

# The hidden history of woad blue: a path through technology and diffusion of “European indigo” in 18<sup>th</sup>-century technical literature

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Woad, the famous “European indigo” plant, still hides some unknowns in its long history. This study wants to contribute to a better understanding of woad’s diffusion and use in Italy throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by analysing the technical-agricultural literature of this period. The research allowed to collect some information on the “geography” of Italian woad, on its processing techniques and on its relation to “rival” Indian indigo: concerning the “places” of Italian woad, the investigation showed that Italy still had some relevant woad-producing centres at the time, which in some cases reached out to European trade routes; as to woad’s processing, the special account of a small-scale dyer allowed to set up a comparison between large-scale and small-scale woad production, showing that both could still prove economically profitable; finally, the examined sources highlighted that woad was still acknowledged to have a significant dyeing function by Italian authors of that time.

*Extended version published online: 4 March 2022*

*Original source: Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Colour Association (AIC2021)*

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the second millennium, the art of dyeing in blue has always been of special importance to European industry. Up to the whole Medieval period, dyers all over Europe used to dye their cloths in a gorgeous blue colour with a colour-yielding plant that goes by the name of *Isatis tinctoria*: woad. Until then, the foreign “cousin” of woad, Indian indigo, coming from the East and yielding a more intense blue, was imported into Europe only in small quantities. Italy, which was at the forefront in Medieval woollen cloth production, had several praised dyeing centres that made great use of woad, and just as many woad cultivation areas which supplied them. The end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, though, was a game-changer: the pioneer voyages undertaken by European navigators allowed to discover new trade routes to the East Indies, resulting in more and more indigo reaching the Old Continent. The praised Oriental dye had an enormous success, and woad, so far the undisputed queen of European blues, started a relentless downfall [1-5].

In contrast to what is sometimes assumed, though, it seems that the decline of woad was not so abrupt. Several studies nowadays contribute to this evidence [3-6], but a precise measure of woad's use and diffusion after the spread of indigo is still lacking. The situation becomes particularly unclear during the 18<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before synthetic indigo definitely overcame the need for natural sources.

In Italy, in particular, the diffusion of woad in this period has been little investigated by now. Some studies have allowed to gain a better understanding of "late" woad cultivation and production in certain territories: insights into the historically renowned "Lombard woad" are provided by Brunetti [7], whereas Petrongari [8] gives an account of woad trade and production in the area of Rieti (Lazio) during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and we learn from Palombarini [9] that in the same period a small amount of woad was still cultivated and used for local needs in the region of Marche, although for small and often poor-quality productions. Guarino *et al.* [10] write about a woad factory set up in Caserta around 1750, contextually to the enhancement of woad cultivation supported by the Bourbons in the Kingdom of Naples since the beginning of the century. From a more "technical" point of view, we get to know some late woad-related dyeing processes in the essays and treatises written by Brunello, especially in relation to 18<sup>th</sup>-century dyeing industry in the Venetian Republic [3, 11].

On the whole, however, many issues still remain unclear. Information on "late" Italian woad is still limited only to certain territories, while some other historically important woad-growing areas haven't been investigated yet. In addition to this, except for some notable examples [3], studies tend to have local points of view and lack a general framework. Most importantly, it is difficult to estimate to what extent Italian woad was actually used, and therefore how important it was in the productive setup of early industrial times.

