

«I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero E Monferrato»: an italian example of UNESCO cultural landscape based on the valorisation of traditional terroir

*Original*

«I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero E Monferrato»: an italian example of UNESCO cultural landscape based on the valorisation of traditional terroir / Renzulli, Alessandra - In: Paisagens Culturais da Vinha: Identidades, Desafios e Oportunidades. XX Aniversário da Classificação do Alto Douro Vinhateiro como Património Mundial ELETTRONICO. - Porto : CITCEM – Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória, 2023. - ISBN 978-989-8970-51-0. - pp. 249-260 [10.21747/978-989-8970-51-0/pai]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11583/2984970 since: 2024-01-11T15:36:17Z

*Publisher:*

CITCEM – Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória

*Published*

DOI:10.21747/978-989-8970-51-0/pai

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# PAISAGENS CULTURAIS DA VINHA IDENTIDADES, DESAFIOS E OPORTUNIDADES

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CULTURA, ESPAÇO E MEMÓRIA

# PAISAGENS CULTURAIS DA VINHA IDENTIDADES, DESAFIOS E OPORTUNIDADES

XX ANIVERSÁRIO DA CLASSIFICAÇÃO  
DO ALTO DOURO VINHATEIRO COMO  
PATRIMÓNIO MUNDIAL

COORD.

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Título: ***Paisagens Culturais da Vinha: Identidades, Desafios e Oportunidades. XX Aniversário da Classificação do Alto Douro Vinhateiro como Património Mundial***

Coordenação: Gaspar Martins Pereira, Maria Otília Pereira Lage, Carla Sequeira

Design gráfico: Helena Lobo Design | [www.hldesign.pt](http://www.hldesign.pt)

Capa: Pormenor do cartaz do Simpósio Europeu *Paisagens Culturais da Vinha: Identidades, Desafios e Oportunidades* da autoria de Marta Sofia Costa (CITCEM)

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Edição: CITCEM – Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória

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Este trabalho é sujeito a *double-blind peer review*.

*Referees*: Álvaro Domingues, Amândio Barros, Artur Cristóvão, Carlota Santos, Fátima Nunes, Fernando Bianchi de Aguiar, Gaspar Martins Pereira, Giuliana Biagioli, João Luís Sequeira, João Rebelo, Mário Barroca, Norberta Amorim, Otília Lage, Paulino da Costa, Phillipe Baumert.

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eISBN: 978-989-8970-51-0

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21747/978-989-8970-51-0/pai>

PEREIRA, Gaspar Martins; LAGE, Maria Otília Pereira; SEQUEIRA, Carla, *coord.* (2023). *Paisagens Culturais da Vinha: Identidades, Desafios e Oportunidades. XX Aniversário da Classificação do Alto Douro Vinhateiro como Património Mundial*. Porto: CITCEM. 368 p.

Porto, junho de 2023 (1.ª edição)

Paginação: João Candeias

Este trabalho foi elaborado no quadro das atividades do grupo de investigação «Valores de Transação/Valores em Transição», e é financiado por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, no âmbito do projeto UIDB/04059/2020.

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# «I PAESAGGI VITIVINICOLI DEL PIEMONTE: LANGHE, ROERO E MONFERRATO»: AN ITALIAN EXAMPLE OF UNESCO CULTURAL LANDSCAPE BASED ON THE VALORISATION OF TRADITIONAL *TERROIRS*\*

ALESSANDRA RENZULLI\*\*

**Abstract:** *Wine-growing landscapes represent the intersection and dialogue of natural and human factors, a cultural landscape that is stratified over time to represent the customs of the local community. They describe a living landscape where transformation reflects farmers' desire to improve forms of construction and design content concerned with the cultivation of wine. Wine has a determined value because of the territory's historical context, and it becomes a tool for enhancing the territory as an economic driver. In particular, the UNESCO cultural landscapes constitute a trademark that attracts people worldwide and is a brand of global significance in tourism. An example is «I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero e Monferrato» that, since becoming part of the UNESCO heritage in 2014, has brought a significant increase in tourist flow to the region. The brand power acquired over time has also shaped the identity of neighbouring areas not included in the nomination.*

