

# TERRITORIAL TRANSFORMATIONS, LANDSCAPE AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF THE “TENUTA DI ISOLA SACRA” IN THE RECLAMATION OF THE EARLY 1900s

Maria Chiara Alati

MIC - Minister of Culture - Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, Viale dei Romagnoli 717,  
00119Rome (Italy), phone+39.06.56358078 +39.342.9749579,  
e-mail: [mariachiara.alati@cultura.gov.it](mailto:mariachiara.alati@cultura.gov.it)

**Abstract** – This paper presents the early acquisitions relating to the transformations of the territory of Isola Sacra, in the Agro Romano, between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, implemented through the land reclamation and enhancement work initiated by the Genio Civile, and definitively completed by the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti* (O.N.C., Soldiers’ National Foundation).

The paper describes, also by means of the graphic and photographic documentation preserved in the archives, a crucial phase of the territorial development of the area, which left deep traces, although they are not easily recognizable. Added to this, it recomposes an overall image of a context that, faster than others, in the course of the last decades has been suffering from the effects of an often-unguided transformation and in which it is difficult, today, to identify the signs of a past as recent and significant as it has been obliterated in many of its architectural and landscape features.

Today appreciated and known, above all for its immeasurable archaeological treasures, including the Necropolis, the Matidia Baths, the Portuense Iseo, the early Christian Basilica of S. Ippolito, this territory testifies of an importance that lasted centuries, also bound by its landscape values. In this sense, the protection and enhancement it requires must also pass through the rediscovery of historical events and landscape features that have defined the most recent structure.

The study examines the period between the first reclamation actions, started around 1885 by the Civil Engineers, and the vast transformation work for agricultural use carried out between 1920 and 1950 by the O.N.C., the “Tenuta di Isola Sacra” being one of the widest created in this period. These transformations, investing all aspects of the territory, from reclamation infrastructure and roads to vegetation asset and architectural characters, were decisive for the structure of the area.

The research is still in progress, aiming to frame either the economic and social development of the area and its most recent transformation, in view of the strong requirements it shows in terms of protection and cultural enhancement.

In fact, the strategic role of the area for its pivotal position between the archaeological and environmental system, constituted from ancient Ostia with the imperial Ports of Claudio and Traiano on one side and the international hub of the airport Leonardo da Vinci on the other, exposes Isola Sacra to strong anthropic pressure.

At the same time this role can offer extraordinary potentialities of a sustainable valorization, if guided by a deep understanding of the identifying and structuring characters that render this place still unique, from the historical and the landscaping point of view.

## Introduction

Known as Isola Sacra since antiquity, the coastal belt portion is bounded on its eastern and southern borders by the terminal stretch of the Tiber, called Fiumara Grande, and on its northern border by the artificial canal of Fiumicino, well known as Fossa Traiana or Fiumara Piccola, whose excavation was due to the construction of the imperial ports of Claudio and Traiano.

This little landscape portion, entirely bounded by the waterways leading the commercial routes to Rome, was between the city of Ostia, first colonial expansion and commercial harbor of Rome, and the great settlement of Portus, risen with the construction of the imperial harbors of Claudio and Traiano, as one of the most important commercial hubs of the Mediterranean Sea. [16-17-18]

The territory of Isola Sacra is nowadays much more expanded towards the sea than in the imperial age, due to the progressive advancement of the coastline (about 4 km) for the fluvial sedimentation [23, 25]. Its morphology and extension were also transformed by a violent flood of the Tiber in 1557, that definitely diverted the course of the river, cutting out a large meander and separating the intercluded portion of land from Isola Sacra.[1]

A prosperous and populated land in the imperial period, as shown by the relevant archaeological findings [14], Isola Sacra suffered from the decline of Ostia and Portus and slowly turned into one of the several marshes and malarial areas, sparsely inhabited, along the Tyrrhenian coast.

