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*Research paper*

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## **SETTLEMENT IN THE RECLAIMED PONTINE MARSHES DURING FASCISM IN ITALY: EVIDENCE FROM AN UNEXPLORED ARCHIVE**

### **Abstract**

An unexplored dataset has been utilized to analyse the colonists who settled in southern Lazio during the Integral Land Reclamation carried out by the fascist regime in the 1930s. The farm records, known as Schede Poderali, encompass the contracts through which selected families were allocated portions of land reclaimed from the marshes. The documents enabled us to delineate the population trends in the decades following marsh reclamation and immigration from other Italian regions. This new piece of information enriches scientific research on the area providing an empirical validation of the interplay between population dynamics and political action.

**Keywords:** Marsh reclamation; immigrant families; Schede Poderali; Agro Pontino; fascism

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## 1 Introduction

The Agro Pontino is a geographical area located near the city of Latina, in southern Lazio, a region of central Italy (NUTS 2). Eighty years ago, the province of Latina was conceived following the extensive reclamation of the marshes that were prevalent in this area. As a result, the Agro Pontino represents an exceptional research environment, a key historical, demographic and anthropological case study.

The aim of this work is to enrich our knowledge of the families that settled in the geographical areas that now make up the province of Latina (NUTS 3). It also aims to shed light on the evolving population dynamics resulting from the land distribution programme that began in the 1930s and was completed in the following decades (Protasi & Sonnino, 2003; Caprotti, 2008).

We use an unexplored source of data, the *Schede Poderali*, the contracts by which reclaimed land was allocated to peasant families during the Fascist era. These records are unique and original documents. They are the only surviving testimony of the immigrant families who arrived in the area in the 1930s, encouraged or forced by colonisation programmes from other Italian regions. Originally collected and kept by the former O.N.C. (Opera Nazionale Combattenti/ National Combatants Organisation) – the institution that led most of the recovery of the Agro Pontino – these records are now part of the heritage of the *Museo della Terra Pontina in Latina*. Beyond detailing the size and nature of the allotted farms, these contracts comprehensively documented the demographic characteristics and composition of the recipient families. This documentation not only records the initial status of the settlers, but also any subsequent changes over the following years. Thus, the *Schede Poderali* database emerges as an invaluable resource for scrutinizing the demographic dynamics and distinctive social and economic facets of this newly established society.

This paper is intended as an introductory demonstration of the research potential that lies within this little-known historical archive. It proposes basic analyses of the demographic conditions and household structures in the area from the 1930s to the 1960s. The focus is on the southern regions of the Latina province, notably the geographic expanse known as the “Golden Triangle” of the Agro Pontino, bounded by three villages: Borgo Vodice, Borgo Hermada, and Borgo Montenero.

The paper unfolds as follows: Section 2 delves into the historical background encompassing the pontine land and its reclamation. Section 3 presents the hitherto unpublished database. Section 4 examines the demographics of the farming families settled within the “Golden Triangle” region. Finally, Section 5 discusses the results, namely in the light of the prevailing political climate at the time.

## 2 Background

The Agro Pontino, a vast area of about 80,000 hectares, lies between the Tyrrhenian Sea from Anzio to Terracina in the west and is bordered by the Lepini Mountains in the east, the Agro Romano in the north and the Agro of Fondi in the south. For many centuries it was largely uninhabited and characterised by swampy and unhygienic conditions, consisting mainly of extensive dunes and stagnant water formations separating the sea from the mountains.

The historical narrative of the Pontine territory revolves around the concerted effort to reclaim the marshes, a saga that began more than two millennia ago with the ancient

Volsci and culminated in the so-called “integral land reclamation” at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Caprotti, 2007).

Remarkable historical accounts from 404 B.C. by Tito Livio in the fourth book of his “Annals” provide insights into the first marshlands inhabited by the Volsci. Traces of their drainage systems, consisting of networks of tunnels that transformed the marshes into smaller “ponds” for fishing and agriculture, can still be seen today. However, the abandonment of these Volscian drainage systems after Roman domination in 328 B.C. led to a resurgence of the marshes.

