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Surrounding Italian Cities**
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The Legacy of Foundlings in the Countryside Surrounding Italian Cities

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Abstract

Abandonment of unwanted infants was a mass phenomenon throughout recent centuries of European history, and in Italy it is estimated to have applied to around 3% of 19th century births. The children were handed over to care establishments using an instrument known as the “ruota” (wheel), or directly, especially when the mother was guaranteed anonymity. The establishments then took care of their upbringing, entrusting them to wet nurses who first breast-fed them and then in many cases brought them up with their own children. The present study highlights through the analysis of surnames that in many municipalities even today there still exists the genetic inheritance left by foundlings, first entrusted to the care of rural families and who then became integrated in the host populations through marriage.

The abandonment of unwanted infants certainly caused a direct gene flow from the town centres to the adjacent hilly and low mountain areas. In general, however, the flow does not appear to have been so high as to change remarkably the genetic structure of the populations involved in the reception of the infants, regardless that not all the foundlings were born in the cities, as is well-known; a percentage of them were taken to the foundling hospitals from the countryside. In addition, many of those effectively born in the cities were children of people whose genetic pool did not differ substantially from that of the residents of the surrounding countryside.

Keywords: foundlings, countryside, Italy

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Introduction

The word “bastard” has often been used derogatively in European culture. It signifies a person born out of wedlock and more generally abandoned by their parents, but also means an animal born from the crossing of different breeds (Gabrielli, 1989: 452; Tam, 1997: 1197; Hazon, 2001: 79). The common denominator can clearly be found in the concept of “spilled out of the race”, where “race” means “ancestry” as it was used in times past (Corrain, 1971: 272; Facchini, 1988: 467).

From the population geneticist’s point of view, “bastard” should therefore be used as a term of endearment, given the biological superiority attributed to hybrids and in any case to individuals who, like foundlings (or rather, foundlings who reach adulthood), show that they adapt to environments in which life is more difficult. Their contribution, like that of hybrids, contributes to enrich the genetic inheritance of populations.

Abandonment of unwanted infants was a mass phenomenon throughout recent centuries of European history, and in Italy it is estimated to have applied to around 3% of 19th century births (Gorni and Pellegrini, 1974: 40; Kertzner et al., 1997). The children were handed over to care establishments using an instrument known as the “ruota” (wheel), or directly, especially when the mother was guaranteed anonymity. The establishments then took care of their upbringing, entrusting them to wet nurses living in the countryside who first breast-fed them and then in many cases brought them up with their own children in exchange for financial compensation.

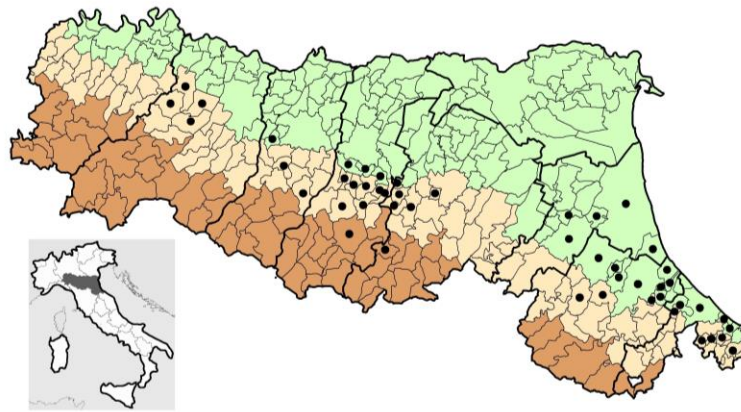
A recent study has highlighted through the analysis of surnames that in many hill municipalities of Emilia-Romagna - a vast region of Northern Italy - even today there still exists the genetic inheritance left by foundlings, first entrusted to the care of rural families and who then became integrated in the host populations through marriage. In some such municipalities it is estimated that the percentage of genetic pool of the resident population derived from infants who passed through the foundling hospitals may be almost 5% (Mazzoni et al., 2012). This is despite the fact that over the past fifty years, firstly rural depopulation connected with the region’s industrialisation, and then immigration from Southern Italy and abroad have considerably changed the makeup of the populations living in the hills of Emilia-Romagna (Boattini et al., 2012).