After a century-long neglect, in the framework of the politics of “integral reclamation” of land, pursued by the Italian Government [11], Isola Sacra was object of massive interventions of hydraulic and agricultural reclamation, to bring it back to agricultural productivity. The main part of this activity was realized in the context of the huge effort of economic and social reconstruction of the country following the Great War. [19-21]

A declared priority of these interventions was the reintegration of veterans in society and in the productive life of the country, which in this period meant, above all, agriculture. This proposal was mainly purchased by the activities of the O.N.C. [2]

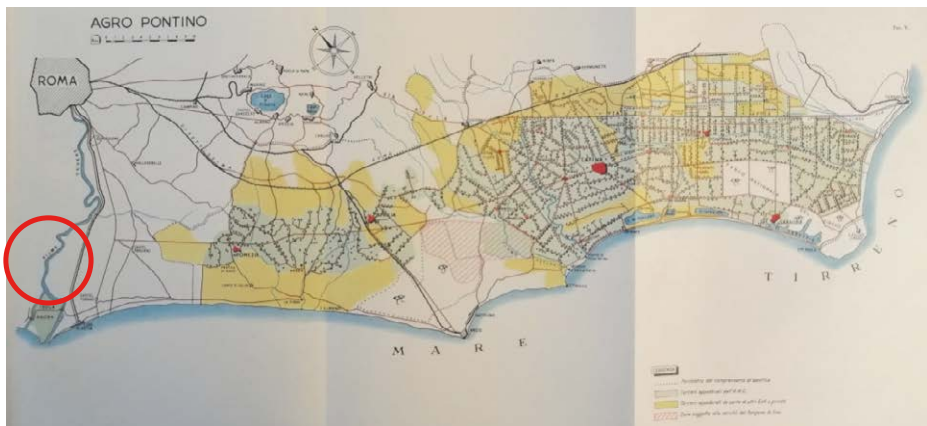


Figure 1 – Reclamation areas in the Pontine countryside. Isola Sacra is circled in red [19].

## Materials and methods

Moving from the direct knowledge of the existing asset of the territory with its historical and landscape values<sup>1</sup>, the research is mainly based on the analysis of archival documents kept in the Central State Archives (A.C.S), and in the archives of the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica. In particular, the work was addressed by the photographic documents and the projects in the archives of the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (O.N.C. or Soldiers' National Foundation), sited in ACS<sup>2</sup>. These documents allowed to reconstruct the details of the infrastructural and architectural development, that substantially was completed in the late 1950s. The intention is to identify and possibly preserve what is still remaining despite the recent transformations in the area. Particular attention is also paid to the architectural aspects by identifying, through the archive sources and the original projects, the architectural typologies of rural buildings adopted in this area, with the different "models" of rural houses that are repeated in the farms, together to the agricultural annexes, functional to the activities, also in order to identify the buildings that still exist despite extensions and transformations.

## Results

### The Opera Nazionale Combattenti

The O.N.C. was established in 1917, in the framework of the initiatives aimed at supporting and reintegrating war veterans.

Initially O.N.C. operated through measures of early unwinding of insurance policies or the granting of guaranteed loans to veterans, with the general tasks of financial, technical and moral assistance. After the approval of its Statute and Legislative Regulation, its purposes and sectors of activities were definitely outlined: *"The Opera [...] helps to promote the technical, economic and civil conditions which will enable the nation's labour force to become more productive"*.

Assistance was subordinated to the general objective of the reconstruction and development of the national economy. The branches of activity are: social action; financial action, through guaranteed loans for farmers, artisans and little entrepreneurs; agricultural development. This will soon become the main activity of this institution.

According to its legal system, the O.N.C. had legal personality under public law and autonomous management, like a semi-public body. It operated with autonomy, albeit under the Government supervision, not only with the scope of individual assistance, but primarily of the "national reconstruction" by means of agricultural development. [20]

In the framework of the laws for land reclamation, promulgated since the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large campaign of expropriation of fallow land for public benefit was launched. It concerned lands formerly subdued to reclamation obligations that

---

<sup>1</sup> In addition to several archaeological bonds, Isola Sacra is submitted to landscape direct bonds. DM. 22 may 1985, Declaration of considerable public interest of Isola Sacra and Casale Santa Lucia; State Natural Reserve of the Roman Coast - DDMM. 428 of 28.07.87 - 29.03.96.

