

Antologia Pontina - Pontine Anthology

Music and Poetry from the Pontine Plain and Ulysses' "Riviera"

By Lorenzo Salvagni

Introduction: From Myth to History

The word "Pontine" comes from the Latin "Ager Pomptinus," which was the name given to the low-lying plains stretching from the Southern outskirts of Rome to the town of Terracina. Most of this vast area was covered by marshes and infested by malaria-carrying mosquitoes; the noun "Malaria" (*mal aria*, which means "bad air"), in fact, might have originated here, where the disease was also known as "Roman fever" and associated with the "pestilential fumes" rising from swamps and stagnant water. The frequent bouts of sickness did not prevent cattle herders and some adventurous settlers from calling this area their home; most people, however, preferred to live near the coast or in fortified dwellings on the Eastern Apennine mountains (*Monti Lepini*), where the air was purer and there were fewer mosquitoes to spread the disease.

Myth and history seamlessly coexist on this coastline where, according to the legend, Ulysses landed during his journey back from Troy (as told in the *Odyssey*) to meet the sorceress (and demi-goddess) Circe. Homer tells us that Circe lived on the Aeaëa (or Aiaia) island, later identified with a promontory aptly named "Circeo." Her parents were the sun god Helios and Perse, an Oceanid nymph. Helios decided to exile his own daughter after she showed an excessive propensity for witchcraft, and more specifically for turning her romantic rival, the nymph Scylla, into a multi-headed sea monster. Seemingly unencumbered by her past deeds, Circe also turned many of Ulysses' companions into pigs shortly after they landed on her island. Ulysses was smarter, however, and instead of drinking Circe's potion he threatened her with his sword. Ignoring the obvious red flags, the two started a passionate love affair that ended after one year, when his buddies (graciously returned by Circe to their human form) convinced him that it was time to go home.

So strong is the association of Circe with Mount Circeo, that its very shape (when looked at from the side) is believed to match her profile. Its peak offers a striking view of the Pontine Plains with its surrounding hills and islands, and hosts the ruins of a sacred site named *Ara di Circe* (Altar of Circe). Other important sites include the Acropolis, an ancient settlement (probably) built by the Romans between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, and a prehistoric cave (*Grotta Guattari*) with the remains of 11 Neanderthals. Archeologists think that the cave might have been inhabited by prehistoric hyenas, who either hunted or scavenged the Neanderthals, dragging them to their den where they were later discovered. Guided tours of the cave are available year-long. Another

important site located near the base of Mount Circeo is the Villa of the Roman emperor Domitian, a large complex (over 111 acres, or 84 football fields) that includes thermal baths, gyms, temples and an impressive water management system.

There are different versions of Circe's story after her lover's departure. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, and unlikely as it seems, she had three sons from Ulysses. One of them, Latinus, later became king of the Latins, who were the ancestors of the Romans. According to another myth, however, the Latins descended from Aeneas and the Trojans; clearly, the Roman intelligentsia was trying to claim the best possible lineage for their own kind! Given that Circe was the daughter of a nymph, however, and nymphs love water, we cannot rule out the possibility that she had a role in either creating or enchanting the river Ninfa, which rises from a powerful underground spring located at the base of the Lepini Mountains. The water of this river is consistently cold, even in the summer; it produces a unique micro-climate that allows a wide variety of plants and animals to thrive. The Romans recognized the unique benefits of this river early on, and near the spring they built a temple (*nymphaeum*) dedicated to the nymphs. The Romans' mastery of water engineering allowed them to keep the marsh at bay when they built the Appian Way, the "Queen of Roads" (*Regina Viarum*) built by Appius Claudius Caecus in 312 BCE. Engineers built a 19-mile stone causeway raised 6 feet above the water. A canal ran parallel to the road, to allow for boat and barge travel.

The presence of abundant, fresh water, together with the vicinity to a major highway that provided safe passage through the marsh were the decisive factors that led to the creation of a custom station, also named Ninfa, which soon turned into a settlement and later into a major urban center. So wealthy and powerful did the city of Ninfa become that, in 1159, Pope Alexander III was consecrated in its main church, Santa Maria Maggiore. His election in Rome had been hotly contested, with another candidate closer to the emperor Frederick I Barbarossa also elected by a minority of the cardinals with the name Victor IV. The resulting schism led to years of violence and confusion until the emperor's death in 1190. Ninfa's wealth and importance turned the city into a target when, in the 14th century, the papacy became split between Italy and France and multiple feuds arose among the local aristocracy.