During the period of Roman expansion, the Agro Pontino was seen primarily as a transit challenge to reach southern Italy. The vastness, sparse population and rampant malaria made the area largely inhospitable. The construction of the Via Appia in 300-200 B.C. marked the first attempts at reclamation: a canal, known as the Rio Martino, was built alongside the road to alleviate flooding. Despite these efforts, the area was neglected in subsequent historical periods, with swamps overtaking fertile land, rendering the Via Appia impassable and contributing to an unhealthy atmosphere in the surrounding areas.

The efforts of Gaius Julius Caesar in 59 B.C. to oversee the rebuilding of the Via Appia were partially successful, but the region remained devastated.

For centuries, the Pontine land was again abandoned until the arrival of Theodoric in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when some drainage work was carried out on the marshy land. After Theodoric's brief initiatives, maintenance work was abandoned due to the disasters that followed.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Church took control of the entire area. Although various popes during this period either donated or sold lagoons for fishing, they made minimal investment in land reclamation. It was only under the leadership of Pope Boniface VIII, from 1294 onwards, that significant efforts were made to reclaim the marshy lands that still belonged to the dukedom of Sermoneta, then acquired by the pope's nephews, the Caetani family. However, with the transfer of the Papal See to Avignon in 1309, the area was once again abandoned.

It was not until Pope Pius VI (Giovanni Braschi, 1775-1799) that a comprehensive plan for the reclamation of the Pontine marshes was launched. This effort involved the temporary expropriation of all marshy land and lasted for about twenty years. More than 29,000 hectares were successfully reclaimed and returned to cultivation. Even before the reclamation work was completed, the drained land was leased to landowners. The high cost of cultivating and maintaining the land necessitated several privileges granted by Pio VI to the leaseholders, including exemption from various taxes, freedom to trade in grain, and the right to produce bread and sell wine.

In 1861, Pius IX created the Consortium of Landowners and Proprietors, which took over responsibility for the maintenance of reclamation works.

The first governments of unified Italy never seriously tackled the problem of land reclamation. It was only after the First World War that the government began to deal systematically with the problem of the Pontine territories. In 1918, the State Civil Engineers carried out extensive studies and launched the “Integral Reclamation”. This huge undertaking involved systematic interventions that included hydraulic works, malaria control, public health initiatives and land reform.

Hydraulic reclamation began in 1923 and involved the construction of an extensive network of roads and bridges, the digging of collecting canals, the installation of various water pumps to drain the subsoil and the creation of lakes on the coast. It was an impressive job: between 1926 and 1937, 18,548,000 person-days were spent on the work of fifty thousand workers recruited from all over the country, especially from the

poor and overpopulated regions corresponding to the current areas of Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, and Emilia-Romagna (Scarzanella, 1977; Caprotti, 2008). Intensive deforestation and the construction of new villages and towns took place alongside the swamps draining and canals building (Caprotti, 2007).

Significant progress has also been made in the area of sanitation (Snowden, 2006; Protasi, 2016; 2017). First the Italian Red Cross, and then the Pontine Anti-Malaria Institute, waged a real battle against the *Anopheles* mosquito, using a variety of methods: draining the swamps, inventing mosquito nets for windows, introducing bats into the swamps and fishes into the water (because they feed on mosquitoes), introducing a poison called “Paris Green” into the watercourses.

The fascist legislation of 1928 marked the onset of land reform, also allocating financial resources for completing the reclamation. The subsequent decree in 1931 expropriated 18,000 hectares of land in favor of the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (O.N.C.), an association of First World War veterans. The reclaimed territory was divided into small estates (“*poderi*”), each consisting of an agricultural plot and a farmhouse. They were allocated to the families who had settled in the area, on condition that the head of the family – or at least one of the members of the household – was a former soldier from the First World War.

