

53

ANCIENT AND PRIMEVAL BEECH FORESTS OF THE CARPATHIANS AND OTHER REGIONS OF EUROPE

“The world rustles among the tree branches, their roots sink into infinity; however, they do not get lost in it, but pursue with all their vital force a single purpose: to realize the law that is inherent in them, to bring their own form to perfection, to represent themselves.”

The Song of the Trees, Hermann Hesse

The beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is a species of tree endemic in the European continent and which formed the large forests which for a long time dominated a conspicuous portion of one of the most anthropised regions of the planet. Few forests, in the millennia of exploitation by man, have kept their primeval physiognomy unchanged and, for this reason, these forests are of exceptional value. This serial transnational site is made up of 94 primeval or ancient beech forests, in 18 countries for a total of more than 100,000 hectares. No fewer than 13 of these forests are in Italy and are among the most precious and characteristic evidence of the mountain forest landscape in the Mediterranean region. Finding refuge in these isolated areas of southern and south-eastern Europe, the beech managed to survive the severe climate conditions of the Ice Ages in the past two million years. With the rise in temperature after the last glaciation, this species once again expanded northwards, colonising a wide spectrum of territories and adapting to the great climate and ecological differences of the European regions and effectively conquering the whole continent. Crossing into these protected worlds, we see the mysterious European landscape before domination by *Homo sapiens*.



NATURAL, SERIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 1133
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: KRAKOW, POLAND
YEAR OF INSCRIPTION: 2017



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The primeval beech forests are an exceptional example of the ecological and biological evolution of temperate forest ecosystems which has characterised the whole European continent from the end of the last glaciation and prove the great adaptability of this species to a wide spectrum, of climatic, geographic and environmental characteristics.



“Walking in the woods is like plunging into the memory. Beyond personal memories and beyond history: a past that almost brushes on myth, time without time suspended like a dream. The tree trunks seem living and ancient presences, as though it was a gathering of ancestors, the great ranks of nameless generations, of the peoples that preceded us and now welcome us, in a timeless moment.”

Driven by the reflections that Francesco Boer makes in *Troverai più nei boschi*, this itinerary goes deep into the heart of the National Park of the Casentino Forests, where there are the northernmost Italian beech forests inscribed in the UNESCO site. By making a ring around Camaldoli, you spend two days completely immersed in the green ocean of the Casentino forests, with breathtaking scenery and historical remains.

The first leg starts from the **1 Monastery of Camaldoli**. Surrounded by the famous and impressive forests of fir trees, it was built from the 11th century and subsequently enlarged in the 16th century. Various parts of the monastery can be visited, including the cloister, the church and the pharmacy. From the bridge on the Fosso di Camaldoli, you go immediately up into the forest until you reach the **2 Rifugio Cotozzo**, along path no. 72. After taking path no. 70, you continue protected by the colossal green centenarians, pass the Fountain of the Duchess, reach the delightful clearing

of **3 Prato alla Penna** and eventually from there the **4 Fangacci Pass** at 1226 m above sea level. Surrounded by the gigantic beech and fir trees which make this forest a real living cathedral, through path no. 225 you reach the top of **5 Mount Penna** at an altitude of 1334 m. The view takes in the whole of the Romagnolo side of the park, in which the area of the Reserve of Sasso Fratino can be identified. Back at the pass, find path no. 00 which leads to **6 Poggio allo Spillo** and to the **7 Crocina Pass**. From here, path no. 64 goes down and crosses the beech wood at the hamlet of **8 Badia Prataglia**, where you can

find various solutions to spend the night and visit the 10th century abbey, which comprises an extraordinary and evocative Romanesque crypt. Taking path no. 60, the second leg goes up again from Badia Prataglia to the old houses of **9 Tramignone**; from here path no. 66 goes to **10 Serravalle**, a hamlet which preserves an 11th century square tower, looming up over the wooded valley of the Archiano torrent. Constantly surrounded by the majesty of the forest, path no. 70 takes you back to the Cotozzo Shelter, from where, again on path no. 70, you return to the Monastery of Camaldoli.



MAP



WILD LUCANIA

“[...] Look at foxes with admiration, / the buzzards, the wind, the wheat. / Learn to bend down to a beggar, / cultivate your rigour and fight / until you are out of breath. / Do not restrict yourself to floating, go down to the bottom / even at the risk of drowning. / Smile about this humanity / which becomes entangled in itself. / Give way to the trees.”