To get insight into this topic, the technical literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century is a privileged means of knowledge. The Age of Enlightenment was characterized by the pursuit of everything that could prove useful for the progress of humankind: its striving for "scientific" and "technological" improvement was conveyed by a literary production that foreran the language of modern science and embraced all fields of human knowledge, including several topics related to the art of dyeing. As to the Italian technical literature, specifically, only a limited part of it has been investigated by now in relation to dye plants and dyeing-related processes. Brunello [3, 11] provides us with insights into some Italian dyeing treatises and "technological" publications of the time, although he mainly examines the technical advances in the field of dyeing, particularly concerning the region of Veneto. Other Italian areas that gave birth to a lively scientific literary production lack a proper examination, as well as many other "unexpected" categories of technical literature, which may not seem linked to dyeing at first sight. Therefore, this study wants to take advantage of this peculiar literary production to get some glimpses into the "hidden" history of woad blue in Italy throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## The "places" of late Italian woad

The rush for systematization and improvement that marked the Age of Reason also involved the fields of botany and agriculture, resulting in a considerable number of dictionaries, periodic journals and monographs concerning agriculture being published in Italy between the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most botanists and agronomists were not specifically interested in dyeing processes, but dealt with dye plants in relation to agricultural issues: bearing in mind that providing the reader with an accurate "geography" of woad was not the authors' main aim, and that the lively exchange of knowledge between different intellectual environments across Italy and Europe may have sometimes

led to reporting second-hand information, the Italian technical-agricultural literature can still offer some precious clues about the diffusion of woad. We hereby examine the points of view of various Italian regions: through the eyes of some selected authors, we can get a firmer grasp of Italy's woad cultivation, production and trade in this period.

By the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the glorious Republic of Venice had long lost its former economic power and was facing its imminent end. In the field of dyeing, as thoroughly discussed by Brunello [3], *La Serenissima* remained mostly anchored in ancient – and sometimes obsolete – treatises. Despite this, the Venetian area played a relevant role in importing into Italy the new “enlightened” European cultural and scientific innovations, including the state-of-the-art studies and technologies on dyeing. Indeed, one of the first Italian attempts to echo the innovative European (mostly French) approach towards the art of dyeing comes from a Venetian treatise: Pietro Arduino, Professor of Agriculture at the University of Padua, gathers information and makes new experiments on dye plants that converge in his treatise, “*Memorie*”, published in Padua in 1766 [12]. From Arduino we learn that the woad used by dyers in the Venetian Republic at that time could be either imported from Germany and from Lombardy<sup>1</sup>, or home-grown. *Ça va sans dire*, local woad is said to be the best.

The appeal of Arduino's dissertation is confirmed by its being cited in the journal directed by another prominent Venetian author, Francesco Grisellini: the periodical “*Giornale d'Italia spettante alla scienza naturale, e principalmente all'agricoltura, alle arti, ed al commercio*”, first published in 1764, not only reported relevant news from Italian intellectual environments, but also frequently translated foreign publications, especially French ones. It is not uncommon to read in its pages French news about dyes, such as the translation of parts of the famous “*Art de l'Indigotier*” [13-14]<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, scientific periodic journals were another expression of the new “enlightened” spirit and played a key role in promoting exchanges and circulation of innovative ideas, both between different countries and on national level. Grisellini's journal is a notable Italian example, and it provides proof that, on the contrary of what is sometimes assumed [3], Italy took its cue from other European countries (especially from France) and gave birth to relevant scientific periodicals in this period.

One of the last representatives of this culture in Veneto, who is interesting to consult since he draws most of his information from earlier sources, is the agronomist Francesco Gera. His agricultural dictionary, “*Nuovo dizionario universale e ragionato di agricoltura*”, published between 1834 and 1850, is a colossal work that summarises current European knowledge on agricultural topics [16]. As late as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Gera decides to devote two articles to woad, in Vol. XII (1840) and in Vol. XXII (1844), describing its cultivation modalities as well as its processing techniques and uses: the very need to explain how to cultivate and use woad is an important clue, and is in all likelihood a sign of an actual and still diffused practice. Concurrently, the author also gives a brief geographical description of

<sup>1</sup> When talking about the product coming from Lombardy, the author is likely referring to the woad that was cultivated in Piedmont: this was indeed commonly called “Lombard woad” [1, 5].

