

Industrial archeology and Waldensian Valleys: identity, conservation and enhancement of an Alpine border Heritage

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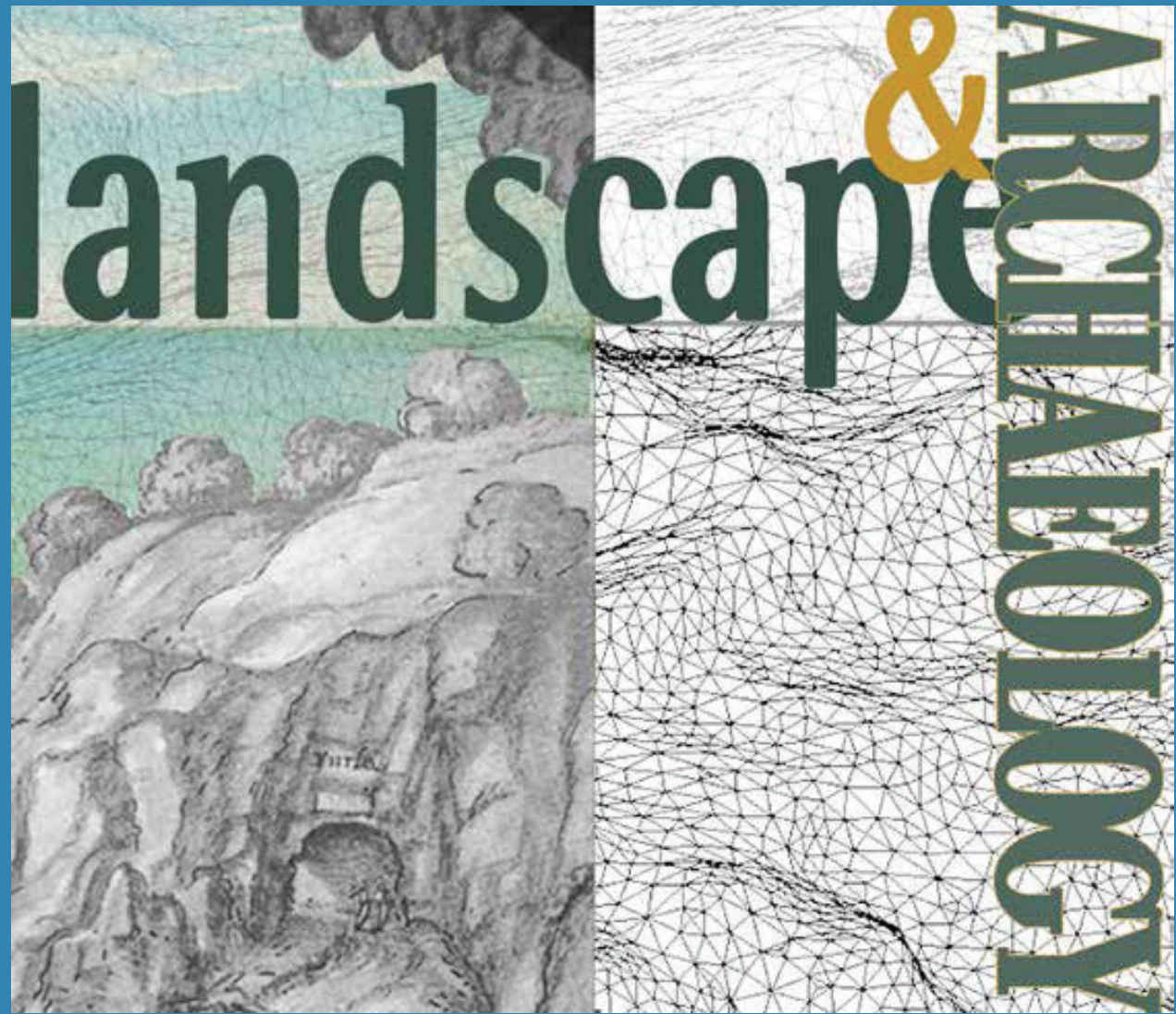
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# Industrial Archeology and Waldensian Valleys: Identity, Conservation and Enhancement of an Alpine Border Heritage

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✓ **KEYWORDS:** industrial archaeology, industrial landscape, Waldensian Valleys, Chisone Valley.

