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Photographing a lexicon of material life.

The images of Sardinia

by Max Leopold Wagner* (1905–1927)

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Abstract: In the history of the formation of the “inner gazes” of the contemporary Western world, the notions of allochrocity and orientalism have emerged as dominant keys to interpretation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, photography, accompanied by cinema, contributed strongly to fixing an image of traditional European societies in a contradictory key, between positivism and exotic fascination. The case of the great linguist Max Leopold Wagner, with his research in Sardinia between 1905 and 1927, supported by a systematic photographic activity, is significant for the encounter between an analytical and classificatory understanding of the images of people, objects, and landscapes of the rural island world and an explicit reference to the linguistic and lexical dimension of the culture he encountered. But within and beyond these levels emerge empathic and projective attitudes that call into question the aforementioned interpretive categories proper to the current debate in visual ethnography.

Keywords: Sardinia; material culture; classificatory images; orientalist visions; allochronic visions.

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* The images reproduced in this issue come from the archives of Ilisso Edizioni, Nuoro and from the AIS Archive of the Sprach-und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz (Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas of Italy and Southern Switzerland), Berne.

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Wagner, the wandering intellectual hero

Max Leopold Wagner was born in Munich on September 17th1880. He studied modern Greek and Russian at the University of Munich. In Paris (1900-1901) he encountered Romance linguistics. In 1902, in Florence, he read an essay by Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke on the language of the *Condaghe di San Pietro di Silki*, one of the most important documents on medieval *Logudorese*. He returned to study in Munich and decided to conclude his academic course with a thesis on word formation in the Sardinian language. The work earned him a prize that enabled him to undertake his first study trip to Sardinia. He spent time between 1904 and 1905 crossing the island on his bicycle, travelling on horseback or in precarious postal stagecoaches. He visited 75 villages and was fascinated by the Gennargentu massif. In 1907 he wrote his first book on the Sardinian language. From Sardinia, his curiosity took him from 1907 to 1911 to Constantinople, where he lived, teaching English and French at the *Deutsche Oberrealschule* in the Ottoman capital. His aim was to study Judeo-Spanish. He received scholarships that enabled him to make important excursions to European and Asian Turkey, where he again met Sephardic Jewish groups who had emigrated from Spain. On his return home he spent some time in Hamburg as an assistant at the *Romanisches Seminar* of the *Kolonialinstitut* and finally went to Mexico on a grant from the American Institute of Anthropology, where he lived from 1913 to 1914. He studied the Spanish of America, Mexican furbish jargon and ancient Mexican manuscripts. In 1915 Wagner was in Berlin, where, after a period as a lecturer, he became adjunct professor of Romance Philology in 1921 and published *Das ländliche Leben Sardiniens im Spiegel der Sprache. Kulturhistorisch-sprachliche Untersuchungen (La vita rustica in Sardegna, The rural life in Sardinia)*. He deepened the theme of the relationship between ethnographic investigation and linguistic research, the subject of his inaugural lecture on the course. His university career came to an abrupt end in 1924 and Wagner continued his wanderings¹. From 1924 to 1930 he was in Italy, in Rome and Naples. During these years he worked on the Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas of Italy and Switzerland, AIS (November 1925-July 1927) and, while teaching at the University of Rome, he travelled several times to Spain and North Africa. After a period in Germany, he taught at the University of Coimbra from 1934 to 1937 and spent the dark years of the Second World War back in Rome, at the Italian Institute of Germanic Studies, as scientific director of the German-Italian and Italian-German dictionary, which was never printed. After the war, he continued to wander between cultural and teaching centres; from 1947 to 1951 he taught in Coimbra as a visiting professor, interspersing his activities as visiting professor at the University of Urbana (Illinois). In 1951 Wagner was seventy-one years old and was welcomed to Washington by his great friend and patron Raphael G. Urciolo. The last ten years of his life were peacefully spent completing his work, his major achievement being the *Dizionario Etimologico Sardo*, (DES) which was published in fascicles in Heidelberg from 1957 onwards. He died in Washington on July 9th1962.

Giulio Paulis, the source of these brief biographical notes on Wagner (Paulis 1997), highlights the aspect of wandering as a choice of life, even a scientific one, made by the great linguist. His invariable rule was to always study the language and culture he sometimes dealt with in the field, always in direct contact with the speakers.

A specialist in lexical problems and, above all, a great etymologist, Wagner began his activity as a linguist at a time when etymological practice was dominated by consideration of phonetic facts: it was enough for phonetics to go "by the book" for an etymology to be considered satisfactory, and if there were any difficulties with this aspect, every possible ploy was employed (...). Little attention was paid to the semantic aspect and to the relationship with the objective reality designated by the words. Wagner soon developed a strong intolerance of these artificial constructions and bookish etymologies (...), but

more generally towards a purely theoretical and abstract approach to living languages. He therefore made Goethe's motto "*Ein Blick ins Buch und zwei ins Leben*" his own and maintained that the linguist must go among the people whose language and culture he intends to analyse, in order to share their lives and everyday experiences. (Paulis 1996, p. 12).

The experience of seeing in Wagner between writing and images

Max Leopold Wagner came to Sardinia for the first time in November 1904. He was 24 years old. "An independent and free spirit ... he did not like to travel the beaten track and wanted to make the world his home", notes Giulio Paulis (2001, p. 7). After a period in Cagliari, he began his journey the following year. "When, in the spring of 1905, I set out to travel the length and breadth of the island by bicycle with my friend Eugen Burger (...) I set myself the goal of getting to know the territory, its antiquities, its life and its customs, rather than carrying out linguistic research. However, as the journey progressed, linguistic interests came to the fore" (Wagner 1958, in Paulis 1996, pp. 10-11).