**Keywords:** *wine-growing landscapes; Italian cultural landscapes; wine tradition; Langhe-Roero e Monferrato; UNESCO brand effect.*

**Resumo:** *As paisagens vitícolas representam a intersecção e o diálogo de fatores naturais e humanos, uma paisagem cultural que inclui elementos estratificados ao longo do tempo para representar os hábitos da comunidade local. Descrevem uma paisagem viva em que a transformação reflete o desejo dos agricultores de melhorar as formas de construção e o conteúdo do projeto relacionado com o cultivo do vinho. O vinho determinou um valor através da história do território, e torna-se um instrumento para valorizar o território como motor económico. Em particular, as paisagens culturais da UNESCO constituem uma marca que ainda atrai pessoas de qualquer parte do mundo e é uma marca de importância global no turismo. Um exemplo italiano é «I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero e Monferrato» que, desde que se tornou parte do património da UNESCO em 2014, trouxe um aumento significativo do fluxo turístico para a região. O poder adquirido ao longo do tempo modelou a identidade das áreas vizinhas não incluídas na nomeação.*

**Palavras-chave:** *paisagens vitícolas; paisagens culturais italianas; tradição vinícola; Langhe-Roero e Monferrato; efeito da marca UNESCO.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A cultural landscape represents the dialogue between space and time, the outcome and mirror of the action of natural and human factors and their interrelationship. The adjective cultural is added when the community recognises it and launches initiatives to protect, enhance and maintain it with a perspective of continuous balance and adaptation to time and events. In particular, the tradition of local production linked to wine often defines the basis for representing a territory: hills, rows of vines, architecture and a vernacular heritage are the elements stratified over time, in addition to the raw material, the grape, that determine the form of the land and the community's identity that has shaped it and is cultivated through the ages. This cultural landscape is a unique and complex system that UNESCO assigns and recognises with a universal value. These countryside landscapes are considered among the most significant expressions of human activity for the important impact they leave on the land and represent a remarkable and rare example of the cultural landscape that the vineyard provides due to the massive presence of social traditions associated with them. They describe a living landscape, where every transformation reflects man's desire to improve forms, contents and functions concerning the cultivation of wine<sup>1</sup>. Wine has determined a value precisely because of the story that the territory tells, and at the same time, it becomes a tool for enhancing the *terroir* as an economic driver. The main purpose of the international, national and local administration is to recognise those values within it and to protect it as a vital testimony and identity resource, as a demonstration of one of the factors contributing to the identity-building processes. The admission of landscape as UNESCO cultural heritage takes into account, through ambitious management plans, the maintenance of very high-quality standards, ensuring a proper balance between conservation, sustainability and economic development and presenting new opportunities for the area. In particular, by economic solid impulses and strategies.

### 1. «I PAESAGGI VITIVINICOLI DEL PIEMONTE: LANGHE, ROERO E MONFERRATO» ARE EXAMPLES OF UNESCO EXCEPTIONALITY

«I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero e Monferrato» are an Italian cultural landscape that was added into the World Heritage List in 2014 after ICOMOS declared a recommendation deferral in 2012. The acknowledgement of their heritage is due to the values of criteria III and V of the parameters defined by UNESCO and represent the mix of different elements combined in a single territorial system. It is a serial site composed of six land components within Alessandria, Asti and Cuneo's territorial borders that measure 10.789 hectares. From a geographical point of view, three are within the district

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<sup>1</sup> GANDINO, MERIGGIO, 2016.

of the Langhe and three in the Monferrato. The landscape components were selected to exemplify the significant places of winemaking from cultivation to production, from conservation to distribution, retracing and emphasizing all the elements that distinguished them in the production process, the historic settlement and architectures, road networks, etc. Each area is linked to specific a wine grape variety, a *terroir*, a winemaking technique, or significant historical places, ranging from castles to artefacts of a vernacular nature, for the history and development of wine growing and winemaking on a national and international scale. The structure of the native vineyards is distinctive: they are planted around the hilltops with moderate or gentle slopes characterised by the absence of walls and terrain, resulting in a systematic arrangement of rows running along the oblique curves of the hillside. All these elements have created a district in a unitary and complete geographical reality: it has made the cultural heritage capable of fortifying and shaping the identity of the UNESCO landscape.



