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Hidden Italy: Rural Landscapes, Peasant Life, and Environmental History

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Introduction

This book explores the deep imbrication of people and place in the making of Italy's countryside—how soils and slopes, rivers and marshes, ownership and obligation combined to shape livelihoods and landscapes across time. From terraced hillsides painstakingly cut into stone to marshlands drained and resettled, rural Italy has been engineered as much by customary practice and household labor as by state policy and modern expertise. By following the rhythms of planting and harvest, the pathways of transhumant flocks, and the long negotiations between tenants and landowners, we uncover an environmental and social history that places rural communities at the center of national change.

Italy's ecological variety is extraordinary, and so are its rural economies. Alpine meadows, Apennine ridges, volcanic soils, and alluvial plains offer different possibilities and limits; in each, peasants crafted agroecosystems tuned to water, climate, and risk. Terraces held soil and captured moisture; woodlands provided fuel, forage, and charcoal; irrigation channels and drainage ditches stitched fields to rivers. The resulting landscapes bear the marks of countless decisions—when to prune an olive, where to graze goats, how to share a millstream—decisions that reflected both ecological knowledge and the social hierarchies within which that knowledge circulated.

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Tenant relations are a recurring thread. Systems such as sharecropping redistributed risk between households and landowners, while large estates in the south concentrated power and shaped settlement patterns and labor regimes. Contracts, customs, and credit bound families to land and to each other, but they also mediated exposure to drought, flood, and price shocks. In examining the lived experience of tenancy—its promises, constraints, and conflicts—we see how social arrangements were themselves environmental technologies, allocating access to soil fertility, water, and woodland at crucial moments in the agrarian calendar.

Environmental policies, from communal forest statutes to national reclamation schemes, likewise remade the countryside. Marsh drainage sought to align public health, agricultural productivity, and territorial control; forestry rules attempted to balance fuel needs with slope stability; agronomic stations and extension services translated scientific advice into local practice with uneven results. These initiatives did not operate on empty ground: they met stubborn soils, entrenched interests, and the accumulated craft of rural people. Their outcomes depended on whether policy could accommodate the grain of local ecologies and the rhythms of household labor.

The book also follows movement—of animals along ancient drove roads, of men and

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women to seasonal work or distant continents, of capital and commodities along new transport corridors. Migration redistributed skills and savings, altered gendered divisions of labor, and recast expectations for village life. War and political upheaval thrust the countryside into national crises, while mechanization, synthetic inputs, and market integration restructured agroecosystems at speed. At each turn, environmental histories illuminate why some communities adapted or prospered and why others were pushed toward abandonment or precarious survival.

Understanding rural Italy, we argue, is essential to grasping the nation’s demographic and economic trajectories. Population growth and shortfall, urbanization, industrial labor supply, health profiles, and regional inequalities all draw on the long history of land use and resource governance. The ecological roots of historic change lie in the interplay between soils and social contracts, between hillsides terraced by hand and policies drafted in capitals. By bringing these domains into one frame, the chapters that follow offer a grounded account of how landscapes and livelihoods coevolved—and how their legacies continue to shape Italy’s environmental futures.

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CHAPTER ONE: Landscapes of Stone and Soil: Italy’s Environmental Regions

Italy’s countryside does not present a single stage upon which rural history unfolds, but a mosaic of microregions, each with its own script of stone, soil, and water. A traveler crossing from the Alps to Sicily in a single day by rail will experience an entire continental palette of climates and geologies, yet the true distances are measured not in kilometers but in ecological gradients. In the north, granite shoulders rise to permanent snowfields; in the center, limestone ridges fold into valleys of clay; in the south, volcanic ash yields extraordinarily fertile but unpredictable soils. The peninsula’s elongated shape—stretching from Alpine damp to Mediterranean aridity—means that rainfall, temperature, and exposure vary sharply over short distances, creating a patchwork of production possibilities and constraints. For farmers, the “region” is defined by a view from a particular slope toward a particular horizon, where the feel of the air and the smell of the soil signal what can be sown and when. These environmental regions are the stagecraft of rural life, shaping the tools, tenancy, and traditions that follow.

