

THE LAST OF THE RED DEER *CERVUS ELAPHUS* OF “BOSCO ISOLA”, LESINA (FOGGIA, SOUTHERN ITALY)

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RIASSUNTO – L’ultimo cervo *Cervus elaphus* di “Bosco Isola”, Lesina (Foggia, Italia meridionale). Sulla duna di sabbia (*tombolo*), denominata “Bosco Isola”, che separa la laguna di Lesina (Provincia di Foggia, Puglia, Italia meridionale) dal Mare Adriatico, è nota la trascorsa esistenza di una popolazione di cervo, *Cervus elaphus*. Molto verosimilmente, questi animali vi furono importati da qualcuna delle riserve di caccia del re di Napoli, come ad esempio la non lontana Torre Guevara. L’ultimo dei cervi di “Bosco Isola” fu ucciso nel 1930. La consapevolezza della sopravvivenza fino in epoche così recenti di selvaggina alloctona di grandi dimensioni sul *tombolo* di Lesina pone seri interrogativi anche sull’origine dell’attuale fauna a mammiferi della Foresta Umbra e dell’intero promontorio del Gargano.

Parole chiave: Cervo, *Cervus elaphus*, Laguna di Lesina, Italia meridionale

The sand spit (*tombolo*) (Fig. 1) separating the lagoon of Lesina from the Adriatic Sea, (Province of Foggia, Apulia, southern Italy), extends to about 1350 ha. This low *tombolo* called “Bosco Isola” features a Mediterranean maquis at various levels of development, from garigue to pine stands, *Pinus halepensis*, and mature holm oak, *Quercus ilex*, interspersed with small shallow ponds of fresh water locally known as “*fantine*”. In this peculiar territory, the memory of the former existence of a population of red deer, *Cervus elaphus* lives on among the inhabitants of Lesina. In the year 1751 the fief of Lesina was acquired by prince Placido Imperiali di Sant’Angelo who decided to establish a hunting reserve on the Bosco Isola. He proceeded to build walls to close off the

eastern and western extremities where the *tombolo* extends into the hinterland, while the sea and the lagoon formed natural boundaries to the north and south. The prince then stocked the reserve with the conventional game that was hunted during the *ancien régime*: red deer, wild boars, fallow deer and roe deer. The origin of the animals is not specified, except in one case in which a gift from the king of Naples is mentioned. Most likely, therefore, the animals came from Torre Guevara, the nearest of the Bourbons’ many hunting reserves (cf. Alisio, 1976), a district situated about 70 km to the south within the township of Orsara. In the light of current knowledge, there is as yet no certainty about the origins of the large game that inhabited the hunting reserves of

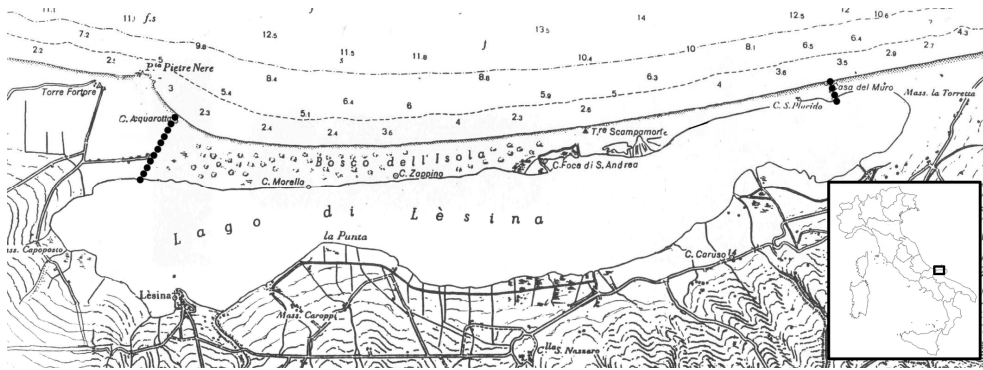


Figure 1 - Map of the *tombolo* of Lesina showing the position of the walls enclosing the hunting reserve (design Arts&altro).

the kingdom of Naples between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The historic documents tell us that some of the noble dynasties that governed the various Italian States at the time occasionally imported animals from central Europe. This is the case of the red deer and mouflons, *Ovis orientalis* Gmelin, 1774, imported from Bohemia in 1835 by Karl Simon to stock the Tuscan hunting reserve of the Lorraine Grand Duke Leopoldo II in the Casentino forest (Targioni-Tozzetti, 1872; Puccioni, 1932; Castelli, 1941; Tassi, 1976; Zangheri, 1976; Farina, 1979; Casanova *et al.*, 1982; Mattioli, 1990; Masseti, 2003). Nor can it be excluded that game may also have been imported from Spain to the kingdom of Naples (cf. Rubio Aragonés, 1996; Lovari, 2001; Masseti, 2003; Masseti and Nappi, in press).