Looking at the photographic corpus produced by Max Leopold Wagner between 1905 and 1927 therefore requires us to interpret its nature in relation to this change in the author's perspective of investigation. Many clues lead us to recognise a considerable complexity and a dense interweaving of observation postures in these images. Some of them seem to refer to human experiences and cognitive practices that are not exactly operating at the moment of their realization. Sometimes the images seem to precede or follow the observer's vision. This is how I intend to verify the hypothesis that in the decades of work Wagner spent studying Sardinia and its linguistic varieties, vision is a sphere of human, intellectual, emotional and aesthetic experiences that are only partly expressed in the images he produced, and which extend to his ethnographic and linguistic work as a whole. Far from belittling them, it is instead necessary to interrogate the photographs selected in this essay in the light of a plurality of access points, which include the *Dizionario Etimologico Sardo* (Sardinian Etymological Dictionary), the contributions to the AIS (*Atlante Linguistico dell'Italia e della Svizzera*, Linguistic Atlas of Italy and Switzerland), the essay on Sardinian material culture in *La Vita Rustica* (1996) and finally, and perhaps most characteristically, in the *Immagini di viaggio* (Travel Pictures) (2001), referred here simply as *Reisebilder*. In these works, one can grasp the close correlation between "words" and "things" the linguist from Munich constantly respects as he proceeds in his mapping of the Sardinian language, in which the "thing" is often present through its image.

We are therefore faced with a primary vocation of these images, especially those collected in the two-year period 1926-27, that is to serve as a documentary. Further explanation is necessary to allow us to understand their connection with the drafting of the AIS, a project in which Wagner was an active participant. The study of dialects for this project was set up according to the criteria of 'linguistic geography', i. e. with the drafting of a meticulous mapping of the idiom spoken in the area in question, which would facilitate the comparison of phonetic, morphological and syntactic features between the languages. The comparison is made possible by the "words and things" method, according to "...the fundamental principle that, (...) many words, passing from one language to another, do not do so alone, but in the company of the objects to which they refer" (Miraglia 2008, p. 19). It was therefore necessary to verify *in situ* not only the words but also the things. A series of survey sheets based on a structured questionnaire and administered in chosen locations in order to create a network, or points, of a systematic survey, was flanked by the corresponding photograph, "...that is, the photograph showing the referents or sign equivalents of the things named by the words" (ib.). This is why in the corpus proposed here we so often come across photographs - photochemical

recordings of moments of lived reality - which instead present themselves as timeless iconic extrapolations of a lexicon of traditional Sardinian material culture. In this case, a plough photographed in Mògoro, removed from a stable or shed and exposed to sunlight in a courtyard, serves first and foremost as an illustration of a carefully filed lexicographic item. It is a way of seeing and looking at something that seems to have already been “known” and assimilated by a questioning that is carried out before the moment of shooting. The diversity of each tool, the classification, the logic of the variants have already been set up and carried out in a universalising filing perspective, intertwined with the respective linguistic data. The images thus seem, for the most part, to have the role of illustrating a documented repertoire of variations in “human types”, clothing, dwellings, cultivation and breeding tools, and women’s domestic activities. This repertory character is intermittently intertwined with a posture of vision that Francesco Faeta has indicated as distinctive of the “internal gaze” of European intellectuals towards the subaltern classes of the 20th century: Heterotopia and Allochry, which consists in seeing them as either affected by a kind of spatial distortion, according to which they seem to be “other places”, or a temporal one which makes them appear as “survivors”, as immersed in a dimension in which time is no longer linear but becomes immobile or at most, cyclical (Faeta 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2019).

Marina Miraglia has rightly observed that, after all, the great projects of linguistic documentation in the European area in the first decades of the 20th century, such as the AIS, were also based on the awareness of the epochal upheaval that the cultural life of the European peasant world “out of time”, or out of modernity, was undergoing, due to the growth and spread of technology and industrial production criteria. It was therefore necessary to rescue traditional cultural heritages in order to hand them over to the new generations. (Miraglia 2008, p. 19). What distinguishes Wagner is the fact that the emotions induced by the encounter with a civilisation “out of time”, an emotional gratification that increases as the scholar penetrates the more internal, more isolated and therefore more conservative regions, is expressed in a peculiar link between text and image. Here it is the first medium that defines the experience of vision as a sensory one, while we frequently witness a sort of semantic diversion in the images. The photographs serve, as already noted, to hypostatise a meaning, to exemplify the lemma, the word of a lexicon in the process of formation: a “plough”, a “bread oven”, a series of “work tools”, while the flow of life, the coexistence between the observer and the observed object imprinted in the photograph emerge as a secondary act, as a clue that has escaped the control of its creator. It is important not to blame Wagner for these apparent photographic *défaillances*. His images were taken with a 9x12 folding camera, transportable and relatively quick to use, which nevertheless required a tripod, framing and focus preparation, including a ground glass screen that had to be replaced before exposure with the sensitive plate. All this required long set-up times and made it difficult to take instant shots. It is also because of these objective technical limitations that if we are to find the feeling of immediacy and pervasiveness of the intentional visual act in Wagner (MacDougall 2006), we must paradoxically turn to his writing. In particular, as already noted, to the *Reisebilder aus Sardinien* of 1907-1908. The “travel images” he proposes are visions in the literal sense.

At the sight of the Gennargentu massif, he does not hide his initial disappointment. The island’s highest peak appears to him as “a long, extended mountain ridge”, without any peaks or real elevation. However, if you take a closer look, you can see its unusual extension: it is a true giant, its surface is enormous (Wagner 2001, p. 65). Entering the Nuoro area, he observes: “simple and harsh like the nature of these places, man has also preserved his patriarchal customs and his conservative language” (p. 75). The gaze intensifies and seeks a perceptive homology between landscape and human beings. Wagner mentions banditry. He speaks of it as a phenomenon recently eradicated