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The Alpine arc in the north forms Italy’s great reservoir of water and pasture. The massifs of the western and central Alps—Gran Paradiso, the Adamello-Presanella, the Dolomites—capture moisture from the Po Valley’s warm air, feeding glaciers, lakes, and rivers that run to the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas. Above the tree line, alpine meadows offer summer pasture; below, conifer forests supply timber and resin; further down, mixed deciduous woods provide fuel and charcoal. Soils vary from shallow, rocky scree to deeper moraines in former glacial basins. In these high valleys, tillage is confined to terraces and narrow alluvial fans where soils have accumulated. The growing season is short, and frost risk is high, so crops like rye, barley, and oats historically dominated, alongside hardy vegetables and dairy production. Pasture management has been crucial: common lands and transhumance routes, governed by customary regulations, allow herders to move flocks from lowland winter pastures to high summer pastures, optimizing fodder availability. Water is both asset and hazard; spring snowmelt can carve fields and flood barns, while irrigation channels have been extended from glacial streams to meadows with careful communal oversight. Even today, the region’s small farms often depend on off-farm incomes, yet the cultural memory of transhumance and cooperative grazing remains woven into village life and local dialect.

South of the Alps, the Po Valley unfolds as a broad alluvial plain built by the River Po and its tributaries—Ticino, Adda, Oglio, Tanaro, and many others. This basin stretches from the foothills of the Alps and Apennines to the Adriatic Sea, comprising Lombardy,

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Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, and Piedmont's lowlands. The soils here are deep, fertile, and often heavy, with clay and silt deposits laid down over millennia. Drainage can be poor in the lower valley, leading to historic wetlands like the Valli di Comacchio, while the upper valley benefits from better gradients and more reliable summer warmth. The Po's waters have long been harnessed for irrigation: a dense network of canals, sluices, and water wheels (nocino) supported rice paddies, meadows, and market gardens. The valley is Italy's breadbasket, producing wheat, maize, and sugar beet, but it is also home to specialized dairy systems, with cow's milk transformed into butter, cheese, and, increasingly, industrial milk powder. The microclimate here is continental: cold fogs in winter, hot humid summers, and seasonal flooding that can make or break a harvest. Environmental management has been a constant negotiation between upstream and downstream interests, between landowners who wanted drainage and millers who needed flow. In the Po Valley, water rights are a legal regime and a social theater, performed at canals, barrages, and water courts.

To the west lie the Ligurian and Tuscan coasts, where mountains meet the Tyrrhenian Sea in dramatic relief. The Ligurian hinterland is rugged, with narrow valleys and steep slopes that descend abruptly to the sea. Soils are thin and stony, derived from sandstone and schist; olive groves and vines cling to terraces, while chestnut woods occupy mid-elevations. Rainfall can be heavy, especially in autumn, but summer drought is common. In Tuscany, rolling hills of clay and marl—famous for vineyards and olive groves—are interspersed with broad valleys like the Arno's, where cereals and vegetables have been grown. The region's soils, enriched by millennia of careful management and the practice of leaving fields fallow, support mixed farming: wheat, grapes, olives, and forage crops. Wind exposure matters; the scirocco can desiccate vines, while the libeccio brings storms. Forests of oak and chestnut historically provided charcoal and acorns for pigs, while chestnut groves produced flour in lean years. Coastal plains, such as the Maremma, were once malarial marshes; their reclamation transformed landscapes and labor regimes, drawing peasants into new settlements under state-sponsored projects. The terracing of hillsides, long a hallmark of this region, is both an agricultural technique and a cultural signature, shaping views as well as yields.