Having become accustomed to the laxity of the preceding holder of the fief, a hospital foundation based in Naples, the local population did not take kindly to the strict measures against poaching introduced by the prince, and a revolt ensued. On the 14th, 15th, and 16th February 1769 a motley crowd with firearms invaded the hunting reserve. Two roe deer, three wild boars, two foxes and one marten were killed in the havoc but most of the animals, especially the red deer, escaped to the woods of the Gargano, through the breaches made in the

walls of the enclosure by the mob. The prince had in fact been particularly attached to the red deer. The fury began to abate on the 17th, when a heavy rain set in which continued for several days. The ringleaders of the revolt were prosecuted (Archivio di Stato di Napoli. *Scritture della Società di Storia Patria*, Fascio 1 n. 58.). Eventually, the prince was able to reorganise his hunting reserve and stock it again, as witnessed by the fact that on the 18th May, 1797, King Ferdinand IV of Naples, as a guest of Don Giulio Imperiali, brother of Placido, was entertained with a hunt on the Bosco Isola. Ferdinand noted in his diary that notwithstanding the abundance of game, the event was unsuccessful as result of mistakes made by the beaters (Caldora, 1965).

The way the inhabitants of Lesina recall the habits of the red deer suggest that the species also ranged free in the open outside the Bosco Isola enclosure. They tell how the deer used to come down from the slopes of the Gargano to drink at the springs at the eastern end of the lagoon of Lesina and to browse in the surrounding fens close to the coast. These animals must have been the descendants of those that broke out during the revolt of 1769. The walling-off of the Bosco Isola was essentially a legal device for establishing the reserve. In any case, the enclosure walls

could not have been an effective barrier for keeping game inside, since they were easily circumvented at both ends by wading through the lagoon or the sea. Thus, the escapees established an authentic wild population in the open territory of the neighbouring Mount Gargano. When the French abolished the feudal system of land tenure at the beginning of the 19th century there was a major takeover of rural property by bourgeois capitalists. Bosco Isola, part of a much vaster latifundum, was acquired by Vincenzo Zaccagnino who continued to care for the red deer through the Calvo family, his agents in loco. During World War I the number of animals fell drastically, so that new animals were introduced by Colozzi, the mayor of Lesina. The last deer of the Bosco Isola, a hind, was killed in 1930 (Breber, 1999), while fording the lagoon in the vicinity of Schiapparo.

The trophy of a local stag (Fig. 2) is still preserved by the Calvo family of Lesina.



Figure 2 - Trophy of an adult male deer shot by Michele Calvo in the hunting reserve of "Bosco Isola", at the beginning of the 20th century (photo Paolo Breber).

Compared with the antler development of other deer from Mediterranean environments such as those of the Mesola Forest, the trophy does not show reduction in size and/or a simplified architecture as might be expected in a population living in a

restricted area of low trophic production, and probably also under stress from inbreeding (cf. Masseti and Zava, 2002). The Calvo head of antlers displays instead a complex architecture with a crown and the bez tine.

Acknowledgement of the survival up to 1930 of wild game of large dimensions on the *tombolo* of Lesina also raises serious questions about the origins of the present-day mammalian fauna of the Foresta Umbra and the entire Gargano promontory. For example, this area is still regarded as one of the last strongholds of the roe deer subspecies *Capreolus capreolus italicus*, described by Festa (1925) (Ghigi, 1950; Tassi, 1976; Perco, 1981 and 1985; Apollonio and Trocchi, 1988; Lorenzini *et al.*, 2002), and reputed to be endemic to Italy (cf. Toschi, 1965; cf. Masseti, 2003).

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