Cedi la strada agli alberi, Franco Arminio

According to the poet, writer, director and “village specialist”, Franco Arminio, “Lucania begins in April and ends in October. It is not a region, it is a summary of the solar system: there is the moon in Aliano in the creeks, Saturn under Vulture, Mars in Pietrapertosa and Jupiter on Pollino”. Two of the primeval beech forests included in the UNESCO serial site are precisely in the National Park of the Pollino, the largest protected area in Italy. In the primeval beech forest of the Pollinello, there are parts where no evidence has been found of human intervention on the forest ecosystem, a very rare example of primary forest in the Old Continent. This is a habitat with numerous centuries-old beech trees, including Michele and Norman which, more than 620 years old, are the oldest beech trees in Europe.



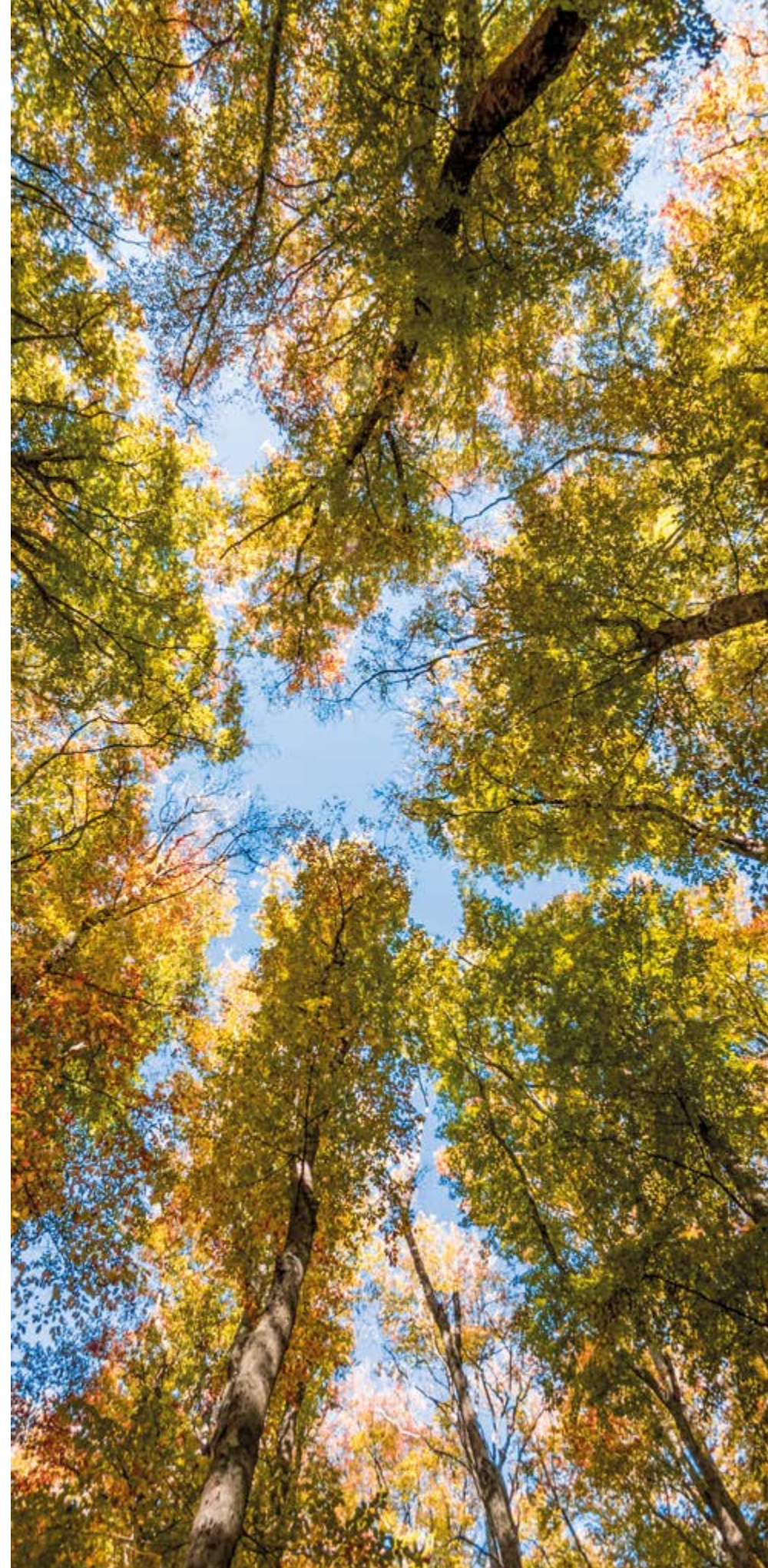
“The Gargano is the most varied mountain that can be imagined. In its heart it has the Umbra Forest, with beech trees and Turkey oaks that are 50 metres high, with a trunk that is 5 metres round, and the age of Methuselah; with fir trees, maple trees and badgers: with a lushness, a colour, the idea that the seasons became frozen in an hour of the evening; with deer, hares, foxes that run away under your feet; with every trill, moan and chirp of birds.”

