

A digital repertoire of Italian banks (1861-present)? Why and what for: the case of cooperative banks

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1. Introduction

The historiography of Italian banking boasts a rich and solid tradition. Its scientific standing is one of the most internationally reputed. However, the lack of unambiguous knowledge of one of the most widely used structural data to evaluate a banking system stands out, namely the number of institutions that exercise credit. For the first seventy-five years since Unity in 1861, it has never been reconstructed.

The adverse circumstances for the identification of banks whole number are in fact of two orders: on the one hand, the non-systematic nature of the official surveys, which are absent for certain institutional categories and even for entire periods; on the other hand, the non-exhaustive character of the surveys present (which many banks eluded) for the phase before the introduction of the Register of Banks in 1926.

This seems particularly true for certain categories of operators, including private bankers – whose difficult identification often stems from their hybrid mercantile-credit nature – but also rural banks, whose actual numerical consistency and spatial distribution partly escapes from the statistical surveys in the first decades of life of the cooperative movement. For instance, confusion could arise when identifying their actual number when there are two or more rural banks established in the same area. Therefore, between the 19th and 20th centuries, it is not always easy to enumerate the population of credit unions, whose existence was sometimes limited to a few years with the tendency to reconstitute after a short time, sometimes with a membership that was in part equal.

The creation of a digital repertoire, which collects the main biographical information of the overall number of Italian credit institutions from unification to the present, represents, therefore, a decisive advance for the knowledge of the banking sector in the long run.

The potential of such a database is multiple.

From a heuristic standpoint, it offers extraordinary possibilities for analysis in two respects:

- macroeconomic: by providing information on the type of banking (including also the less structured morphologies such as private bankers, credit unions, pawnshops, etc.), legal forms, geographical areas, size classes, etc.;

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- microeconomic: by following the evolution of individual institutions (also those little known in the literature), their expansionary processes and the possible existence of relational networks with other subjects, or by tracing the genealogy of banking groups/institutions.

The repertoire is also a fascinating entry point to get to know the Italian banking world. For example, the company profiles would help to sensitize the local communities to the positive function that the credit activity has had for the local development. In addition, the availability, within the same database, of many profiles offers the possibility to easily grasp similarities and differences between individual operators in the credit world, such as to analyse competition dynamics at local level.

However, the challenges posed by the implementation of the repertoire are not insignificant.

First, the definition of subjects. Banking has not always been carried out in the way that is most familiar to us today and according to current legislation. This limit induces to consider, inside the database, also figures little formalized but however active, in some measure, in the credit sector.

Secondly, the absence of many decades of official records of the banking population. In the first decades after the unification, credit activity, due to its multifaceted nature, was regulated according to different legislations (for example, the pawnshops were treated as pious works and the banking activity of partnerships was treated as commerce). There is therefore no exhaustive official evidence on the banking population between 1861 and 1936.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 concentrates on the main methodological issues and the overall database's structure. Section 3 provides an outstanding example of how the database can be used to analyse a historical case of financial distress affecting a rural bank in the early 1920s, and the domino effect it brought about in the local credit system. Section 4 concludes.

2. Stages in the database construction: methodological aspects and structure

The 'Repertoire of Italian banks from 1861 to the present' is produced by the Istituto Luigi Einaudi Foundation (Rome) in collaboration with the Centro per la cultura d'impresa (Milano) and with the support of various stakeholders (banks and associations) belonging to the banking sector (fig. 1). It lists and describes, with different degrees of depth, all the subjects that, from Unity to present, have officially disbursed credit in Italy.



Figure 1 Stakeholders involved in the project (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

As a starting point, in 2020, a general map of both primary and secondary sources was created, which allowed us to define a first estimate of the universe of banking institutions on Italian territory (over 7,000). Based on the results obtained, starting from 2021, the first part of the project was developed, which concerned the regions of Liguria, Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta.

The making of the repertoire relies on the joint and complementary use of archival and bibliographical sources, in turn divided into three different levels: the national level (the Bank of Italy historical archives, the Central State Archives, etc.), the regional and provincial/local level (archives of chambers of commerce, historical bank archives, etc.).

