

The End of the Montello Woodland: Institutional Change, Economic Transformation and Rural Conflict in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy

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KEYWORDS: wood, industrialisation, forest policies, rural conflicts.

JEL CODES: N33, N53, N73, N93.

The article explores the reciprocal interaction of administrative and economic modernisation in shaping nineteenth-century forest landscapes and governance. The research focuses on the Montello woodland in northeastern Italy, considered a strategic state asset throughout the early-modern period due to the abundance of oaks essential for shipbuilding. Economic, institutional, and social changes in the late nineteenth century brought this system into crisis. Escalating conflicts between state authorities and the local population during that period also led to the degradation of the woodland. This work investigates the socio-ecological implications of state-building and industrialisation through an analysis of documentation produced by key actors involved in the management and use of the Montello area. Methodologically, this research argues that understanding similar global phenomena requires localised case studies that illuminate the complex interplay of dynamics at work on the ground.

El fin del bosque de Montello: Cambio institucional, transformación económica y conflicto rural en la Italia de finales del siglo XIX

PALABRAS CLAVE: **madera, industrialización, políticas forestales, conflictos rurales.**

CÓDIGOS JEL: N33, N53, N73, N93.

***E**l artículo explora la interacción recíproca entre la modernización administrativa y económica en la configuración del paisaje forestal y la gobernanza del siglo XIX. Se centra en Montello, un bosque del noreste de Italia que se consideró un activo estratégico del Estado durante toda la Edad Moderna debido a la abundancia de robles, esenciales para la construcción naval. Los cambios económicos, institucionales y sociales de finales del siglo XIX llevaron a este sistema a una situación de crisis. Durante ese período, los crecientes conflictos entre las autoridades estatales y la población local provocaron la degradación del bosque. Mediante el análisis de la documentación elaborada por los principales actores implicados en la gestión y explotación de la zona, este artículo investiga las implicaciones socioecológicas de la construcción del Estado y la industrialización. Desde el punto de vista metodológico, sostiene que para comprender estos fenómenos globales es necesario realizar estudios de casos localizados que pongan de relieve la compleja interacción de las dinámicas que operan sobre el terreno.*

Received: 2025-04-10 · Reviewed: 2025-10-15 · Accepted: 2025-11-03

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, forest history research has broadened our understanding of the relationship between woodlands and past societies (Muigg & Tegel, 2021; Watkins, 2015). Within this varied field of study, some scholars have focused on specific woodlands, developing what has recently been defined as “forest biographies” (Cristina & Gabellieri, 2025; Short, 2022). This approach has become established particularly within historical ecology, a discipline traditionally more inclined to adopt a site-based analytical scale, which allows for the detailed reconstruction of the historical and ecological processes affecting current landscape configurations (Rotherham & Moody, 2024; Szabó, 2015). The adoption of a local analytical scale is considerably less frequent within the scholarship dedicated to these topics by environmental historians, although notable exceptions demonstrating its potential do exist (Lazzarini, 2008).

This paper focuses on the Montello woodland, located on a hill in the upper Treviso plain, about 50 km north of Venice. Despite its relatively small size, Montello played an exceptionally important role in early modern Europe. During the rule of the Republic of Venice, the woodland became crucial for supplying timber to the shipyards of the Arsenal. It was placed under state control and was subject to a complex series of regulations aimed at ensuring its protection and management. After the fall of the Republic of Venice, Montello retained its special status under the direct supervision of the state authorities, during both the French and Austrian dominations. This situation was also maintained after the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, so much so that in 1871 it was included in a list of inalienable public forests. However, just twenty years later, a new law mandated the privatisation of the hill and its conversion into agricultural land. By the time this legislation was enacted, the woodland had already almost entirely disappeared. The law was thus seen as the necessary acknowledgment of an irreversible process.

The Montello crisis resulted from the interaction of two dynamics connected to modernisation, which historiography has often explored through distinct research strands. The first concerns the state-building process, which many scholars have analysed in relation to the development of scientific silviculture, the introduction of new forest policies inspired by silvicultural theories during the nineteenth century, and the impact of new regulations at the territorial level. Some research initially conducted in colonial contexts has shown that this process was not unidirectional and top-down. On the contrary, the implementation of forest policies resulted from conflicts and negotiations involving multiple actors, both within and outside the government apparatus. The various subjects constituting the state administration themselves often had con-

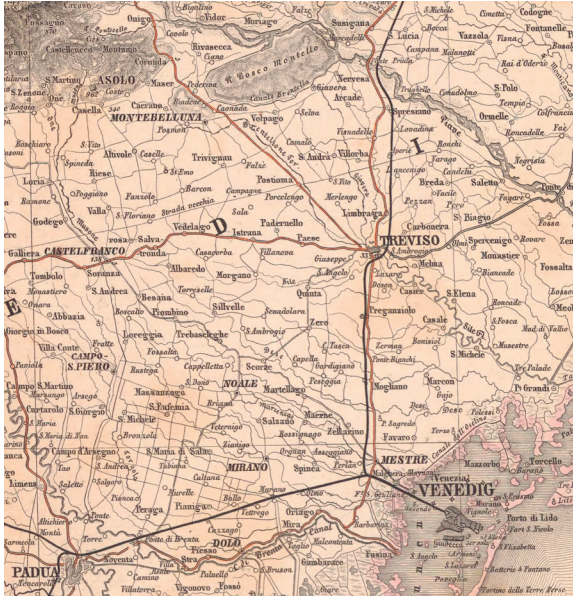
flicting interests (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2020). This approach has also proven fruitful for studying forest policies in Europe in their concrete implementation on the ground (Bonan, 2019a; Hölzl, 2011; Lučić, 2022).

The second research strand concerns economic modernisation, and in particular the role of wood in the process of industrialisation. Recent studies have shown that the industrialisation of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century did not unfold through the replacement of wood with alternative energy sources or raw materials. On the contrary, this period was marked by a sharp increase in wood consumption across all major economic sectors (Bemmann, 2024; Fressoz, 2024; Meiske & Zumbärgel, 2021). This growth was made possible by the expansion of supply basins, facilitated by the development of rail networks and other new means of transportation; a process that has been defined as the expansion of the timber frontier (Lotz, 2015).

To bring these two research strands into dialogue, a micro-analytical approach may prove particularly effective to highlight the reciprocal influences between administrative and economic modernisation in shaping forest landscapes. Montello is a functional case study for this purpose because, given its importance, substantial documentation has been produced by the main actors involved in its use. As is often the case in such situations, the archival material is extensive but far from homogeneous. It provides considerable insight into the perspectives of those who authored it, predominantly members of the state apparatus or local elite; while offering only fragmentary glimpses into how the poorer segments of the local population viewed and interacted with the woodland. This latter aspect can be partially illuminated by reading the official correspondence against the grain, particularly that produced during periods of heightened social tension and systematic violation of forest laws by rural populations (Jacoby, 2001; Scott, 1990).