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Running down the spine of the peninsula are the Apennines, a chain of limestone and sandstone ridges that divides east from west. From Emilia-Romagna through Marche, Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, and into Calabria, the Apennines create a mosaic of valleys, plateaus, and high pastures. Limestone landscapes are characterized by karst features—sinkholes, caves, and thin soils—making tillage precarious and favoring pastoralism. In many areas, mixed woodland of beech, oak, and chestnut persists, providing fodder, fuel, and mushrooms. High pastures in Abruzzo and Molise have supported sheep and cattle transhumance for centuries, with flocks moving between coastal plains and mountain ridges along well-defined droveways. Water is scarce in many Apennine valleys, with seasonal springs and intermittent streams; irrigation is limited, and agriculture depends on rain-fed crops such as rye, barley, and pulses. The

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terrain encourages small, scattered fields and a high degree of labor intensity, as terraces and stone walls are built and rebuilt over generations. Environmental hazards include landslides and flash floods after heavy rains, particularly where forests have been cleared for pasture. The region's geology has also fostered craft traditions—stone masonry, lime kilns, and charcoal production—integrating local resources into the rural economy.

Between the Apennines and the Tyrrhenian coast lie the broad valleys of Lazio and Tuscany, with Rome at their heart. These landscapes are shaped by rivers such as the Tiber and the Arno and by volcanic plateaus like the Alban Hills. Soils range from alluvial deposits on valley floors to volcanic tuffs on uplands, creating fertile conditions for cereals, vegetables, and orchards. Historically, these valleys included extensive marshes—the Agro Pontino most famously—where drainage was limited, and malaria was endemic. The reclamation of these marshes, particularly in the twentieth century, dramatically altered land use and settlement, but earlier interventions date back to Roman times, with drainage canals and embankments designed to open land to agriculture. The Roman legacy is visible in the centuriation of fields—grid-like divisions that influenced property boundaries for centuries—and in the management of roads and aqueducts that connected countryside to city. Water access remains crucial; wells, cisterns, and aqueducts have shaped village siting and farm layouts. These valley systems are less rugged than the Apennines, allowing larger fields and a different scale of farming, but they remain vulnerable to floods and drought, and their history is marked by periodic reorganization of land tenure and land use.

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On the Adriatic side, the Marche and Puglia present contrasting coastal plains and karst uplands. The Marche's rolling hills and coastal strip benefit from a milder climate, with orchards, vineyards, and wheat. The region's clay soils support mixed cropping, while the Sibillini foothills offer pasture. In Puglia, the Murgia limestone plateau dominates the interior, with thin soils and extensive olive groves—some of the most significant in Italy—plus sheep grazing. The coastal plains of Puglia, including the Tavoliere delle Puglie, are broad and flat, historically used for cereal cultivation and seasonal grazing. The Tavoliere's climate is marked by dry summers and occasional heavy rains; its soils are fertile but require careful water management. The region is known for the long-horned Podolica cattle that graze on natural pastures, a system adapted to the drought-prone environment. Olive cultivation here has a long history, with trees often centuries old, and the "ulivo secolare" is both an economic asset and a cultural icon. Coastal lagoons and wetlands, such as the Lesina and Varano lagoons, support fisheries and birdlife, and their management intersects with agriculture and tourism. The Adriatic side, influenced by the Bora and Scirocco winds, has a different agricultural rhythm than the Tyrrhenian coast, and its rural history reflects the interplay of dry farming, pastoralism, and maritime trade.

In the south, the Murgia gives way to volcanic and coastal landscapes of extraordinary fertility. The Phlegraean Fields near Naples and Mount Vesuvius produce dark, mineral-

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rich soils suitable for grapes, tomatoes, and orchards. Further south, Calabria's Aspromonte and Sicily's mountains rise from narrow coastal plains, where citrus groves, olives, and vineyards exploit the Mediterranean microclimate. Soils derived from volcanic ash and basalt are highly productive but vulnerable to erosion if poorly managed; steep slopes require terracing and careful ground cover. The Ionian and Tyrrhenian coasts bring mild winters and hot summers, with long growing seasons but periodic drought. Irrigation is critical for intensive horticulture and fruit production, drawing on groundwater, springs, and river systems. Inland, the landscape becomes more arid; pastures support sheep and goats adapted to sparse vegetation and heat. Coastal wetlands, like the Stagnone lagoon in western Sicily, offer salt pans and fisheries alongside vineyards grown on sandy soils. Volcanic islands—Stromboli, Vulcano, and the Aeolian archipelago—have unique microclimates and soils, and their rural economies combine agriculture with fishing and craft. The south's environmental diversity is reflected in a rich culinary tradition: pistachios of Bronte, blood oranges of Sicily, and figs of Calabria all arise from specific combinations of soil, slope, and sun.