In the 16th century, the Pontine Plains (and much of central Italy) were ruled by the Popes. In 1563, in response to the increasingly frequent pirate raids in the area, Pope Pius IV ordered the construction of a defense system that included four towers built in strategically important locations along the coast. To each tower was assigned a garrison armed with powerful cannons to dissuade and repel any attackers. *Torre Paola* is the best preserved of the four, and its imposing presence seems to defy the

corrupting forces of time and weather. Because of its location at the base of Mount Circeo, poet Rodolfo Carelli identifies it with Circe as she waits for Ulysses' return.

The Pontine region remained infested by malaria-carrying mosquitoes well into the 20th Century, and very few people dared to venture on it during the hot months. The Appian Way had fallen into disrepair after the fall of the Roman empire, and many reclamation attempts (including one by Leonardo Da Vinci) were unsuccessful until the mid-1920s, when dictator Benito Mussolini deployed an unprecedented number of workers and heavy machinery to solve the problem once and for all. A complex network of canals and pumping stations pushed the stagnant waters back to the sea, and vast new plots of fertile land became available for settlers to cultivate and build on.

By the early 1930s, five new cities and multiple farmhouses ("poderi") had been built in the newly reclaimed "Terra Pontina." The hype surrounding this unprecedented feat of civil and cultural engineering strengthened Mussolini's ambition to establish similar settlements in Italy's African colonies. A link was also created between Italy's new territories and the American colonization of the "Wild West" by pioneers in the previous century. The *butteri*, or Italian cowboys, it was said, had even defeated their American counterparts while the latter toured central Italy with Buffalo Bill's "Wild West Show," back in the 1890s! The factual basis of that claim mattered less than the prestige deriving from that far-fetched association.

Myth and history have always happily coexisted in the Pontine country, a region that has remained largely untouched by mass tourism, despite its attractions that rival those of the nearby Amalfi coast. The Pontine islands (Ponza, Ventotene, Palmarola, Zannone and Santo Stefano), all visible from Mount Circeo, are especially well-known by divers for their pristine waters and rich wildlife. Circeo became a national park in 1934, which allowed the surrounding area to enjoy special protection and remain mostly free from the wild urban speculation that occurred in the decades following WWII, when Italy experienced an economic boom.

Antologia Pontina (Pontine Anthology) is a collection of songs inspired by poems written by Rodolfo Carelli, Mattia Pacilli, Anna Michielon, Augusto Sindici and Theodore Roethke. All the poems are intimately connected with the Pontine region, where I grew up. The songs were commissioned by Hathaway Brown School on the occasion of the first Italian tour of their chorale, in the summer of 2024. I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to my friend and colleague, Laura Webster, for commissioning these pieces, and to all the students who worked very hard to learn and perform them on multiple occasions on both sides of the Atlantic!

1. Torre Paola (poem by Rodolfo Carelli)

Torre Paola is a defensive outpost built in the 15th century to protect the coast from pirate incursions. It is located near the base of Mount Circeo, right above the waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea; the promontory takes its name from the Goddess Circe, who, the legend goes, once inhabited one of its caves. The episode of Ulysses and Circe from Homer's *Odyssey* is well known; in Carelli's poem, the tower symbolizes Circe staring at the sea, longing for her lost love. In the music we hear the sound of the waves, the wind, and the sirens' calls for Ulysses. His ancestral home, Ithaca, has become "wherever a woman awaits, unable to forget."

Regale fissità

Incide sull'acqua il suo profilo

Che il vento non osa cancellare.

Vigile attende / Che ritorni Ulisse

Nel suo eterno peregrinare.

Itaca / ovunque una donna aspetti

Che non sa scordare.

Royal steadiness

Carves on the water her profile

The wind doesn't dare to erase it.

Vigilant awaits / for Ulysses to return

From his eternal wandering.

Ithaca / wherever a woman awaits

Unable to forget.

2. Sabaudia città metafisica (poem by Rodolfo Carelli)

One of the five cities built after the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes, Sabaudia (est. 1934) is the most aesthetically pleasing and a perfect model for the architectural movement known as Rationalism. It is also Carelli's hometown, and in his verses Sabaudia's iconic architectural elements (ramps, arches, towers) blend with the poet's feelings for his beloved community.