<sup>2</sup> The periodical “*Giornale d'Italia*” was published in three series [15]. The first one was published with the title mentioned above from 1764 to 1776 and was directed by Francesco Grisellini and Giovan Francesco Scotton. The second one (1776-1784) was published under the name of “*Nuovo Giornale d'Italia*” (“New Journal of Italy”) and directed by Alberto Fortis and Alvise Milocco. The third series was issued under the direction of Giovanni Arduino between 1789 and 1797. The excerpt from Pietro Arduino's dissertation is reported in the first series, Vol. I (1764-65) [13 Vol. I pp. 329-336, 337-343, 345-350] (it is worth noting that it is reported here before the official publication date of the treatise *Memorie* in 1766: this is due to the fact that, as Arduino himself says, the information contained in the treatise is based on studies conducted and recorded in previous years). The extract from the “*Art de l'Indigotier*”, translated from Bertrand's edition of the *Descriptions des Arts et Métiers*, can be found in the second series, Vol. II (1777-78) [14 Vol. II pp. 273-277].

woad's diffusion at the time: he says that it is still cultivated in Germany, in England, both in northern and southern France in the surroundings of Caen, Valenciennes, Castres, Albi, Toulouse and Avignon (Vol. XXII), and that it is still extensively cultivated in many parts of Italy (Vol. XII), although he does not specify where.

Does Gera report second-hand information? His paragraphs on woad have indeed many points in common with the description of "*Pastel ou Guède ou Guesde*" given by the French botanist and agronomist François Rozier in Vol. VII of his *Cours complet d'agriculture* (1786)<sup>3</sup> [17]. Small differences in the description of woad's "geography" are present, but not of paramount importance. All things considered, it can be said that the relevance of Gera's account lies in its implicit acknowledging that woad cultivation was still taking place in Italy in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Moving to Milan, a city that was at the forefront in Italy's enlightened literary production, we find another dictionary, the "*Dizionario universale economico rustico*" written by the Milanese priest Glicerio Fontana under the pseudonym of Creneo Insubre and first published in Milan between 1773 and 1791 [18]<sup>4</sup>. For the purposes of this work, it is worth considering also the second edition, reworked by the renowned lawyer and scholar Carlo Fea and published in Rome between 1793 and 1797 [19]<sup>5</sup>: indeed, Fontana's first edition devotes a long article to woad in Vol. VI (1776), and an even longer version can be found in Vol. IX (1794) of the second issue. At the beginning of the dissertation on woad, Fontana is again drawing information from foreign sources, explicitly citing Duhamel du Monceau when reporting French cultivation modalities; afterwards though, he most interestingly adds personal contributions, providing a detailed description of cultivation and processing techniques of woad in Italy. The reader learns that at the time this plant was not sufficiently cultivated in Italy, and particularly in Lombardy, to supply local dyers' needs, with the result that many provinces had to resort to importing expensive foreign woad<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, two areas in Italy still grew and traded fine and renowned woad: Castel nuovo Tortonese (likely to be identified nowadays with Castelnuovo Scrivia, in the heart of Piedmont's historical woad-growing area) and Rieti, part of the Papal States, today capital of the homonymous province in the region of Lazio<sup>7</sup>. Other minor woad-production centres were also Borgo San Sepolcro and Città di Castello in the Valtiberina, another historically important Italian woad area. Fontana says that Rieti's "*pastello*" in particular was so renowned, that its trade all across Italy and Europe was a major income for the territory at the time: the main trade destinations were the towns of Matelica and Norcia in the Papal States and, above all, Capodimonte in the Kingdom of Naples. The information about the importance of Rieti's woad production supports the idea that Italy still had important woad centres in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which not only supplied many Italian regions, but also other European countries.

<sup>3</sup> Rozier's work, originally released in Paris between 1781 and 1800 [17], was then published and translated into Italian in Padua.

<sup>4</sup> The first edition of the work was integrated and completed by a collaborator of Fontana, Vincenzo Pini, after Fontana's death in 1783.