Fig. 1. Monocultural landscape of Langhe

## 2. UNESCO: AN ICONIC WORLDWIDE BRAND

The vineyard landscapes of Langhe, Roero e Monferrato comprises two buffer zone with unique, different and incomparable landscapes. For buffer zone 1, we refer to a polycultural landscape: 8-10% vines, which despite attempts to increase the number of vines, the percentages have remained very low. Their recognition as UNESCO World Heritage Sites is due to a unique rural architecture as *infernot*, a small underground space, dug into the stone without light and ventilation, usually reached through a cellar, and used to store bottled wine. Buffer zone 2 instead is characterised by a historical monoculture landscape: 80-90% vines; the high percentage of the wine-covered landscape was the main element for including the areas in the nomination.

The notoriety of wine-growing landscapes continues to acquire worldwide prestige over time and the choice of the Langhe monocultural landscape as the representative backdrop for the Piemonte region in the *Ti Amo Italia project*. The Special Edition held in 2020 and promoted by Ferrero, the producer of *Nutella*, comprising a limited series of thirty jars celebrating all the regions of Italy. The project is realised by ENIT (Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo). It aims to enhance and promote the Italian territory using a QR code, in which consumers can virtually visit symbolic locations of Italy. As a consequence of this iconic branding, it follows that economic results are closely linked to the valorisation and enhancement of those elements of the territory that are most attractive to tourists, sometimes at the expense of other traditional values, landscapes and architecture.

## 3. THE UNESCO BRAND EFFECT THROUGH DATA ANALYSIS

Since the cultural landscape of the Langhe, Roero and Monferrato became a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it has brought significant increases in tourist flows to the region (+4%). As Marco Valle, an expert in cultural heritage and one of the curators of the UNESCO heritage nomination process of «I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero e Monferrato», reports, if we consider that the national trend for the same period was around 1% year on year, we can easily understand how strong the UNESCO brand impact has been. This success can also be seen in the inclusion of Piemonte among the ten most beautiful places in Europe as noted by the «Lonely Planet», by «Wine Enthusiast USA» and as the best wine travel destination by the «New York Times»<sup>2</sup>.

To gain a full understanding of the influence that the UNESCO nomination has brought to these territories, we will proceed by reporting the data on the tourist influx in Piemonte and the reference ATL (Azienda Turistica Locale) elaborated by the Osservatorio Turistico della Regione Piemonte in collaboration with the Direzione Turismo. The data have been summarised from the annual reports from 2014 (year of publication 2015) through 2020. The charts and values reported in Fig. 2 show the evaluation

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<sup>2</sup> VALLE, 2015.

carried out first of the tourist flow balance in terms of presence and arrivals in the Langhe Roero and Monferrato area, second the accommodation offered, and the beds occupied by tourists. The presence data indicate the number of nights spent by the clients in the receptive establishments (hotel or complementary accommodations); the arrivals instead indicate the number of Italian and foreign clients hosted in the respective establishments (hotel or complementary accommodation) in the period considered.

