Urban and community renaissance in the Caserta area: the “arts village” of Valogno

In the territory of Caserta, among the twenty-four villages near Sessa Aurunca, an exceptional presence for its intermittent history of light and shadow, grey and colours, is that of Valogno, a small village lying on a branch of the provincial road that from the Appian Way reaches Roccamonfina, on the slopes of the homonymous volcano. This paper, integrating aspects of urban history with those of the discipline of drawing, aims to bring Valogno to the attention of the scientific community as a unique example of the application of street art to urban regeneration, in its ethical declination, before its artistic one.

The street-art project (titled “The colours of grey” by the promoters) was moved on the one hand by the need to start a path of individual renaissance, and on the other by the idea of involving the entire local community to increase its sense of civic duty, rather than to business. The project has been developed with progressive enthusiasm over the last decade, managing to characterize this village as a singular “arts village”, because it uses art as a tool to push individual citizens to “give themselves” in favour of the welfare of the community.

Keywords:
Street art; Urban regeneration; History of the city; Inner areas; Valogno

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the territory of Caserta, among the twenty-four villages near Sessa Aurunca, an exceptional presence for its intermittent history of light and shadow, grey and colours, is that of Valogno, a small village lying on a branch of the provincial road that from the Appian Way reaches Roccamonfina, on the slopes of the homonymous volcano.

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2. VALOGNO, THE URBAN CONTEXT

This village, which was renowned in the geological sciences of modern and contemporary age for the quality of basaltic lava, has lived a long oblivion between renunciations and displacement, in the general impoverishment of small towns in the inland area, which led it to experience a massive emigration after the Second World War. As a consequence of these events from 1991 [ISTAT, 1991, p. 283] to the present day the resident population has shrunk to just eighty units and now there is a high percentage of uninhabited and also neglected houses, and a total absence of urban services.

Valogno – perched on the western slopes of the volcano of Roccamonfina – over time has been conforming as a spindle along a road converging towards the intersection of several creeks, original water routes useful for transporting the products of local industries.
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Its urban shape is well legible in the cartography entitled *Disegni originali della Carta dei dintorni di Napoli alla scala 1:20000* [1] (Valerio, 1993, pp. 640–644; Di Biasio & Conti, 2012) and made between 1836 and 1840 by the Royal Topographical Office of the former Kingdom of Naples (Fig. 1). In this drawing the mountainous territory, crossed by valleys and moats, is dotted with numerous small building clusters that are the hamlets of Sessa. This territory, as Giovan Battista Gagliardo pointed out, «non [era] che pochissimo abitata [...] ciò sarà forse avvenuto dall’essere i suoi villaggi tra loro molto vicini» [2] (Gagliardo, 1814, p. 7), highlighting precisely the rare and polycentric characteristic of the Aurunca area, which persisted, as the sources attest, since the Medieval commune period [3] (Di Marco, 1995, p. 187; Senatore, 2018, p. 349). In relation to the dynamics of settlement exploded since the late Middle Ages to obtain the increasingly widespread exploitation of the territory and of the abundant natural resources, Valogno (named in the aforementioned cartography Vologna piccolo alteration of Balogno or Baloneo [4] piccolo (Di Meo, 1819, p. 245; Diamare, 1906, p. 132), adjective that distinguished it from the neighboring hamlets of *S. Maria di Vologno* contributed especially to the local economy with the mines of the boulders (de Masi, 1756, p. 272) (Fig. 2).

The geological nature of the district of the Roccamonfina volcano had, in fact, encouraged a thriving mining activity intended to derive from basaltic lava a good building material worked as a coating of building artefacts, or as a paved road (so called basolato). In Valogno in particular, basaltic lava was hollowed out by the leucitofoiro, a compact and very tenacious stone from the extinct volcanoes themselves (Tenore, 1872, p. 25; Di Marco, 1995, pp. 167–181) that was used to carve the millstones to grind cereals. From the natural quarries located in the high seas – about 400 meters above sea level – the millstones reached the Porto delle mole on the Garigliano River, through the creeks that flowed on its left bank, giving rise to a fundamental activity in the pre-industrial food production system. This activity is remembered with an authentic millstone, donated by a stonecutter from Roccamonfina, and placed at the entrance of the village.