## ABSTRACT

The industrial and proto-industrial heritage of the Chisone, Germanasca and Pellice valleys, near the town of Pinerolo (TO) – known as the Waldensian Valleys for the large presence of the homonymous Evangelical Church – features important evidences that can be traced even at the Modern Age: milling, stone and metal extraction, and lately, linked to the production of yarn, cloths and mechanical activities, have bequeathed buildings and set of buildings of great relevance (also in state of ruin) and, in some cases, comparable with considerable international realities. The greater number of the valleys industries stood along the bed of the rivers and their tributaries, and, for the most part, ancillary works to plants (especially those of supply and use of water, from pipes to closings, supply reservoirs of hydroelectric power plants and distribution lines derived from them) are preserved with the built complex. This structured and ramified in the territory ensemble, having specific characteristics but collective roots, has been the subject of numerous studies of inventory and conservation proposals; these last in particular, have directly involved the local communities, who actively participate in the restoration and enhancement of their history, which identifies and intertwines with the testimony of industrial archeology. Moreover, recent and reliable studies have highlighted the close relationship between industrial activity and the presence of the Waldensian Church (in fact, many entrepreneurial families came from central Europe, and were of reformed religion), and the different approach towards work in factory than the Catholic community. This contribution is therefore intended to provide a reading of the industrial heritage tying him to the religious communities of the territory, to their fluctuating presence dependent on persecutions and periods of peace and coexistence, connecting the production complexes with works of charity and places of worship. At last, I would like to suggest a promotion connected with the roads and the international phenomenon of attesting of these industries, suggesting new conservation and advertising methods, aimed to a responsible tourism in larger scale, also availing of study cases examples.

## *1. Introduction*

Pellice, Chisone and Germanasca alpine valleys, near the town of Pinerolo (TO), are commonly known as the Waldensian valleys. This strong semantic characterization highlights an important identity factor, detectable in the religious component: since late Medieval times the Valdes of Lyon message was professed in these valleys by the people. It still persists in a revised version after joining the Protestant Reformation (1532) (G. Merlo 1984, G. Tourn 2003). In compliance with the alpine culture and religious beliefs, the main activities were agriculture, livestock and manufacturing. These activities significantly changed with the advent

of industrialization (nineteenth century). For the abundance of water, the valleys were some of the first most industrialized areas of the Savoy state and we can notice this peculiarity in the wide network of material evidences, such as production complexes, social facilities built for the working class, water channeling, electrification system.

## *2. The industrial system of the Waldensian Valleys*

The two aforementioned identity factors raise the question if there is a direct correlation between industrial development and the Waldensian community.

In the early decades of the XIX century the relationship with European reformed environments originated important international business initiatives in the valleys, because these territories were very suitable for planting new industrial structures. Recent studies (C. Bermond 2014, pp. 115-127) show that foreign investors, especially Germans and Swiss, were attracted to the Pinerolo Valleys for the possibility of access to new and promising markets, with the advantage of a lower cost of labor compared to their countries of origin. The advanced technology at their disposal – especially in an expanding sector such as cotton – also allowed them to establish advantageous joint ventures where more capital was invested by local entrepreneurs in change of the provision of machinery and the developed knowledge. But if these investors were active preferentially in the Pinerolo Valleys is not secondary their fideistic proximity: Calvinists or Lutherans the Germans and Swiss entrepreneurs and engineers, who interfaced with local Waldensian businessmen (C. Bermond 2014, p. 74). This is what happened for the cotton mill of Pralafera (1832) in Luserna San Giovanni (Val Pellice), established with substantial capital of the Waldensian Giuseppe Malan, or the Widemann cotton mill of San Germano Chisone, which takes its name from the Swiss Vittorio who acquired, in partnership with the Italian Carlo Simonetti, from the Mazzonis' family (1892). Another example is the “Jenny and Ganzoni sas” (later Abegg), Italo-Swiss initiative settled in Perosa Argentina. Almost similar dynamic involved the ex novo silk factory of Perosa Argentina, made by the French Benedetto Berthelot in 1870 and taken over in 1883 by the Gütermann German family.