with drastic military measures. However, he does not see this as a dangerous place, if approached with reasonable caution and a predisposition for curiosity and sensitivity. These are uncharted lands. Travel there is anything but easy. However, every sacrifice is justified by the discovery that this area preserves: “traditions and customs of the past, and where the inhabitants – handsome, free men - make up for all the hardships” (p. 76). The comparison between those who live in the Nuoro area and the inhabitants of southern Sardinian is merciless: the latter are pale, due to malaria, small, servile because of their Spanish (?) character, while the Sardinian from the interior is tall, proud, fond of “the free and untamed life in contact with wild nature” (ibid.). “There is no doubt that in these mountains the purity of the ancient Sardinian race has been preserved far better than on the plains, repeatedly submerged by new invaders” (p. 76). For the *Reisebilder*, therefore, the vision, the ecstatic contemplation of this “ancient” humanity is gratification, a compensation for the discomforts of the journey and the fatigue of having to deal with at times the demands of local hospitality. But there are more surprises to come. In spite of the high rate of illiteracy noted by Wagner, he is amazed at the clarity and relevance of the answers given by the young people he meets on the way, young people who have never set foot outside their own district (pp. 77-78). The description of Nuoro, a village of seven thousand inhabitants, is vivid and full of admiration. He takes great pleasure in observing, from the table of a café on Corso Garibaldi, “the traditional costumes of the whole area (...), beautiful women with dark eyebrows, men who boldly observe them and old patriarchs with eyes that are still untamed and gleaming” (p. 81). After having spent time on Monte Ortobene with Grazia Deledda, as he is riding his horse through an oak grove, he meets the priest of the little church of Nostra Signora del Monte, who is also on horseback, holding an umbrella in one hand to protect himself from the sun and an open breviary in the other. A “painting”, as Wagner notes with ecstasy (p. 83).

More and more “snapshots” of the trip accumulate. In Bitti, once he and his friend Burger have made their study intentions clear, they are welcomed with all due honours. They approach many of the locals, including a beautiful girl who says to them with a smile: “You don’t joke in Bitti”. “Not even in love?” - asks Wagner mischievously – “In love even less than in other things”, replies the girl, becoming serious. Our Bavarian declares his pleasure in observing from the window of his Bitti lodgings, in the evening: “the groups that used to form: sitting and standing together, tall, strong men with thick hair, dressed in inconspicuous, dark local costume (...). Only their sharp gaze and glittering eyes revealed that they were talking about the events of the day, last night’s unpleasantness, the damage of livestock from the previous evening (...) Sardinians are extremely restrained in their movements” (p. 89). Immediately afterwards we find another enraptured glimpse of “... venerable old men, bearded and with white curly hair, unbowed by the weight of years and with eyes no less expressive than those of the young, true figures out of the Old Testament ...” (ibid.). Wagner’s gratified gaze focuses on the island’s inland regions, which stimulate his antiquarian interest, but he also finds something to feed his imaginary passion in other areas.

On their journey from Cagliari to the Sarrabus and Ogliastra, the two friends leave Quartu Sant’Elena behind them and cross a completely uninhabited part of the island along the Eastern Sardinian road (Orientale sarda), spending an adventurous night at the Campuomu roadman’s house and arriving the next day in Muravera. The two young Germans are immediately introduced to the local notables. They are obliged to eat and drink on many visits. The apotheosis takes place in the house of the mayor of Villaputzu. A procession of thirty people forms and accompanies the guests to an open-air dinner party. Young women wearing traditional costume serve wine to everyone. Wagner is clearly in raptures.² A guided tour of the orange and lemon groves follows. Scents, visions, golden oranges, magnificent lemons, quinces,

2 The position of guest in Wagner thus seems to be at least in part a constitutive element of his gaze and sensibility, his enthusiastic eye can be compared with other cases in which the figure of the researcher and visitor is projected humanly, but not naively, onto that of his guests, constructing a relevant form of empathy. For a comparison, see the notes that Vincenzo Esposito dedicates to the relationship between the American anthropologist and photographer Frank Cancian and the community of Lacedonia (province of Avellino, Campania) that was studied by him in a long stay starting in 1957 (Esposito 2019). The image of the harvest along with many others concerning agricultural work in Wagner can be usefully compared with the photographs taken in Sardinia in 1955 by Bruno Marano, an agricultural scientist from the University of Naples, who was then on the island for geological research in the Campidano region. Marano’s gaze is particularly acute on the productive world of Sardinian farmers, captured before the great modern transformations (see Marano 2006 and Tiragallo 2006).

pomegranates, medlar fruits. “We see in front of us a group of young girls of ancient beauty, coming from the nearby fountain, who, with amphoras on their heads, look like living versions of the caryatids of the Erechtheion, while from the houses resounds the plaintive song of the dirge with which the women accompany their work at the loom” (p. 111). The glimpse is vivid and exemplary of Wagner’s enamoured gaze, which is devoid of any linguistic remarks in the whole chapter on the Sarrabus in the *Reisebild*.

In several of her recent essays on the relationship between nature, landscape and culture in Sardinia as seen through German-language travel literature and fiction, Valentina Serra has noted that Wagner can be considered the leader, in his cultural context of origin, of a then constant interpretation of “Sardinian identity”, in which the correspondence between landscape and ethos (character) emerges above all through perceptive experiences. This is quite evident in the following passage, taken from Wagner’s first essay on Sardinian poetry translated into Italian, which describes his contemplation of the Santa Barbara nuraghe in Macomer:

I remember that this correspondence between the character of the people and the landscape became clear to me when I visited the nuraghe of Santa Barbara near Macomer. From the village that stretches upwards, blackish, one descends along goat paths to the bed of a small stream, from there one climbs again and through thistles and thorns one arrives at the solemn monument of “remote antiquity”: everything inside is rock. On the other side of the stream the track of the Nuoro railway runs high up, extruding from the rock, I was looking down on this dark valley that seemed depopulated, when suddenly from the bottom echoed the stretched out and slightly tremulous notes of a *mutu*: I saw the singer, a young girl rinsing her laundry in the smokehouse: the melancholy song rang out from the steep sides of the mountain, and the last verses sounded even louder: then everything fell into the deepest silence. Considered in the midst of the nature in which they are born, the *mutos* have an inexpressible charm, and it is in that environment that they are understood. (Wagner 1906, pp. 389-390)