The great exception to the dry-farmed south is the Po Valley, which stands apart in its water abundance and intensive cultivation. Here, rice cultivation has been possible since the Middle Ages, with paddies carved into flat land and fed by canals that regulate flow from Alpine rivers. The climate—humid summers with frequent thunderstorms—supports rice, but also encourages pests and diseases, requiring careful water management and crop rotation. The valley's landholdings range from small family farms to large capitalist enterprises, and the region's productivity has made it a core of Italy's agricultural economy. Drainage and irrigation are inseparable: ditches and pumps remove excess water in spring to prepare fields, then water is channeled in to maintain paddies in summer. The winter months bring fog and cold, sometimes severe enough to damage overwintering crops. The landscapes are relatively uniform—long, straight fields bounded by canals and poplar rows—but microvariations in soil texture and elevation make a difference in what can be grown. The Po Valley's water systems are an ecological infrastructure, maintained by consortia and local labor, and they underpin the region's food production and export capacity.

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The islands add further complexity. Sicily, the largest, encompasses coastal plains, the rugged Madonie and Nebrodi mountains, and the fertile cone of Mount Etna. Etna's volcanic soils are prized for vineyards and orchards, while the interior plateaus are dry and suitable for wheat and pastoralism. The island's climate varies from Mediterranean on the coasts to almost continental in the highlands; rainfall is uneven, and summer drought is intense. Sardinia is mountainous and more continental in climate, with extensive pastoral traditions. The island's granitic and limestone landscapes support sheep and goat herding, chestnut groves in the interior, and coastal olive and vine cultivation where conditions allow. Sardinian soils are generally thin and prone to erosion on steep slopes, encouraging transhumance to access seasonal pasture. Coastal lagoons and wetlands add ecological diversity, but irrigation

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is scarce in much of the interior. The islands' environmental constraints—drought, wind exposure, and soil fragility—have historically necessitated careful agroecological planning and risk management. Rural life here often relies on diversified livelihoods, combining crop production with pastoralism, craft, and, increasingly, tourism.

Microclimates play an outsized role in shaping Italy's rural landscapes. Elevation, aspect, and proximity to the sea create local conditions that differ markedly from regional averages. A south-facing slope in the Apennines can ripen grapes or olives where a north-facing slope supports beech forests. Valleys that trap cold air—known as fondi—experience frost pockets that damage early blooms, while coastal terraces benefit from moderating sea breezes. Rain shadows behind mountains reduce precipitation, explaining why some inland areas are drier than coastal zones just kilometers away. Wind patterns—Bora from the northeast, Libeccio from the southwest, Scirocco from Africa—dry or dampen crops, and farmers have adapted by planting windbreaks, selecting hardy varieties, or scheduling planting to avoid vulnerable stages. Soils vary with parent rock: granite in parts of the Alps and Sardinia yields acidic, well-drained soils; limestone karst gives thin, alkaline soils; volcanic ash provides rich, easily workable soils with high nutrient content. These microclimatic and edaphic factors are not footnotes but the central drivers of rural land use, dictating what can be grown, how irrigation must be managed, and which risks dominate the agrarian calendar.