La mia è una città spaziale

Per come il cielo la fa da padrone

Per come lievita altrove

L'anima rapita in un baleno

Dalle rampe di lancio e torri,

Emblema della comunità

Patrie del cuore, ellissi

Di un amore conteso tra due fuochi

L'io e il mio Dio

Mine [my city] is a city of space

For how the sky rules it

For how the soul levitates elsewhere

Captured in a ray of light

By its ramps and its towers

Emblem of the community

Heart's homeland, ellipse

of a love caught in between two fires:

My God and I!

3. La fata di Ninfa (poem by Augusto Sindici)

The city of Ninfa took its name from an ancient Roman temple dedicated to the nymphs. Both the temple and the city were built near the spring of a river, also called Ninfa, that

provided a much-needed stream of fresh water to the first settlers of the malaria-ridden Pontine marshes. During the middle ages, because of its strategic position and resources, the city grew considerably in size, wealth and importance; it had seven major churches and even a Pope (Alexander the Third) was elected here! The city's fortunes were abruptly reversed when the combined armies of several smaller towns attacked it in the 14th century. Its citizens were either killed or captured and deported, its grandiose buildings were sacked and burned to the ground. During the following 5 centuries, the ruins of Ninfa stood as a memento of the transient nature of human glory, and gave origin to many legends.

According to the most famous tale, the king of Ninfa wanted to reclaim the surrounding farmland from the swamp, and promised his beautiful daughter's hand in marriage to the man who could accomplish this feat of engineering and hydraulics. A powerful wizard took on the challenge and - using dark magic - was able to drain the swamp in one night! Alas, the princess of Ninfa was in love with someone else, and rather than marrying the wicked wizard she threw herself from the tallest tower into the depth of the lake below. This is where poet Augusto Sindici begins his tale: after her premature demise, the poor princess turned into an evil sorceress, and decided to take her revenge against her father and all the people who dared to pass by the cursed lake. She wove a poisonous cape that could instantly drain all life energy from anyone who touched it, and started haunting the roads at night, only returning to her watery grave during the day. This story is clearly an allegory that portrays the symptoms of malaria (consumption, drowsiness, fever etc.) in a more compelling and romantic fashion. The swamps were finally drained in the 1930s, but only after many more people succumbed to the dark power of the lake!

<i>Vive ella a Ninfa nel fondo roccioso</i>	<i>She lives at Ninfa, on the rocky bottom</i>
<i>Del verde lago in fra l'erba malsana</i>	<i>Of the green lake, among the noxious weed</i>
<i>Tessendo lo suo manto velenoso</i>	<i>Weaving her poisonous cape</i>
<i>E con sue grida assorda questa piana.</i>	<i>And her shrieks deafen the plain.</i>
<i>Erra la notte senza mai riposo</i>	<i>She wanders at night without ever resting</i>
<i>E torna a giorno ne la oscura tana,</i>	<i>And at daybreak returns into her dark den</i>
<i>E se col nero ammanto ti carezza</i>	<i>And if her black cape caresses you</i>
<i>La bella gioventù muta in vecchiezza.</i>	<i>The beauty of youth she'll turn into decay.</i>

4. I Am Here (Excerpts from "Meditations of an Old Woman" - poem by Theodore Roethke)

In 1382, a league of cities supporting the anti-pope pillaged and razed the once glorious city of Ninfa; its surviving citizens were either killed or enslaved, and the area was annexed to the domains of the powerful Caetani family. Five centuries later, the vegetation-covered ruins had become the perfect embodiment of the “picturesque” aesthetics, and were often visited by travelers on their *Grand Tour*. A British noblewoman, Ada Wilbraham, and her daughter in law, the American Marguerite Chapin, who had both married into the Caetani family, took it upon themselves to clean up the ruins in order to grow a garden that to this day remains one of the most beautiful and unique in the world: the Garden of Ninfa. The American poet Theodore Roethke was a friend of Marguerite and visited the garden in the 1950s. This excerpt from “I Am the Wind” might have very well been written to honor her memory.

*I am here [...] I see a shape, lighted with love, light as a petal falling upon stone.
From the folds of my skin, I sing. The air still, the ground alive, the earth itself a tune!
[...]
I am benign in my own company. A shape without a shade, or none.
I hum in pure vibration, like a saw, The grandeur of a crazy one alone!
By swoops of bird, by leaps of fish, I live. My shadow steadies in a shifting stream;
I live in air; the long light is my home; I dare caress the stones, the field my friend;
A light wind rises: I become the wind. (I am the wind)*

5. Era la vo' (Sicilian Lullaby)

This is a popular, ancient lullaby in Sicilian dialect. The titular expression, similar to the English “lullaby,” is supposed to accompany the back-and-forth movement mothers use to lull their baby to sleep. This is the only text in the collection that is not related to the Pontine Plains; I am including it here because it was commissioned by Hathaway Brown, like the other songs in the anthology.

