Bocconea 28: 369-370
https://doi.org/10.7320/Bocc28.369
Version of Record published online on 22 November2019

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Evolution of the forest landscape in the Punic Eparchy area (West Sicily): the importance of cork oak in natural residual vegetation for the purposes in the restoration of the forest landscape

Raimondo, F. M.: Evolution of the forest landscape in the Punic Eparchy area (West Sicily): the importance of cork oak in natural residual vegetation for the purposes in the restoration of the forest landscape. — Bocc. 28: 369-370. 2019. — ISSN: 1120-4060 printed, 2280-3882 online.

Key words: *Oleo-Ceratonion*, *Erico-Quercion ilicis*, *Quercus suber.*

The natural forest vegetation in the territory of the western provinces of Sicily (Palermo, Trapani and Agrigento) has almost completely disappeared. This area coincides with the ancient administrative territorial unit that precedes the division into three "valleys" of the most inhabited island of the Mediterranean: it is the Val di Mazara, remembered by archaeologists as "Punic Eparchy". As a seat of important Greek cities (Himera, Solunto, Entella, Agrigento, Gela, Eraclea Minoa, Segesta, Selinunte, Erice, Lilibeo, Mozia, etc.), it was a Punic domain before being abandoned. Due to the lack of a marked relief and the benefit of climate, agriculture was practiced for three millennia. In the last centuries – first in extensive and then intensive way – this form of agriculture was progressively occupying all practicable spaces and the cultivation of woody plants replaced the natural vegetation - the scrub and the Mediterranean evergreen forest - thus determining a landscape with a strong agricultural imprint, devoid of forest formations; from almond groves, olive groves and vineyards of classic cultivations it has been passed to modern, more rational woody plants which mainly make up the two extreme provinces, the most important wine and olive cultivation area of Sicily. The study of the remains of the natural vegetation that have been re-ignored – almost always small surviving plant communities in the less suitable spaces for traditional agricultural activities – presently allows us to reconstruct the potential vegetation of the area, partly referring to phytocoenosis of the *Oleo-Ceratonion* (*Pistacia-Rhamnetalia alaterni*) and *Erico-Quercion ilicis* (*Quercetalia ilicis*). In this scenery the cork oak (*Quercus suber*) plays an important role, considering its presence as isolated plants or rather open stands, mainly in the westernmost provinces of the Island. These elements of the local natural heritage can be assessed as important relics of the

destroyed climacic vegetation of the extensive area stretching from the northern Tyrrhenian coast to the southern one, in contact with the African sea.

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