The next section provides an overview of the history of Montello from the start of Venetian rule to its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy. This long-term reconstruction serves to highlight certain ecological, social and legal characteristics of the woodland that are crucial to understanding the transformations of the late nineteenth century. The third section explores the debates and conflicts surrounding forest governance in the years immediately following the annexation of the area to Italy. During this phase, institutional actors still aimed to protect the woodland and reserve it for the needs of the State. The fourth section examines the turning point of the 1880s, when the decision was made to privatise the Montello and convert it to agriculture. This choice stemmed from the interplay of economic, social and political dynamics characteristic of that specific juncture. The final section offers some concluding remarks.

FIGURE 1
Location of the Montello woodland (at the top of the image)
in the upper Treviso plain



Source: Mayr, Johann Georg (1874). *Atlas der Alpenländer*. Justus Perthes, sheet 5.

2. MONTELLO AND ITS ADMINISTRATION BEFORE ITALIAN UNIFICATION

Montello is an elliptical hill marking the northern boundary of the Treviso plain, covering an area of about 6,000 hectares with a maximum altitude of just 369 meters above sea level. Its northeastern slope is bordered by the Piave River, while the other slopes are home to thirteen villages. These date back to the Middle Ages and in the nineteenth century they were incorporated into five municipalities: Arcade, Cornuda, Montebelluna, Nervesa, and Volpago. Most of the area was covered by mixed coppice woodland composed mainly of oaks, beeches, and chestnuts, but agricultural activities (including vineyards) and livestock farming were also widespread in the region (Agnoletti, 2022: 293-98).

In the fourteenth century, with the acquisition of the Marca Trevigiana by the Republic of Venice, Montello came under Venetian jurisdiction. Over the following century, as its territorial dominion expanded, the Republic of Venice developed a complex forest policy aimed at ensuring a stable supply of timber, both for the energy

needs of a rapidly growing city and for strategic uses. Most of this demand was met by the extensive Alpine and Perialpine woodlands closest to the Venetian plain, which remained under the control of rural communities (Lorenzini, 2024; Zannini, 2011). However, the Republic of Venice extended its direct control over certain woodlands, selected for the presence of tree species particularly suitable for naval construction and reserved exclusively for the needs of the Arsenal shipyards (Appuhn, 2009).

The main reserved woodlands of the Venetian mainland were Somadida, rich in firs for ship masts; the Cansiglio, whose beech trees provided oars for the galleys; and Montello, which was placed under state control in 1471 due to the presence of oaks (Agnoletti, 2018: 101-21). Oaks were valuable and sought-after for shipbuilding, as they provided greater resistance to the corrosive effects of salt water and were preferred for the construction of hulls and external planking (Eliasson & Nilsson 2002; Trapaga *et al.*, 2023). In the Venetian region, the most widespread varieties were those the Venetians generically called *rovere*, which in fact included both the sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) and the pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*). The choice of Montello was due to the presence of trees suitable for producing *tavole da filo* (planks), while the curved timber pieces required for ships' hulls were largely sourced from the Istrian woodland of Montona. However, the exploitation of Montello was not limited to supplying the Arsenal. Trees that were deemed unsuitable for shipbuilding due to their size or quality were used as lagoon navigation markers and for the construction of protective works along the sandy shores separating the lagoon from the sea (Lazzarini, 2021; Susmel, 1994).

Beyond its abundant timber resources, Montello's strategic role in Venetian forest policy also derived from its geographical position. Before the development of industrial technologies, one of the main challenges associated with forest exploitation was the logistics of connecting production areas with consumption centres. Overland trade was extremely costly and feasible only over short distances due to the weight and bulk of the material. As a result, the timber trade was heavily reliant on waterways (Jacob-Rousseau *et al.*, 2023). This applied both to tree species that could float and to those with a specific gravity greater than 1 (such as most oaks), which were loaded onto rafts made of conifers and transported in this manner. In addition to its proximity to the capital, Montello was connected to the Venetian lagoon by the Piave River, which bordered one of its slopes, and by the Sile River, whose sources were just a few kilometres down from the hill (Bonan, 2020; Lazzarini, 2009: 195-208).

The increasing involvement of the Venetian authorities in Montello's management brought them into conflict with the interests of the inhabitants of the villages on the

hill's slopes, since they derived essential resources from its exploitation. The local population entered the woodland to collect firewood and timber for daily use, but the availability of raw materials had also contributed to the spread of various manufacturing activities, such as the production of barrel staves and the operation of lime and brick kilns. Additionally, people gathered litter and fodder for livestock, medicinal plants, and the wild fruits of the forest and undergrowth (chestnuts, acorns, nuts, strawberries, and mushrooms). Hunting and bird-catching were also common, and several areas of the hill had been placed under cultivation or were used for grazing animals (Vergani, 2006: 407-13).

The ban of 1471 initiated a process of state appropriation of the woodland that was developed over more than a century through a series of legislative measures. The Montello was placed under the direct control of the Council of Ten, the highest governing body of the Venetian State, and a special magistracy was later established to manage the woodland. Repeated orders were issued to demolish all buildings constructed within or adjacent to the forest (with the exception of religious structures) and to uproot non-forest crops, including chestnut trees, to prevent them from attracting the inhabitants of the surrounding villages. Meanwhile, prohibitions were extended to virtually any activity that could damage the trees, with punishments that included the death penalty for offenses such as lighting fires within the forest (Caniato, 1994; Vergani, 1991).

These measures were not limited to protecting the forest area but also entailed a fundamental ecological transformation. As previously mentioned, before Venetian rule Montello was a mixed coppice forest. The needs of the Arsenal led the Venetian authorities to progressively increase the space dedicated to oak trees at the expense of other tree species, which were gradually eradicated from the area. Furthermore, the management of the woodland shifted from coppice to high forest, which was more suited to the production of the ships' planking. Selective felling was practised, and acorns were sown to facilitate oak regeneration (Agnoletti, 2022: 293-98).

These interventions transformed not only the ecology of the hill but also the social structures of the local communities. The restrictions placed on economic activities within and adjacent to the woodland prompted many people to emigrate. For those who remained, as partial compensation, the Venetian administration guaranteed employment in timber cutting and transportation, as well as in the maintenance of the necessary infrastructure. These services were mainly paid for in kind, through the allocation of scrap wood and other secondary forest products (De Bortoli, 2005). Over time, this led to the making of a rural population whose survival depended on forest work and the sale of wood obtained illegally. In nineteenth-century publications, these figures

were referred to as *bisnenti*, based on an erroneous etymology that suggested they were utterly destitute (twice nothing)¹.

State control of the woodland was never fully accepted by the local population, as evidenced by the frequent forestry violations that characterised Venetian management. This phenomenon intensified during the tumultuous years following the fall of the Republic of Venice (1797), when the unstable and shifting institutional structures emboldened local villagers to systematically violate forestry regulations, motivated by a sense of impunity but also by the desire to exploit political upheavals to gain concessions from the new rulers (Follador, 1990). This resulted in significant human pressure on the forest, further exacerbated by wartime demands for timber.