<sup>2</sup> ACS Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Fondo Opera Nazionale Combattenti, Servizio Ingegneria, Serie Progetti (A.C.S., Fund O.N.C. Engineering Service, Project Series. In italian in the footnotes).

the owners had not completed or realized at all, or that are left uncultivated. Actually, it means that expropriation primarily should have affected latifundium [3-4-5-6].

### **The territory and landscape of Isola Sacra between the end of 19th century and the early 20th century**

Like most of the Lazio coast, at the end of the 19th century, the area of Isola Sacra was swampy and almost completely uninhabited. The reclamation of the area, already planned by law in 1876<sup>3</sup> started in 1885 with some hydraulic arrangement activities implemented by the Civil Engineers, following a mixed system. The estate was divided into two areas, one with natural drainage remediation, the other with drainage due to mechanical exhaustion. The heart of the system was the network of main and secondary collectors and, most of all, the dewatering pumps for exceeding waters, necessary in the second area, closer to the sea, swampy and malarial<sup>4</sup>.

After the hydraulic draining was executed, land owners, united in consortia, were committed to complete the minor reclamation interventions, such as ditches and drainage

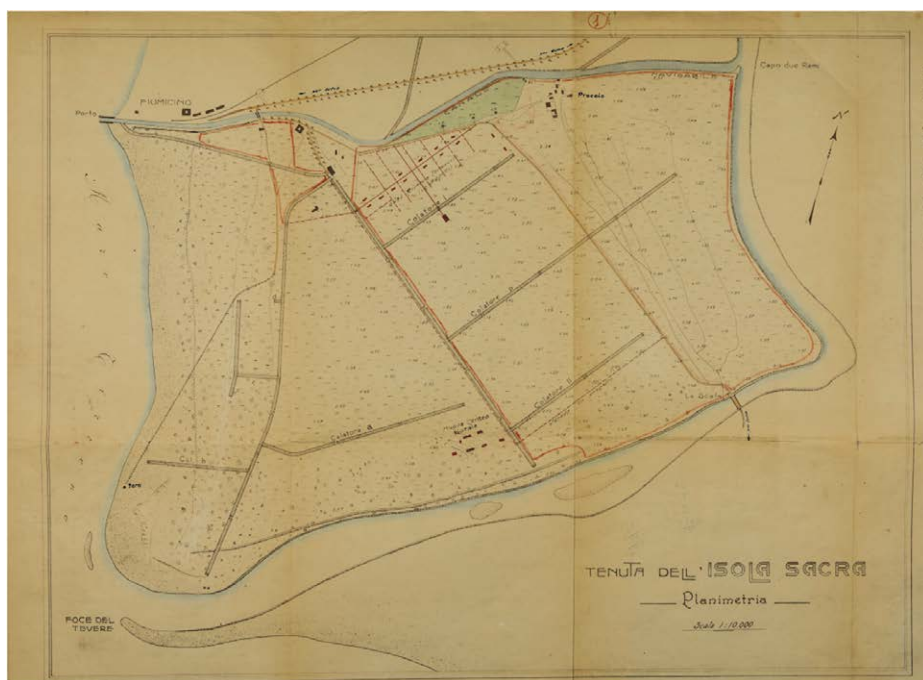


Figure 2 – Tenuta di Isola Sacra. Land reclamation and colonization project, 1922<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> L.11 Dec 1876<sup>3</sup> No. 4642, 2nd series, for the Reclamation of the Agro Romano.

<sup>4</sup> A.C.S., Fondo Opera Nazionale Combattenti. Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 266, Land reclamation and colonization, 1922, Report.

<sup>5</sup> A.C.S., Fondo Opera Nazionale Combattenti. Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 266, All. I. General plan. There are reports of the water reclamation carried out by the Civil Engineers in 1885.

channels for the runoff of standing water in the individual properties. The owner, the Marchesa Guglielmi, did not fulfil her obligations; in 1914<sup>6</sup>, Isola Sacra was subdued to the *Testo Unico sul bonificamento dell'Agro Romano* and was assigned to the O.N.C. [7]