As shown in the chart in the Fig. 2, the analysis of tourist influx increased through 2018: in terms of presence, a value of 640,485 in 2014 to 803,600 in 2018. In 2019, due to the imposed national and global shutdown of COVID-19, the influx trend dropped to 622,122 and continued to drop in the year 2020 with 561,630 total presence. The same phenomena impacted the total arrivals in the year 2019: from 2018, 803,600 arrivals in the territory, it reverts to a value of 277,961 (about 275,536, value of 2014) and continues to fall to 249,468 in 2020. The percentage compared to the previous year is equivalent to a loss of -51.69% for total presence and -54.39% for total arrivals in the Langhe Roero and Monferrato area. The distribution between the national and foreign markets remains more or less the same through the period analysed and is around 40% for Italian presence, 60% for foreigners, around 47% for Italian arrivals, and 53% for foreigners. As reported for 2020, following the pandemic the Italian market has invested mainly in the Langhe Roero and Monferrato areas. Indeed, the percentage of presences is reported to be about 62% and arrivals about 69% for foreigners. The foreign countries that have benefited, and continue to benefit, from the beauty of this area are primarily Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, France, the USA, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

Moreover, the trends related to accommodation facilities and the number of occupied beds have been increasing since the admission of Langhe Roero Monferrato as a UNESCO World Heritage. In particular, the trend has remained positive until 2018 with a value of 832, the maximum recorded in the years for accommodation facilities, and 12,292, slightly lower than the previous year, the maximum recorded value of 12,418. The value is being normalized slowly with the recovery after COVID 19.

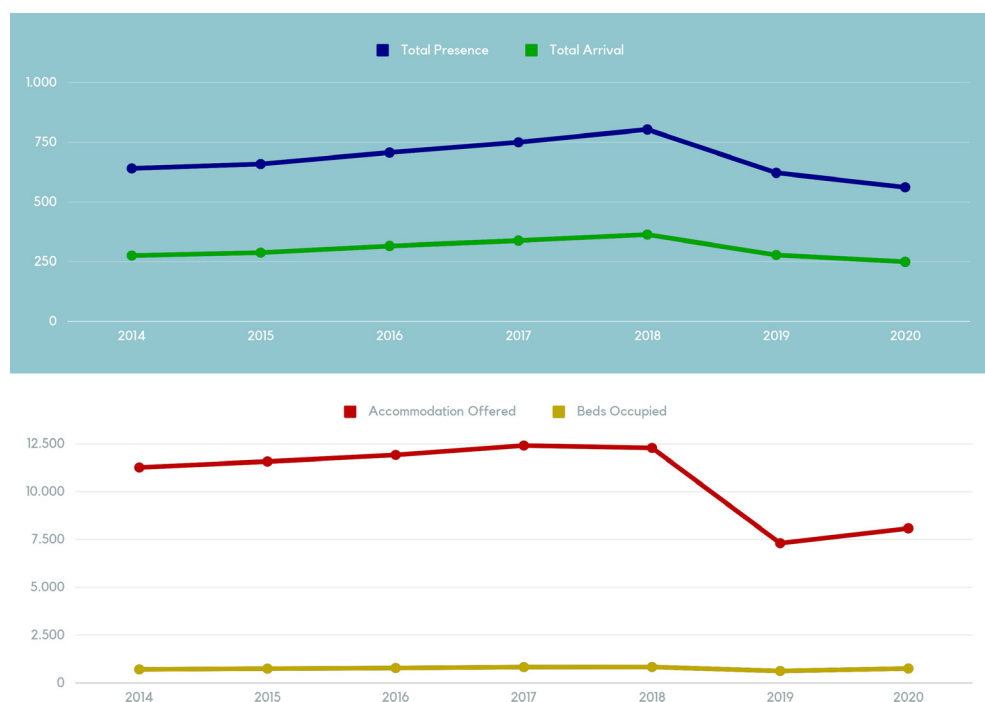


Fig. 2. The analysis of tourist influx in the Langhe Roero and Monferrato areas during the year from 2014 to 2020

As far as 2021 is concerned, data are still being processed by the SPOT project and by the Osservatorio Turistico della Regione Piemonte. They analyse several factors regarding culture and tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Langhe, Monferrato and Roero, and found a strong correlation to the UNESCO brand. Looking at the trends in the territories under the jurisdiction of the Agenzie Turistiche Locali, all the districts increased their tourist movements compared to 2020, reducing the gap recorded last year compared to 2019. The best positive outcome of the Piemonte region was recorded in the Langhe Monferrato Roero areas, where the 2021 final balance was less than 20% lower than in 2019. The UNESCO value maintained a stable trend over nineteen years, notwithstanding the imposed shutdown in 2020.