At a formal level, Venetian regulations were upheld during the brief occupation by revolutionary forces and even after Austria acquired these territories through the Treaty of Campoformio. However, things changed with the return of the French and the annexation of Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy, formalised by the Treaty of Pressburg (1805). The Napoleonic Government initiated a gradual revision of forestry legislation, culminating in the law of 27 May 1811, which remained in force for over half a century in the Venetian and Lombard territories (Bonan, 2019b: 43–6; Sansa, 1999). Article 28 of this law stipulated that anyone claiming usufruct rights in public forests had six months to present official documentation proving such entitlements, which would then be assessed by the relevant prefectures. The villages of Montello sought to use this provision to secure recognition of their right to gather secondary forest products. However, the Napoleonic Government ruled that such activities were merely compensation for the work the local population carried out on behalf of the navy. Since the law stipulated that these obligations should be directly assumed by the public administration, the associated benefits for the local inhabitants were effectively nullified (Buosi, 1998: 156).

This decision was reaffirmed after the end of the Napoleonic era, both under Austrian rule and in the years following Italian unification. This approach ostensibly strengthened state control over the woodland, denying the legitimacy of any claims made by the local population. However, in practice, the Governments that succeeded the Republic of Venice in managing Montello were far less stringent in enforcing the forestry regulations aimed at protecting the trees. In late nineteenth-century public debate, this situation contributed to the emergence of an ecological myth that

1. A social condition elsewhere referred to as *repetini* (BRUNELLO, 2021).

idealised Venetian governance and contrasted it with the poor results of subsequent administrations².

In reality, the reasons for these differences should not be attributed to an *ante litteram* form of environmental consciousness on the part of the Republic of Venice (Vergani, 2010; Zannini, 2012). Rather they reflect more concrete changes within the interests involved. Venetian forest policy was primarily aimed at ensuring the supply of timber for what was considered a strategic sector: shipbuilding. From this perspective, Montello's significance was determined by the availability of its key resource (oak trees) and its geographic location, which was particularly advantageous for timber transportation. These two factors remained crucial in the early decades of the nineteenth century. However, by that time, Venice had lost its status as a capital and had been absorbed into much larger political entities, whose actions had different and more articulated objectives. For both the French and the Austrians, the Arsenal was one of many public shipyards –and not even the most important–, and the needs related to its supply had thus to be balanced against other priorities, some of which were deemed more pressing. For example, avoiding excessive restrictions on the exploitation of woodlands that might provoke social unrest.

The half-century of Austrian rule over Montello was characterised by the widespread violation of forestry regulations by the local population. This phenomenon was fuelled by population growth, increased timber consumption (particularly for energy use) and improvements in the region's commercial transportation routes. Such endemic non-compliance escalated during periods of heightened social tension, in times of economic hardship or political upheaval, when the weakening of the repressive apparatus reinforced the inhabitants' sense of impunity (Brunello, 1981).

During the great famine of 1816-17, caused by the climatic anomalies following the eruption of Mount Tambora, the pressure on the forest was described in alarming terms in petitions submitted by the local clergy to the Government. These appeals called for the authorisation of extraordinary timber felling, arguing that otherwise this would occur illegally given the population's need for heating (1816 is known as the year without a summer) and sustenance³. Indeed, in this extreme context, many considered prison a place where at least food was guaranteed (Monteleone, 1969). A similar

2. The most well-known example is an author who will reappear in the following pages (DI BÉRENGER, 1863).

3. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe), Senato di Finanza, IV, b. 18, ff. IV/5, IV/10, 1816. On the global impact of the Tambora eruption, see BEHRINGER (2019).

situation arose during the European crisis of 1846-47, triggered by the poor harvests of 1845. The decision of the British Government to abolish import duties on grain in June 1846 prompted Venetian merchants to sell off their accumulated stocks abroad, causing a sharp rise in the prices of maize and wheat in Veneto, which peaked in the first half of 1847. In those same months, discontent spread through the countryside, leading to riots that prompted the Austrian Government to ban grain exports and implement other measures to support the rural population (Brunello, 1979; Ginsborg, 1979: 58-64).

In the context of emergency, the authorities issued a new regulation for Montello on 12 March 1847. While reaffirming the state's full ownership of the forest and its reserved status for naval needs, the crown decreed, "as an act of great clemency", that the inhabitants of the villages surrounding the hill would be employed in forestry work, with the exception of those convicted of forestry violations. Additionally, the decree allocated up to 300 klafter (about 570 cubic meters) of firewood to "absolutely destitute individuals" residing in the area. Any surplus from this distribution, as well as leftover wood from logging done for the navy, was to be sold at a price below market value to those living near the hill who did not possess "considerable landholdings", again with the exclusion of those convicted of forestry violations⁴.

In practice, the measure proved difficult to implement, as there was no clear definition of who qualified as "absolutely destitute". Moreover, the allocated firewood provided minimal support given the high number of potential beneficiaries. However, the concessions reinforced the already widespread belief among the local population that they had rights in the woodland⁵. The opportunity to reaffirm these rights arose the following spring: in the few weeks between the outbreak of the 1848 revolution and the return of Austrian troops, reports surfaced of widespread logging and violent attacks on forest guards, who became the target of popular resentment⁶.

The post-revolutionary period saw the revocation of these concessions and the strengthening of the repressive apparatus, which included the deployment of a military garrison to support forestry inspectors. However, these measures failed to curb the ongoing assault on the woodland, as illegal activities remained widespread and involved much of the local population. Government officials themselves admitted that strictly

4. The regulation has been published in BUOSI (1992: 119-20).

5. ASVe, Magistrato Camerale, III, b. 1137, f. 29/7, 1845-49.

6. ASVe, Magistrato Camerale, III, b. 1136, f. 2/52, 1845-49.

enforcing the law would have meant filling the prisons with entire villages⁷. To make matters worse, the forest guards were not only inclined to tolerate these offenses but often actively orchestrated them⁸. In the final years of Austrian rule, the authorities gradually lost interest in managing the forest, even considering its sale, while their primary concern shifted to containing social tensions⁹.

With this objective in mind, the Government first authorised the temporary collection of forest litter and then, in June 1865, issued a new regulation governing the granting of forest products. This measure was more detailed than the previous one in defining the eligible beneficiaries. These were identified as the inhabitants of the villages on the slopes of the hill who had been resident for at least ten years and had not been convicted of forestry violations. The residency requirement stemmed from the belief –later adopted by the Italian authorities as well– that without such restrictions, the concessions would attract hordes of poor people from neighbouring areas, who would devastate the forest in order to survive. Permanent residents were divided into two categories: the “truly destitute” (those unable to work due to age or health) and the unemployed. The former were allowed to collect secondary forest products such as litter, mushrooms, fruits, acorns, and deadwood. The latter were permitted to gather bundles of wood, stumps, and softwood in predetermined daily quantities. Furthermore, the measures introduced in 1847 regarding the distribution of firewood among the inhabitants (limited to those unable to work) and their employment in forestry work (for the unemployed) were reinstated¹⁰.

