The history of agriculture and the countryside in Italy has a long tradition of studies. The deep historical and environmental diversity that characterizes Italian history, the wealth of archival sources have addressed studies on the medieval countryside, with a focus on regional specificities and the relationships between agrarian history and economic history:
urban-rural relationships, agricultural structures and the countryside, reclamation and cultivation techniques, forms of farm management and work, animal breeding and transhumance, diet and the movement of goods.

In this context, the questions of why and how to study the Italian countryside may seem unnecessary, given the medieval world’s widespread rural character and agriculture’s obvious centrality at the base of the demographic, economic and social development. Instead, justifying the importance (the why) and the perspectives (the how) that have emerged from studying the countryside is a fundamental step to highlighting the peculiarities of the rural world in medieval Italy. What must be stressed is the fact that these diverse agricultural Italies already existed in the late Middle Ages: the various types of farming, (cascine, poderi mezzadri, casali, masserie) and seasonal grazing inevitably refer to their origins and their consolidation, traceable to between the 13th and 14th centuries, amid crisis, transformation, and development.

At the end of the 1990s the review committee of the “Rivista di storia dell’agricoltura” (Review of Agricultural History), edited by Giovanni Cherubini, decided to embark a new initiative. Despite the possible criticism for the choices made, Cherubini himself clearly stated the purpose and task in the presentation of the work: to fill a historiographic gap; to offer “the possibility to follow a common thread from antiquity up to today and to set up analogies and comparisons between the conditions, structures and aspects of our countryside”; to present a “vast harvest of facts and knowledge and a clear outline for the history of our countryside”. So, the five thick volumes of the Storia dell’agricoltura italiana (History of Italian Agriculture) were published in 2002.

New interests and new sensibilities, originating from the challenges facing our world, have turned today to history with new attention to the intersections between agriculture and landscape, or between agriculture and the environment. Today we have a wealth of knowledge that enables us to collect and compare various types of data (documentary data and proxy data) and to intercorrelate them within specific economic or ecological theories. In this context, historical studies cannot ignore these new sensibilities and methods of study, nor can they give up their responsibilities and specific contributions.

It is ultimately to those historical reasons (purposes, contingencies, needs, formulating responses, choices of people and communities) that we continually turn our attention, because we understand that there is always something that escapes mere description or data analysis. It is something we can focus on, investigate and assess in the short or the long run, but which always leaves something unresolved in our eyes. Besides, predictable outcomes belong to fictional reconstructions, not to the unpredictable twists of human life. Moreover, landscapes cannot be imagined without those who lived there. And it is this that, in hindsight, forms the emerging point of interest in history.

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Old and New Worlds: the Global Challenges of Rural History
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Panel 24: Old and New Challenges for Rural History of Middle Ages