Recently, a first data analysis reveals that residents embraced a static representation of the local cultural tourism's appeal and heritage, while tourists were motivated primarily by gastronomic and wine experiences. According to this provisional data accumulated, the percentage of potential Italian and foreign tourist influx to the Piemonte region is that 57% of Italians who plan to go on holiday will choose Piemonte during the autumn period. As far as foreigners are concerned, tourists from Benelux, Switzerland and Scandinavia seem to prevail, as they prefer to go there during autumn

and summer. The sentiment analysis, carried out on the territory by point of interest and interviewees, show that the value of the sentiment analysis of the Langhe Monferrato Roero is +1.3% compared to the previous year and more optimistic compared to Italy as a whole. Moreover, more positive among users from the foreign market (Swiss, French, and Germans)<sup>3</sup>.

The first results seem to be positive compared to the year of standstill that the territory suffered during 2020, the COVID year. In the UNESCO cultural landscapes of the three municipalities of Alessandria, Asti and Cuneo, with an increase of 20% in a tourist presence and an economic impact on the entire area estimated at around 425 million euros over five years. In 2019 tourism in Piemonte recorded a +1.82% growth in terms of arrivals, with a greater gain for foreign visitors, equal to +3.7%. Although overnight accommodation decreased by one percentage point, visitor satisfaction and positive sentiment increased. In particular, for the accommodation segment that relates significantly to tourist arrivals, the number of reviews posted by operators in Piemonte's tourism industries throughout 2021 increased by +33.3% compared to 2020. The sentiment index for the period for the Piemonte tourism product as a whole (accommodation, restaurants and attractions) stands at 88/100, more positive than the overall number for Italy, which is 87.2/100. The index for the accommodation sector, 87.7/100 for Piemonte, is also better than the national index (86.5/100). The analysis of tourist flows shows that the ATL Langhe Monferrato Roero is the best performing area in Piemonte when comparing the 2021 and 2019 data on arrivals and presences. Langhe Monferrato Roero registered 1,028,036 presences for 2021: a figure that is close to the total presence of the pre-pandemic year, with a loss reduced to 12%, the best Piemonte data. A positive performance supported by the absolute record of presences reached for four consecutive months, from August to November 2021, which therefore recorded a greater monthly flow of tourists than pre-pandemic levels.

In addition to surveys and statistical measurements, another set of data that make up the new LRM Observatory is based on the monitoring of online reviews of visitor destination points of interest (accommodation, catering, and attractions), which show a decrease in the number of reviews posted, in line with the spring lockdown and summer recovery. The attractiveness of the area was able to recover from the losses in arrivals and presences after the spring lockdown, reaching, in August, the levels recorded in 2019. During three separate surveys, carried out in May, August and November, on Italians' inclination to spend their holidays in Italy on the one hand, it emerged that the number of holidaymakers who would have chosen Piemonte for holiday has progressively decreased from 58% in May to 12% in November; on the other hand, the share of those who would have chosen Piemonte for holiday has progressively

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<sup>3</sup> RECH, MIGLIORATI, 2021.