These activities were subject to the issuance of a licence by the forestry administration, but the identification of eligible individuals was delegated to local municipal officials and parish priests, based on documentation submitted by applicants, thus following a model that reconciled paternalism with social control. The same priests and municipal administrators were also tasked with instructing the population on the new system, particularly emphasising that this provision did not imply the recognition of any rights over the forest. Indeed, the licences explicitly stated the temporary and revocable nature of the concessions, which remained subordinate to the state’s full ownership of the forest and its products. However, the Austrians were not able to assess the effectiveness of these regulations, as the following year Montello, along with the rest of Veneto, became part of the Kingdom of Italy.

7. ASVe, Prefettura delle Finanze, XXX, b. 943, f. 1/6, 1857-61.

8. ASVe, Prefettura delle Finanze, XXX, b. 944, f. 2/4, 1857-61.

9. ASVe, Ispettorato Generale ai Boschi, Atti riservati, b. 667, allegato 28.

10. The regulation has been published in BUOSI (1992: 129-32).

3. FROM A LOCAL TO A NATIONAL PROBLEM

On 14 August 1866, just two days after the armistice between Italy and Austria, and two months before the annexation of Veneto was ratified by the Treaty of Vienna (October 3, 1866) and the plebiscites of 21-22 October, the municipal deputation of Nervesa sent an appeal regarding Montello to the royal commissioner of Treviso; a *pro tempore* figure with responsibilities similar to those of a prefect in the newly acquired provinces¹¹. The appeal emphasised the importance of the woodland for at least 6,000 people who depended on “secondary forest products and illicit forestry violations”. It referenced the concessions established the previous year and claimed that the Austrian Government had prepared a plan to lease the southern lands closest to the settlements either to the municipalities of the area or directly to the inhabitants, with the possibility of cultivating them in exchange for a commitment to preserve the forest cover on the northern slope. The municipal deputation of Nervesa urged the Italian administration to implement this plan¹².

The royal commissioner of Treviso, who had been in office for less than two weeks, decided to forward the request to the forest inspectorate of Giavera, which had jurisdiction over the forest and was headed by Adolfo di Béranger. At the time, di Béranger was regarded as the most skilled forestry expert in the Venetian administration and arguably the most competent in the entire peninsula. The following year, he was transferred to Vallombrosa (near Florence) to establish the Kingdom of Italy’s first forestry institute. During his career, spent almost entirely in Austrian-controlled Veneto, Di Béranger had gained a reputation as a rigorous professional, determined to apply silvicultural principles and reluctant to compromise with political or economic interests that might harm the forest heritage (Lazzarini, 2023). These characteristics are evident in his response to the royal commissioner.

Di Béranger criticised the neglect that had characterised the final years of Austrian rule and emphasised the centrality of the woodland within the new political context: to revive production at the Arsenal shipyards and, more generally, for the supply of timber to Venice. He attributed Montello’s degradation to excessive exploitation, particularly because the concessions granted by the Austrian Government had not been confined to the poor and those unable to work, but had also benefited tenant farmers working on estates adjacent to the woodland (known as *massariotti*). In this regard, he noted:

11. On the institutional changes, see SIMONE (2022).

12. Archivio di Stato di Treviso (ASTv), Prefettura I serie, b. 1452, 14 August 1866.

The indigence of the majority of this population does not stem from a lack of work, but from other, more remote causes worthy of attention. Firstly, the landowners around Montello, instead of cultivating one part of their land for grain and another for pasture, following sound principles of agricultural economy, cultivate almost exclusively maize. While this obtains higher yields, it deprives them of essential straw and fodder. Hence they could not sustain livestock or fertilise their fields if they did not have the opportunity to obtain litter and forage from the nearby woodland; which is to say, at the expense of the civil treasury, which, moreover, pays part of their land taxes for them; as it has been burdened with an enormous assessment to ease private accounts. Secondly, most of these landowners (especially those of Selva, Volpago, Biadene, and Ciano) have divided their estates into tiny plots, even half a field or less, to the point of being able to collect exorbitant rents, which they call 'fees', but which are more properly tributes demanded for the concession of the right of residence in the vicinity of the royal woodland, and the inherent opportunity to gather firewood, cut hay, collect leaves, etc., in short, to steal almost with impunity. This is the reason why so much poverty has been able to nest in this woodland, and increasingly crowds around it¹³.

Thus, both the *bisnenti* and the *massariotti* directly profited from the woodland's degradation, while local landowners, many of whom also served as municipal administrators, benefited indirectly. For this reason, Di Béranger distrusted the proposal from Nervesa's municipal delegation to lease part of the hill in exchange for guarantees of protection for uncultivated lands. In his opinion, the scheme was suspicious, mirroring the way local administrators had previously obtained concessions for secondary forest products from the Austrian Government, arguing that it would put an end to forest violations, when in fact the violations had continued unabated.

By the end of Austrian rule, Di Béranger had already criticised the excessive willingness of parish priests and municipal officials to issue licences for collecting secondary forest products. In the weeks following the annexation, he reiterated his stance in several reports sent to local and central authorities, describing the woodland's condition in stark terms, regarding both its declining forest cover and its economic mismanagement. To reverse this trend, he suggested gradually tightening the concessions, granting licences only to those truly unable to work and imposing additional restrictions on the collection of secondary products. He acknowledged that this measure would need to be implemented alongside a strengthened military presence, as it would provoke

13. The document has been published in BUOSI (1992: 133-36).

popular uprisings¹⁴. His proposal contrasted with that of the royal commissioner, who had advised renewing the concessions to avoid fomenting discontent among the population¹⁵.

At the end of 1866, the Italian administration restricted the concessions for the collection of secondary products from the woodland and decided to authorise a massive sale of timber, obtained by putting the work out to public auction without clauses that guaranteed the use of local labour. These decisions triggered a backlash from the *bisnenti*, who felt disadvantaged on several fronts: in addition to being excluded from forest work and restricted in collecting secondary products, the auctions competed with the small-scale timber sales that they had been conducting illegally. Discontent erupted the following winter in the form of land invasions, a typical manifestation of peasant protest (Hobsbawm, 1974). Groups of *bisnenti* repeatedly entered the forest, felling large numbers of trees, damaging boundary markers, and clashing with forest guards (Simonetti, 1988: 53-4).

The situation was brought under control between the spring and autumn of 1868, partly because some of the population found employment in agricultural work, but the following winter, coinciding with the approval of new auctions for timber sales, popular unrest flared up again¹⁶. On this occasion, the grievances of the population were recorded by a journalist who witnessed the protests:

They forbid us from gathering litter, yet they sell for twenty lire trees worth sixty. We shall tear out the oak saplings, and then they will be satisfied [...] They don't want us going there to gather litter for bedding, and they throw us in jail over a handful of twigs, while they get to sell for three what's worth twelve (Casellato, 2012: 64).