In the vivid images that *Il deserto e dopo* by Giuseppe Ungaretti can evoke, all the exceptional nature of the Umbra Forest stands out, perhaps the most peculiar of those included in the UNESCO serial site. It is protected by the limestone spur of the Gargano, which extends into the cobalt blue waters of the southern Adriatic. This route goes from north to south, allowing combining the wild life treasures of the forest with those of the coast, together with some cultural gems which enrich the mosaic of history and nature of the National Park of the Gargano.

Start from **1 Mattinata**, among the infinite picture-postcard beaches and the dizzy heights of the limestone cliffs of Baia delle Zagare, with its iconic sea stacks. North of the town, there rises the **2 Monte Sacro** (874 m), which in the Spring offers multi-coloured blossoms of orchids in the medieval ruins of the Abbey of the Very Holy Trinity. However, the spiritual heart of the Gargano is on another mountain to the south-west: **3 Monte Sant'Angelo**, a centre of pilgrimage since the Late Middle Ages; in addition to the shrine and the impressive castle, the site

preserves the very ancient Rione Junno, from the 10th century. On the other side of the SP52b road, you will finally be enraptured by the mysticism of the living cathedral of the **4 Umbra Forest**. A network of 15 paths of different lengths, but all very accessible and which lead to the most beautiful corners of the forest, allowing you to read all the extraordinary richness of this ecosystem, spreads out from the Visitors Centre. Returning north, **5 Vico del Gargano** can boast of a medieval historic centre with a chessboard pattern. It is possible

to follow the amorous suggestions created around the local patron saint, St Valentine, in the labyrinth of alleys. The itinerary closes by joining the coast, towards the north. In **6 Peschici**, fill your eyes and lungs with the Mediterranean atmospheres and the dazzling white cubes of the houses that cover the rocky spur on which it stands. Walk under the arches, in the lanes and alleys and the small squares of the ancient town, admiring the town-houses that grow next to the cave homes, and open your eyes wide before the medieval siege engine of Monte Pucci.



THE VAL CERVARA

“In scientific literature, there is a tendency to define three centuries as the maximum age of a beech tree. I find this denial by the Abruzzi forests great. [...] I can sit down at the foot of a tree born in the times of Michelangelo and Raphael, and contemplate all the phases of the life cycle of the natural forests in temperate climates: trees like columns in various shapes, trees standing dead with shelves of fungi, others lying on the ground with numerous cavities, plants one or two years old in carpets of moss and lichens. A thought of gratitude for the farsighted; a feeling that is also shared, I'm sure, by the Marsican bear.”

Alberi sapienti, antiche foreste, Daniele Zovi

The beech forest of the Val Cervara is like one that has never been touched by human hands. It was the local community led by the botanist Loreto Grande, of Villavallelonga, that preserved it, saving it from economic interests and bringing it under the protection of the National Park of Abruzzo after World War II. Today it is home to some of the oldest specimens of *Fagus sylvatica* in the northern hemisphere, with some that are more than five centuries old. The ecological dynamics that regulate the cyclic nature of forest life can be clearly seen.



"COME ON, DON'T TAKE IT BADLY. / BUT FOR ONCE, / ENJOY THE SILENCE IN PEACE / AND LISTEN TO ITS VOICES... / LISTEN TO RADIOFOREST / WHICH BROADCASTS FROM BRANCH TO BRANCH / THE MUSIC OF LIFE, / ITS ETERNAL RECALL... / LISTEN TO THE SONG OF THE WIND, / THE MURMUR OF THE STREAMS AND IN THE NESTS THE SWEET CHIRPING OF THE / BIRDS... / FOLLOW FROM LEAF TO

LEAF, / FROM PATH TO PATH, / NATURE WHICH HIDES IN ITS GREEN MYSTERY."