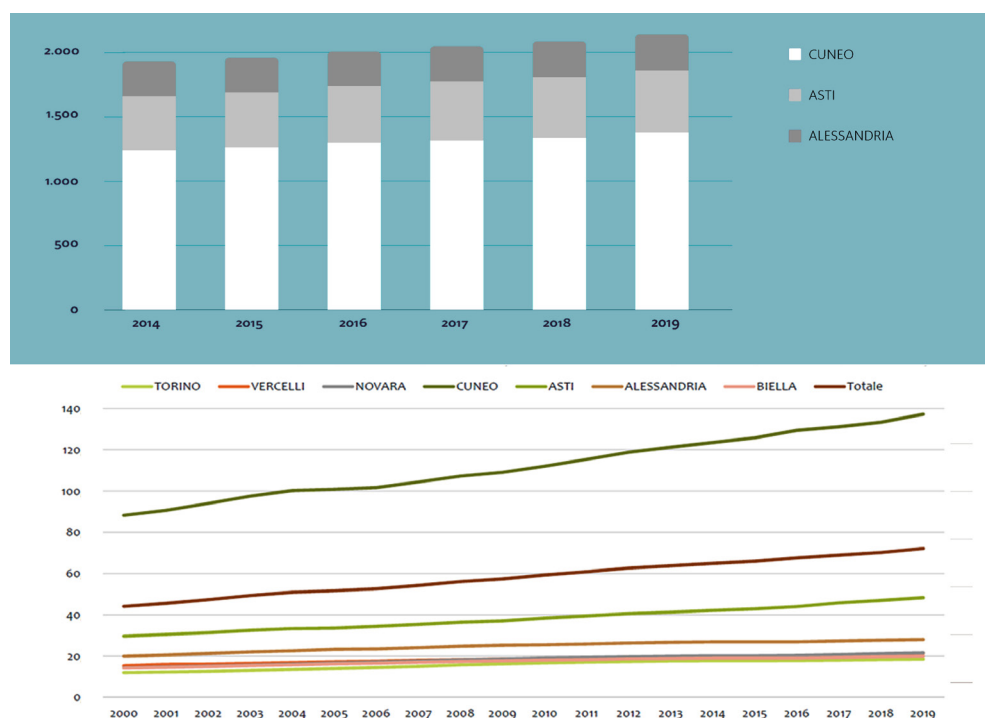


increased from 25% to 42%. In all three surveys, Langhe Roero e Monferrato remain consistently in second place among the Piemonte destinations chosen, after the Turin area. In the first seven months of 2021, the sentiment of the Langhe Monferrato Roero tourism destination in online reviews increased. There was an increase in reviews: +12.1% in the overall sector, +34.5% in accommodation and +6.6% in catering, and the sentiment indicator improved 90.6/100 in the overall sector (+1.3% compared to the same period last year), 93.2/100 In accommodation (+0.8%) and 89.8/100 in catering (+1.1%). For the city of Asti, there were more than 10,000 reviews for the total services of the wine sector with an overall sentiment of 86.9/100. The sentiment index for the tourism product of the ATL areas as a whole (accommodation, catering and attractions) is higher than the national value, 87.2/100, with the Langhe Monferrato Roero recording a better rate than the Piemonte region: 90.1/100<sup>4</sup>.

The UNESCO effect has guaranteed an even more significant increase in cultural tourism, business development and the property land market. In the first few years, the influx of tourists and accommodation facilities improved considerably. According to the Annual report published by CREA (Consiglio per la Ricerca in Agricoltura e l'Analisi dell'Economia Agraria) on the value of Italian vineyards, prices were stable in 2019 at 53,600 euros per hectare. To understand real trends, we need to look at least at five and ten year data sets: only the Piemonte region, among all Italian regions, had a growth of more than 2% in both periods. If we look at the average value per hectare of Piemonte vineyards, we can see that from 2014 to 2019 the values have risen significantly: in 2014, the value is 64.9 EUR/hectare compared to 72.1 EUR/hectare in 2019. In the last year surveyed alone (2018/2019) there is an increase of +2.7% in property value, while the annual variation in vineyard prices between 2014 and 2019 is around 2.1%. As CREA also declared, the average land value of vineyards in Asti, Alessandria and Cuneo peaked after three years after 2014, whereas in the other municipalities outside the UNESCO heritage area, Turin Biella, Novara and Vercelli, values have decreased. The graphical chart included shows that in the Alessandria, Asti and Cuneo areas, values have increased respectively.