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Across these regions, the interplay of climate, water, and geology has produced distinct agroecosystems. Alpine and Apennine systems prioritize mixed pastoralism and hardy cereals, coupled with forest management for fuel and fodder. The Po Valley specializes in intensive field crops and rice, with water management central to productivity. Central hilly regions focus on vineyards, olives, and wheat, with terraces stabilizing slopes and optimizing exposure. Southern dry-farming regions rely on olives, sheep, and drought-tolerant crops, with irrigation where possible. Coastal zones integrate horticulture, fruit, and fisheries, while islands combine pastoralism with Mediterranean cultivation. These systems are not static; they have shifted with market demand, policy interventions, and environmental change. Yet the underlying ecological templates remain recognizable, and they explain the regional distribution of land use patterns that have persisted for centuries. Understanding these environmental regions is the first step in reading the landscape—its stones, soils, and water—as the book of rural history.

The history of Italy's rural landscapes is also a history of human engineering. Where nature did not provide flat fields, terraces were cut into slopes. Where rivers flooded unpredictably, embankments were raised and drainage channels dug. Where soils were thin, manure and ash were hauled uphill by hand. And where water was scarce, communities organized to share it through communal channels and regulated irrigation schedules. This engineering was not only physical but social: tenure systems, customary rights, and village statutes defined who could use what and when. The

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result is a layered landscape that records centuries of decision-making: ancient olive trees on terraced slopes, drainage patterns in former marshes, and field boundaries that follow old centuriation or medieval property lines. Reading these features allows us to trace the coevolution of environment and society, to see how local adaptations have been scaled up through markets, policies, and technologies.

Agriculture in Italy has always been a dialogue between the possible and the practical. Where soils were deep and water abundant, farmers could afford to specialize and intensify, investing in irrigation and market crops. Where slopes were steep and soils thin, they diversified and minimized risk, relying on pastoralism, foraging, and small-scale horticulture. In the Po Valley, the relative uniformity of the landscape encouraged large-scale coordination and mechanization; in the Apennines and the south, topography and fragmentation favored small plots and family labor. These differences are not just aesthetic or economic; they shape demographic patterns, migration flows, and political identities. Regions with productive, diversified farms tended to sustain higher population densities, while marginal areas often experienced out-migration and land abandonment. Environmental constraints, therefore, are not passive backgrounds but active agents in shaping Italy's social and demographic history.

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The chapters that follow explore how these environmental regions interact with specific themes—terracing, reclamation, forests, pastoralism, and the institutions of land tenure. By grounding each topic in the physical geography of Italy, we can see why certain practices emerged in particular places and how they changed over time. The terraced hillsides of Liguria and Tuscany, for example, are not merely aesthetic but a response to slope, soil, and rainfall, and they carry implications for labor organization, water rights, and market access. Similarly, the marsh reclamation projects of the Po Valley and Lazio were driven by public health concerns and economic ambitions, but their success depended on local geology, hydrology, and labor availability. Understanding these regional contexts allows us to avoid simplistic narratives of "traditional" agriculture and instead appreciate the diversity and ingenuity of Italian rural life.

Environmental regions also influence how communities cope with hazards. Droughts in the south and floods in the Po Valley demand different strategies: crop choice, irrigation infrastructure, storage, and social insurance. Forests and commons management varies by soil type and slope stability; fuelwood collection in the Alps differs from chestnut harvesting in the Apennines. Coastal areas face storms and salt intrusion, requiring embankments and saline-tolerant crops. Even disease ecology—malaria in the marshlands, for instance—has regional patterns tied to water regimes and land use. These hazards have shaped household decisions and state policies, creating feedback loops between environment and institution. By mapping these regional risk profiles, the book situates the social history of rural Italy within an ecological framework, showing how peasants and landowners negotiated uncertainty

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in ways that fit their local conditions.

Italy's modern environmental policies often arise from these regional differences. National reclamation schemes have targeted specific zones—marshes in Lazio, steep slopes in Calabria, high pastures in the Alps—tailoring interventions to local geology and hydrology. Forestry laws respond to the distinct ecology of conifer versus broadleaf forests, while irrigation policies grapple with the contrast between the Po's water abundance and the south's scarcity. Agronomic research stations and extension services have historically been located in key environmental regions to study crops suited to those soils and climates. The uneven success of these policies is partly explained by their fit with local ecology: a plan designed for the Po Valley's deep soils may fail on the thin, rocky slopes of the Apennines. Recognizing these regional constraints is essential to understanding Italy's agricultural trajectory and the political economy of rural development.