It is therefore evident, especially for the cotton sector, the existence of a Pinerolo and, more generally, Piedmont network (think of the Leumann family) of the textile industry, that interlaced business and financial dimensions, family alliances (often reinforced by weddings), and religious identities (C. Bermond 2014, p. 121).

So, fideistic commonality is an important factor for the installation of new production sectors in the valleys. But it can be considered an element of identity for the Waldensian community? If the response seems positive for what concerns the ruling class, the consequences that industrialization had on the local population are quite different. In fact, it radically refuses factory work, because of its religious tradition, that was also endorsed by the preaching of the pastors. The Waldensian community preferred agricultural activities, which were in crisis. To overcome this problem the population began to emigrate, and this originated a dynamics of Catholic immigration that was used in industries (C. Bermond 2014, 131-144).



Fig. 1. The Gütermann silk factory of Perosa Argentina (Google maps).

Therefore, industries play a dichotomous role in the Waldensian identity, and this is also reflected in the recognition of the factories as Cultural Heritage by the specialized Office of the Waldensian Board: nowadays there are no productive buildings marked as “historical sites”: in this category are included more atavistic monuments (D. Jalla 2009, D. Jalla 2010).

Nevertheless, the sensitivity for the historical and human events that distinguished the Waldensian Church has meant that it was the promoter on several occasions of the safeguard of the industrial identity of the Valleys. A striking example is the preservation of the archives of the Wiedmann factory in San Germano Chisone, now owned by the municipality, which was carried out thanks to its direct action. Furthermore, through one of the first actions to the enhance of the industrial heritage in Val Germanasca – the restoration of abandoned talc mine in Prali and “Scopriminiera” cultural activities – the Waldensian Church has contributed to the creation of an eco-museum which highlights, next to mining work and the valley’s economy, even the life of the reformed communities (C. Ronchetta, M. Trisciuglio 2008, p. 139).

### *3. Project proposals: the industrial sector for the conservation and enhancement of the Valleys’ cultural heritage*

About knowledge and protection of this Cultural Heritage, the studies that have regarded Pinerolo and its valleys were many and authoritative (A. Cerrato, C. Ronchetta 1996; A. Masarente, C. Ronchetta 2004, C. Ronchetta, M. Trisciuglio 2008). They don’t just brought the identification and cataloging of all production buildings, but also the proposal of a series of itineraries which highlighted their historical, environmental and physical values, with specific reference to their material culture. Unfortunately these studies appear now just as a repertoire because many of these complexes are gradually breaking down. This suggests that the documentary value of what remains begins to prevail over the analytical and practical aspect than initially informed this research. However, there are few initiatives aimed at their protection and enhancement.





Fig. 2. Educational activities in abandoned mines of Prali ([www.ecomuseominiere.it/visite/scopriminiera/](http://www.ecomuseominiere.it/visite/scopriminiera/)).

For example, we remember the aforementioned project “Ecomuseo delle miniere e della valle Germanasca” of Prali; the association “Ecomuseo delle attività industriali di Perosa Argentina e valli Chisone e Germanasca” of Perosa Argentina; the “Difiloinfilo” path, at Pomaretto and Perosa; The “Ski Rochon” Museum of San Germano Chisone, where a small section of it is devoted to the activities of the Widemann cotton mill; the “Museo della Storia della meccanica e del Cuscinetto” of Villar Perosa. The latter in particular is a highly distinctive and catalyst element of the whole Val Chisone: it is an expression of the entrepreneurial ability of the Agnelli family, which influenced the town and the whole valley up to Pinerolo through innumerable works and political action. The city government is currently preparing a memory circuit of this family through the systematization of their historical places, and the setting of a permanent exhibition entitled “l’Avvocato e la sua Valle” in the building called “Finestra sulle Valli”.