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<sup>4</sup> OSSERVATORIO TURISTICO DELLA REGIONE PIEMONTE, 2020.



**Fig. 3.** On the top: average values of vineyards by UNESCO provincial altitude zone (Cuneo, Asti, Alessandria); on the bottom: Average values of vineyards by UNESCO regional altitude zone (Cuneo, Asti, Alessandria, Torino, Biella Vercelli)

The nomination as a UNESCO heritage area also continues to have a positive influence on wine and food tourism from abroad in the Langa areas and the vineyard lands (especially for the production of Barolo and, with increased interest, Barbaresco) maintain exceptionally high prices that continue to increase. According to CREA's surveys, the most highly quoted vineyards are still those of Barolo DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita), with a range that can go from 200,000 euros to 1.5 million euros, ahead of those of Brunello di Montalcino, which produces an exceptional Tuscany wine, which oscillates between 250,000 and 700,000 euros per hectare. Barbaresco also ranks high overall, with quotations of around 600,000 euros.

The landscapes appear to continue to preserve their exceptional value on a national and international scale from the original survey result. This is attributable to the considerable attention and investments associated with their UNESCO nomination and management pursuit.



#### 4. THE UNESCO BRAND EFFECT ON THE NEIGHBOURING LANDSCAPES

Undoubtedly, the UNESCO label attracts many people from within Italy and even more so internationally. To increase visibility and tourist influx, a minor boundary modification project has recently been proposed by the management body «I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero e Monferrato» to extend the buffer zone to surrounding areas. The new boundaries would include about forty new municipalities divided among the three provinces of Asti, Alessandria, and Cuneo. The project envisions the inclusion of seventeen municipalities in the Roero area, in the province of Cuneo, five municipalities in the province of Asti and fifteen municipalities in the province of Alessandria. The management body intends to create a stronger connection with the Roero region which was previously excluded in the earlier nomination process and is nowadays represented in the UNESCO buffer zone boundaries by just two municipalities Monticello d'Alba, and Santa Vittoria d'Alba and fortify it with the landscape of the province of Alessandria. Alessandria is the municipality associated with the UNESCO heritage area of Monferrato. The area was selected within one of the buffer zones for the presence of *infernot*, a vernacular architectural typology built by farmers for the domestic conservation of wine. The site «Il Monferrato e gli Infernot», which represents core zone 6, includes eight urban centres on high ground characteristic for the widespread use of *Pietra da Cantoni*, a sandstone which is only found in the hilly basin of Langhe, Roero and Monferrato. The extension of the boundaries of the buffer zone, in this case, is due to the desire to include new wine companies; already 104 in the Alessandria UNESCO area, and the vineyard landscape within the territorial dynamics. The aim is to make new vine plantings sprout in the territory and to approach the problem of climate change in an environmentally correct manner. The motivation is linked up with the idea that the area is more related to polyculture than to monoculture, where the percentage of wine-growing area is only around 5/10% of the total surface. This value is extremely low when compared to the Langhe area, where 85/90% of the landscape is planted with vines. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Monferrato area had a vineyard coverage of 80/90%, a value that at the time almost exceeded that of the Langhe and Roero. The lack of economy and the presence of *flavescente dorée*, however, led to the disappearance of the wine-growing landscape and allowed for a change in cultivation, either by diversifying it or by turning the hills into *gerbido*, in other words no longer cultivated. Currently, the landscape does not have continuity with the Langhe in particular, as there is not a high percentage of vines to give it this denomination. It is from this moment that the history and rural architecture linked to the wine production chain acquire an inestimable value: the site is indeed made up of five components plus a sixth, that of the *infernot* whose presence was essential for annexing the territory of Alessandria to have the nomination as a UNESCO