To provide technical and financial assistance to the settlers, a commercial and service centre was created for every hundred farmhouses, then forming a village (“*borgo*” in Italian), with a similar urban structure, including the church, the government office (“*casa del fascio*”), the agricultural credit, the school. The first 5 villages were given the name of the main battle sites of the First World War: Borgo Podgora, Borgo Sabotino, Borgo Grappa, Borgo San Michele, Doganella; eventually, a total of 18 villages were settled in the region. This marked the inception of larger towns such as Littoria (now Latina) in 1932; Sabaudia in 1934; Pontinia in 1935; Aprilia in 1937; Pomezia (in the province of Roma) in 1939.

Towards the end of the Second World War, the scourge of war was unexpectedly unleashed on the region. Shortly before the landing of Allied troops in Nettuno, the German troops had blown up the dams that collected, contained and distributed the water in the reclamation canals. As a result, a large area was completely flooded. The whole of the Agro was hit by artillery, which destroyed many farmhouses, destroyed crops, set fire to and burnt all the plantations and killed the remaining livestock.

After the war, the O.N.C. led a reconstruction effort that focused on rebuilding structures, draining flooded areas and rebuilding destroyed agricultural units. The O.N.C. continued its activities until the end of the 1960s and it was finally dissolved by Decree 616 in 1977.

### 3 The *Schede Poderali*

The study proposes an analysis of the information contained in the *Schede Poderali*, i.e. the documents used by the O.N.C. to register the contracts by which farms were allocated to peasant families.

The expropriated and reclaimed land of the Agro Pontino became state property. Through the O.N.C., they were divided up and allocated by means of specific contracts to the peasant families settling in the area, mainly from other regions of Italy. Each family was given a share of the land through a sharecropping system based on their skills and labour capacity. The state provided not only land and housing, but also basic

livestock and agricultural tools. Settlers also had the opportunity to buy back the land and become small landowners.

The main types of contracts were:

Contract A: Involved a sales agreement with instalment payments.

Contract B: Consisted of a purchase agreement with initial interest only payments, with the price being amortized for future payments.

Contract C: Consisted of an improvement lease with a conditional sale agreement for the future.

In 1942, due to the difficult wartime political climate, the O.N.C. moved from the sharecropping system to the final allocation of ransom farms throughout the region.

The two eligibility criteria for families to secure a farm allotment were:

- 1) The head of the family had to be an ex-soldier of the First World War, or at least one member of the family had served in the war.
- 2) A minimum number of labour units: The total number of family members could not fall below a certain threshold based on the size of the land allocated.

Family work units were set by the O.N.C. and calculated on the basis of the age and gender of each member. An adult male aged between 18 and 65 was considered as a full labour unit (1). A woman of the same age was valued at 0.55, slightly more than half a man. Children aged 8 to 13 contributed 0.25 units, while those aged 14 to 17 contributed 0.50 if male and 0.25 if female. Older persons aged 65 and over were valued at 0.20 units, irrespective of their gender. The sum of these coefficients represented the total labour force of the family at the time the holding was allocated. Cultivation requirements dictated that each hectare of land had to have at least 0.25 working units; if this was not the case, the productivity of the farm was compromised. Larger plots required a minimum of four able-bodied men and two women. Family members under the age of 8 or unable to work were considered dependent. Excess labour would increase management costs, with the O.N.C. supplementing the family's income based on active units. This explains why the families selected for the Agro Pontino generally had an average of ten members, including relatives or cohabitants of the head of the family. The family included ascendants, descendants, collaterals, and in-laws, while the cohabitants included individuals linked to the head of the family by bonds of solidarity and friendship.