With the words of *La radiolina nel bosco* by Gianni Rodari still buzzing in your ears, take this itinerary which reaches the enchanted Old Beech Forest of Mount Cimino. Set off from the historic centre of Soriano nel Cimino, a hamlet at the foot of the mountain of the same name, so full of the atmosphere of past times that it will be like embarking on an adventure worthy of a medieval legend. Start from the crenelated walls of the **1 Orsini Castle**, which are so majestic as to lengthen their shadow over the alleys

in the centre. The austere fortress was built from the 13th century and lived in by noble dynasties and popes. The walls are surrounded by a patrol walkway, from which you dominate the surrounding countryside. The many legends that inhabit it include that of the ghost of Marcello Capece, the valet unjustly accused of being the lover of the Count Giovanni Caraffa. After your visit to the castle, weave your way down through the alleyways of the **2 historic centre**, with its concentration of churches and townhouses. Alongside your relaxing walk in the medieval village, you can discover the delicious typical specialities, in the restaurants or buy them directly in the small shops in the centre. Far from the gloomy atmosphere of the castle, the marvellous **3 Palazzo Chigi Albani** is a home worthy of a prince. In addition to sumptuous halls and a magnificent garden, it is home to the Fonte di Papacqua, fed by a natural source and decorated with a bizarre group of sculptures dominated by a gigantic female figure with goat's feet and carrying her three children, known to the people of Soriano as "la mammoccia". It is at last time to point the "steed" towards the Old Beech Forest of Mount Cimino. The forest seems to have come out of the pages of a chivalric romance, where the silvery trunks of the beech trees seem to defend, with their colossal dimensions, the borders of an enchanted realm. Before "getting lost" in its atmosphere, with the help of a network of well-indicated paths, you can aim for the **4 Educational Wood of Tenuta Sant'Egidio**, which was created with the intention of allowing adults and children to approach the beauty of this natural oasis, thanks to numerous educational activities, spaces for environmental education, equipped areas and green classrooms in the heart of the wood.



THE ANCIENT BEECH FORESTS in books

Reading suggestions to get lost among the trees of the old beech forests.

- **The Song of the Trees**, Hermann Hesse (1952). This iridescent collection of poetic writings, reflections in prose and stories, germinates around trees which, like faithful companions, accompany the writer's life.
- **Il deserto e dopo. Le Puglie**, Giuseppe Ungaretti (1961). Travel prose in which the poet evokes the places he visited during his exploration of the area around the Gargano, full of ideas, reflections and suggestions charged with universal themes.
- **L'Italia è un bosco**, Tiziano Fratus (2014). A lived "treeography" which is reasoned and full of emotion on the experiences of a man who has dedicated his life to researching and studying the large trees of the world and who in this journey, focuses on the living treasures of the Italian peninsula, from the pioneers of the Alpine peaks to the giants of the Apennines.

- **Cedi la strada agli alberi**, Franco Arminio (2017). With this revealing title, the author collects poems of love and land which pay tribute to the "landscape" and all the living beings that inhabit it, with a sense of belonging and attention for what exists and that the trees guard, key presences to fall in love with the world.

- **Alberi sapienti, antiche foreste**, Daniele Zovi (2018). A forest scientist who for more than 40 years was in the Forest Service. Zovi is an exceptional guide in the world he knows best, that of the forests. A "different" and "wild" world by definition, the forest is a "place of the spirit, a dimension in which fears and hopes hover, with flights and embraces, dreams and ancestral visions" which the author, page after page, teaches us to listen to and to protect.

- **Troverai più nei boschi**, Francesco Boer (2021). Faithful to the motto of Bernard of Clairvaux which inspired the title, the author goes on a peregrination in nature full of curiosity and open to wonder, with a gaze that combines scientific lucidity and the meaning of interior research.

This "manual on how to decipher the signs and mysteries" of the natural world is almost a guide to listening to what trees and rocks have to tell human beings, something which no teacher will ever say.

Children's books:

- **Nursery Rhymes for a whole year**, Gianni Rodari (1986). With his irony and passion for tolerance and solidarity, Rodari offers a whole year of nursery rhymes, which in the extraordinary variety of subjects and linguistic ideas never cease to put a humanism that is always topical at their centre.

- **Il favoloso mondo degli alberi**, Federica Buglioni, Emanuela Bussolati (2021). Sitting in the shade of trees, protected by their embrace, children will discover the secret world of plants, between science, and history, daily life and mythology. Fifteen species of trees are the main characters on this journey, each with an important role in the lives of human beings.