These tensions extended beyond mere public order concerns, as the protests of the *bisnenti* gained support from various local elites, which aimed to exploit social tensions to wrest control of the woodland from the forestry administration. The conflict received extensive coverage in local newspapers, particularly the *Gazzetta di Treviso*. The fierce

14. The main reports are held in ASVe, Prefettura delle Finanze, XXVIII, b. 1444, f. 1/10, 1862-66. The most detailed, dated 6 September 1866, has been published in LAZZARINI (2023: 147-60).

15. Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale dell'Agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento, b. 240, f. 849.

16. ACS, Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale dell'Agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento, b. 695, f. 2759, On the seasonality of the protests, see in particular the report by the Giavera forest inspector dated 9 January 1868.

debates pitted authors who were often anonymous, although aligned with landowners and local administrators, against Di Bérenger and other forestry experts over various aspects of Montello's management¹⁷.

A compromise was only reached in the autumn of 1869. The Government confirmed the system of public auctions for timber sales; and in compensation, restrictions on the collection of secondary forest products were lifted, with the benefits being extended not only to the *bisnenti* but also to the *massariotti* (sharecroppers and tenant farmers) (Buosi, 1992: 51-2). Two years later, due to the abundance of oaks particularly suited for shipbuilding, Montello was included in the list of "inalienable public woodlands" designated according to the law of 20 June 1871. At nearly 6,000 hectares, it became the second largest state-owned high forest after Cansiglio (Bonan, 2025)¹⁸. In the following years, partly as a result of this legislative development, the challenges surrounding Montello's management were no longer confined to the local context but became a matter of growing national interest, both in parliamentary debate and in public discourse.

At the institutional level, it soon became clear that to ensure the management of public woodlands according to modern silvicultural principles, it was necessary to resolve the issue of customary activities practised by the rural population on these lands. To this end, a bill was presented in early 1873 and was approved after much debate on 1 November 1875. According to the parliamentarians involved in drafting the legislation, it was primarily inspired by the need to address Montello's dire condition and prevent further devastation¹⁹. The law established procedures for recognising any rights of use within public woodlands. Legitimate usufruct rights could be extinguished either through the transfer of a portion of land to the users or through monetary compensation. Activities deemed essential for the survival of the population could continue but were to be regulated according to criteria determined by the authorities.

In cases where entire communities claimed usufruct rights, municipal administrations were responsible for submitting requests on behalf of their citizens, and this

17. ACS, Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale dell'Agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento, b. 693, f. 2754. The file includes key press articles and several reports by forestry officers speculating on the interests behind the journalistic controversies.

18. The Follonica forest was also larger, but consisted of several non-contiguous woodland plots, most of which were not high forest.

19. LAMPERTICO (1874); *Atti del Parlamento Italiano: Discussioni della Camera dei Deputati*, 25 May 1885, p. 14010.

is what the Montello municipalities did in June 1876. However, the mere initiation of the procedure triggered new protests and mass forest violations, as the inhabitants became convinced that the recognition of their rights over the hill was imminent. The discontent was particularly intense in the village of Ciano, where in early winter, about sixty people armed with hatchets and sickles attacked forest guards who had tried to stop them from leaving the woodland with illegally cut logs. The agents were forced to retreat as other villagers arrived to support the attackers. The situation remained tense in the following months and escalated again at the end of 1877, partly due to the government's sudden decision to abolish the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce, leaving the woodland almost completely unguarded and at the mercy of indiscriminate logging for several days²⁰.

Meanwhile, the government commission tasked with evaluating the municipalities' claims denied the existence of any rights over the woodland on the part of the population²¹. This decision was justified by reiterating the arguments already expressed in the regulations of the Austrian era; that the concessions had no legal basis but were merely acts of generosity on the part of the State, as the sole owner of the forest. However, fearing that this decision might provoke new and more severe protests, the authorities adopted a compromise solution. The collection of secondary forest products, though formally deemed illegitimate, was confirmed from a substantive point of view (Buosi, 1992: 61-3; Simonetti, 1988: 59-60).

In the press, it was Luigi Luzzatti who brought wider attention to Montello's plight beyond the province of Treviso. At the time, Luzzatti was Secretary-General of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce and a member of the Historical Right in Parliament. He had been the architect of the 1871 law on the public woodlands and, throughout his career, frequently returned to these topics in his dual role as statesman and scholar of economics and law. His efforts culminated in 1910 with the enactment of Italy's second forest law, commonly known as the Luzzatti Law, as he promoted it during his tenure at the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce, shortly before being appointed Prime Minister (Gaspari, 2000).

In the spring of 1873, while on holiday in the province of Treviso, Luzzatti visited Montello and was struck by the forest's dire condition and by the social context, which he saw as the root cause of its degradation. He expressed his views in a public

20. ACS, Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale dell'Agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento, b. 694, f. 2758.

21. ASTv, Prefettura I serie, b. 1727, 12 October 1878.

letter to his colleague Quintino Sella. To put an end to the devastation, Luzzatti acknowledged that it would be necessary to sacrifice the integrity of the woodland and allocate part of it (2,000 hectares) to poor families for cultivation. Additionally, to provide further employment opportunities for those who had until then relied on forest violations for their livelihood, he proposed offering tax incentives to facilitate industrial development in the area (Luzzatti, 1873). Luzzatti's proposal was taken up the following year in a memorandum published by the Venetian lawyer Luigi Carlo Stivanello (1874). However, he believed it would be preferable to entrust the colonisation of the land to private enterprises, which would then employ the *bisnenti* as tenant farmers.

Opposing these privatisation proposals was Luigi Favero, a retired forestry inspector who had served in the Montello area during Austrian rule. In 1875, he published a substantial volume, rich in information gathered during his career, on the social, political, and economic dynamics that had led to the degradation of the forest heritage. Favero believed it was still possible to protect the woodland and revitalise its management, but this goal was incompatible with the presence of the *bisnenti*, whom he suggested should be relocated and compensated financially for relinquishing their rights to collect secondary forest products (Favero, 1875). A very different proposal was put forward the following year by the deputy from Bassano, Andrea Secco (1876). He considered it illusory to think that the forest could still be preserved, given that most of the local population survived thanks to forestry violations. For the same reason, he dismissed the proposals of Luzzatti and Stivanello as half-measures that would merely shelve the problem. Secco argued that the only solution was to implement rationally what was already happening in a chaotic manner: the systematic felling of the entire forest and the allocation of the land to the municipalities, which would then distribute it to the inhabitants, either through sale or leasing.