<sup>5</sup> In the preface to the second edition, Carlo Fea writes that he has made some "corrections and additions" to the original version, in order to "*adapt the reading of the work to all Italy, and not in particular to Lombardy, from where Father Fontana was writing*" (*Dizionario universale economico-rustico*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. I, 1793) [19 Vol. I p. iv]. In the following lines, information taken from Fea's second edition (and not present in the original version) will be duly specified. Whenever no specifications are provided, it is understood that the information refers to the original edition.

<sup>6</sup> In the first edition, Fontana writes that the area of Milan does not grow its own woad, and therefore needs to import it from abroad. In the later edition, Fea adds that this lack of woad affects many parts of Italy.

<sup>7</sup> Fontana mentions only Rieti as a major woad centre, whereas the reference to Castel nuovo Tortonese is added in the second edition.

As a matter of fact, Fontana had direct experience of the area of Rieti: we know indeed that he spent several years in the Papal States, and particularly in Rieti, conducting his work as a scholar. To confirm his words, we get evidence of woad's intense trade across the boundaries of the Papal States from an edict on customs duties, issued in 1786 in Rome by the Pontifical "General Treasurer" Fabrizio Ruffo [20]: woad is mentioned among the goods in the tax regulation, showing that it was both imported and exported through the borders of the State.

The second edition of Fontana's dictionary provides also another record about the Papal States, which is crucial in order to gain a better understanding of woad's relevance at the time: at the end of the article on woad, we find the reported text of an "*Instruction on woad cultivation and preparation*" ("*Istruzione sulla coltivazione e preparazione del guado*")<sup>8</sup>; Fea asserts that it was published in 1790 by the *Congresso economico di Roma*, with the aim of increasing woad cultivation and manufacture in the Papal States. The existence and the very purpose of this *Instruction* provide proof that woad could still be economically profitable at the time, to the point that the Papal States aspired to enhance its cultivation and production.

An insight into Tuscany's agriculture is given some years later by doctor and botanist Ottaviano Targioni Tozzetti, member of a notable Tuscan family of scholars. Among his various works on agricultural topics, his *Lessons on agriculture* ("*Lezioni di agricoltura specialmente Toscana*"), published in six volumes between 1802 and 1804, give a special account of Tuscany's cultivations [21]. A lesson on dye plants is reported in Vol. II (1802) and a specific dissertation on woad in Vol. VI (1804): the author states that woad is still cultivated in Borgo San Sepolcro, in the Marche region and in the surroundings of Cortona, although not as extensively as in the past times of great Tuscan wool industry (Vol. II). The extension of such cultivation must have been especially limited in the *Cortonese* area, though, if we give credit to canon Andrea Zucchini, author of several botanical and agricultural writings related to Cortona: in a dissertation held in 1778 he states that woad, as well as madder, has "*fallen into total oblivion and disuse*" in Cortona ("*da molt'anni indietro andarono in totale oblio, non che in disuso*"<sup>9</sup>) [22].

Finally, a collection of issues concerning Italian agriculture was printed in Milan between 1809 and 1814 in the scientific periodical that goes by the name of "*Annali dell'agricoltura del Regno d'Italia*" [23]. Its eminent author, Filippo Re, at that time Professor of Agriculture at the University of Bologna, was one of the Italian agronomists whose works had most widespread circulation across the country, and his *Annals* are another remarkable example of Italian periodic journal.

When dealing with woad, Re's *Annals* are surely influenced by Napoleon's Continental Blockade, which in those years endorsed woad reintroduction as a consequence of the lack of indigo import. Volume XIX of the *Annals*, for instance, reports a translation of part of the well-known treatise on woad by the Piedmontese chemist Giovanni Antonio Giobert: his "*Traité sur le Pastel et l'Extraction de son Indigo*" (1813) was famously written in response to the French government's need for indigo blue [24]. Nonetheless, several articles included in the *Annals* are prior to the Blockade-induced "woad rush". Not only do they mention the contributions of Arduino, Fontana and Targioni Tozzetti (*Annali*, Vol. IX), but also other dissertations on woad are reported. From a record written by the Friulan botanist Giovanni Brignoli, Professor of Botany and Agriculture in Urbino (Vol. IX), we learn that at the time woad was

<sup>8</sup> *Dizionario universale economico-rustico*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. IX, 1794 [19 Vol. IX pp. 139-146]. Carlo Fea introduces the document saying that it can integrate to some extent the previous specifications on woad ("*può supplire in qualche cosa alle [istruzioni] precedenti*", p. 139).