Serra continues: “Wagner’s description of the landscape is a kind of synesthetic perception involving sight (the nuraghe, the brook, the railway track and, finally, the girl washing her clothes), hearing (the brook, the melancholy song and then the silence) and touch (thistles and thorns). It is only through this multiple sensation that the narrator comes to understand the island landscape and its indissoluble link with local cultural manifestations: in this sense the *mutos* can only be fully understood in nature, in the environment that inspired them.” (Serra 2015, p. 88-89). In German-language travel literature from the 17th century onwards, Sardinia emerges as a “remote and archaic place where the authenticity of customs and traditions has remained intact” (Serra 2011, p. 14). As early as 1869, Baron Heinrich Von Maltzan himself expressed his fear of the future “corruption” and degradation of this authenticity due to tourism. A fear shared many years later by Ernst Jünger (1955, 1995) and expressed in 1958 by Wagner himself, who in his old age looked back with serene nostalgia on his research experience on the island (in Paulis 1998, p. 1218). For Jünger, Sardinia and islands in general are “a homeland par excellence, the only refuge still possible for human beings in search of genuine and immediate contact with cosmic forces, a mysterious archaic dimension that must necessarily be recovered today” (Serra 2011, p. 35). The journey to Sardinia, in this sense, would therefore not simply be an immersion in the “primitive”, but rather a journey of maturation, marked by a concept of circularity, of “eternal return”; “... the search for an original spiritual communion between man and the universe on an island that undergoes a substantial mythical and magical-fairy-tale transfiguration”. (p. 36).

Wanted their gaze on the island and its inhabitants to be connoted with a Eurocentrism imbued with an interest in what was perceived as genuineness but also as pathologies or cultural delays. Münster for example hypothesised that it was almost psychologically difficult for Sardinians to enter a historical dimension, causing them to live in an eternal present “that would not allow them to take their destiny into their own hands” (Serra 2015, p. 55).

Sardinia beyond language. “Ein Blick ins Buch und zwei ins Leben”.

Do the German linguist’s photographs of Sardinia offer us the same imaginary freshness, the same freedom of mirroring between knowledge and desire as the written word? Before giving an answer, let us try to conduct a brief survey of this corpus of images in order to subject them to an empirical interrogation, according to an analytical model already experimented in a previous work on positivist criminological photography (Tiragallo 2013)³. The following notes are therefore impressions drawn from observation of the photographs selected for this essay. They are elements for deciphering Wagner’s overall photographic view of his object. We will try to focus our attention on: a) what the image says about the social situation it embodies, according to David MacDougall’s fundamental reflection on co-everything in the image of two subjects and two polarities of gazes (MacDougall 1998, p. 265), and according to Johanna Scherer’s remarks (1992, p. 32) on the social field that is activated around the photographic image; b) the extent and modes of the selective gaze expressed in the image, that is, what is inside and outside it, what is included and excluded in terms of spatiality and temporality; c) how the images relate to the experience of vision conveyed by Wagner on the texts just mentioned and on those of *La vita rustica* and how to interpret the friction on the ways in which the author nourishes his imagery of Sardinia; d) how to compare Wagner’s images with similar photographic projects, the main one being of course Paul Scheuermeier’s two-volume work on peasant culture in Italy and Switzerland (Scheuermeier 1980, ed. or. 1943, 1956). But one must also keep in mind those more general models of photography which up to late positivism had repertory and universalising purposes or, from a different interpretative angle, August Sander’s contemporary models of sociological and modal investigation of Sardinia (1927, 2009). In any case, it is worth bearing in mind some basic data regarding all the choices made by Wagner in the use of photography, as well as his clearly documentary orientation, linked to the aims of the AIS⁴. These characteristics are: a) a vivid representational realism; b) an absolute impartiality of gaze “...that could constantly expel, as extraneous and counterproductive, any subjective, interpretative or formal intrusiveness” (Miraglia 2008, p. 19); c) a suspension of judgement, a “discreet and impartial attitude that could never prevaricate on the subjects of the shot” (ibid.). Wagner shows no direct interest in photography - Miraglia notes - and neither did the linguist Ugo Pellis, who also travelled around Sardinia in the 1930s with his camera to contribute to the *Atlante Linguistico Italiano* (see AA.VV., *La fotografia in Sardegna*, 2008); instead, there is an interest in the indexical properties of the medium, “capable of highlighting the objectual and referential aspects of representation” (Miraglia 2008, p. 19).

Who is Max Leopold Wagner as a photographic subject? In 1905, as the first images show, he is a young man of slight stature, with a round face, moustaches that give him a bourgeois dignity, a physiognomy that is certainly not athletic. A mild but extremely attentive gaze. However, he showed his physical stamina when, with his partner Eugen Burger, he travelled around the island in all directions, often by bike, on horseback or even in the old stagecoaches that linked the inland villages in the interior. We find Wagner portrayed as he takes a walk along the quays of the port of Cagliari in 1906, certainly in the company of friends. (IMAGE 1).

3 I borrow this definition from the concept of filming intention developed by Marc-Henri Pualet in reference to the first evolutionary phases of the relationship between cinema and anthropology. Phases in which he identifies an attitude of taking charge of the linguistic potentialities of the photographic and cinematographic instrument in function of a communicative result expressly pursued beyond any naivety on the objective correspondence between image-reality in the work of photographer-filmmakers such as Edward Curtis and Thomas Reis, active in the first decades of the 20th century (see Pualet 2000, p. 39-43).