The surnames Casadei, Casadio, Degli Esposti, Incerti, Tanzi and Venturelli, which in Emilia-Romagna were those most commonly assigned to foundlings until the mid 19th century (when they began to be assigned with made-up surnames), are among the most common in many of the hill municipalities; it is therefore clear that this was the area lived in by most of the

families entrusted with infants by the town hospitals (Figure 1). The decision to place foundlings there was officially motivated by hygiene considerations; the mountain climate was considered too harsh, and that of the lowlands, where malaria was often endemic, was considered too unhealthy. But it should not be ruled out that there were also underlying logistical reasons, such as the relative proximity to towns with foundling hospitals, or reasons connected with economic opportunities such as the supply of labour to one particular type of farm or another.

In this work, the surname analysis has been extended to the vicinity of several major Italian cities: Milan, Florence, Rome and Naples¹.

FIGURE 1. *Emilia-Romagna. Distribution of municipalities in which one of the surnames assigned to foundlings is among the five most common surnames. Lowland municipalities are shown in green, hill municipalities in light brown, mountain municipalities in dark brown (from Mazzoni et al., 2012).*



¹ The genetic structure of the Italian populations has not changed remarkably in the period that goes from the Iron Age to the mid-20th century (Mazzoni et al., 2012). An explanation for this surprising persistency can be provided by the statement of fact that in the cities, where the people who during the course of the centuries invaded Italy tended to settle, families would extinguish rapidly. Such phenomenon probably favoured the constant repopulation of the urban centers by the immigrants from the surrounding countryside (mainly inhabited by the descendants of the ancient native populations), while a flow in the opposite direction would have been weak.

In this context it is interesting to understand what impact the practice of entrusting foundlings to peasant families could have had on the genetic pool of the host populations.

Materials and Methods

The research was divided into several phases. Firstly it was attempted to identify, as had been done in reference to Emilia-Romagna, the most common surnames assigned up until the mid 19th century to foundlings who passed through the foundling hospitals of the cities considered. A rich bibliography was consulted for this purpose (Gorni and Pellegrini, 1974; Reggiani, 2011; Corsini, 1976, 1991; Sandri, 2002; Levene, 2006; Schiavoni, 1991; Ipsen, 2000; Da Molin, 2002; Salvemini, 2011).

For each of the identified surnames it was then attempted to define:

- the chronological bounds within which the surname was assigned to foundlings;
- whether it was assigned to all foundlings passing through the hospital or only some of them²;

A study was also made of the time trend of the phenomenon of abandonment in the cities considered, with particular reference to the most recent period, during which foundlings were assigned made-up surnames, as stated above. This information, together with the percentage frequency of the surname currently observable among those living in the studied areas, allows an estimation - even if approximate - of the percentage of the genetic pool of the population derived from infants abandoned at foundling hospitals³.

Given the breadth of the survey, which involved 2,180 Italian municipalities, in order to obtain a reliable estimation of the percentage of the current resident population with a particular surname, following appropriate controls use was made of the database available on the website italia.indettaglio.it (Table 1).

It would have been too onerous to use the municipal registries for this purpose (moreover, their consultation is restricted by privacy laws) or the electoral rolls extracted from them.

² In many hospitals the surnames assigned to foundlings were two and more (with several variants) and sometimes the foundling took the surname of the foster family. Females, obviously, did not transfer the characteristic surname to their children but, on the other hand, males transferred it to their children carrying only 50% of their DNA.

³ In approximately half of the cases, the foundling was male. The mortality rate was very high (among females and among males): more than 50% died during the first ten years of life. In addition, only part of the survivors got married, but there would not seem to have been any gender preference.

TABLE 1. *Difference between the frequencies provided by the website italia.indettaglio.it and those provided by municipal registries, with reference to the most common surnames in some Italian cities.*