<i>Era la vo' / che beddu stu nomu; Cu ci lu misi / è nu galantomu.</i>	<i>Era la vo', what a pretty name Must have been picked by a gentleman.</i>
<i>Bo, bo, durmi nicu e fa' la vo' Bo, bo, durmi nicuzzu e fa' la vo'.</i>	<i>By, by, sleep baby and lullaby By, by, sleep little baby and lullaby.</i>
<i>Era la vo' / sunnizzu veni; Veni a cavaddu e 'un veniri a pperi.</i>	<i>Era la vo', come little sleep; Please ride a horse, don't walk here.</i>
<i>Bo, bo, durmi nicu e fa' la vo'</i>	<i>By, by...</i>

Bo, bo, dormi nicuzzu e fa' la vo'.

*Era la vo' / durmiti, durmiti
Ca li arvulichchi sun murti di siti.*

*Era la vo', go to sleep, go to sleep
All the little trees died of thirst.*

*Bo, bo, dormi nicu e fa' la vo'
Bo, bo, dormi nicuzzu e fa' la vo'.*

By, by...

6. Suggestioni Estive (poem by Anna Michielon)

Poet Anna Michielon lives in Sabaudia. Her work is intimately connected to the history and folklore of the Pontine plains, a coastal region that stretches between Rome and Naples. "Suggestioni estive" (*Summer Evocations*) focuses on one magical evening, when the music from a distant performance reaches the poet as she stands on the balcony of her apartment in Sabaudia. The notes of different instruments seem to blend with the landscape: the seashore, the wind, a starry sky. We don't know what music was being performed; the poet leaves that to the imagination, focusing instead on the magical vibe created by those faraway sounds. The composer, however, inserted a 1-measure citation from a famous Italian song: "Dimmi quando tu verrai" (*Tell me when you will arrive*). Can you find it?

Suggestioni estive

by Anna Michielon

Una musica lontana
sovrasta il silenzio della sera
e dolcemente trova il suo cammino
fin dove l'eco spande l'onda.

Il cielo, pentagramma infinito
accoglie le sapienti note dell'orchestra;
stelle vibranti che spargono veli di nuove emozioni.

Il suono del violino mi porta il vento,
il flauto il profumo del mare,
la chitarra la bellezza del lago
ed il pianoforte la regalità del Circeo.

Sabaudia è magica stasera!
Alla finestra indugio rapita

assaporando l'inatteso sussurro.

Summer Evocations

by Anna Michielon

A distant music fills the silence of the night
and gently makes its way to the shore,
where its echo multiplies.

The sky, like a boundless music canvas,
captures the orchestra's crafty tunes;
They are stars that radiate new emotions.

The sound of the violin brings me the wind;
the flute, the scent of the sea.

This evening, Sabaudia is bewitched!
I linger at the window, captivated,
as I savor the unexpected whispers.

7. Primavera vien danzando (poem by Mattia Pacilli)

On the night of the Catholic Feast of Ascension, on the Lepini mountains, giant bonfires are lit and the villagers dance to celebrate the arrival of spring, while shouting the exciting verses that provide the text for the closing piece of this collection. It is a joyous song that says farewell to winter, and hello to another long-expected spring!

*Primavera vien danzando!
La dea Maja sta arrivando,
Pioggia e vento andate via,
Venga il sole nelle vigne,
Su pei pascoli, nei campi.
Rivestitevi di gioia e cantate
"Viva Maja!" Presto il sole arriverà...
Il dio Fauno sta arrivando! Viene, viene,
E gli affanni se ne vanno! I dolori dell'inverno,
La tristezza della pioggia,
la malinconia del vento...
Via! Via!*

*Spring comes dancing!
Divine Maya is about to arrive,
Rain and wind be gone,
May the sun shine on the vineyards,
On the grazing lands, on the fields.
Dress yourselves in joy and sing
"Hail Maya!" The sun will soon arrive...
The divine Faun is coming! He comes,
And all the pain goes away!
The sorrows of the Winter,
The sadness of the rain and the wind...
Be gone!*

Venga il sole, con la gioia e con l'amore!

Let the sun shine, with joy and love!