While families of ten were not uncommon in Italy in the 1930s, especially in regions such as Veneto and Emilia-Romagna with high rural demographic pressure, few met the working capacity requirements of the Agro Pontino. In order to meet the O.N.C. criteria, families were often merged or restructured. As a result, beyond the simple "household nucleus", that is the family formed by a married couple with or without children, many farm records show quite complex household types, such as those with several cohabiting nuclei, ("multiple households") or "extended households", including a family nucleus with cohabitants. The *Schede Poderali* faithfully recorded all this information, both in terms of the characteristics of the land entrusted, the size of the farmhouse and the equipment provided, as well as the composition of the household and the value of the work units. An example of the original card is reported in Figure 1 and in Figure 2. Figure 1 at the top shows information on the contract holder and the extent of the allocated land. The first page then lists all the initial equipment provided in terms of livestock and farming implements. In the second page, all the information about the household composition, with name and date of birth, and relationship with the family head of each member. These records were regularly updated to reflect changes in family and demographic events and thus they meticulously document not only the structural characteristics of families and individual members at the time of

farm allocation, including the economic characteristics of the farms themselves, but also the ongoing dynamic changes that occurred in subsequent years, in a longitudinal perspective. This includes details such as marriages, births, deaths, and possible migrations.

As a result, these records serve as a genuine population register that was carefully updated until the early 1960s. Transcribing the paper registers into processable data was a challenge because of the handwritten nature of the cards, which were sometimes incomplete, indecipherable, or worn over time, as the one in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1. Example of farm record: Scheda Poderale – page 1

**OPERA NAZIONALE PER I COMBATTENTI - ISPettorato AGRO PONTINO**

ZONA *Veduggia* PODERE N. *3376* COMUNE DI *Santhia* Foglia di mappa N. *432* Zona pedologica *classe 2a - m. 1000*

Contratto tipo *A* Prezzo cessione L.  Rata annuale *Grano Q.ii* (Registrato a *Santhia*) il *11.6.48* N. *4179* Vol. *516*

INTESTATARI *Giuseppe e Silvana*

**CONDUTTORI**

Data della vendita	Variazione successiva al contratto	Superficie contratto <i>11.12</i>	BOVINI										TRATTORI		IRRIGAZIONI	
			LATTI			LAVORO	CAVIE	INCECCHI	TOTALE	Cm 25 HP N.	Ad azionisti	A scottamenti				
			T N.	P. I.	Q.ii								N.	Q.ii	N.	Q.ii
			30.4	54	12	10	2	11			4.9	48	50	1		1800
			5	5	11	14	2	11			3	57		1		800

**M I G L I O R I E**

Stazione da cui del.	VINOLO specificato	FRUTTO specificato	FABBRICATI			
			Numero costruzioni	Valore per piano mq.	Ampliamento	Valore per piano mq.
	1.50	000	11	6.60	2.70	100.000
	5.70	820	19	6.60	5.36	336

**A T T R E Z Z I**

Capelli	Aratri																	
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

Superficie residua Ha.

NOTE: *1.10.48 - 11.12.48*

Source: Schede Poderali archive

Figure 2. Example of farm record: Scheda Poderali – page 2

SITUAZIONE DI FAMIGLIA: *Previdenza*      !Data di immissione nell'attuale podere      *1941*  
 data di arrivo in Agro Pontino