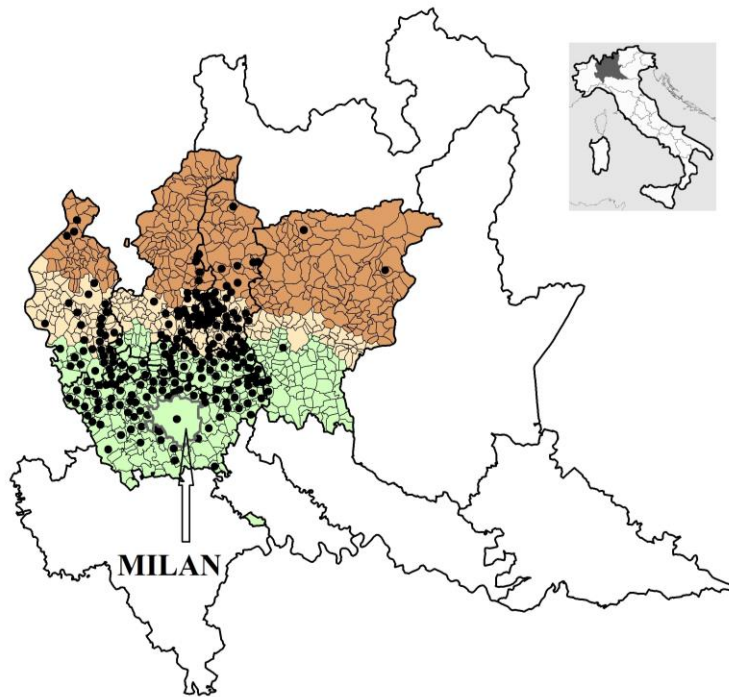
	Italia.indettaglio.it (2012)	Municipal registries (2012)	Difference (%)
<i>Bologna</i>			
Rossi	1,233	1,352	- 8.8
Venturi	1,023	1,051	- 2.7
Fabbri	893	901	- 0.9
<i>Milan</i>			
Rossi	4,124	4,430	- 6.9
Ferrari	3,527	3,568	- 1.1
Colombo	3,520	3,685	- 4.5
<i>Florence</i>			
Rossi	1,364	1,543	- 11.6
Innocenti	961	916	+ 4.9
Bianchi	828	962	- 13.9
<i>Rome *</i>			
Rossi	9,161	10,557	- 13.2
Mancini	5,703	6,605	- 13.7

*The third most common surname in Rome was found to be De Angelis (4,946). The top three in the city of Naples are Esposito (10,000), Russo (8,154) and Romano (3,801). The corresponding registry data are unavailable for these surnames.

Results

With reference to Milan, the surname assigned to foundlings before made-up surnames started to be given to them (precisely between 1659 and 1825) was customarily Colombo (Reggiani, 2011). Today that surname is one of the most common in the municipalities to the north of the provincial capital. However, its area of distribution goes well outside the borders of the present province of Milan, extending to the hilly part of the adjacent provinces of Monza, Varese, Como, Lecco and Bergamo (Figure 2). More particularly, Colombo is the surname of 0.7% of the population of the province of Milan (its capital excluded), 0.7% of the population of the province of Como, 0.9% of that of the province of Varese, 1.0% of that of the province of Monza and 1.6% of residents in the province of Lecco.

FIGURE 2. Lombardy. Distribution of municipalities in which the surname Colombo is one of the five most common surnames. Lowland municipalities are shown in green, hill municipalities in light brown, mountain municipalities in dark brown.



In the period from the mid 17th to the late 18th century, the infants entrusted to public care numbered around 91,000 in Milan, including 20-25% for free wet-nursing only (Reggiani, 2011). In the following century their number increased greatly: the statistical framework of 1865 recorded 85,277 abandonments from 1845 to 1864, with an average of 4,264 per year (Gorni and Pellegrini, 1974: 122). Only at the end of the 1860s, which coincided with the closure of the “ruota”, did the number of entries to the Ospizio di Santa Caterina La Ruota begin to decrease gradually, to settle at around one thousand individuals per year at the end of the century (Table 2).

Luciano Nicolini
The Legacy of Foundlings in the Countryside Surrounding Italian Cities

TABLE 2. *Newly entered foundlings at the Milan Ospizio di Santa Caterina La Ruota (1845-1901)*

Period	Total number	Average yearly number
1845-1849	16,129	3,226
1850-1854	18,963	3,793
1855-1859	23,411	4,682
1860-1864	26,774	5,355
1865-1869	23,947	4,789
1870-1874	12,610	2,522
1875-1879	7,900	1,580
1880-1884	7,353	1,471
1885-1889	8,099	1,620
1890-1894	8,491	1,698
1895-1901	7,192	1,027

Source: Gorni e Pellegrini (1974: 122, 152 e 153)

The surname Innocenti and its variations Nocentini and Degl’Innocenti, typical of the foundlings abandoned at the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence, occur with a high frequency not only in the city and in Scandicci but also in the hill municipalities to the east, as well as in municipalities with similar characteristics in the neighbouring provinces of Prato, Pistoia and Arezzo (Figures 3 and 4). More particularly, they are the surnames of 0.6% of the population of the province of Florence (excluding its capital), 0.4% of the population of the province of Prato, 0.6% of that of Arezzo and 0.8% of residents in the province of Pistoia.