However, despite the abundance of cultural value initiatives there is a disorganized global management of this industrial heritage, and from many quarters is invoked its systematization to give a turn at the cultural and tourist promotion of the Valleys.

To overcome this, recently the municipal administrations of lower Val Chisone and Val Germanasca, in synergy with associations and cultural institutions such as Italia Nostra, CeSMAP (Centro Studi e Museo d’Arte Preistorica) of Pinerolo and local museums, are developing a project proposal, both cultural and touristic, to promote knowledge, conservation and enhancement of this industrial heritage through systematizing productive complexes and networking them with other attractions (historical, artistic, naturalistic, etc...).



Fig. 3. The factory and residences system of the RIV of Villar Perosa, in a Twenties postcard ([www.alpcub.com/tesi%20sandra/testo/cap%20IV/2%20la\\_riv.htm](http://www.alpcub.com/tesi%20sandra/testo/cap%20IV/2%20la_riv.htm)).

As first step each municipality must prepare a registry update of all industrial testimonies and an evaluation of the archives, after which it will move to the systematization of the existing initiatives in the area. Thanks to this preparatory phase it will be able to hypothesize enhancing actions for the industrial buildings through the inclusion of new functions into them. The systematization of the whole cultural heritage, where each site is considered not in isolation but as part of a complex environment, will avoid redundant initiatives and the fragmentation of the visits of the potential users. Having fulfilled this first phase, it will be necessary to assume a supra-municipal coordinate action, that should provide:

- the creation of one or more archives linked together and aimed at the preservation of factory and workers documents;
- the establishment of a permanent documentation and multi-disciplinary studies center; the preparation of a cultural communication through traditional and innovative channels.

In this regard it should propose:

- the creation of an internet site (a common platform) that funnel the information of every single industrial center of the valleys;
- the production of audiovisual material that can be used in museums or online;
- the creation of a tourist trail through the use of new technologies (QRcode, augmented reality, etc...), affordable to disabled people too.

The project idea designates as main stakeholder the inhabitants of the valleys. This would create a widespread museum that does not aim to the exclusive enhancement of material testimony, but also of the environment and local knowledge. Close attention will be given to students, in order to understand the natural and social environment, the industrial process and the substantial weight had on the landscape formation. The project envisages the establishment of a media and lower Val Chisone cultural pole, linked in particular to Gütermann and Widemann families and, above all, the Agnelli family, which constitutes a focal point with a large attractiveness. This system should be put in relation with Val Pellice's and Pinerolo's ones, with its industrial and proto-industrial system along the medieval flume Rio Moirano.

The project can be considered the stimulus for a territorial promotion on a larger scale. In fact, the industrial path can be the attraction pole for other itineraries (from the naturalistic to the prehistoric one) and the opportunity for the enhancement of the historic villages of the Valleys. Another important factor is that the Chisone Valley is an area of transit to and from France. It will be important to increase the use of alternative transport system, promoting a transnational soft mobility. In this sense, the short-term creation of the "Route Européenne d'Artagnan", the first European transnational riding trail (and that reaches Pinerolo), will certainly be an opportunity factor. Furthermore, the proximity to Turin and to the great ski resorts (as Sestriere), allow to have a very significant catchment area of visitors. In conclusion, this multidisciplinary context, in which the preservation of the culture, the direct population and students participation and the touristic activity are focal points of the project, may constitute a good opportunity to create new socio-economic development for the Valleys, indissolubly linked in a more conscious knowledge of the territory and its numerous resources.

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