4 On the biography of Max Leopold Wagner, the publication of his correspondence with his friend and colleague Karl Jaberg, edited by Giovanni Masala Dessi, brings additional and important insights. Among other things, some of the circumstances that led Wagner to interrupt his university career in Berlin and turn to a wandering lifestyle emerge. It was, according to the letters (Masala Dessi, Wagner 2019, p. 50), a conspiracy hatched by nationalist members of academia hostile to the Bavarian who pushed him to resign by leveraging, on one occasion, his homosexuality, then sanctioned by the 1872 penal code. Wagner’s criminal rehabilitation would not occur until 1937 (Masala Dessi, Wagner, 2019, pp. 15-16). There is no definitive information on how linguist Max Leopold Wagner’s photographic fund was established. What remains today of his photographic repertoire? There are two main cores. The largest one belongs to the Ilisso publishing house and is the result of an acquisition in the mid-1990s. The second core is part of the archive of the AIS (Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas of Italy and Southern Switzerland) of the Institute of Italian Languages

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The second picture of Wagner is from the 1920s, when he was probably carrying out his Sardinian survey for the Linguistic Atlas of Italy and Switzerland project (AIS). He still has a round, slightly chubby face and a short moustache. His eyes are here a little feverish as he is portrayed sitting with a friend under the reed roof of an open-air wine bar, perhaps near the sea. On the table a litre of wine and two glasses filled with red; they are two intellectuals caught in a moment of pause in their walk around the city (IMAGE 2).



An important image is the group standing outside, which catches Wagner himself in the act of photographing those who are photographing him. Next to the tripod of his 9x12 are two friends, one with a camera in his hand, plus two barefoot children, clearly "belonging to the context". The background is that of the marshy areas which at the time lay at the bottom of the Bonaria hill in Cagliari. The year is 1906 (IMAGE 3).



Wagner is again a young bourgeois in a bowler hat. It is a cold day; the group is shot at the edge of a damp dirt coastal road. A first friction emerges. The *Reisebilder* does not contain a single line about Cagliari or any other city on the island. In Wagner's visual notes, however, the city is present, and not fleetingly. The panorama towards the west (IMAGE 4),



perhaps shot in the 1920s, bears witness to this. As does the attention paid to the fishermen as they unload their fish and lay up their boats (IMAGE 5).



He is struck by the lively atmosphere of the port, with the inevitable *piccioccus de crobi* portrayed on the quays near Via Roma, playing (IMAGE 6) or posing for the photographer (IMAGE 7).





But Wagner's perception of the diversified social types present in these public spaces is also acute, and they are the first to present themselves to the gaze of the stranger, like the prickly pear vendors in the square in front of the station, the herald of a rural reality that appears as a guest in urban spaces. Cagliari's port attracts the camera of the linguist who takes measurements and calculates distances between the wharves and the looming and distant upper city. Wagner was not interested in the then emerging bourgeois city. The antiquarian aspects and testimonies of the past prevailed: the church of San Bardilio at the foot of the hill Bonaria, a building that would later collapse, and the other early Christian church of San Saturnino is extraordinary.

It is one of the few that depicts a specific event that is "underway": the Easter procession along Corso Vittorio Emanuele with the statue of the Virgin proceeding, presumably, to *S'Incontru* with the risen Christ. Here Wagner obtains a true snapshot, with the crowd of believers filling the scene and transforming the city from a vague setting to a place teeming with life (IMAGE 8).



However, antiquarian interest prevails. In fact, we observe the entrance to the *Grotta della Vipera* in Sant'Avendrace and the incredible Punic necropolis that stretches along the road, with the tombs dug out of the limestone perfectly visible (IMAGE 9 a-b), or the necropolis in the foreground and the “Carlo Felice” state road in the background venturing solitarily into what was then (1906) open countryside.



The city's contiguity with the water and the life in the saltmarshes of its fishermen is also very well expressed (IMAGE 10).



Wagner's gaze seems to sharpen when he moves into the rural dimension. Here his photographs become much more contiguous to the accounts of the *Reisebilder*. Beyond the western lagoon we find the first farming villages, past Capoterra and Pula; we enter a courtyard in Domus de Maria, a dusty and desolate space in which a single-axle wagon stands out with the wind stirring the flaps of its roof, near to which a barefoot girl poses amongst a group of boys (IMAGE 11).



Then Teulada, documented with a panoramic shot and a photo of the interior of a courtyard of a *furriadroxiu* house in which four adults pose, dressed in the local style of costume with the unmistakable wide-brimmed felt hat of Spanish origin (IMAGE 12).



Sant'Antioco shows a farmer posing holding a sickle, in the act of (perhaps) grafting (IMAGE 13).

This is one of Wagner's few 'working' photographs. In these winter images one can see his interest in different styles of traditional dress. The four men in IMAGE 14 are posing for the camera.





This is probably a rare opportunity for them to experience portraiture . They make a good impression on the guests, whose shadows can be seen to the left of the picture. The focus in their dress is on protecting their head with a *berritta*, wrapped in a heavy thick cloth handkerchief. The armed horseman in IMAGE 15 shows a different attitude.



He does not simply lend his figure and appearance to Wagner's lens. Instead, his intention is to impersonate and return a model. A model of pride and virile dignity associated with a full acceptance of the social exchange taking place with the photographer. There is a hint of a smile in his gaze, he stands tall and strong, his right hand on the reins and his left hand on his hip, proudly holding a rifle on his shoulder. The same young man is portrayed in IMAGE 16 with his bride (?), both wearing festive costumes. Their smile of the couple is subdued but confident: they feel gratified by what the camera is doing and they also feel represented by the baskets and sieves hanging on the wall behind them.



In Sant'Antioco, the 'filing' photographs for the AIS begin. The word "plough", "*aràu*", "*aràdulu*" takes shape in the tool that we see artfully arranged above a basket and a crate in IMAGE 17. The image here "exemplifies", that is, it transforms something that in itself is not a signifier into a signifier, almost "moving forward" in its contours. One could comment, with Magritte: *ceci n'est pas un charrue* (this is not a plough). Whereas it is the extreme contingency of what we see in the background (the piglets, chickens, the badly plastered wall) that tells us that we are in the moment of a life experience, in an instant of Wagner's life shared with others and made persistent.



The same thing happens with the 'fork cart with beam' in IMAGE 18. Beyond the wall, on the right, the covered head of a woman peeps out, afraid to appear in the frame. The unexpected, tolerated, casual presences of people that surround the object of Wagner's defining interest continually shift his images from the domain of significant exemplarity to that of historicity and accidentality. They humanise them, in the sense that they provide a weak but unequivocal confirmation of the importance, of the unrepeatability of the cognitive action of the ethnologist-linguist, of his observant participation as Giulio Paulis has pointed out (2001).