Here the same great availability of volcanic stones and a labour force evidently specialized in its working has determined not only the use of stone tools in peasant activities [such as the one used to crush legumes or rings fixed to the wall to bind animals], but also the diffusion on the fronts of buildings, often of non-courtly commission, of portals with rather marked recurring motifs, such as the presence of a few monolithic lava stone blocks, the support shelves, the nuts and the keystones – marked, as often happens in “high altitude” farmhouses in this territorial quadrant, by ashlars in key with cusped extrados (Farnaro, 2014, pp. 113-114; Giannattasio, 2009).

In many cases, moreover, the ashlar in key or on the head, is engraved with the date of construction, so that the wall can perform a clear “talking” function in the eyes of the passerby. The same stone-cutting skill and ancient apotropaic beliefs can also be linked to the presence on the chimneys of the houses or even in the quarries of the marcolfe (Fig. 3), faces roughly carved on the stones, whose severe and terrifying features were used to drive away negative influences from the families and places they controlled. A very ancient custom, frequent in the Italian Apennine centres (Orsini, n.d.; Zati, n.d.), of which some houses of this village still retain traces.

Mining, although progressively decreasing, has fuelled the economy of Valogno until the middle of the last century, as evidenced by the documentation kept at the State Archives of Naples, but its subsequent cessation, together with the general depopulation towards the cities of industrialized Europe, led to the gradual removal of the inhabitants from the village and the consequent loss of its identity. As if by magic, in the last ten years, the history of the village has suddenly been rekindled with unforeseen lights and features, made of bright colours and painted walls, which animated its alleys with visitor intrigued by the new “arts village”, with the artists who have often stayed there.

![Fig. 3 - The quarries of San Felice near Valogno (photo by Alessandro Santulli).](http://disegnarecon.univaq.it)
to give vent to their creativity, and again with photographers and journalists attracted by the opportunity to document and disseminate, especially on the internet, the surprising phenomenon in progress entitled “The colours of grey” (Fig. 4).

It is a specific conversion that, in recent decades, has concerned many Italian towns or large areas of the metropolises outskirts, driven by the idea of being able to exploit street art as a work of physical, social and economic regeneration «[...] attraverso l’evocazione grafica di un concetto di “bellezza” atto a promuovere sviluppo locale e crescita culturale» [5] (Zerlenga et al., 2018, p. 1247). Street art, as it is known, has lost its initial protest value thanks to these recent experiences, and it is being configured more properly as a form of applied art that combines artistic languages, techniques of representation and spontaneous or author architecture, managing to trigger the aesthetic redevelopment of places, through which different effects of social and moral quality can be generated, without adding volumes [Arnaldi, 2017; Palestini & Basso, 2018]. The impulse and the reasons that animated these episodes in Italy are of various nature: the research by the muralists of walls on which to manifest this contemporary art form (e.g. Dozza, Orgosolo, Ariano Irpino, Vallesaccarda, Monteleone); the integration of primary activities such as summer or food and wine tourism with new collective interests (such as Diamante, Sant’Angelo le Fratte, Cibiana di Cadore); or the desirable brake on depopulation through a communication tool that has become attractive and easy to spread (Civitacampomarano, Nureci, Valloria).

In Valogno, this peculiar process of urban regeneration was not triggered by the municipal administration, but by its citizens and, above all, to two “modern” patrons, who took refuge there in search of a project in which to regenerate their family life. Giovanni Casale and Dora Mesolella, with their three children, moved from Rome to Valogno to live the new course of their...
community adventure in the silence of the small village, and sought the inspiration to look forward, share hopes, realize experiences of a new authentic sociality in the silence of the narrow alleys and in relations with the few fellow citizens. Since 2008, here they have promoted a progressive intervention of beautification of the outer walls of the anonymous existing buildings, constituting a “choral laboratory” aimed at “erasing the ugly” existing. The ugly physical, or architectural, was generated over time by the uncontrolled work of the inhabitants who did not hesitate to change the urban context with additions, demolitions and alterations, and did not hesitate to engrave the composition of the building facades, with unsightly and inconsistent forms [Pino, 2019]. The “ugly” is thus more extensive to the general urban context, made for this neglected and devoid of any interest. The “ugly” is also related to the emotions of Giovanni and Dora, who were recoiled and terrified by the discovery of the incurable disease of a child, and it is also that of the entire community that was symbolically urged to cure the real and virtual spaces of their existence.