### O.N.C.'s projects

The first land reclamation and colonization project of the O.N.C. offices was filed on May 15, 1922<sup>7</sup>. It describes with accuracy the situation of the estate, illustrating the previous interventions and the presence of pre-existing buildings for agricultural uses, in bad conditions and in need of renovation. At that time the estate was already divided into Reserves, left for the most part uncultivated or to pasture<sup>8</sup>. Exceptions are: S. Biagio and Cioccati, rented and cultivated with wheat and oats; Reserves of Casone, Ponti and Capo due Rami di sotto illegally occupied by former combatants from Fiumicino, ploughed and partly sown (for 110 ha); Riserva del Crocifisso, occupied and cultivated with wheat (for 10 ha); Riserva del Torraccio (7 ha) granted as sharecropping and always cultivated with fruit trees. The "pools" are still present, permanent marshy areas scattered in several parts, not only in the coastal area. The report mentions at least 13 major ones and mentions other minor ones.

The coastal area, *"in the past always used as pastureland, is by siliceous nature, with very marked dunes and is a thankless and sterile soil. In this part alternate areas infested with asphodeles with brambles, brooms and other weeds"*<sup>9</sup>. The estate is also totally devoid of drinking water, which is brought from Ostia or Fiumicino with barrels. The water for the animals is collected in cisterns and raised by pumps with wind engines, existing in number of 10.

The technical report enclosed in the project mentioned: *"At this date, a small number of buildings, some of which were already in existence, were equipped with the estate: the Torraccio; little house near the pontoon bridge; barns near the Church of the Crucifix; a little*

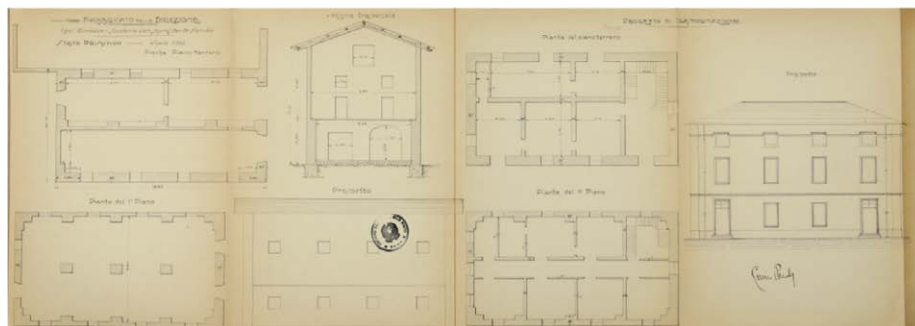


Figure 3 –Land reclamation and colonization project, 1922. Building of the Direction<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> With Royal Decree n.200 (1914, 15 February).

<sup>7</sup>A.C.S., Fondo Opera Nazionale Combattenti. Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 266. Land reclamation and colonization project, 1922.

<sup>8</sup>A.C.S., Fondo Opera Nazionale Combattenti. Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 266., All.2. The Reserves.

<sup>9</sup>A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 266, General Report.

<sup>10</sup>A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B.266, All.8.a.

house for temporary staff towards Ostia; the group of building near the Procoio (now called S. Ippolito, ndr) with little the two storey houses of the “Massaro” (the farmer, ndr), the house of the “facocchio” (who builds or repairs carriages); stable for calves; butter processing room; room for the processing of butter, not registered, with the entrance to a labyrinth of caves. Near “Tenuta di mezzo” a building under construction...” All premises are not in good conditions”.

The O.N.C plan provided to divide the Estate in two parts, each one headed by a Rural Centre; the first one in the area of Procoio, near the canal, the second one near the Scafa Bridge. This one, in the overall plan is defined “New Rural Centre”. A third part of the estate was devolved to semi-wild breeding, and headed by Torraccio, where some barns already existed. In a second moment this part should have been divided into 3 ha vegetable plots to be equipped with a house and ancillary buildings, a little stable, and awning.

In this regard, an application for license for water withdrawal from the Canal was submitted in March 1922 to turn part of the area into orchards through two water lifting systems (one at the bridge of boats, the other one facing the Cemetery of the Port of Fiumicino).