N.	COGNOME E NOME	Paternità	Data di nascita	Grado di parentela	Unità lavorative	ANNOTAZIONI
	<i>Giuseppe</i>	<i>Antonio</i>	<i>6 10 81</i>	<i>figlio</i>		<i>Assoldato 1° 10. 1936</i>
	<i>Filomena</i>	<i>Adriano</i>	<i>28 11 89</i>	<i>figlia</i>	<i>20</i>	
	<i>Angelo</i>	<i>Giuseppe</i>	<i>20 5 81</i>	<i>figlio</i>		<i>Assoldato 1° 10. 1936</i>
	<i>Stasio</i>	"	<i>22 12 16</i>	"		
	<i>Giulio</i>	"	<i>17 12 89</i>	"		<i>Assoldato in 1° 10. 1936</i>
	<i>Antonia</i>	"	<i>20 5 89</i>	"		<i>Assoldata</i>
	<i>Luigi</i>	"	<i>1 11 19</i>	"		
	<i>Antonio</i>	<i>Erasmus</i>	<i>29 3 83</i>	<i>marito</i>		
	<i>Maria</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>20 10 87</i>	<i>figlia</i>	<i>15</i>	
	<i>Cesca</i>	"	<i>16 4 87</i>	"		<i>115</i>
	<i>Anna</i>	"	<i>9 5 81</i>	"		
	<i>Antonio</i>	"	<i>3 10 82</i>	"		
	<i>Mario</i>	<i>Giuseppe</i>	<i>6 4 19</i>	<i>figlio</i>		<i>1° 10. 1936</i>
	<i>Giorgio</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>15 1 87</i>	<i>marito</i>		<i>1° 10. 1936</i>
	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>Mario</i>	<i>29 7 88</i>	<i>figlio</i>		
	<i>Luigi</i>	"	<i>2 1 80</i>	"		
	<i>Stasio</i>	"	<i>1 10 81</i>	"		
	<i>Giuseppe</i>	"	<i>19 11 83</i>	"		
	<i>Mario</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>20 1 87</i>	<i>marito</i>		<i>1° 10. 1936</i>
	<i>Giulia</i>	<i>Mario</i>	<i>7 6 85</i>	<i>figlia</i>		
	<i>Giuseppe</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>5 10 85</i>	<i>marito</i>		<i>1° 10. 1936</i>
	<i>Giulia</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>3 12 87</i>	<i>figlia</i>		
	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>16 4 87</i>	"		
	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>17 4 80</i>	"		
	<i>Luigi</i>	"	<i>21 4 87</i>	"		
	<i>Maria</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>21 1 84</i>	<i>marito</i>		
	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>Luigi</i>	<i>20 7 80</i>	<i>figlio</i>		
	<i>Luigi</i>	"	<i>8 9 88</i>	"		<i>Torre - Ponte - Greco</i>
	<i>Luigi</i>	"	<i>20 9 83</i>	"		<i>Luigi</i>

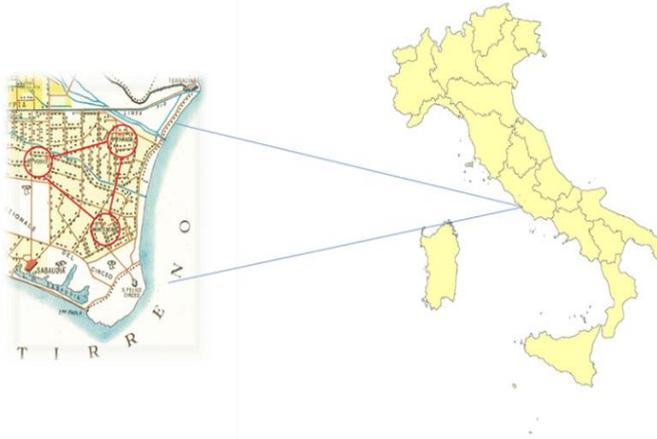
Source: Schede Poderali archive

#### 4 Population dynamics and families in the “Golden Triangle”

In this paper, we present some descriptive analyses of data obtained from the previously described archive (Section 3), focusing on three villages: Borgo Vodice, Borgo Hermada, and Borgo Montenero, which currently fall under the municipalities of Sabaudia, San Felice Circeo and Terracina, respectively (Figure 3). The territory

enclosed between the three villages constitutes what is called the “Golden Triangle” of Agro Pontino.