Turning from abandonment to care, from irresponsibility to involvement, “from gray to colour”, the murals and other creative experiences – that the two modern patrons have made in Valogno over more than a decade, as tools of immediate, instinctive, amplified but simple communication – were able to point out to the world the existence of the village and to push the local community, and the internet one, to a pressing need for attention, tying people around a new common project. Nowadays, there are about eighty works of urban art; they are painted or sometimes sculpted on the walls, with various traits – proper to the expressive languages of each artist – that are sometimes fairy-tale, sometimes didactic, sometimes commemorative; these works have been created – or rather donated – by the artists involved gradually in the regeneration program with pride and a spirit of sharing.

In most cases, the works are characterized by a limited height extension – often not exceeding the ground level – because of the desire to accompany

Fig. 6 - GIS map of the street-art works: wall painting and other artistic genre.
the gaze of passers-by, and because of the context characterized by streets and alleys of very small width – the main Via Palazzo has an average roadway of 3 meters –, and also for safety during execution and probably property issues. This prerogative clearly distinguishes them from the similar Campania examples made on high walls of blocks of flats (such as in Lioni and Bonito, in the district of Avellino), or on walls of considerable length, as in San Bartolomeo in Galdo (in the district of Benevento), and in Baronissi (near Salerno). The works are carried out from the first building available in front of the street at the entrance of the village – the school disused for obvious lack of students – along the main street and in its few lateral branches – Via Razzini and Via Natali above all –, outlining a varied crossing route that also leads to meet the few important architectural testimonies of its history.

At the village entrance, there is St. Michael Archangel church, with the side bell tower, characterized by a single nave, rectangular apse and entrance portal with a frescoed bezel [the church was built in place of another more distant, located in St. Angel village on the top of the hill (Napolitano et al., 2013, pp. 205-207), probably built in the early 14th century]. In the heart of the village, there is St. Anthony of Padua chapel, in the little square Bernardino Mazzeo; it is an abnormal fusion of a civil clock-tower with a religious hall. Then, the third church inside the village is the simple St. Joseph chapel, to which is linked the origin of the most important local fair for the inhabitants. On the opposite front, at 20-24 of Via Palazzo, there is the baronial palace [6] which is complex building with courtyard, probably grown on a pre-existing Catalan structure (Fig. 5); it is qualified by the adjoining hanging garden that is bordered by a wall in squared tuff, by a beautiful lava-stone portal, on which the date 1855 is engraved, and by the stucco decorations stretched out on the main facade of the palace. The latter is a peculiarity that can be considered rare, and as an interesting proof of the prominent parietal ornamentation in the Campania territory. This type of parietal decoration creates geometric squares of circles and polygons com-
bined to form flowery silhouettes with the coating stucco (Biscontin & Driussi, 2001; Pasquini, 2002) as it’s possible to see on many fronts of religious or pure noble buildings.

In the baronial palace of Valogno, the mixed ornate bands – made by undercutting bands of smooth plaster on the curbed surface – alternate combinations of semi-circles, comparable to stylized flowers, with irregular octagons with concave diagonal sides, and central smaller medallions. Studies of authentic sources, meticulous findings and material investigations will allow us to more closely frame the technical and cultural root that characterizes this little-known expression of the local artistic culture. In the meantime we can limit ourselves to associate to this episode similar cases such as, for example, in the Caserta area in Carinola, in the farmhouse of S. Ruosi, the main front of the Ciocchi farm, founded between the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century (Amelio, 2017); in the Benevento area, in Solopaca, both the front of the SS. Body of Christ church and the atrium of the Ceva Grimaldi palace, and in S. Agata dei Goti the castle; in the Salerno area, instead, we can mention the monastery of S. Maria degli Angeli in Montoro.

These parietal treatments, obtained by impression on the well-prepared wall, reinterpret the idea of the painted facade that specifically used drawings and colours to explain symbolism, to create spatial depths and illusory images, and to simulate more or less valuable materials. These parietal treatments, in fact, bring to the perspectives the refined effects of the pictorial drawing with the relief effect, combining the decorative function with the protective one, also through the use of low-cost materials, whose modelling was evidently entrusted to specialized workers.