We encounter discontinuities on this encyclopaedic itinerary. The domestic interior of a peasant's cottage in Mògoro (IMAGE 19 a - b) is surprising, where what could have become a posed portrait comes alive transformed into a moment of harmonious and fleeting coexistence, perhaps coinciding with

the click of the shutter. A father with a tanned face and hat on his head smiles, his son in his arms. His grandmother and his wife (?) are watching on the sides. A man in the foreground on the left seems to be engaged in something unrelated to the photographic moment. The hanging baskets 'contextualise' the whole scene. In the next image (b) the same father observes his son playing while sitting inside a basket, used as a crib with sides.



The interior is a domestic-rustic one, with fireplace and oven, but it is the action that predominates over the objects. Many images in this central part of the corpus document traits of traditional material culture. In most cases they are the technical practices of female knowledge, particularly spinning and weaving. It almost seems as if, for his own design, Wagner favoured those skills that could best be encountered in the streets of the villages he visited and that presented themselves before others to the traveller's gaze. IMAGE 20 shows an elderly woman demonstrating how to hold the spindle for binding the flax.



We are immersed in Mògoro's material culture. The images of tools and machines (olive press, millstone for grain, a wire cage for chicks, hut-shelter in the countryside) alternate with images taken from life. The harvesting of the grain (IMAGE 21), carried out by men wearing protective clothing and portrayed in a pose close to the action, as in the best images of Scheuermeier and Rohlf (1980).



Wagner achieves a beautiful synthesis of exemplarity and vital intensity with the image of the embroiderer and the basket-maker from Cabras (IMAGE 22).



These are women who reveal a transparent and unequivocal beauty. Despite the astonishment, anxiety and fearful apprehension of their gazes, they are fully involved in what Wagner is doing and add humanity to the image they are working on. In a similar situation the spinners of Busachi (IMAGE 23) show less fear, more confidence, perhaps less interest in the act of photographing.



The exploration of the material culture of a remote and archaic district continues. The full-wheeled ox cart from Busachi bears witness to this archaic nature, as does the figure of the cart-maker and the woman with the amphora standing on the wheel rim in the background (IMAGE 24).



The flax retting process is shown in the exemplary photo set in the courtyard of the house. The agricultural tools of Escalaplano just need a caption to specify their respective nomenclature (IMAGE 25).



Perhaps there is an underlying more comparative desire: to allow the outside eye to be mirrored in a unique but comparable family picture. A sociological sensibility also emerges in one of Wagner's rare "snapshot" photographs: the lively main streets of Tortolì, in the 1920s, a battered, streaked, creased frame, but full of information, such as the presence of adult "bourgeois" men in a group in the background, of others in "traditional" dress on the right, in the middle ground, and of women with various goods balanced on the head, in the foreground. There are no decipherable faces, the sun is at its peak, producing sharp shadows. The diaphragm is too closed, thus ideal markers of distances and social relations emerge in a public exchange, in which the street gutter on the right-hand side of the road indicates a hint of modernity (IMAGE 26).



We enter Barbagia and have our first contact with the kind of human being that most attracted Wagner's interest and appreciation. We see a farmer with his yoke of oxen coming towards the lens (IMAGE 27).



The female world of Desulo is portrayed in perhaps the most self-representative way. Women are all portrayed engrossed in domestic work, holding the distaff and spindle, taking care of babies. The costumes and attitudes of both men and women express a message of ancient pride which is far removed from the sordid and miserable life which can be glimpsed in other images. The bonnets, the collars, the white of their shirts speak a thousand words. The place for these self-representations is always the street, the public outdoors of Dèsula (IMAGE 28).



Still in Desulo we can see a variety of rural activities outside of farming, such as this aviary with cork hives, July 1926, IMAGE 29.



We then go up to Fonni, where we find images taken indoors, where the grain is being cleaned, but the act is not documented. In Fonni our technological lexicon is also enriched in some way : weaving on a horizontal loom, the preparation of a skein of wool (IMAGE 30).



We arrive in Nùoro, photographed as the backdrop of a cultivated field (IMAGE 31).



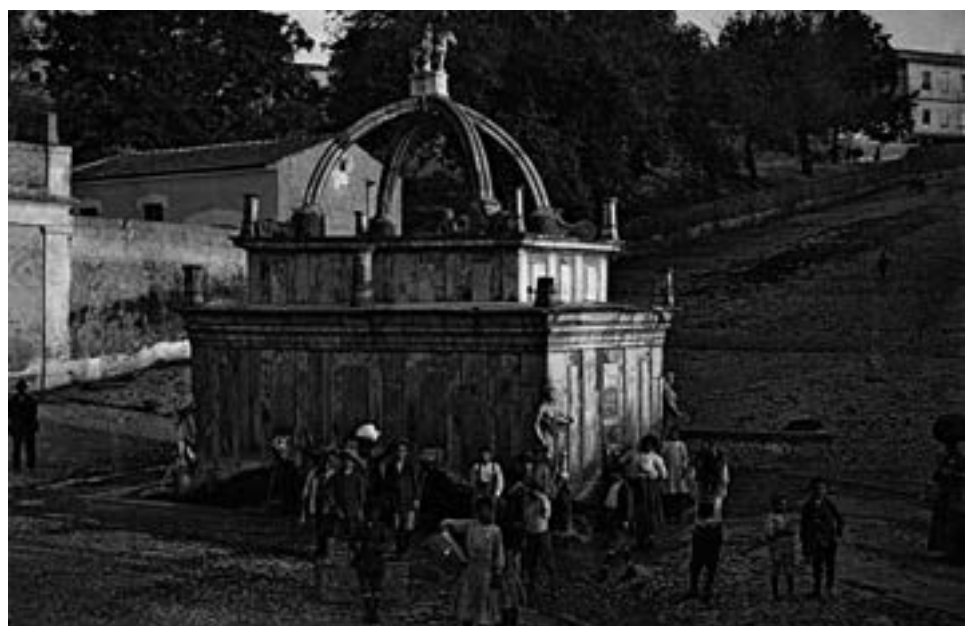
But we only find views and glimpses of urban settlements. Like the view from Sant'Onofrio hill, the Séuna district and an internal balcony in the Santu Perdu district. There are also some fine images of Bitti, in one of which a woman wearing traditional costume stands out, reminiscent of the brief approach reported in the *Reisebilder*. But the most interesting facts regard the social relations described in Tempio where a landowner is portrayed with a child in his dominos, near cheese making equipment (IMAGE 32).