These writings differed not only in their proposed solutions but also in their scope, content, and the quality and quantity of the information provided. In particular, it is worth noting that there was a fundamental divergence in how the authors viewed the role of the woodland. The forestry inspector Favero (1875: 175) reiterated what his colleague Adolfo di Bérenger had already stated in the previous decade: the forest needed to be protected and enhanced due to the importance of its oaks in a strategic sector such as shipbuilding. In contrast, the lawyer Stivanello (1874: 54) and, especially, the deputy Secco presented an opposing view, more in line with the profound technological changes revolutionising naval transport at the time: "It is undeniable that, given the current state of naval affairs, continuing to speak of wooden ships would be akin to equipping our army with old flintlock muskets" (Secco, 1876: 16).

Indeed, during the 1870s –albeit somewhat belatedly compared to the leading naval powers of the time– Italy also began transitioning from the construction of wooden sailing ships to iron-hulled steamships (Lo Basso, 2020). In Montello's case, demand for oak timber from the Arsenal had already been declining in the final years of Austrian rule, and this trend was confirmed in the public auctions organised by the Italian administration after annexation. During those years, the forest production of the hill was redirected to meet other rapidly growing demands, chief among them the need for railway sleepers, during what is considered the golden age of railway expansion in Europe²². However, the different uses of the timber also placed a different pressure on the forest areas. Traditional shipbuilding demands were qualitative, requiring the selection of trees above a certain size and age. In contrast, the railway industry and other emerging sectors prioritised quantity, seeking to maximise logging to keep pace with surging demand (Agnoletti, 2003; Buosi, 1992: 60; Iriarte-Goñi, 2013).

Moreover, the advent of industrial transportation not only transformed how timber and other raw materials were used but also redefined their commercial flows. Indeed, railways and steam navigation were disruptive technologies capable of rapidly upending entire production sectors and their associated social structures (Fumian, 2016). In this sense, the severe tensions of 1876-77 must be understood within a broader context of profound changes in rural living conditions. In the Veneto region, the most visible effects of these transformations were the onset of the agrarian crisis and the start of the migratory exodus. Both of these dynamics prefaced by the poor harvests of 1876, caused by unfavourable weather conditions²³.

In the following years, employment opportunities and incomes from agriculture progressively worsened, increasing the ranks of those who relied on Montello as their sole means of survival. However, even the woodland's ability to support a portion of the local population was diminishing. This was due, first and foremost, to the systematic overexploitation it had suffered for decades. Furthermore, the market changes mentioned earlier did not only affect the agricultural sector but also the timber supply chain (Agnoletti, 1998; Bonan, 2023). Reliable statistical data on timber prices is difficult to obtain, as prices varied significantly by market location and across numerous products

22. On timber sales from Montello in the 1860s, see the data in ASVe, Ispettorato Generale ai Boschi, Presidio, b. 644, f. 9; ACS, Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale dell'Agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento, b. 690, f. 2729. On the European railway network, see the milestone (LANDES, 1969).

23. The milestones are FRANZINA (1976) and LAZZARINI (1981). As for migratory flows, it is worth noting that systematic data collection began in 1876.

and tree species²⁴. However, local sources indicate a decline in the retail price of firewood, the primary commodity the population obtained from Montello²⁵.

4. “A DISASTER THAT CANNOT BE AVERTED”

By the early 1880s, it was clear to anyone with direct knowledge of Montello’s condition that the fate of the woodland was sealed. While in 1873, Luigi Luzzatti had proposed converting one-third of the hill (2,000 hectares out of 6,000) to agricultural use with the aim of preserving the forest cover in the remaining part, just over a decade later this ratio had been reversed. Even the most optimistic estimates suggested that the woodland covered no more than a third of the hill²⁶. This situation was the result of prolonged pressure from both above, through the public auctions, and below, from the local population.

As we have seen, the *bisnenti* and *massariotti* could access the woodland in different ways to collect secondary products. The number of licences granted varied each year, depending on whether the municipalities or the forestry administration prevailed. The former were eager to extend them as much as possible to contain popular discontent, whereas the latter aimed to restrict the number of beneficiaries to maintain greater control over the woodland. However, authorised activities mainly served as a pretext to engage more often and more easily in illegal practices. The authorities were fully aware of this phenomenon, as evidenced by numerous reports documenting the most common violations²⁷. A widespread practice was to enter the woodland at night and to bury cutting tools, which were then used to make incisions in tree trunks or to cut suckers, thereby “producing” deadwood that the licence holders could later collect in full compliance with forestry regulations (Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, 1877: 562-63).

Moreover, human pressure on the woodland was increasing due to both demographic and social factors. During the mid-nineteenth century, the local population grew rapidly with the onset of the demographic transition (Rossi, 2004). In this con-

24. For some data on the Padua market –not far from Montello–, see CIANCI (1933: 376-83). For a critical analysis of these sources, see WARDE (2019).

25. ACS, Ministero dell’Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale dell’Agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento, b. 694, f. 2758.

26. ASTv, Prefettura I serie, b. 1985, 4 April 1885.

27. Several examples in ASTv, Prefettura I serie, b. 1729.

text, the poor harvests of the late 1870s and the subsequent explosion of the agrarian crisis reduced the living standards of much of the rural population (Lazzarini, 1998: 184). A survey of 1872 recorded the presence of 7,618 *bisnenti* in the villages around the hill. This figure represented more than half of the population and grew further in the following years, as the forest became a lifeline not only for those unable to work and casual labourers (the *bisnenti* proper) but also for many sharecroppers and tenant farmers (*massariotti*)²⁸.

The issue was clearly outlined in a report sent to the Government by forestry inspector Giacomo Rigoni Stern on 19 February 1877. A statistical table attached to the memorandum showed that reports of forest violations had risen steadily from 1,644 per year in 1872 to 5,171 per year in 1876. The conviction rate exceeded 99%, while recidivism rose from 20% in 1872 to 90% in 1875 and 1876. Obviously, these figures should be seen as indicative of a much larger phenomenon, as forestry violations were among the most difficult crimes to detect and prosecute. The inspector Rigoni Stern suggested possible remedies, such as increasing surveillance and pressuring the judiciary to impose harsher penalties; though the latter could easily respond that the region's prisons were already overcrowded and that it was impossible to arrest entire villages. However, Rigoni Stern admitted that the situation was now irreversible:

Unfortunately, the forest will not escape its fate, which is destruction. It is merely a matter of time, since from year to year the number of needy people (*bisnenti*) increases and therefore the export of materials will grow proportionally, and always exceeding the woodland's regenerative capacity. It must therefore perish in a long agony without benefit, indeed with actual damage to the state's finances²⁹.

The growing awareness of the woodland's imminent disappearance shifted the stance of the local elites, who until then had supported the population's demands. This support had often been driven by economic interests: renting houses or land on the hill's slopes to the *bisnenti*, purchasing contraband timber at favourable prices, or obtaining forage for livestock from the forest without sacrificing agricultural land. But the deeper reason emanated from the paternalistic mentality of the time: the forest was seen primarily as a safety valve to contain social tensions.