<sup>9</sup> *Sopra la Luteola sativa*, 1778 [22 p. 5].

documented to grow spontaneously in many parts of Italy (in mountainous regions of Piedmont, in Valle d'Aosta, in the surroundings of Urbino, and all across the Kingdom of Naples), but it was also cultivated on small scale in Friuli. The author states that such cultivations were meant for local use: a certain Cesari, dyer in Udine, is said to have been cultivating woad for 40 years to meet the needs of his personal dyeworks, and the author himself asserts to have been supplying self-grown woad to local dyers for 10 years in the surroundings of Udine.

### Some observations on woad's processing techniques

The authors discussed above also provide accounts of how woad was prepared and used, which allow us to delve deeper into woad manipulation described from the point of view of Italian sources.

Overall, we learn that the main steps of the processes were more or less the same everywhere (in Italy as well as in Europe). Harvested woad leaves were ground in woad mills, and the resulting paste was arranged in heaps and composted. After some weeks, or sometimes one or two months, the paste underwent a second grinding step and was then shaped into loaves or elongated balls: when these woad loaves were dry, they were broken up again and sprinkled with liquid (usually water) to reactivate fermentation. The coarse powder obtained in the end was finally ready to be sold and used. The whole process, from the first harvest to the final product, took several months (even over a year according to Targioni Tozzetti). Some little differences could occur, or the process could stop at different stages, depending on what final product was meant to be sold (either woad balls or woad powder) [12, 18, 19, 21].

It might be questionable to what extent these written processes corresponded to reality, and how much of them was only a "scholarly" record with little resemblance to actual procedures. The reader can get some hints from the fact that such descriptions, aligned in their main steps, are spiced up with little details of "local taste" that probably stand for actual local processes: for example, Targioni Tozzetti is the only one to call "*barca*" the heap of woad paste, and to write that the "*barche*" are disinfected by sprinkling them with the juice of fresh woad leaves (*Lezioni*, Vol. VI) [21]. In addition to this, the extremely meticulous description these authors make of woad treatment might likely be linked, at least to some extent, to first-hand documentation.

Until now, records of eminent agronomists and botanists have been discussed. But the scientific literature of that period passed on to us also some singular, precious accounts of real woad growers and dyers: this is the case of Gioachino Cesari, dyer in Udine. Cesari must have been quite popular at his time, according to the different notices about him reported in Filippo Re's *Annali*: he is cited in the letter by Giovanni Brignoli mentioned above (*Annali*, Vol. IX, 1811) and a thorough description of his work is given in Vol. X (1811) [23]. The latter, in particular, is an interesting dissertation on woad cultivation and dyeing processes written by the Secretary of the Agrarian Society of Aquileia. While writing an account on local woad growers, he examines the case of Gioachino Cesari, reporting and discussing a sort of "interview" in which the dyer speaks about his work.

First of all, we learn that Cesari cultivated woad for the purpose of supplying his own dyeworks, so we are dealing with a rather small-scale cultivation intended for local use. Gioachino's father, Giuseppe, had grown woad in his grounds since 1780: it is relevant to notice that the homegrown woad production proved so profitable, that Gioachino decided to expand the cultivated fields. When it comes to the description of woad's cultivation modalities, we get to know that some little differences occur between Cesari's ways and the methods recommended by scholars: the kind of soil in which woad is said to grow

best, preparation of the fields, number of yearly harvests, etc. This is probably due to a factor that distinguished Cesari from most of the authors: experience on the field.