FIGURE 3. *Tuscany. Distribution of municipalities in which the surname Innocenti is one of the five most common surnames. Lowland municipalities are shown in green, hill municipalities in light brown, mountain municipalities in dark brown.*

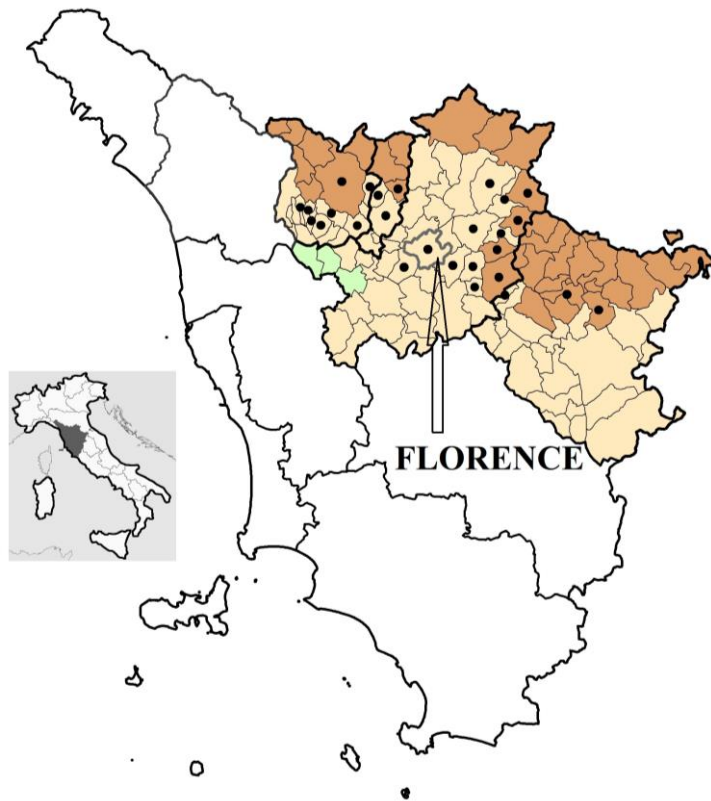
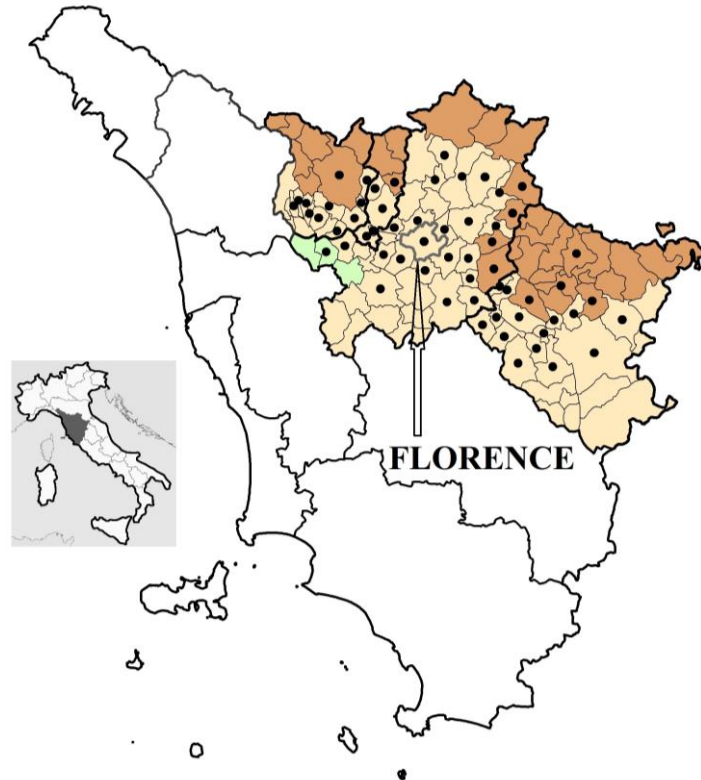


Figure 4. Tuscany. Distribution of municipalities in which a hypothetical surname with a frequency obtained by summing the frequency of the surnames Innocenti, Nocentini and Degl'Innocenti is one of the five most common surnames. Lowland municipalities are shown in green, hill municipalities in light brown, mountain municipalities in dark brown.



