
Resia: A Deep-Rooted Slavic Community in the Italian Alps and Its Garlic Landrace

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Abstract

At the crossroads of Latin, Slavic and Germanic cultures, Friuli (NE Italy) is truly a land of differences, as shown by physical geography and climate, flora and vegetation, national and minority languages. After the disastrous earthquake of 1976, alpine villages became depopulated and people relocated to urban areas. Genetic erosion, after its impact on lowland agriculture, now affects alpine agroecosystems. Attempts are being made to test the hypothesis that linguistic and cultural islands, still intact and thriving, could be important refuges for relict crops. Resia is an isolated alpine valley in north-eastern Friuli, stretching 21 km W–E and closed towards the Slovenian border by the Canin massif (2580 m). Until the 1960s, farming relied on meadows and livestock pasturing, only partially on field crops. Buckwheat, a staple food for centuries, is today a relict crop. Potatoes, maize, beans, *Allium* spp. and fruit trees form the current set of crop species. Home gardens provide a better environment for kitchen crops, especially for the traditional landrace of garlic (*A. sativum* L.). This garlic clone (*Strok* in Resian dialect) is very aromatic and storable, with multiple uses: food condiment, in meat preparations, and popular drug. There is also a folk memory of garlic amulets used as necklaces to ensure children's well-being. In autumn 2001, the Resian garlic population was collected and samples sent to IPK Genebank in Gatersleben. Evaluation and characterization data are being collected. This ethno-botanic approach may cast a new light on the cultural history of this isolated alpine valley and help to protect a useful crop genetic resource.

Key words: ethno-botany, Friuli, garlic, minor languages, Resia.

Introduction

Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) Region is a land of differences. Despite being reasonably small (7855 km²), it includes 3 of the 5 European biogeographical regions (EEC Directive 92/43). Crossroads for Latin, Slavic and German cultures which met and clashed here for centuries, the entire region is an assortment of idioms and languages. As well as Italian, Friulian is spoken (an ancient neo-Latin language) and dialects of Veneto origin. Slovenian is used in the strip along the border, and age-old idioms of German or Slavic origin can be found in islands of linguistic minority at Sauris, Timau, Resia and in part of the Tarvisio province (Devetag, 2004). After the upheavals of the two World Wars, the disastrous earthquake in 1976 marked a turning point. The post-earthquake economic development lessened the role of mountain agriculture, with a consequent depopulating of high-altitude areas that is amongst the most significant in the Alps. Today's genetic erosion has largely been caused by the loss of agro-

pastoral *habitats*.

The Resia Valley extends for 21 Km on the eastern FVG mountains. To the east it is closed by the Canin massif (2587 m) that marks the border between Italy and Slovenia. There are fewer than 1400 inhabitants, distributed in 5 hamlets. Practically isolated until 1920 by the lack of roads, its geographical position influenced the history and ethnography: a unique cultural heritage still lingers in Resia and an archaic dialect of Slovenian origin is spoken. Music, dance and other aspects of the life of the Resian community are still now signs of ancient and enduring traditions. Until the mid-1900s the local economy was a subsistence one, based on fruit-growing, small arable fields, but mostly livestock rearing (cattle, sheep and goats). It largely depended on seasonal migration, for the selling of craftwork or practicing itinerant trades: the knife grinders of Stolvizza were very well-known. Around 1960 a rapid drop in the number of livestock began and the consequent abandoning of pastures.

Materials and methods

A CNR-IGV delegation visited Resia in 2001, collected garlic reproductive material and sent it to the IPK Genebank at Gatersleben. Over the next two years, a multi-disciplinary study led to its initial characterisation (IPGRI *et al.*, 2001), accompanied by an agronomic valuation (Margherita, 2004). The local Resia garlic was compared with two other from the Carnia area and two commercial varieties, at three sites in the Val Resia and on the plain at Udine. Tissue from bulbs obtained in 2003 (Resia clone and 2 commercial varieties) was analysed by GC-MS to determine the profile of the principal volatile compounds.

Results

In Resia, bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris* L.) and free-pollinated maize landraces are still to be found (Pozzi and Miceli, 2004). A buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum* Moench.) variety was reintroduced from nearby Slovenia, whereas commercial varieties of potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum* L.) are grown.

The genetic resource of greatest interest is a garlic (*A. sativum* L.) landrace. Its introduction goes back to antiquity: all those interviewed declared that their families have always cultivated it (Margherita, 2004). Present in almost every household vegetable patch, only 3-4 farmers produce it for the market. The head or bulb is covered by white tunicae, while those covering the cloves are a flesh-pink colour. The medium-small bulb (*Glauá* or *Laua*) is formed by between 6 and 8, rarely 10, bulbils or cloves (*Noize* or *Nöghize*) in a single row round the stalk axis. The absence of central cloves limits the number per bulb. Their large size and regular shape make them highly appreciated in the kitchen, as does the long storage capacity of the bulbs. After the onset of the vegetative period, the plant differentiates a tall flower stalk (0.6–0.7 m) bearing an inflorescence with pedunculate sterile flowers and bulbils. The latter are not used for planting because they produce bulbs with a single clove. The inflorescence and part of the scape are removed and often eaten as a cooked vegetable. These reproductive characteristics denote primitive aspects of the crop (Etoh and Simon, 2002).

Among the uses of Resia garlic, folk memory tells of it being strung as a necklace to

protect children from intestinal worms, or in general as an amulet. Different uses still exist of Resia garlic. Its aroma makes it desirable for culinary purposes, in soups, meat-based dishes and sausages. On the local market it currently fetches prices up to 2.5 times that of common garlic. A Traditional Product (D.M. 8 September 1999, no. 350), since 2004 Resia garlic has also become one of the 198 Italian *Slowfood Presidia*. The Enemonzo and Verzegnis clones had similar bulb shape and structure (the former has pink-coloured tunicae too, but higher yields). The CG-MS analysis recorded a total of 20 peaks. For six of them a chemical form was assigned by comparison with a reference database. The two sulphide compounds present in higher amounts (from 20 to 26%) are slightly less abundant in the tissues of the Resia garlic.

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