The idea of “integral land reclamation”[11], developed as an essential element of the socio-economic policies in Isola Sacra is achieved in a series of project that complete the Hydraulic drainage with agricultural colonization. The complete set of infrastructures necessary to lead the resettlement and cultivation of the area: roadways and farm roads, drainage ditches, irrigation systems, rural and residential buildings, schools, either trees planting along the streets.

A few years later (June 15th, 1927)<sup>11</sup> the project for the system of farm roads, partly on natural background, partly with a crushed stone surface, was developed. It included the construction of another group of farmhouses adjoining the plots, silos for the products, the primary school<sup>12</sup>. This project is followed shortly after by another one concerning the general irrigation system and canals<sup>13</sup>. It provided a secondary network of canals, linked to the primary canals, water lifting cabins, a loading tanks and intake works, like the one that is still visible near the Terme di Matidia. It is completed by the empowerment of the irrigating system of the vegetable gardens of Torraccio, near the canal, which existed since 1922<sup>14</sup>.

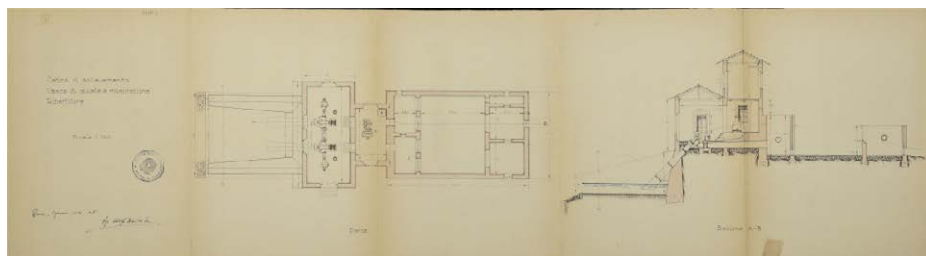


Figure 4 – Lifting cabin. Gripping work, loading tank and distribution<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 267, Fasc.2. Project of farm roads for the Estate of Isola Sacra, Roma 15 June 1927.

<sup>12</sup> A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 267, Fasc.2, all. 6,7,9.

<sup>13</sup> A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 268.

<sup>14</sup> A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 271.

<sup>15</sup> A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 268, all. 9.

At that time, the drainage of the several swamps widely disseminated around the estate was yet uncompleted. The pools, as they are called on the maps and documents, needed grave digging or filling according to their position and conditions, with huge and expensive earth moving, as included in a project of 1930; the swamps are obviously predominant in the Western part of the estate, the coastal side, the most insalubrious and difficult to cultivate, and the last one to intervene in.

Between 1936 and 1939<sup>16</sup>, two projects are conceived to bring and distribute drinkable water to 14 farms and plots, including the construction of another 12 farmhouses, two stables, shelters, and some rural buildings. This farmhouse plans show the strong influence of rationalist architectural language, although, in the reality, the farmhouses will be built in traditional shapes, using two prevalent distribution and dimensional types.



Figure 5 –Tenuta di Isola Sacra. Farmhouse with adjoining farm of 20 ha, 1927.

The land reclamation works allowed the archaeological discovery of one of the most significant sites of the area, the ancient Necropolis of Portus, along the Via Flavia. The ancient structures were widely excavated in a huge archaeological campaign lead by Guido Calza between 1925 and 1930; and inaugurated in 1934<sup>17</sup>. The event appears in ideal conjunction with the enormous effort spent to complete the excavation of Ostia Antica in time for the great Universal Exposure of Roma in 1942 (E42). [8-9]

In the documents, films and photographs of this period, the Rural Centre of Procoio appears to be totally completed. The complex is shown entirely in some perspective views preserved in the Ostia Archives, deployed with new buildings and with the three silos that, still nowadays, make it visible from all over the surroundings.

The farm centre completion marks the definition of the general asset of the area yet before the World War Two. In the same way are detailed, beside the agricultural asset, the landscape, architectural, vegetal characters and the first elements of the archaeological landscape.

After the conflict, the interventions are mostly finalized to restore buildings, structures, and plantations seriously damaged by the war. The main damages were caused by the floods, provoked in order to stop German troops in the first months of 1944. The floods involved more than 600 ha of land.