As for the scale of the phenomenon of abandonment, the number of infants entrusted to the hospital every year rose from around 350 in 1725 to 897 in 1782 (Viazzo et al., 1999) to become 4,275 in the three years from 1840-42, with an average of 1,425 a year (Corsini and Lagazio, 1999). Table 3 shows the increase which occurred up to 1875, when the closure of the “ruota” led to a rapid decrease in admissions, which did, however, continue at high levels for several decades (Bortolotto and Viazzo, 1996; Viazzo et al., 1997).

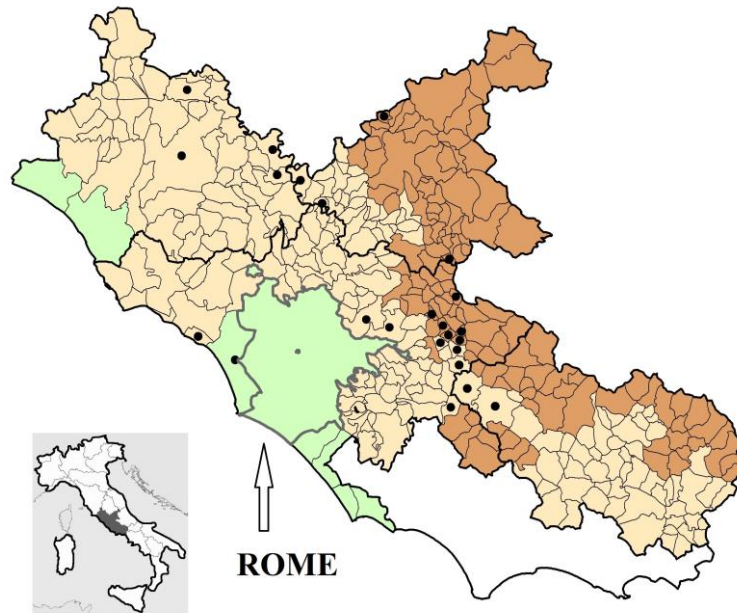
Table 3. Newly entered foundlings at the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence (1812-1899)

Period	Total number	Average yearly number
1812-1814	3,186	1,062
1815-1819	7,806	1,561
1820-1824	7,004	1,401
1825-1829	6,901	1,380
1830-1834	8,122	1,624
1835-1839	8,314	1,663
1840-1844	7,115	1,423
1845-1849	8,938	1,788
1850-1854	11,334	2,267
1855-1859	11,930	2,386
1860-1864	10,934	2,187
1865-1869	11,002	2,200
1870-1874	12,091	2,418
1875-1879	6,527	1,305
1880-1884	4,745	949
1885-1889	4,342	868
1890-1894	3,192	638
1895-1899	3,335	667

Source: Bruscoli (1900: 292-297)

Also Proietti and its variation Proietto, the main (but not the only) surnames assigned to the foundlings of Rome, are present mainly in the hilly areas to the east of the capital, as well as being common in various hill and low mountain municipalities in the provinces of Frosinone, Rieti and Viterbo (Figure 5). More particularly, they are the surnames of 0.3% of the population of the province of Rome (excluding the capital), 0.3% of the population of the province of Viterbo, 0.2% of that of the province of Rieti, and 0.1% of residents in the province of Frosinone. These are very low percentages as it is logical to expect, given that they were not the only surnames used. However, it should be noted that it is precisely the hilly area adjacent to the capital which has the highest percentage frequencies of the surname Proietti, which even reach around 15% in some municipalities.

Figure 5. Lazio. Distribution of municipalities in which the surname Proietti is one of the five most common surnames. Lowland municipalities are shown in green, hill municipalities in light brown, mountain municipalities in dark brown.