Figure 3. The “Golden Triangle” of Agro Pontino



Source: Pisano (2014)

Table 1. Settled families by village and place of origin

Region of origin (NUTS 2)	Province (NUTS 3)	Borgo Vodice	Borgo Hermada	Borgo Montenero	Total
Friuli Venezia Giulia	Udine	16	47	19	82
	Verona	9	19	17	45
Veneto	Padova	3	4	9	16
	Rovigo	5		5	10
	Treviso	33	4	41	78
	Venezia		16	6	22
	Verona	9	19	17	45
	Vicenza	13	8	31	52
	Belluno	7	4		11
Emilia Romagna	Ferrara	24	58	1	83
	Reggio Emilia			9	9
	Modena			2	2
Lazio	Latina	34	14	26	74
	Other	6			6
Other regions		5	1	6	12
TOTAL		155	175	172	502

Source: Schede Poderali archive

The “Golden Triangle” constitutes a remarkably fertile and lush area. Renowned for its agricultural productivity, this land remains a vital source of Pontine wealth, contributing significantly to the export of wine, oil, vegetables, and fruits.

Our research file includes approximately 500 families, for a total of 7,632 individuals. Families settled in this area came mainly from the provinces of Veneto, but the presence of people from Udine and Ferrara was also significant (Table 1). It is also noteworthy that 10% of the families came from areas bordering the Agro Pontino itself.

According to the O.N.C. requirements, the average size of families was high, with a fairly large number of work units (Table 2). Complexity and average size tended to increase rather than decrease over time, with the multi-nucleus households increasing from around 34% in the 1930s to over 70% in the 1950s (Table 3).

The explanation for this evolution in family structures is closely linked to the size of the family labour force, expressed in terms of work units, and the urge to increase the average size in order to meet the requirements for the subsequent redemption of the allocated land (Table 3). To this end, many nuclear families merged. It is worth noting, however, that only a slight correlation (around 0.4 value) has been estimated between family size, number of working units and farm size at the time of redemption.

*Table 2. Average size of settled families by village*

	N. Families	Average size	Average work units
Borgo Vodice	155	17.2	4.2
Borgo Hermada	175	14.8	4.2
Borgo Montenero	172	13.9	3.5
Total Triangle	502	15.2	4.0

*Source: Schede Poderali archive*

*Table 3. Settled families by typology over time (a.v. and %)*

Family type	Years					
	30s	%	40s	%	50s	%
Nuclear households	220	43.8	134	26.7	66	13.1
Extended households	110	21.9	98	19.5	79	15.7
Multiple households	170	33.9	269	53.6	356	70.9

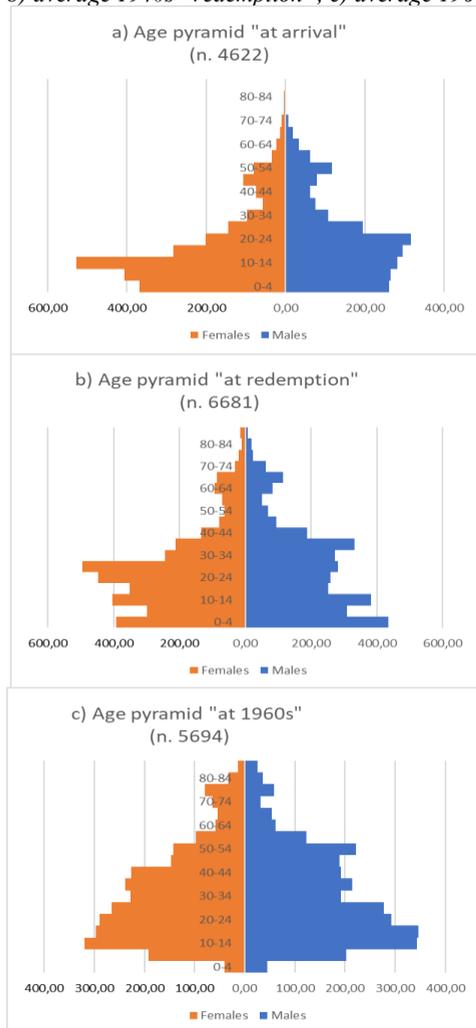
*Source: Schede Poderali archive*

The distribution of farms by size was heterogeneous in the area and also related to the predominant origin of the settlers: in Borgo Montenero, where the Venetians predominated, there was a high frequency of small farms with a maximum of 10 hectares of land, while in Borgo Hermada, where mainly families from Udine and Ferrara settled, the main size of the land was between 11 and 20 hectares. The type of contract also changed, although everywhere the “C” contract prevailed, i.e. a lease with a conditional agreement for a future sale.