<sup>16</sup>A.C.S., Fondo O.N.C., Servizio Ingegneria Serie Progetti, B 272, all. 9. Project for the construction of 12 farmhouses; all.10 Distribution network for drinking water supply to 14 farms.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Archivio Istituto Luce, Serie Foto attualità, codice foto: A00057658, A00057659.

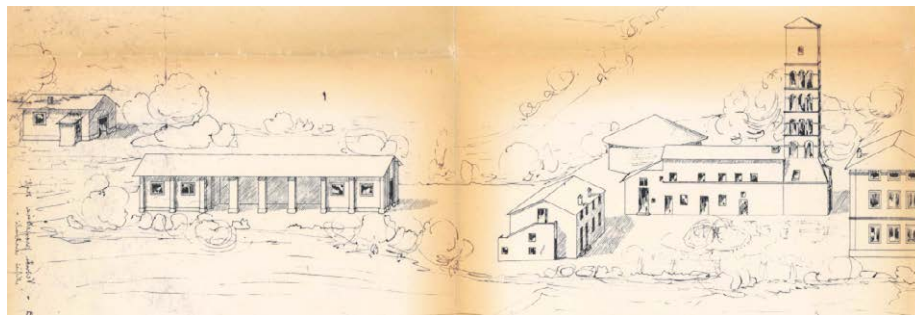


Figure 6 – The Farm centre near Procoio, near the chapel and tower of S. Ippolito.

One of the last relevant architectural and functional interventions was the construction, in 1946-47, of a great factory for the processing and conservation of tomatoes produced in Isola Sacra. The construction was led by O.N.C. through the Società Industrie Lavorazioni Prodotti agricoli (S.I.L.P.A., Society of Industries processing agricultural products) owned for 99,5 % by O.N.C. It was established along the main street connecting Isola Sacra with Ostia e Fiumicino, now leading to the International Airport Leonardo da Vinci.

A little Church, commissioned by the settlers for a vow during German occupation and dedicated to the Madonna del Grano (Our Lady of Grain), was also built in these years.

After these last efforts in reconstruction, maintenance and land improvements went on at a reduced pace. This historical phase ideally concluded on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1955, when the settlers received the property acts for their plots and officially became owners.

O.N.C. retains the ownership of some buildings, in particular the ones of the Rural Center. In the seventies, due to the archaeological findings of the basilica di S. Ippolito, near the chapel in Procoio, part of the land and buildings are transferred to Minister for Cultural and Environmental Affairs; the remaining part passes to Regional property offices, which still own them.

## Conclusions

Although Isola Sacra is known mostly for the importance of its archaeological remains, and for its strategic position in the coastal area between Rome, the airport and the sea, its importance is also bound to its environmental and landscape values and to his recent historical events, that that have defined its actual landscape structure.

Its factual protection and enhancement, however, can only go through the rediscovery of historical events and the transformations that have determined its structure and the most recent landscape features. These are strongly determined by the presence of waterways and the combination of reclamation infrastructures, agricultural fabric, and rural construction, now incorporated into recent building fabrics to the point of being almost no longer recognizable.

Without a path of collective and shared cultural re-appropriation, able to give meaning and continuity to the historical, architectural and landscape values still present in this territory, no protection and no exploitation can never be effective and sustainable.





Figure 7 – General asset of Isola Sacra in 1955[19].

## References

- [1] Baldassarre I., Bragantini I., Morselli C., Taglietti F., (1996) -*Necropoli di Porto. Isola Sacra*, Roma.
- [2] Barone G., (1984) -*Statalismo e riformismo: l'Opera Nazionale Combattenti (1917–1923)* in Studi Storici XXV, Roma.
- [3] Barsanti D., (1987) - “*Le bonifiche nell'Italia Centrale in età moderna e contemporanea: profilo storico e prospettive di ricerca*”, *Rivista di Storia dell'Agricoltura* - a. XXVII, n. 2.
- [4] Bevilacqua P., Rossi Doria M., (1984) - *Le bonifiche in Italia dal 700 ad oggi*, Bari.
- [5] Biagianni I. (1987) -*La legislazione sulle bonifiche in Italia*, *Rivista di Storia dell'Agricoltura* anno XXVII n.°2 Ed. Firenze.