The facade of the baronial palace of the small farmhouse of Sessa Aurunca preserves, therefore, an unusual decorative system conceived with simplicity by the local workers, which ideally combines the current wall art form of the murals with the one that appeared on the curtain of the main emergency of the village at the time of its first flourishing season of life.

Fig. 8 - Valogno, the mural La fuga. I Briganti (The Horde. The Robbers), by Salvo Caracagnano, along via Razzini.

Fig. 9 - Valogno, the mural dedicated to Matilde Serao, by Angelo Guadagnino and Antonio Picozzi, along via Palazzo.
3. THE INFORMATION SYSTEM OF URBAN ARTWORKS IN VALOGNO

After noting the heterogeneity, the number and the spread of the murals and other works present in the urban context of Valogno – highlighted in Figure 6 – the research was initially focused on their cataloguing in a Geographical Information System, with the aim of systematizing the information obtained from multiple sources, including oral information provided by the protagonists of the events, beyond the on-site investigation. The cataloguing was conducted according to a synthetic form that follows the main items of the official form of the Istituto Centrale del Catalogo e della Documentazione [ICCD], dedicated to Opere d’Arte Contemporanee (Contemporary Works of Art, OAC 3.0; MIBACT & ICCD, 2004) [7], and has been linked to the shape elements in GIS that geo-localize all artistic examples in the village. The GIS project – developed in an open source software – was organized from the topographic layer (the Regional Technical Charter, 2014 edition) in the ETRS89 reference system (UTM33N cartographic projection). The historical cartography (1836-40) and the most recent land maps have been geo-referred to this layer, in order to draw the buildings and road fabric of the village at 1:2000 scale (Fig.2).

The urban artworks recorded on site were drawn in GIS according to a geometric criterion that took into account the respective horizontal development, also based on the cartographic graphic error corresponding to the scale. Therefore, cases with a plan extension greater than 40 cm (especially the murals) have been drawn as polyline, adhering to the wall perimeter of the buildings on which they develop in reality; in contrast, cases with a lower extent were exemplified with points [8].

At the end of on-site survey, GIS cataloguing and vectorization, among the urban artworks – collectively signed by more or less well-known authors of this creative field [9] but still considered worthy of interest as integral parts of the project – it
is possible to count: 57 pictorial works (about m² 230, and about m² 500); 10 ceramics, connected to the historical manufacturing tradition of the nearby farmhouses of Cascano and Corbara; 4 stone works and 2 metal ones [10]. It is evident that the murals promoted by the project “The colours of grey” are predominant for numerous and urban distribution – as shown in Figure 6 – compared to the other works, according to a variety of artistic techniques also found in other art villages in Campania, including Furore, in the Amalfi Coast, where ceramic panels, marble sculptures, iron, lead, wood and other materials are alternated with murals.

Among the data classified in relation to the specifics of the murals of Valogno, three aspects are to be noted, and two of them were introduced in cataloguing as an implementation of the ICCD taxonomy [11] (Greco, 2017; Ulmer, 2017). In addition to the usual dimensional data, the average height of the artistic works from the campaign plan has been recorded, in order to emphasize their variety of placement on the facades of buildings, and above all the relationship between the position in height, and the visual perception of the works in the perspectives of the road. The relationship among the pictorial work, the wall support and its technological equipment is another aspect recorded, as a direct observation of the village case studies, and as can be seen in many and much more well-known examples. In other words, within the group of murals, it was noted that in some cases the author took into account pre-existing buildings, such as portals, windows, niches, plaster fragments – to mention the most recurrent cases –, integrating them into the iconographic composition, or he was strongly conditioned in the drafting; in other cases, instead, the muralist iconography remained autonomous from the wall context: these three thematic variabilities are summarized in Figure 7.

The urban artworks preservation, in comparison with the execution chronology (between 2008 and 2020), finally shows that the works are on average in discrete/good condition, due to the favourable environmental condition in Valogno. In particular, the proportion between the roadway and the height of the building facades, the limited exposure to the Sun and the winds of many urban facades have facilitated the preservation of pictorial works by external agents, especially compared with what happens in metropolitan contexts, where the large sections of road expose the masonry surfaces to the weather. The experimental application of cataloguing to the Valogno examples and their transposition in GIS aim to configure technical support for the urban fabric surveying through which we could further
implement important aspects, and also propose the approach to the systematic study of mural works, as a phenomenon at urban and territorial scale through proper surveying tools.