Some differences emerge. The woman from Tempio holding the spindle and distaff, portrayed indoors in IMAGE 33, is dressed in a 'bourgeois' manner and on the wall behind her we can make out a print depicting St. Mark's Square in Venice.



Finally, in Sassari, Wagner is fascinated by the location of the Rosello fountain and the life that flows around it (IMAGE 34) and here, much better than in the images of Cagliari, Nuoro, Oristano and Alghero, we can capture the social life that comes alive around the fountain and which makes these photographs direct testimonies of everyday life.



In order to draw conclusions from this analysis, let us now proceed to categorise and classify this corpus into groupings that rather than expressing the thematisation of the photographed objects try to reflect the photographic intention of the author. We therefore have:

(a) *The words and the (images of) things.* Wagner's intention is to place the images of artefacts, tools, machines, parts of clothing, architectural and natural elements in such a way as to correspond to the word that designates them in the variants of Sardinian that he gradually examined, according to the method already mentioned, applied in his contributions to the AIS and to the drafting of *La vita rustica* (Wagner 2001).

b) *The natural and man-made landscape.* Here, Wagner's gaze observes environments rendered in long shots, almost always marked by man in the present and in the past. On the one hand, we find many images depicting inhabited centres and invariably placing them in a nature that seems to besiege them; sometimes made up of barren rises and rough rocks, sometimes, mostly in Barbagia, with trees and vegetation surrounding the compact inhabited areas. But even here, the name of the village seems to overwhelm the image.

c) *Human figures and work.* The human figure is captured in these photographs in two different ways. There are images that tend to simply isolate the appearance of the existence of people who are not called upon to do anything. They only have to lend their figure, their bodies, their unique clothes, their physiognomy. They are men and women who look into the camera with different attitudes and with different involvement. There is a contemplative intensity about them that the photograph partially renders. Other images, on the other hand, adhere more closely to Paul Scheuermeier and Gehrard Rohlf's point of view and their intention to capture the salient moment of a technical gesture within a precise operational chain. A third use of human figures is to contextualise a space, a device, an object that thus receives a dimension and proportions. These images of Wagner are marked, one might say constantly visited, by a theory of little boys and girls who appear in all sorts of ways in the images, mostly barefoot and in modest clothes, probably curious and fascinated by the devices and tinkering of the German visitor.

d) *Life caught in the act.* This category contains all those images, often belonging to the previous types, that bear the sign of some vital dynamic that spontaneously takes place as the shot is being taken. A moving procession, a yoke of oxen advancing unexpectedly along a village road towards the photographer, a moment of joy in a rural domestic interior amongst children in the arms of their parents and the pleasure of a visit.

Sardinia's historical times in Wagner's images

The first decades of the twentieth century saw considerable changes in the appearance of urban and rural landscapes throughout Europe. The images of this period often show radical interventions of rearrangement and rehabilitation of city centres, with the opening of new roads, the demolition of old military buildings and the inauguration of public utility structures such as markets, public wash houses, hospitals and factories. This relevance of cities as new 'bourgeois' centres, electrified, artificially lit, criss-crossed by tramways and increasing mobility, has been associated with a more interlocutory view of rural centres, which, in the case of the various European Southern regions, and in particular the Italian Mezzogiorno, is more inclined to perceive the historical and spatial distance from the driving centres of change. In the field of social and anthropological sciences, Francesco Faeta's work has made a major contribution to the dissemination and enrichment of visual anthropological themes in Italy. In his studies of images of Sardinia between the 19th and 20th centuries, Faeta identifies a common trace in the conception and creation of photographs, consisting firstly in a process of distancing in time and space;

secondly in a process of primitivisation and orientalisation; thirdly in the instrumentality of these options in the process of constructing the image of the national state (Faeta in Clemente 2015, Faeta 2019). A question of accommodating within the protected perimeter of 'us' a peripheral area represented, as marginal and adrift, within the framework of the interests of nationalism and capitalism; and fourthly in photography's contribution to shaping the figure of the other, playing a role in "managing the theatre of compatibility" (Faeta 2009, p. 25). Photography for Faeta is a means that - depending on needs and contingencies - can either distance Sardinia's cultural diversity from the authority of the Western eye or actually bring them closer - in space and time. In Sardinia too, the outcome of this "unequal" gaze is the prevailing tendency towards primitivisation (distancing in time) rather than orientalisation (distancing in space). In the early twentieth century, photography still gives us an antiquarian image of Sardinia, of an island out of time, according to the interpretative matrix that would seem so close to the perception and ethos of our Wagner, while after the Second World War, according to Faeta, the island is increasingly placed in an "orientalised" horizon and less and less in a "primitive" one. In fact, the canon of Neorealism produced a visual register common to all the gazes of the photographers who looked at the island on several occasions: that of the exoticisation of Sardinia, whose appeal and fascination arose, in Faeta's opinion, from the "photographic discovery of the beauty of the coasts, beaches and sea, combined with the fundamental presence of the obscure and picturesque barbarian nucleus" (Faeta 2010, p. 26).

Photography thus failed to establish itself as an innovative tool for interpreting reality and its changes. The sore point, for Faeta, is that the implementation of the radical transformations of the island that came about during the Second World War was ignored not only by photography, but also by the social sciences. The sociology of the *Piano di Rinascita* years sees the traditional world as holding back development and treats it as an obstacle. Anthropology and demology study the magical world, popular poetry and material culture from a conservative point of view. In the second half of the twentieth century what prevails is either an exotic view of Sardinia that aims at suggestion and beauty as 'regenerating' aesthetic experiences, or an urgent anthropology, which seeks above all traces of a world perceived as disappearing (Faeta 2019, pp. 155-164).