- [6] Boccini F., Ciccozzi E., (1998) -*Enti e lotta antimalarica: l'Opera Nazionale per i combattenti, l'Istituto di Malariologia Ettore Marchiafava, l'Istituto interprovinciale antimalarico per le Venezie*, vol. X, n. 3.
- [7] Boccini F., Ciccozzi E.(ed.) (2007) - *Opera nazionale per i Combattenti. Progetti. Inventario*. Min.per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Dir. Gen. per gli Archivi, Roma.
- [8] Calza G., (1928) - *Rinvenimenti nell'Isola Sacra*, in NSc 1928.
- [9] Calza G., (1940) - *La necropoli del Porto di Roma nell'Isola Sacra*, Roma.
- [10] Cazzola F., (1986) -*Tecnici e bonifica nella più recente storiografia sull'Italia contemporanea*, in «Società e Storia», a. IX.
- [11] Cerri R.,(1979) -*Note sulla bonifica integrale del fascismo*, in « Italia contemporanea », 1979, n. 137, pp. 47-49;
- [12] Fumian C., (1979) - *Modernizzazione, Tecnocrazia e ruralismo: Arrigo Serpieri*, in «Italia contemporanea», 1979, n. 137.
- [13] Germoni P., (2001) -*Valorizzazione dell'area archeologica dell'Isola Sacra: necropoli e zona naturalistica*, in F. Filippo (a cura di ), *Archeologia e Giubileo. Interventi a Roma e nel Lazio nel piano del grande giubileo del 2000*, Napoli.
- [14] Germoni P., (2009) -*Fiumicino Isola Sacra: vecchi e nuovi rinvenimenti*, in *Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale, CX*.
- [15] Giraudi C., Tata C.,Paroli L. (2007) -*Carotaggi e studi geologici a Portus: il delta del Tevere dai tempi di Ostia Tiberina alla costruzione dei porti di Claudio e Traiano*, Journal of Fasti Online, Int. Ass. of Classical Archaeology Roma.
- [16] Keay S., (2012) -*The port system of Imperial Rome*, in Keay S. (ed.), *Rome, Portus and the Mediterranean* (Archaeological Monographs of the British School at Rome.
- [17] Keay S., Millet M., Strutt K., Germoni P. (a cura di), (2020) -*The Isola Sacra Survey. Ostia, Portus and port system of Imperial Rome*, Cambridge, 2020.
- [18] Keay S., Paroli L. eds., (2011) -*Portus and its hinterland: recent archaeological research*,Archeological monographs of the British School at Rome, 18, London.
- [19] Marinelli O., (1955) -*36 anni dell'Opera Nazionale Combattenti. 1919-1955.*, Roma.
- [20] Morselli C., (1996) -*Il contesto topografico*, in Baldassarre; Bragantini, Morselli, Toglietti, *Necropoli di Porto. Isola Sacra*. Ministero per i beni culturali ed ambientali, Itinerari dei musei, Gallerie, scavi e Monumenti d'Italia, Nuova Serie n.° 38. Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma.
- [21] Opera Nazionale per i Combattenti, (1928) -*Isola Sacra*, Stab. Tipogr. Castaldi,Roma. 1928
- [22] Pannuzi S.(2013) -*La laguna di Ostia: produzione del sale e trasformazione del paesaggio dall'età antica all'età moderna*. Melanges de l'Ecole Francais de Rome.
- [23] ParisellaA., SinodiA., (a cura di), *Antologia dell'agro romano. Volume III. Documenti 1923 – 1963*. Ed. Regione Lazio. Assessorato all'Agricoltura. Quaderni di Informazione socio-economica n. 20.
- [24] Praturlon A. (2008) - *Il vecchio e il nuovo delta del Tevere* (Fiumicino e Ostia, la spiaggia e il porto di Roma) *La geologia di Roma. Dal centro storico alla periferia. Memorie descrittive della Carta Geologica d'Italia Vol. 80/2008, APAT (ISPRA) ed SEL.CA. Firenze 2008*
- [25] Stampacchia M. (1983) -*Tecnocrazia e ruralismo. Alle origini della bonifica fascista (1918-1929)*, Pisa.