figure 10**).



**Figure 10:** Ettore Muti refuge entrance.

Source: archive Paolo Ceroni

The shelter could host up to 100 people, but during the last months of the war, when all the Casalecchiesi had taken cover in Bologna (“open city”) and even the authorities had abandoned the town, an estimated number of 20 homeless families, people who had lost all their belongings, settled inside the cave. Here, they lived a primitive life, with the only support of the parish priest of San Martino, Don Carlo Marzocchi, who never abandoned them.

Don Carlo Marzocchi deserves to be remembered as a man who, in times of turmoil, took on himself the tasks of civil institutions and dealt with military authorities when it was necessary. He gave shelter to wanted partisans and, after the war was over, impeded that people colluded with the previous regime could become the target of personal vengeance (**Figure 11**).



**Figure 11:** Don Carlo Marzocchi, parish priest of the church of San Martino from 1940 to 1986, beloved by the parishioners, who died in 1993.

Source: Il Resto del Carlino

The shelter has been partially restored and is currently open to the public on some occasions.

## Conclusions

After the end of the war, in May 1945 bomb disposal experts cleared the Bregoli path of mines laid by the Germans. Gradually, the mule track started to attract once again pilgrims and jolly trippers (or, more precisely, also jolly and devoted people).

In those years, dialect musicians took an interest in the Bregoli and composed brilliant songs, also performed by committed singers such as Laura Betti (who was born in Casalecchio).

In 1983, the owner of a farmhouse located at the border between the Bregoli and the driveable road Via Montalbano (taking to the Sanctuary of Holy Virgin) was granted by the municipality of Bologna the permission to restore the building, which was turned into an elegant villa (**Figure 12**).



**Figure 12:** The rustic home at the top of the Bregoli path now transformed into a villa  
Source: Giorgio Ramenghi, 1973.

To enlarge the garden, the owner arbitrarily diverted the Bregoli route to the south, making it quite inconvenient and incorporating in his own estate a few stations of the Via Crucis.

Thanks to the initiative of engineer Giuseppe Ghillini, a committee composed by Monsignor Alberto Di Chio, Roberto Mignani and Alessandro Menzani was established to restore the ancient track mule. Whilst a legal action was started against the



privatisation of the road, the Committee also superseded the restoration of the Via Crucis, the pillars of which were still damaged by the war (**Figures 13, 14, 15**).



**Figure 13:** Votive shrine of the first station of the Via Crucis.

Source: archive Paolo Ceroni.



**Figure 14:** Detail of the plaque affixed to the first votive shrine.

Source: Archive Paolo Ceroni.



**Figure 15:** Votive shrine of the XIV and last station of the Holy Way of the Cross  
Source: archive Paolo Ceroni.

It was only in 2010 that a final judgement restored the Bregoli path in its original route. On June 6 of the same year, at the S. Martino Church, with a simple ceremony and at the presence of Mons. Alberto Di Chio, Mayor Simone Gamberini cut the inaugural ribbon and a group of athletes from Casalecchio started their race to reach the Sanctuary on the Colle della Guardia.

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