The role of markets and transport also differs by region. The Po Valley's flat terrain and dense canal network facilitated early mechanization and integration with industrial supply chains. Central Italy's hilly landscapes limited large machinery but supported high-value products like wine and olive oil, which could be transported to cities and ports. Southern regions, with fragmented landholdings and limited irrigation, faced higher costs and risks, making them more vulnerable to price shocks. Coastal access allowed some areas to develop export-oriented horticulture and fisheries, while mountain valleys were more self-sufficient and isolated. These regional economic patterns persist, influencing contemporary debates about rural revitalization, tourism, and agricultural competitiveness. The environmental regions thus provide a lens through which to interpret the successes and failures of market integration and policy interventions across time.

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The cultural landscape of rural Italy—its architecture, rituals, and village layouts—is also rooted in environmental regions. Stone houses built from local quarries reflect geology; roof shapes and materials respond to rainfall and wind; agricultural calendars align with local climate patterns. Festivals tied to harvest or patron saints often mark regional agricultural cycles, from grape harvest in Tuscany to olive pressing in Calabria. The design of irrigation consortia, the organization of transhumance routes, and the siting of mills and water wheels are all shaped by topography and hydrology. These cultural expressions are not separate from the environment; they are adaptations that make rural life viable and meaningful. Understanding this helps avoid romanticizing the countryside as a static backdrop and instead reveals a dynamic interplay between nature and culture.

In reading Italy's environmental regions, it is helpful to adopt a microregional approach. Rather than treating "Tuscany" or "Sicily" as homogeneous units, we can look at smaller units—valleys, hillsides, plains—where soils, slopes, and water create distinct farming systems. This microregional perspective illuminates the fine-grained

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decisions that define rural life: which seed variety to plant, how to organize irrigation shares, when to move flocks, and how to allocate labor. It also clarifies why policies that work in one microregion may fail in another. Environmental regions, then, are not just geographic categories but frameworks for understanding the diversity of Italian agriculture and the ecological roots of historic change.

The mosaic of Italy's countryside continues to evolve. Climate change is altering rainfall patterns, raising temperatures, and shifting growing seasons, with regional variations that map onto these long-standing environmental zones. The Po Valley faces more frequent droughts and heat stress; the Alps experience glacial retreat and changes in pasture availability; southern regions confront increasing aridity and water scarcity. At the same time, new markets—organic produce, agritourism, high-quality wine—create opportunities for regions with distinctive terroir and traditional practices. The ecological templates established over centuries are being tested and reshaped by modern pressures, but their persistence underscores their functionality. Recognizing the regional diversity of Italy's landscapes is essential for planning sustainable rural futures that respect both environmental limits and social traditions.

Italy's rural past is written in its stones and soils, but it is also written in the relationships between people and place. Environmental regions are the physical frame within which those relationships develop. They determine what can be grown, how labor is organized, and how risk is distributed. They shape the design of infrastructure—terraces, canals, embankments—and the institutions that manage them. They also influence the distribution of wealth and power, as some regions offer abundant resources and others impose constraints that must be overcome with ingenuity and cooperation. By starting with the environment, we can trace the threads that connect ecology, economy, and society, and understand why the countryside looks and functions as it does.

This chapter has outlined the environmental diversity of Italy, from Alpine heights to volcanic islands, and sketched the agricultural systems that emerge from these regional conditions. It has emphasized the interplay of geology, climate, water, and human agency in shaping the rural landscape. In the chapters that follow, we will explore specific practices—terracing, reclamation, forestry, pastoralism—and institutions—tenancy, cooperatives, state policy—that grew out of these regional foundations. By rooting social history in environmental context, we can better grasp how rural life has been sustained, how it has changed, and why understanding Italy's countryside is central to understanding the nation's broader demographic and economic trajectories.

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