Max Leopold Wagner's photographs seem to support this thesis, as if his gaze, on the basis of the written and visual sources we have considered, expressed a sort of prototype, a case of a primitivising *ur*-gaze, capable of transferring the purity of language, which becomes increasingly crystalline as one reaches the heart of the island, to the level of visual feedback on the landscape and its inhabitants. Here it is easy, for example, to understand the sequence of portraits, figures and faces captured by his lens as the clearest evidence of this plausible affective and emotional projection. We will try to show that things are not so simple and that Wagner's photographs partly free themselves from the gaze of their maker and lead to different and further levels of perception and meaning. To do this, we must return to the question posed in the title of this paragraph. In a historiographic sense, what are the characteristics that mark the early twentieth-century Sardinia in which Wagner moves? An overview proposed by Manlio Brigaglia reveals some important dynamics such as the flight from the countryside and the reduction of cultivated areas, which also seem to be linked to the consequences of the trade war with France in the previous decades, the chronic lack of capital, the collapse of many banks and the expansion of usury (Brigaglia 1998, p. 516). In the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, the rapid and tumultuous expansion of the dairy industry, with Roman pecorino cheese and the increase in sheep population (pp. 517-518), was very significant. Precisely in 1906, practically during Wagner's first travels, huge trade union unrest shook the island's mining world, as well

as the working-class urban realities, which were associated, in the Giolittian age, with the separation of the Sardinian and urban mining world from the rural one (Brigaglia 1998, p. 519, Di Felice 2008, pp. 46-47). Another historical reality is the hitherto endemic presence of malaria, widely perceived and noted in the *Reisebilder*, and linked to another phenomenon which is perceived as structural in Sardinia: depopulation (Mattone 1998, p. 26 ff.). It is therefore the historical dimension that can help us place Wagner's images in a perspective that is useful for verifying the presence of this dimension in their analysis, despite the fact that they are subject to the hypothecation of a gaze that is not bound by time.

Giulio Angioni has argued that if Sardinia has lagged behind historically, this has not happened in the present, but mostly 'in other times', perhaps for reasons more geographical than strictly historical (Angioni 1998, p. 1125). In the common image, Sardinia "was once a place of negative difference", its diversity was felt as "naturalness, genuineness, archaicism, primitiveness, living prehistory, uncontaminated place, remoteness, exoticism..."; thus a "diversity as timelessness or as a non-linear and irreversible temporality, but cyclical..." (ibid.). Angioni acknowledges the island's lesser historical exposure to cultural influences and exchanges (p. 1126). Isolation and preservation are present, certainly, but nevertheless relative. All Sardinian cultural traditions, both cultured and popular, if analysed with a minimum of historical documentation, show complicated events of innovation, grafting, transformation, abandonment, revival, syncretism: in short, they show a depth and a historical concreteness ... (ibid.). Despite this, we perceive our diversities as fixed, as given "...although in the historical perspective the myths of autochthony and unaltered preservation soon dissolve..." (p. 1127). Pastoral monoculture in the inland area of Sardinia, as Angioni noted in 1998, is a phenomenon that only emerged a century ago, in relation to the introduction of industrial cheese-making (p. 1128). The cereal growing, viticulture, horticulture, arboriculture, wood craftsmanship and beekeeping have all declined and been lost in the mountain areas, together with the coordinated and combined exploitation of the soil (ibid.). Evidence of this historical co-presence of many coordinated activities in inland areas is, for example, the tripartition of the urban fabric of a centre like Nuoro, with the identifiable spaces of the social and working classes of the recent past: the bourgeoisie, the peasants (Séuna) and the shepherds (Santu Pedru). My hypothesis is that, if interrogated from the perspective of this slow but incessant historical becoming, in a linear and irreversible sense, many of Max Leopold Wagner's photographs also show traces. See for example IMAGE 27, the Barbagia farmer with oxen beam", IMAGE 29 of the beekeepers in Desulo and the beautiful panorama of Nuoro in IMAGE 31 with sheaves of wheat in the foreground.

This "ancient rural country", as Angioni notes, therefore has characteristics that have long linked a plurality of presences and activities, according to forms of integration of coexistence between agriculture and livestock farming that have been variously balanced in the different historical areas of the island. All of them, however, were marked by human settlements in a great concentration of compact villages, by the scarcity of buildings in the countryside, and by forms of habitation which, in Wagner's time, remained fairly stable around a few models of *a corte* or *palathiu* houses (p. 1131). While forms of shared distinction between cultivated and grazing areas prevailed in the southern plains and hillside areas, the higher areas of Barbagia and Ogliastra were the places "where the strongest and most structural rivalries between the productive classes took place for the use and possession, public or private, of pasture and woodland, woodland and acorn fields, places of shelter and watering places" (p. 1132). In the mountains too, as in the hills and on the plains, the abandonment of previously cultivated areas and pastoral monoculture have wiped out the traces of a previously polymorphous landscape, which was "agricultural, arboreal, horticultural and pastoral at the same time" (p. 1133). Those who read

the careful descriptions of production processes offered by *La vita rustica* can easily find a trace of this polymorphism and this intertwined coexistence of production models typical of the first part of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the best way to approach this photographic corpus is, in the end, to take into account the will and desire for discovery that animated the steps, eyes and camera of this restless and passionate polyglot. Wagner confesses in the *Reisebilder* that he was bored during his stay on the island of San Pietro, where the town of Carloforte, so orderly and symmetrical in its colonial layout, conveyed nothing to him, as did the spaces of the Sardinian towns (Wagner 2001, p. 58); while the discomforts of each of the excursions in Barbagia were amply repaid by the thousands of details and encounters that could be made while walking in the most humble of the narrow streets of its villages. We must give credit for this attention, recognise its nature as a gift and accept in it the spirit and intention of those who have lovingly presented it to us and who have thus enriched us.

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