4. DRAWINGS “ON THE WALLS”

Nowadays, the “drawing on the walls” seems therefore to be a distinctive feature of the buildings facades in Valogno, as a tool bearer of beauty and not of denunciation, as an expedient useful to qualify somewhat characteristic context, so much so that it becomes an eclectic urban workshop open to the creative activities of many muralists. Among these muralists there are both some forefathers of this pictorial sector, involved in the work of the first Italian dissemination of this artistic phenomenon since the eighties of the twentieth century [they are Franco Mora from Emilia, Salvo Caramagno and Carmen Crisafulli from Sicily] [12] and both emerging or established young people [e.g. Alessandra Carloni from Rome, Valentino Silvestre from Naples, Emanuele Riccio from Caserta, Silvio and Hemmanuel Fusco, Michele Roberti from Valogno]. The following subjects of the paintings have been entrusted to them, often in agreement with Giovanni and Dora Casale: the scenes inspired by local history and crafts – the fair of St. Michael, the brigandage, the harvesting, the processing of oil – [Figures 8-10]; the quotes of the southern folk beliefs of superstition referring to the mazzamurello – as the Treccani Dictionary states “folletto del folclore romano e napoletano, in forma d’uomo, che spaventa le persone cattive ma è buono con quelle buone” [13] (“mazzamurèllo”, n.d.) –; or the evocative paintings of the artistic program initiated by the two promoters, such as Valentino Silvestre’s large panel dedicated to Frida Kahlo, or that by Salvo Caramagno titled Lo studio del pittore [Fig. 11]; the first proposes by analogy the prevailing connotation of the “new” Valogno village, through the Mexican artist raped by the disease and resurrected to new life thanks to art; the second sums up the contribution that mural painting makes to buildings in search of redemption, with naïf traits [Fig. 12]. These themes of local tradition and daily life are used in the iconography of the murals of some small Campania centres: for example, Piana Vetrale (hamlet of Orria), village of the inner area of Cilento, has a street art gallery inspired by these subjects in its alleys, for about thirty years [Pellecchia, 2012, pp. 200-201].

In this urban-scale board, each author left own marks using very different language codes, techniques and approaches in dialogue with the existing one. In this sense, in fact, it must be observed that in many cases the inaccuracies, the scraps of the masonry, the openings, and the ornamental parts present on the walls were involved in the

http://disegnarecon.univaq.it
representation, becoming an integral part of it, so as to inextricably merge the drawing to the built. In other cases, however, the limited portions of the walls, or the different expressive choices place the murals in limited sectors, treating them as large canvases exposed in the open air. With regard to the technique of creating the painting on the walls, the artists approach the ideational and executive phase in a different way, reflecting also the free and extremely varied quality of this creative language, and the variety that is consequential to the diversity of the surfaces on which it is expressed. The laying of street art, as is known, can be done on sight with the help of projectors, with the technique of stencil or proportional grid (Drogheria, 2015; Lauda & Zerlenga, 2018). We relied directly on the words of the most prolific authors to learn about the techniques used to transfer the drawing on the walls in Valogno. Valentino Silvestre (Naples 1990) – the youngest artist – used a grid drawn by spray and brush depicting Frida Kahlo on the mural at the entrance of the village (Fig. 12); the grid was subsequently concealed by the colour-covering layers. Valentino Silvestre has evolved the preliminary collection of images – used as a generic ideation cue in the transition to realization – towards an impromptu iconographic construction that has been able to grasp suggestions from the human and social context, rather than urban, as for example was the crown of red flowers, included in the final representation [14]. Thus the “lived moment” contributed with an added value to the aesthetic enrichment of the image. The method by which he created the image dedicated to the “harvest” and the mural entitled Il gatto e la bambina che prende le stelle is analogous.