As to woad preparation for dyeing purposes, it is said that between Cesari and the “authors” there are no significant differences but one: Cesari’s process is simpler. It might be interesting to analyse this detail. It seems logical that woad cultivated for use on small and local scale was prepared in a different way than a product that was destined for sale and trade. Scholars’ treatises usually give account of large-scale processes, since these were considered the most relevant ones for the welfare of society and economics, which was a key target of the enlightened enthusiasm for scientific progress. As a drawback, we rarely get to know small-scale processes like this one.

Specifically, Cesari only macerates woad, and after leaving it to rest he directly uses it in the vat; he does not make woad loaves or use any particular additives. What must have been most interesting for intellectuals of the time, longing for a replacement of Indian indigo, is Cesari’s claim that – sadly – woad alone is not sufficient to make a beautiful blue tint: woad is used to get a solid basis, but an unspecified “*calculated dose*” of indigo needs to be added to gain in brightness and preciousness<sup>10</sup>.

## The relation between woad and Indian indigo

The previously mentioned words of Gioachino Cesari are one of the “hints” the ancient literature gives us to estimate the relation between woad and Indian indigo in Italy at the time, and similar information is hidden in other discussed sources. Almost all of them, when talking about woad, mention the fact that its blue colour needs to be combined with indigo, and the practice of mixing the two blue dyes in “woad vats” in that period is already well known today [5-6]. Indeed, several authors nowadays wonder whether woad balls were still used for their colour-yielding function at the time, or if their role in the vat was only to activate fermentation, thus creating the reducing conditions which are necessary to dye with indigo powder.

Pietro Arduino is very clear about woad: it is one of the most important dyes and forms every possible shade of blue and green, and it can be used either alone or combined with indigo, although the latter solution is said to be much better [12]. In 1844, Francesco Gera [16] writes that woad is mixed with indigo to increase the fastness and intensity of the latter: this statement seems to mark woad as the “best” colour between the two of them, in contrast to what other sources say, although later authors like Gera might be biased because of the enthusiasm for woad that arose during the Blockade years.

Fontana’s dictionary provides us with interesting information on the relative prices of the two dyes. At the end of his article, Fontana states that woad yields an excellent, very colourfast blue colour [18], which is used – Carlo Fea adds – as a base for obtaining many other colours and also to “fix” indigo on cloths: “*woad – the dissertation continues – was once preferred to indigo [...], but now indigo has prevailed over woad because it is more beautiful and maybe because it is cheaper than woad itself*”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “[...] egli suole aggiungere al guado una dose calcolata d’indaco ogni volta che gli accade di fare una bella tinta bleu” (*Annali dell’agricoltura del Regno d’Italia*, Vol. X, 1811) [23 Vol. X p. 36].

<sup>11</sup> “Una volta il guado si preferiva all’endaco [...], ma ora l’endaco ha preso di mano al guado come più bello e forse perché è men caro del guado stesso” (*Dizionario universale economico-rustico*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. IX, 1794) [19 Vol. IX p. 146]. The original version reads: “[...] ora l’Endaco ha preso di mano al Guado, forse perché è più caro, e più caro dell’Endaco stesso” (“[...] now indigo has prevailed over woad, maybe because it [woad] is more expensive, and more expensive than indigo itself”), *Dizionario universale economico rustico*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Vol. VI, 1776 [18 Vol. VI pp. 226-227].

[19]. Thus, if we give credit to these words, the convenience and the availability that marked woad's success over indigo during the Middle Ages had been turned around in favour of indigo at this point.

Overall, it appears that woad was still acknowledged to have a relevant dyeing function by Italian authors of the time. The specific role of its blue colour was frequently mentioned. However, it was barely used alone by then: it mainly seems to have been used as a “base” or in mixtures, above all with its long-time rival indigo. In the eyes of today's reader, it seems that scholars and small-scale dyers had an important point in common: woad was still said to be an important dye, but indigo was an indispensable ingredient in the vat.