An analysis by age and gender of the population structure (Figure 4) shows that the settled farm families were composed of relatively young individuals, with a slight

predominance of women, what ensured that the population initially grew quite rapidly – then slowed down after the Second World War – to almost 6,000 units in the mid-1950s. As expected, population structure gradually aged. At the beginning of the 1930s, the initial population that settled in the three villages of Borgo Vodice, Borgo Hermada and Borgo Montenero consisted of a total of 4,622 units, of which 2,186 were male and 2,436 were female. The age pyramid shows that the population was very young in the early 1930s, at the time of arrival (Figure 4a). In the following decade, notwithstanding the Second World War, the total population increased to 5,860 units, including 2,910 males and 2,950 females, although with a slightly ageing structure (Figure 4b).

Figure 4. The “Golden Triangle” population structure at: a) average 1930s “arrival”; b) average 1940s “redemption”; c) average 1960s



Source: Schede Poderali archive

At the end of the 1950s, beginning 1960s, the population of the area under consideration reached 5,917 units, of which 3,061 were males and 2,856 females. The age pyramid (Figure 4c) refers to the year 1959, one of the last dates for which the data registered in the small farm records are available and reliable: the process of closing the O.N.C. had already begun at the end of the 1950s. The indicators shown in Table 4 summarize the evolution of the age structure of the population of the “Golden Triangle”, which can be observed by comparing the three key moments of the period analyzed. The male/female ratio increased notable from less than 90 men for every 100 women on arrival to more than 104 /100 at the beginning of the 1960s. At the same time, both the dependency ratio and the number of children per woman were falling, reflecting the fact that the presence of adult male workers consolidated, the reproductive behaviours of families was declining, although the elderly component of the population remained small.

Table 4. Population gender and age structure indicators (x100)

	At arrival	At redemption	1960s
Male/female ratio $P^M/P^F$	89.74	93.93	104.31
Dependency ratio ( $P_{65+} + P_{0-14}$ )/ $P_{15-64}$	88.58	64.19	38.88
Children/women $P_{0-4}/P^F_{15-49}$	65.28	42.17	5.08

Source: Schede Poderali archive

We also calculated the crude birth and death rates for the period 1940-1959. As expected, with around 2,500 births and 430 deaths, the corresponding rates – 21.1 and 3.6 (x 1000) – are further evidence of the very young population living in the Agro Pontino at that time.

It may be useful to place the evolution of this population in the context of the Italian demographic transition and to compare the natural dynamics (birth and death rates) in the period concerned and in the whole of Lazio with those recorded in the regions of main origin of the settlers (Table 5).

Throughout the period, Latina had a higher birth rate and a lower death rate than the other regions considered, thus indicating a younger and rapidly growing population.

Table 5. Death and birth rates (x 1000) – Latina province and various regions (1935-1955)

Year	Latina		Lazio		Veneto		Emilia Romagna	
	Death	Birth	Death	Birth	Death	Birth	Death	Birth
1935	11.1	30.2	12.8	23.9	11.8	24.4	11.9	20.2
1939	9.7	30.0	11.4	24.2	11.5	24.3	11.7	19.4
1942	10.5	25.6	11.9	20.8	11.7	21.7	11.8	16.4
1947	8.8	29.3	9.6	22.2	10.6	21.7	10.9	17.8
1955	6.3	21.3	7.9	18.6	8.9	17.0	9.0	13.3

Source: Our elaboration on ISTAT data, Population and demographic dynamics (1862-2014) <https://seriestoriche.istat.it/>.