28. ASTv, Prefettura I serie, b. 1986, 11 June 1885.

29. ACS, Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Direzione Generale dell'Agricoltura, Archivio generale, primo versamento, b. 694, f. 2758.

However, during the 1870s, the growing distress in the countryside was perceived and described in increasingly bleak and alarmist terms by the ruling class (Taccetti, 2023). Among the local notables, concern began to arise that once the woodland was lost, the population accustomed to surviving through forestry violations would turn to rural theft and other crimes. To avert this scenario, the mayors of the area formed a consortium, and, in May 1883, they established a commission to develop an “appropriate plan to resolve the social question of the Montello in terms of both humanity and public security”. The outcome of this body’s deliberations was to request that the State take responsibility for the emigration of the *bisnenti*, seen as the only way to ensure public order and to preserve what remained of the woodland³⁰.

Within the Government, discussions were also underway regarding how to resolve the problem of Montello, although with different priorities than those proposed by local administrators. The very particular condition of Montello was highlighted in a report on public woodlands presented to Parliament by the Minister of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce, Luigi Miceli, ten years after the enactment of the 1871 law. At the social level, it held the grim distinction of having the highest number of forestry violations and daily instances of destruction wreaked by the local inhabitants. Financially, the challenges were equally stark. Revenues aligned with those of other state woodlands, thanks to substantial timber sales from public auctions. But these earnings were negligible compared to expenditures, in which Montello ranked highest. This was partly due to the cost of surveillance personnel: this woodland alone absorbed almost a third of the expenses dedicated to guarding the entire state forest heritage³¹.

Comparisons with non-state woodlands can also be drawn, using tables published at the time by the forestry administration, although the data should be treated with caution. First and foremost, several scholars have highlighted the unreliability of contemporary statistics regarding total forest surface (Armiero, 2007; Lazzarini, 2013). Moreover, the analytical scale is that of the forestry inspectorate, the administrative body responsible at the local level, with no information available on individual woodlands. For these reasons, the figures should not be seen as exact values but as indicators of relative magnitude. Nevertheless, the picture that emerges leaves little room for doubt.

The inspectorate of Giavera oversaw an area of 10,005 hectares, of which Montello occupied approximately 6,000 hectares. In 1875, a total of 58 forest guards were

30. ASTv, Prefettura I serie, b. 1985, 27 June 1883.

31. *Atti del Parlamento Italiano, Camera dei Deputati*, “Relazione intorno all’amministrazione dei boschi demaniali dichiarati inalienabili dalla legge 20 giugno 1871”, n. 283, doc. n. XVIII.

employed, one for every 172.5 hectares. In that same year, there were 4,955 forestry violation cases pending, approximately one for every 2 hectares of forest. For the rest of the Italian forestry administration, the figures were as follows: one forest guard per 857.25 hectares and one violation per 202.6 hectares³². Furthermore, Giavera was the only forestry inspectorate in Italy that required a permanent military garrison for forest policing, adding additional costs to those already incurred for forest guards and legal proceedings.

These problems were exacerbated by the decline in orders from the shipyards. Indeed, in 1886 the Government made alienable certain small state forests in the provinces of Treviso and Venezia, which had originally been protected due to the presence of species suitable for naval construction (Del Giudice, 2025). The situation was similar to that of Montello; although there, such a resolution would require more time, given the size of the woodland and the social implications of such a decision. In the summer of 1884, the Minister of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce Bernardino Grimaldi, appointed a new commission chaired by the prefect of Treviso. Assisted by agricultural economists, the commission was tasked with determining whether the forest could still be preserved or if it should be converted to agricultural use.

The commission's final report began as follows: "The depletion of Montello woodland is a disaster that cannot be averted, given that seven thousand people live off forest theft". The situation had worsened dramatically over the past two decades, leading to the near-total destruction of the woodland, since "the population has become denser, poorer, and more immoral". The government commission rejected the municipalities' proposed solution of emigration, considering it "an expression of the panic gripping the region around Montello, which, witnessing the daily plundering, fears the day when those cast out of the woodland will turn their hunger against private property". To avert this scenario, the only solution was to convert the hill to agricultural use to provide employment for the *bisnenti*. Minister Grimaldi quickly endorsed this proposal and, on 11 June 1885, he presented a bill to Parliament calling for the privatisation of Montello, to be carried out through either sale or emphyteusis³³.

At the local level, these developments within Parliament had an immediate performative effect. As had happened during the process of recognising usufruct rights,

32. Data from the year 1875 are used here by way of example, but the tables published for adjacent years show similar magnitudes. Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, *Bollettino ufficiale per l'amministrazione forestale italiana*, III, 31 March 1875, p. 117.

33. The bill and the commission's report were published in Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, *Bollettino ufficiale per l'amministrazione forestale italiana*, VII, 31 March 1887, pp. 6-16.

merely discussing the potential sale of the forest triggered a rapid increase in forestry crimes. A public security report dated 4 September 1885 noted that even the courtyards of the humblest homes were filled with firewood³⁴. The following month, the prefect of Treviso asked the Ministry of the Interior “to promptly implement preventive policing measures to halt the destructive work of the woodcutters in time and prevent the emergence of the social question, which would be fraught with dangers and threats”³⁵.

Minister Grimaldi’s initiative caught the municipal administrators and other local notables off guard, alarmed at having to accept decisions made without their involvement or even contrary to their interests. This concern was further compounded when, alongside the introduction of the bill, newspapers reported that the Government had received an offer from an anonymous private company that was committed to carrying out the colonisation of the hill, employing the *bisnenti* both in the land transformation work and for subsequent agricultural labour, while also guaranteeing the construction of housing for the settlers and other necessary infrastructure. The project had the backing (including financial support) of several major landowners and industrialists from Veneto, as well as the endorsement of leading newspapers (Buosi, 1992: 82-3; Simonetti, 1988: 70-2).

Despite the apparent imbalance of interests and some initial internal friction, the local ruling class quickly repositioned itself, assuming a central role in the debate over Montello’s future. The key figure in this shift was Pietro Bertolini, a young lawyer and newly installed mayor of Montebelluna. His involvement in this issue helped launch a successful political career that would take him first to parliament and then into government (as Minister of Public Works and later of Colonies). By the end of 1885, the consortium of municipalities had also presented a project for the colonisation of the hill, proposing to allocate half of the land to the *bisnenti* while selling the remaining portion to finance the operation and relieve the State of any costs (Buosi, 2002).

Moreover, to reinforce the municipalities’ role as the only legitimate interlocutors, Bertolini revived the issue of usufruct rights over the forest, dedicating a pamphlet to the subject (Bertolini, 1887). In a petition to Parliament, Bertolini and the other mayors of the area came to legitimise the forestry violations committed by the population:

34. ASTv, Prefettura I serie, b. 1985, 4 September 1885.

35. ACS, Ministero dell’Interno, Gabinetto, Rapporti dei prefetti (1882-1894), b. 22, 26 October 1885.

the law punishes, but conscience absolves, and a forest offence was never considered a moral crime [...]. The woodsman not only believes he is not stealing, but sees himself as exercising legitimate rights over a woodland that, since time immemorial, he has considered his own. It is impossible to dislodge him from this belief, passed down from generation to generation –just as it is impossible to convince him that the State is not stealing from him when it sells trees to outsiders (*Petizione al Parlamento ed al Governo...*, 1886: 5).