## Conclusions

A selection of 18<sup>th</sup>- to early 19<sup>th</sup>-century technical literature dealing with woad in Italy has been presented, with a special focus on dissertations concerning agriculture. By selecting all-encompassing works, such as agricultural dictionaries or periodic journals, this contribution wishes to help overcome limits based on locally-centered sources. Although this sort of brief “review” does not claim to be exhaustive and will be enriched with other sources in the future, it can still lead to some conclusions on woad's diffusion and use in Italy throughout the examined period.

A first observation is that woad was still a relevant topic at the time. Several different “intellectual environments” across Italy were interested in providing and discussing information on this plant. The very need to explain how to cultivate and prepare it most likely indicates an actual need for guidelines and a practical outcome: indeed, today's reader must bear in mind that enlightened authors mostly wrote about what was actually considered useful.

From the “geographical” analysis, we can conclude that the importance of several historical Italian woad-producing centres had changed in comparison to the past. The major Medieval woad area of inner Tuscany seems to have significantly declined by then, whereas Piedmont's production was still quite renowned and supplied several Italian regions with “Lombard woad”, although we learn that neighboring Lombardy also needed to import some woad from abroad. The area of Rieti, on the other hand, which was as well a historical woad area but had always been less important than the former two, was now at the forefront in Italy's woad production. A measure of Reatin woad's importance is given by its trade routes, which not only supplied many Italian areas, but even reached other European countries. The Kingdom of Naples, in particular, seems not to have grown enough woad within its boundaries to meet the needs of the factories promoted by the Bourbons, and had therefore to turn to Rieti's supplies.

Overall, we get to know that the trade of Italian woad was still quite intense at the time, both between different Italian regions and outgoing towards Europe. These trade routes suggest that woad was still an important good, and especially that large-scale production could still be a matter of economic importance.

But we also learn that woad had an important local dimension, being cultivated on small scale for local use. As to this last topic, the literature of this period – typically searching for the useful – provides us with some precious records of authentic working procedures like the ones of Gioachino Cesari, “hidden” within learned dissertations.

Some considerations on the possible limits of the examined sources are due as well. On the whole, the purpose of the writings and their historical context must be taken into account carefully. Regarding the “places” of Italian woad, for instance, as mentioned in the beginning, the reader must bear in mind that the authors' aim was not to provide an accurate account of woad's geographical diffusion. As a consequence, it is sometimes necessary to “read between the lines” in order to collect information.

Concerning historical events, the Continental Blockade represented a turning point in the scientific and literary production on dye plants due to the well-known endorsement of “homegrown” woad. The information reported by writings of the Blockade years, which might likely be biased in favour of woad, must therefore be interpreted cautiously.

All things considered, it is undeniable that by then Indian indigo was widespread to the point that, according to Fontana’s dictionary, it was even cheaper than woad. Nevertheless, records such as the *Instruction* of the Papal States or the story of Gioachino Cesari, who took up woad cultivation following his father’s success, tell us that both large-scale and small-scale woad production could still prove profitable.

In conclusion, the collected information shows that Italy still had some relevant woad-producing centres between the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which in some cases reached out to European trade routes. It seems that this woad was not just a supporting component in indigo vats, but that it still had an active role in dyeing in blue, although its combination with indigo was unavoidable. Finally, further insights into the trade of woad in Italy and additional observations about the following steps of woad’s productive cycle – that is, the processing procedures that lead from the colouring matter to the final application product – will be discussed in future contributions.

## Acknowledgements

This study has been conducted with the contribution of DAStU “Fragilità Territoriali” Research Project funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR), within the Departments of Excellence Initiative 2018-2022.

A special word of thanks to Professor Alberto Grimoldi, supervisor of the author’s doctoral thesis, who has been of fundamental importance to the achievement of the hereby presented results.

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