From the end of the 1950s, the compilation of farm records became less accurate and progressively the registration of events – in particular births and deaths – passed through the municipal registry offices. In 1977, the O.N.C. was definitively suppressed.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

The data presented in this study reveal a unique narrative that portrays the families who settled in the Agro Pontino in the 1930s. This area, south of Roma, had previously been characterized by inhospitable environmental conditions, minimal economic progress, and depopulation (Protasi, 2013). The “Integral Reclamation” of the Agro Pontino represented a monumental commitment of financial and human resources and offered a chance of redemption to numerous families who settled in these “new lands”, coming from social and economic backgrounds that were, if anything, even more precarious (De Rose, Strangio, & Corà, 2012). Beyond any historical judgement on the political origins of this colossal operation (Treves, 1976; Ipsen, 1996), the territory honors its heritage with deep respect and pride, as shown by the invaluable archive of *Schede Poderali* kept at the *Museo della Terra Pontina*.

For the first time we have delved into this unpublished archive, focusing on three villages in the southern Pontine region, forming the so-called “Golden Triangle”. This title derives from their geographical position and the variety of agricultural products that the settlers were able to cultivate on the land wrestled from the marshes. By analysing this archive, our aim was to contribute to the description of the demographic characteristics of the region during the Fascist period and the following decades. This newly discovered documentation could contribute significantly to our understanding of the history of reclamation and the settlers who participated in this process.

The allocation of land to settlers, based on the size of the family and its capacity to grow and improve the labor unit, is in line with the well-documented demographic policies of the Fascist regime. To integrate more individuals into families, the government and the *Fascist Chamber* implemented several measures to boost the birth rate, offering cash bonuses to prolific families, tax concessions for real estate purchases, and direct tax benefits such as exemptions and deductions for dependent children. Spouses and fathers of large offspring were granted career advancement and salary integration, accompanied by interest-free loans.

Families within the “Golden Triangle” skilfully navigated these policies to their advantage. To secure larger plots of land, several family nuclei often merged, sometimes reaching sizes of over 20 members, with a recorded maximum of 39 members in Borgo Vodice.

An analysis of the age structure shows an increasingly balanced and young population, with the average age of new settlers on the farms being around 20. Demographic indicators confirm a young population invested in offspring and a quite slow ageing process.

The farm records offer insights into both departures from and entries into the original family, including aspects such as deaths, births, and migrations, all of which warrant further study. An initial look at the data suggests that mobility was limited, with a small number of people leaving the family farm to emigrate abroad or return to their place of origin, and a larger number of young brides leaving their parental homes to join their husbands' households. There are also cases of renouncers who, for religious or personal reasons, choose to distance themselves from their original family unit.

Subsequent research could also explore issues such as the family formations pattern prevailing in that area during the period analysed, namely how two contrasting systems – northern and southern – merged within the Agro Pontino, as a consequence of the forced migrations of peasants from the northern regions. Indeed, still at the dawn of the 20th century, the family formation model prevailing in the agricultural society of north-eastern Italy – where the sharecropping-type agrarian contract prevailed – was

characterised by late and not universal marriage, and frequent patrilocal arrangement of the new couple, with several cohabiting nuclei in the same household. In contrast, in southern Italy, a massive presence of labourers employed in larger landholdings was usually associated with lower ages at marriage for both men and women and an almost universal access to marriage, as well as the neo-locality of new nuclei remaining of small size (Barbagli & Kertzer, 1992; Cocchi et al., 1996).

Overall, the first insights into the dataset used in this study suggest that the *Schede Poderali* archive is of great value for demographic research and the empirical validation of the interplay between population dynamics, political intervention, and the socio-economic development of the region.

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## **Data availability**

The *Schede Poderali* data underlying this article were provided by “*Museo delle Terre Pontine*” in the city of Latina. Data will be shared on request to the corresponding author with the permission of the museum.

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