According to tradition, the Roman wheel was established by Pope Innocent III in the 13th century. Based on the available data, it appears likely that throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, entries to the foundling hospital numbered around 600-800 per year, rising to 800-1,000 in the first half of the 19th century (Schiavoni, 1991) and reaching 1,000-1,200 per year in the period from 1854 to 1870 (Table 4).

Table 4. Newly entered foundlings at Santo Spirito in Saxia in Rome (1803-1870)

Period	Total number	Average yearly number
1803-1810	6,371	796
.....		
1812-1815	3,954	989
.....		
1823-1825	2,299	766
.....		
1828-1834	5,271	753
1835-1839	4,288	858
1840-1844	4,484	897
1845-1849	4,844	969
1850-1854	4,877	975
1855-1859	5,759	1,152
1860-1864	5,580	1,116
1865-1870	7,019	1,170

Source: Schiavoni (1991)

Although in all cases considered so far, the widespread use of surnames characteristic of foundlings seems to apply mainly to municipalities located in the hill and low mountain belt, the situation is different for the geographical distribution of the surname Esposito and the other surnames assigned in the past to the foundlings of Naples, which was one of the most populated European cities between the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, in the municipalities of the surrounding region, a correlation between the frequency of surnames characteristic of foundlings and altitude above sea level does not appear evident. Figure 6 shows the municipalities in which the surname Esposito is one of the five most common, while in Figure 7 the frequencies of this surname have been added to those of the others evidently assigned to foundlings (Nunziata and Annunziata). The outcome is essentially unchanged: although in Figure 7 the anomaly constituted by the Vesuvius area disappears (the area in which the surname Esposito is less common, having been replaced by Nunziata and Annunziata), there also the surnames once assigned to foundlings are very common in lowland municipalities and hill municipalities.

Overall, in the province of Naples (excluding the capital) 1.8% of the population has these three characteristic surnames, in the province of Salerno the figure is 0.7%, in the province of Caserta 0.4%, and in the province of Avellino 0.3%. The percentage is also high in the municipality of Naples (1.1%).

Figure 6. Campania. Distribution of municipalities in which the surname Esposito is one of the five most common surnames. Lowland municipalities are shown in green, hill municipalities in light brown, mountain municipalities in dark brown.

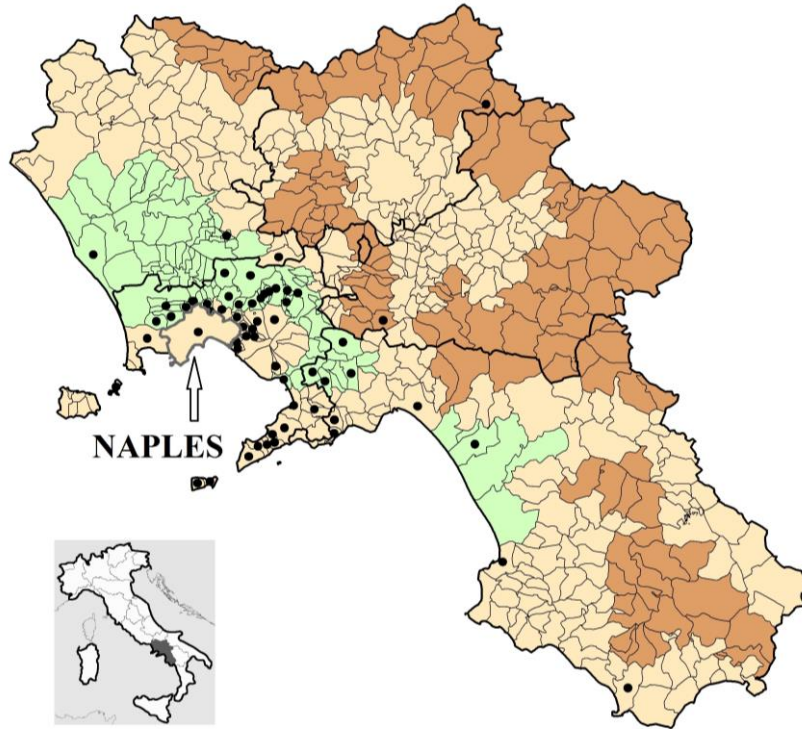
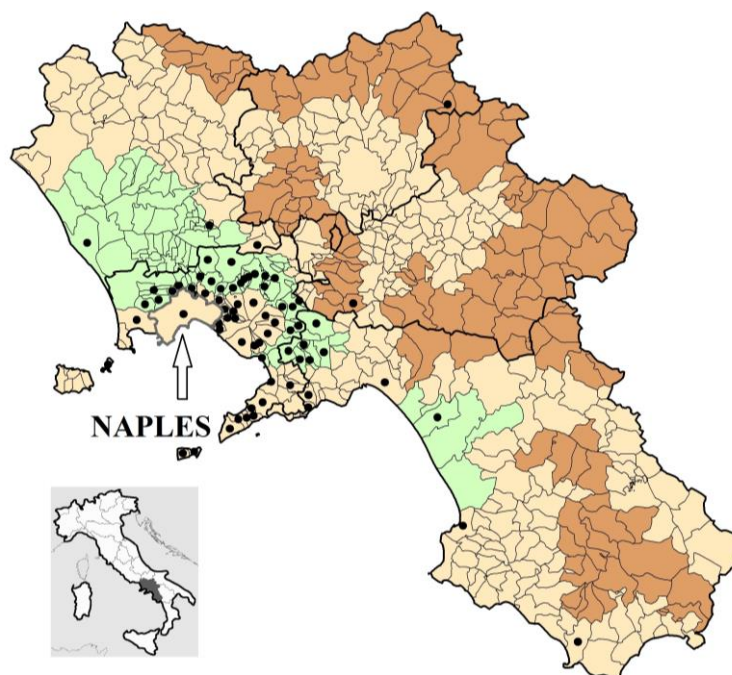