These legal aspects were instrumental in leveraging what the local administrators considered their strongest bargaining counter in negotiations with the Government: the social question. In a complete reversal from just two years earlier, when they had asked the Government to arrange for the emigration of the *bisnenti*, the mayors now positioned themselves as the spokespersons for the claims of the poorest members of the population. Between 1886 and 1887 they organised two large demonstrations, mobilising hundreds of people, and promoted a new petition to Parliament for the division of the hill, which was signed by 4,453 “workers of Montello” (Durante, 1977). On these occasions, they also raised the spectre of potential social unrest if their proposal to divide Montello was not accepted. This scenario prompted the Government to steer the legislative debate away from the option of selling the forest to the private company. In May 1888, Minister Grimaldi presented a new bill identifying the consortium of local municipalities as the sole interlocutor for the colonisation of the hill (Simonetti, 1988: 76-81).

The issue remained unresolved for several more years, with further proposals being introduced but failing to reach discussion stage in the chamber due to postponements or the dissolution of Parliament³⁶. One factor that likely contributed to prolonging Montello’s demise was the legislators’ belief that mass migration would paradoxically simplify the situation, first by alleviating pressure on what remained of the woodland and later by reducing the number of those who might claim a share of the land division. Migration flows had indeed surged again after the area was struck by a cholera epidemic in the summer of 1886 and remained high until the end of the decade (Buosi & Nicoletti, 1999: 27-71; Meneghetti Casarin, 1990: 36-47).

It was only in February 1892 that the law for the colonisation of Montello was finally approved. The legislation divided the now almost entirely deforested hill into two equal parts. The section furthest from the settlements was to be divided into lots and sold at auction, to relieve the State of any costs and guarantee the resources needed for the

36. *Atti del Parlamento Italiano, Camera dei Deputati*, vols. 452, 531.

cultivation of the other half. The latter was to be allocated in plots to poor families who had resided for at least ten years in the villages of the area. The municipal consortium was tasked with appointing a representative body to oversee the implementation of these provisions. The allocation of plots took approximately two years due to delays in starting the representative body's work and the need to obtain a royal amnesty for the many applicants with pending (unenforced) convictions for forestry violations (Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, 1896).

However, the primary challenge was determining the beneficiaries, as the criterion of poverty was even more ambiguous than the parameters adopted in previous decades for granting forest product concessions. This gave rise to prolonged disputes both within each municipality and between the various municipalities, resulting in the approval of 1,987 applications out of 2,705 submitted³⁷. The selected families were allocated a total area of 2,956 hectares, divided into 1,224 plots of varying sizes depending on the quality of the land. As these figures indicate, the beneficiaries far exceeded the number of available plots, so most families were grouped to cultivate shared land. Overall, it was a progressive legislative initiative, the first law enacted in Italy on internal colonisation, but one that proved unsuccessful in its implementation. The extreme fragmentation of land ownership led to numerous relinquishments in subsequent years. Those who remained were forced into subsistence farming, often supplementing their income through additional means, the most common being earnings from seasonal migration to Northern European countries and remittances sent by family members who had left for South America. The experiment came to an end during the First World War, when the area was evacuated due to its proximity to the frontline. In the immediate postwar period, this situation provided the Government with a pretext for abandoning the colonisation project (Bortolotti, 1991; Buosi, 2018)³⁸.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The disappearance of the Montello woodland in the quarter-century between the area's annexation to the Kingdom of Italy and the 1892 law resulted from multiple factors: institutional changes, particularly those related to forestry legislation; demographic changes, with the rapid population growth and the onset of mass migration; socio-economic transformations, marked by the agrarian crisis and worsening rural

37. The documentation produced by the body appointed by the municipalities is held in ASTv, Prefettura I serie, bb. 2050-2051.

38. For a comparison with other internal colonisation experiences, see van de GRIFT (2015).

living conditions; lastly, industrial transition that caused a shift in commodity markets, including that of wood. These dynamics affected much of Europe and also influenced the evolution of the forest landscape³⁹.

I believe it is useful to analyse the effects of these global-scale dynamics through a micro-analytical approach. For instance, the case of Montello has shown the importance of assessing the quantitative increase in timber demand that characterised the industrialisation process in its qualitative dimension. Indeed, the growth in consumption in some sectors (railways) and the contraction in others (shipbuilding) necessitated diverse strategies of forest management and exploitation, even for the same tree species. The divergence between these strategies also underscores the difficulty of aligning forest policies with productive needs during a period marked by rapid and far-reaching shifts in the economic context. The decision to designate Montello as an “inalienable public woodland” due to the presence of oaks suitable for shipbuilding in 1871 –precisely when this sector was beginning its transition to iron– reveals the bounded rationality of institutional actors in woodland management. These challenges extended beyond forest policy itself, but assumed greater importance in this field due to the material characteristics of this peculiar commodity. As Martin Bemmman has recently observed (2024: 288): “wood distinguishes itself from other renewable resources due to its prolonged growth duration [...]. Consequently, aligning forestry and wood-based industries with industrial production and innovation cycles remains feasible only to a restricted extent”.

Finally, the case of Montello underscores the need to expand our current understanding of the transformation of the wood market during these decades. As we have seen, this transformation concerned both the uses of timber –and, consequently, the tree species most in demand– and the geography of its flows. So far, scholars have focused on the areas of Northern and Eastern Europe that were incorporated within the expansion of the timber frontier. In these territories, the arrival of the railway marked the beginning of intensive woodland exploitation for commercial purposes, along with a boom in timber processing activities. These developments also triggered significant social and ecological changes, as well as conflicts over the use of forest resources (Daheur, 2024; Lučić, 2024). To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the processes that led to the creation of a continental wood market in the late nineteenth century, these studies should be complemented by similar investigations into areas where

39. Notably through the replacement of broadleaves by conifers, which were better suited to industrial uses and were actively promoted –often through the establishment of monocultures– by forestry experts (GREWE, 2003; JOHANN, 2007).

the onset of industrialisation triggered the decline of pre-existing economic activities based on the exploitation of the woodlands.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is supported by the European Union under the ERC StG 2023 grant ‘Industrial Wood: European Industrialisation as Seen from the Forests (1870-1914)’ (INWOOD, grant agreement no. 101115916). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. I discussed a previous version of this article with Piero Brunello, Federico Del Giudice, Marta Gravela and Giulio Tacetti. I would like to thank them, as well as the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of *Historia Agraria* for incisive feedback and for the time they devoted to the text.

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