Alessandra Carloni (Rome 1984), on the other hand, defines the mural subject with a freehand drawing on paper that then transfers in digital image with raster graphics software, in which she elaborates the chromatic studies of the figures and the simulation in the building context, using photographs of the building’s facade on which she will paint the mural (Figures 13-14). The author, then on site, transfers the sketch on wall by
freehand with chalk, studying the proportions of the iconography and its figures impromptu (Fig. 15); afterwards she paints and refines the mural with quartz paints, stretched out with rollers and brushes [15]. In her case, the illustrative language also allows to derogate the proportions of the subjects portrayed and, therefore, not to use the grid. The process chosen by Salvo Caramagno (Catania 1953) is even more immediate: his murals are made on a white covering background, used as a real canvas; in this way, the works are made impromptu, without preparatory sketch, with easily corrected charcoal strokes, and then they are finished later with layers of acrylic colour. The artist from Catania is less creatively inspired by the place than the previous authors; he is attentive to the aspects of conservation that is offered by the conditions of reduced exposure to the Sun of the buildings’ walls in Valogno, since they are forced between rather high buildings [16]. This peculiarity of the site, as mentioned above, slows down the natural deterioration inherent in the works of street-art, property favoured, however, also by the extra-urban condition, which makes the paintings limitedly susceptible to change compared to those of big cities. Emanuele Riccio (Mondragone 1992) also applies the washable acrylic colour on the wall taking inspiration from a photograph that he uses as a reference, without being too conditioned; he creates the mural as a painting, reducing the colour range to make the effect of a vintage image posted on an ancient building facade [17] (Fig. 16).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The creative gestures that in various ways the over 33 artists have imprinted on the walls of Valogno, sharing the ethical and social intent with which the initiative “I colori del grigio” by Giovanni and Dora Casale was born, sensitive and cultured men, spontaneous promoters of civic sense and a special declination of environmental sustainability, have characterized it as the most colourful village in the province of Caserta. Here, then, the culture of proximity, understood as openness to the other for mutual enrichment, as a system of actions oriented to the good of the community and not to the interests of the individual, has written an extraordinary page of contemporary urban history, demonstrating that the “arts village” – imagined by us with and without apostrophe – is nourished by mutual giving of itself, before the multiple forms of art. A restaurant in solidarity and the “war vegetable garden” project have also been originated by the combination of care and sharing: the first offers dishes to those who need it; the second one has been conceived in the last pandemic days, and is a cultivation designed to donate the harvest to the poorest even with the intention of motivating everyone to small-scale agriculture to bring back lush pieces of land uncultivated. The care of a portion of the land, such as the care of the walls and that of the entrance gates to the houses, soon, «[…] significa – as Giovanni declares –, dedicarsi alla vita e ripartire con essa!» [18] (Verdile, 2020).

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street-art works. The linking to GIS is directed towards interoperability with SIGECweb system of Italian MIBACT.

[8] The geographical coordinates of the artworks were measured with GNSS rover antenna, referring to the Permanent Geodetic Network of the Campania Region.


[10] In addition to the works listed, there are seven more made with mixed techniques and materials; all the artworks recorded are eight to May 2020.

[11] Our cataloguing approach is like the ICCD one thinking the systematic application to street-art works. The linking to GIS is directed towards interoperability with SIGECweb system of Italian MIBACT.

[12] These artists constituted the G.I.M.N. (Gruppo Itinerante Murales Naif, Itinerant Group Murales Naif) together with Bianca Bertazzoni (from Foggia), Diara Salardi (from Emilia), to Primula Campomaggiore (from Viterbo). In the eighties of the last century, this group was very active in Italy by spreading this open-air art form accessible to all.

[13] “Anthropomorphic sprite that scares bad people, but is good with good ones, typical of Roman and Neapolitan folklore”.

[14] On 18.6.2020, the author was interviewed on this topic.

[15] On 20.4.2020, the author was interviewed on this topic.

[16] On 27.4.2020, the author was interviewed on this topic.

[17] On 7.5.2020, the author was interviewed on this topic.

[18] [...] It means to devote on to life and start again with it."
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Senatore, F. (2018). Distrettuzioni intermedie e federazioni rurali nel Regno di Napoli (Sessa, Cava, Giffoni). In F. Lattanzio & G. M. Varanini (Eds.), I centri minori italiani nel tardo Medioevo. Cambiamento sociale, crescita economica, processi di ristruttura-