Figure 7. Campania. Distribution of municipalities in which a hypothetical surname with a frequency obtained by summing the frequency of the surnames Esposito, Nunziata and Annunziata is one of the five most common surnames. Lowland municipalities are shown in green, hill municipalities in light brown, mountain municipalities in dark brown.



With regard to the time trend of the phenomenon of abandonment, the infants left at the Annunziata establishment in Naples numbered around 500 per year in the second half of the 17th century, rose to around 1,000 per year in the first half of the 18th century, and then reached and exceeded 2,000 per year at the end of the century (Salvemini, 2011). During the 19th century, the number of abandonments fluctuated between 1,700 and 2,600 per year (Ipsen, 2000), and only as of the 1870s, following the closure of the “ruota”, did they drop to 1,400-2,000 (Table 5).

Table 5. Newly entered foundlings at the Annunziata in Naples (1800-1901)

Period	Total number	Average yearly number
1800-1804	10,825	2,165
1805-1809	10,155	2,031
1810-1814	10,434	2,087
1815-1819	10,744	2,149
1820-1824	9,630	1,926
1825-1829	9,562	1,912
1830-1834	10,191	2,038
1835-1839	10,490	2,098
1840-1844	10,755	2,151
1845-1849	11,096	2,219
1850-1854	10,436	2,087
1855-1859	9,784	1,957
1860-1864	9,231	1,846
1865-1869	10,783	2,157
1870-1874	11,431	2,286
1875-1879	7,797	1,559
1880-1884	7,570	1,514
1885-1889	7,304	1,461
1890-1894	8,288	1,658
1895-1901	12,743	1,820

Source: Da Molin (1994), Ipsen (2000)

Discussion

The main objectives of this study were as follows: firstly to analyse the geographical distribution of surnames formerly assigned to foundlings in the countryside surrounding some large Italian cities; secondly to attempt to estimate the present percentage of the genetic pool of the population derived from them in the reception areas for infants cared for by the establishments.

With regard to the former point, it is clear that from Milan, Florence and Rome, as from the towns of Emilia-Romagna, most of the infants were moved for wet-nursing to the adjacent hill and low mountain areas; indeed it is there that we find the municipalities in which the characteristic surnames of foundlings are among the most common, even today. The family hosting them for wet-nursing was not always the same family with which they lived until they married or achieved financial independence; once weaned, the children could be returned to the establishment and entrusted to another family. In general, however, it is reasonable to assume that they were brought up in the same peasant family to which they had been initially assigned. On reaching adulthood, some of them would marry other foundlings or partners

they had met in the reception area, thus enriching the genetic variability of the local population (Mazzoni et al., 2012).

