

Landed identity and the Bourbon Neapolitan State: Claude-Joseph Vernet and the politics of the 'Siti reali'

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By the mid-eighteenth century, rural configurations had long served as conventional and powerful frames for imaging kingship. The apparently natural state of the landscape worked to bestow an equivalent status upon the monarch and the political relations figured within it. In this paper, however, I will examine the ways in which conditions particular to mid-eighteenth-century Naples invested land with unusually high status as a locus for the mapping of royal identity. In their seamless attachment of king to the local landscape of the kingdom's predominantly rural territory, rustic images of Carlo di Borbone did much to mask distinctions between a local, Neapolitan identity and that of a new and foreign dynasty. And in a kingdom where feudalism had worked to collapse any mediating social space between country and capital city,¹ the rusticized image of the king came to assume a special significance. Harnessed to royal reforms that sought radical reduction of feudal power over rural territory and the transfer of much of that authority into the hands of a centralized, royal state, the rural image of the king functioned as part of an imaginative geography that worked to rearticulate the local landscape as one properly belonging to a royal patrimony. It soon becomes clear that the success of any royal programme of reform would depend in large part upon the re-articulation of the form and function of the predominantly rural territory of the kingdom, a territory which in the absence of a local sovereign had for so long been organized according to aristocratic interests. This royal territorial politics involved a series of institutional practices; a *giunta delle ricompre* was established to administer the appropriation of tracts of feudal land for incorporation into royal estates, legislation was introduced against enclosure and deforestation, and groups of foreign nationals were invited into the kingdom to settle land held under royal patrimony.² Power over the kingdom's provincial territories was also wrested from the nobility through the introduction in 1738 of a set of *prammatiche* that outlawed the right of the aristocratically controlled courts in the capital to exercise judicial authority over the affairs of the provincial courts.³

The consolidation of royal interests over the territory of the kingdom also involved another set of *cultural* practices. This paper will examine the role played by rural images of the king, principally pictorial representations but also those literary ones that worked to underpin them, in the fashioning of a new, national identity for the territory of the newly-autonomous kingdom, one crucially shaped around the figure of royal authority. I shall investigate the strategies through which very different types of imagery worked to suggest that the local landscape, newly restored to royal patrimony, was always a productive landscape, variously yielding a cultural heritage, national history, or valuable natural supplies, all precious cultural and material resources for formation of the new sovereign state.

¹ "The ultimate foundations of the early modern Kingdom of Naples...must be found in the countryside...The Kingdom is best defined by rural structures and rural values...[with] the city of Naples...the epiphenomenon of an agricultural kingdom.", John A. Marino and Antonio Calabria, ed./trans., *Good Government in Spanish Naples*, New York, 1990, p. 11.

² See Gennaro Incarnato, "Un esperimento di 'Migliora Agraria': La colonia albanese di Badessa e piano di Coccia nelle carte farnese dell'Archivio di Stato di Napoli", *Atti*, Associazione Archeologica Frentana Ortona, 1988, pp. 75-119.

³ The power of this legislation as an important tool in royal efforts to restructure the administrative relationship between capital and provinces never reached its full potential: in 1744 the Crown was forced to abandon all reform of feudal judicial power in return for much-needed aristocratic support in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48).