heritage site. Although it would be of great merit the inclusion of these municipalities and their relative areas would nevertheless entail a strong anthropisation. Assessed not just in terms of built-up areas, but in terms of the transformation of the landscape as well. The intense anthropization could compromise the agricultural territorial system of these landscapes. For example, the Roero has plenty of forestry crops, unlike Langhe, where the landscape is largely vines, such as Monferrato, where polyculture is still preserved. The UNESCO effect could resonate to such an extent that the strong tourist momentum would lead to a considerable increase in vineyards closely related to them. As well as the desire to plant new vines in the Monferrato area to contrast the meticulous work carried out over the years by *flavescence dorée* and the lack of income in the vineyards.

Following this logic, it sways the neighbouring territories outside the buffer zone boundary, as in Alta Langa, a hilly area located more on the border with Liguria to pursue a similar UNESCO designation. It is mainly characterised by thick vegetation alternating with cultivated farmland and forests. Hazelnuts are a typical product of the area, and the fields permit the cultivation of large areas of cereals and wine and the grazing of animals for cheese production. In recent years, the landscape has been undergoing significant transformation mainly linked to the desire to plant new vineyards in the high hills to expand the DOCG area. As of 2018, the Piemonte region has promoted calls for increasing it to produce Alta Langa DOCG. On the one hand, this has made it possible to recover abandoned or uncultivated *terroir* to upgrade. On the other hand, it has also eliminated crop expansion due to higher value return from forest planting. However, this process is not only linked to the specific area of Alta Langa, though there are also numerous requests for admission to the DOCGs of Barolo or Barbaresco every year. Neighbouring areas such as Verduno and La Morra submit similar requests to be included in higher sector and value production and thus sell more bottles with more prestigious affiliations.

## CONCLUSION

Even though the UNESCO brand is regulated and strict guidelines have been drawn up for its use, the effects it intrinsically has on the territory are considerable: from the general attitude and willingness by citizens and enterprises to use the logo for any type of product or event, to the increase in business development, market value and tourism in the geographical borders; from the desire to become part of the landscape at any cost by entering into new buffer zone boundaries or the most important DOCG zones, to the transformation of more traditional agricultural landscapes to be associated with the iconicity of vineyard scenery. In particular, the economy of the Langhe has driven an already wine-growing landscape to increase its product with 85/90% vines, with peaks of increase in recent years. However, it is necessary to be careful about the transformation of the landscape towards monoculture, especially in consideration of climate change and the historical and cultural dedication that belongs to the varied areas.

For example, in the case of Monferrato Alessandrino, the negative economic consequences of *flavescence dorée* did not allow the natural evolution of the monocultural landscape. Farmers cut down and removed plants which had little value in the present condition in favour of accelerating the planting and cultivation of forest ecosystems that produced a higher economic return. The thought and decision by many farmers were mainly related to the family heritage, in particular to pass on to their children and grandchildren a landscape of little to no value. This has been the reason why many vines have been uprooted and how the landscape has been radically transformed in the region.

Climate change initiatives are helping this process of landscape transformation, but the continuing drive to the iconic nature of the Langhe's rows of vines encourages new winegrowers to plant new ones and above all to buy plots of land on higher ground, at around 500 m.

To conclude, «I paesaggi vitivinicoli del Piemonte: Langhe, Roero e Monferrato» constitutes a unique testimony to a cultural tradition that is still powerfully alive, as its UNESCO fame and quality attest. Today's Langhe landscape results from a historical attachment to the land on the part of countless generations of winegrowers and centuries of intense and constant work necessary to carry out an agricultural transformation of exceptional dimensions and original character. To this end, care must be taken to ensure that the characteristic elements of each part of the Piemonte landscape system, stimulated by excessive attractiveness to the site, do not compromise the universally recognised underlying value to the detriment of the minor elements that have enabled its recognition.

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# PAISAGENS CULTURAIS DA VINHA IDENTIDADES, DESAFIOS E OPORTUNIDADES

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