The situation is different as concerns the city of Naples and its surrounding countryside. Firstly, there it was very common for infants to be entrusted to wet-nurses of the city who lent themselves, often free of charge, in order to fulfil a vow to the Virgin Mary (Gorni and Pellegrini, 1974: 98). As a result, surnames characteristic of foundlings are quite common even in the provincial capital. In addition, with regard to the surrounding countryside, there appears to have been no particular preference for entrusting the infants to peasant families living in the hilly area. The reasons for this peculiarity are not clear, although the habit of starting off those taken care of in various craft trades, including those connected with the art of music, seems to have been fairly common⁴. Moreover, it is said that this was one reason behind the good fortune of the Neapolitan school of music (Del Prete, 2011).

On the other hand, as regards the attempt to estimate what is now, in the reception areas, the percentage of the genetic pool of the population derived from infants abandoned at foundling hospitals, the situation appears fairly homogeneous when examined by considering the different provinces covered by the survey. The most concrete data are those related to the provinces which accepted the foundlings of Milan: there, from 1659 to 1825, the surname Colombo was assigned to the majority of them, therefore it is reasonable to assume that the percentage of individuals with that surname will provide a good estimate of the percentage of the genetic pool of the population derived from foundlings accepted between those dates. The information available on the trend of the phenomenon of abandonment in the subsequent period suggests that the overall number of foundlings accepted over the past centuries cannot be three times those accepted from 1659 to 1825. It follows that in the provinces considered, in all probability the percentage of the present genetic legacy derived from such infants does not reach 5%.

The calculation concerning the provinces which accepted the foundlings of Florence is more complex: it is not known exactly how many of the foundlings cared for up to the beginning of the 19th century were assigned one of the three most characteristic surnames (Innocenti, Nocentini and Degl'Innocenti). However, there is good quality information on the time trend

⁴ Naples, during the last centuries, was one of the most populated European cities and until 1860 was the capital of a wide kingdom. In this context, foundlings were probably trained to work not only on the farms but also in various craft trades, in the factories and in the royal navy. This statement of fact could explain the homogeneous distribution of their characteristic surnames.

of the phenomenon of abandonment, and based on that it seems reasonable to conclude that also in these provinces, the percentage of the genetic legacy derived from foundlings is below 5%.

As for the areas which accepted the foundlings of Rome, the estimate is even more problematic since, as stated above, the surnames Proietti and Proietto were not the only ones assigned to them prior to the 19th century. Based on their present frequencies and the data on the time trend of the phenomenon of abandonment, it may be concluded that also in these provinces, the percentage of the genetic legacy derived from foundlings is below 5%. It should, however, be noted that in some municipalities in the province of Rome, the frequency of the surname Proietti is around 15%, suggesting much higher percentages.

Finally, in the provinces which accepted the foundlings of Naples, the cumulative frequency of the surnames Esposito, Nunziata and Annunziata ranges between 0.3 and 1.8% (province of Naples, excluding the capital). It is reasonable to assume that the percentage of individuals with these surnames may provide a good estimate of the percentage of the genetic pool of the population derived from foundlings accepted until the early 19th century. In this case also, data on the time trend of the phenomenon of abandonment suggest that it is unlikely that the percentage of the genetic pool of the resident population derived from foundlings is above 5% currently.

Perspectives

The abandonment of unwanted infants was fairly common in Italian cities, especially during the 19th century, and certainly caused a direct gene flow from the town centres to the adjacent hilly and low mountain areas. The phenomenon is evident in all areas taken into consideration in this study, with the partial exception of the Naples area. In general, however, the flow does not appear to have been so high as to change remarkably the genetic structure of the populations involved in the reception of the infants, regardless that not all the foundlings were born in the cities, as is well-known; a percentage of them were taken to the foundling hospitals from the countryside (Schiavoni, 1991; Tagliavini, 2013). In addition, many of those effectively born in the cities were children of people whose genetic pool did not differ substantially from that of the residents of the surrounding countryside.

This study has nevertheless highlighted several small populations in which the frequency of surnames characteristic of foundlings suggests that the percentage of the genetic pool derived from these infants is currently at least 15%. It would be worthwhile to conduct genome analysis on these

populations (following Darlu et al., 2012) in order to understand to what extent the contribution of foundlings may be considered of non-native origin.

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