The methodological hypothesis is that the information content of the archival and bibliographical sources of the various levels is mutually complete, making it possible to make up for the deficiencies and opacities present especially in the Liberal Age (1861-1922) and infra-war; where, for example, a people's bank or a rural bank has not reported its constitution to the Ministry (national archival source), is the register of the Chamber of Commerce (provincial level archival source) or the official bulletin of legal announcements (bibliographical source at the provincial level) that could potentially indicate the foundation and provide other possible information. The possible presence of specific archives or literature on a given subject is then a fourth source level (subject level), able to provide further information.

Bank profiles are the core of the repertoire. Each entry consists of two sections, the first dedicated to collecting the company's data, and the second intended to host the biographical notes. The information collected for each institution thus gives rise to a data sheet, which shows, under the heading (with the last or current company name), the following fields: chronological extremes (date of establishment and date of termination); an indication of the other names (including date of modification); the historical profile; the registered office; the share capital and the main changes throughout the company's life; the legal form with its variations (joint stock company, limited liability company, sole proprietorship...); the banking category with its variations (ordinary credit bank, cooperative credit bank, savings bank, private banker...); the archival and bibliographical sources (fig. 2).

Banca di Caraglio del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo < 4 di 15 >

Caraglio (CN)
Data di costituzione: 17 settembre 1892

Altre denominazioni

- Cassa Rurale di Prestiti di Caraglio [1892]
- Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Caraglio [1938]
- Banca di Credito Cooperativo di Caraglio [1995]
- Banca di Caraglio e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo [2000]
- Banca di Caraglio, del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo [2001]

Il 17 settembre 1892, don Silvio Felice Ramazzina insieme a 14 abitanti del piccolo centro di Caraglio davano vita alla Cassa Rurale di Prestiti allo scopo - come recitava l'art. 2 dello Statuto sociale - "di largire il credito ai Soci per migliorare la loro condizione economica e morale e favorire il risparmio accettando dai Soci denaro ad interesse". Nel 1922, sotto la guida del presidente cav. Riccardo Momigliano, venne aperta la prima sede fissa con sportello della Cassa. Fino a quel momento, i soci si erano riuniti ogni domenica mattina in un locale concesso dal Comune o in canonica per accettare le iscrizioni di nuovi soci. Tra il 1937 e il 1938, complici le difficoltà del sistema creditizio e alcuni fallimenti di banche locali, la Cassa Rurale venne tenuta in vita grazie anche al forte impegno del nuovo presidente, il geometra Luigi Bruno, e all'insistenza del dott. Ottavio Cirioidi, delegato della Banca d'Italia. Negli anni della Ricostruzione, quella che era nel frattempo diventava la Cassa Rurale e Artigiana di Caraglio fu decisiva nel sostenere la crescita delle aziende attive nel settore agricolo, nell'artigianato e commercio e, infine, nella piccola e media industria che in quel periodo nascevano sul territorio. Contemporaneamente cresceva in maniera importante anche la "massa fiduciaria", ossia i risparmi depositati presso la banca,

Albero genealogico

Current name

Past names

The genealogical tree

Brief history of the institute

Bibliographical and archival sources

Fonti archivistiche

- Archivio per la storia del movimento sociale cattolico in Italia "Mario Romani" (Milano) Fondo documenti Banche cattoliche Archivio Romani, b. 1, f. 2.

Fonti bibliografiche

- Un paese, la sua banca. Cassa rurale e artigiana Caraglio: 1892-1992, si, Dial Arti Grafiche, 1992
- AA.VV., Banca di Caraglio 1892-2017. Tracce indelebili di un unico cammino, Caraglio, 2017

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Figure 2 A profile example: the Banca di Caraglio, del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori – Credito cooperativo (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

High value is the presence of a genealogical tree, which makes relationships with other subjects (i.e. mergers and/or acquisitions) instantly accessible with an overview. This gives the database the original strength to reconstruct and visualize, in a comprehensive and historicized way, the dynamics of acquisitions, mergers and aggregations that have characterized the history of the Italian banking system since the late nineteenth century. The case represented in Fig. 3, relative to the current Banca di Caraglio, del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori, exemplifies the potential of this tool. In the present case, it is easy to historicize the development of the institute, which was founded in 1892 as the Cassa Rurale di Caraglio; in 1938 the name became Cassa Rurale e Artigiana di Caraglio and, in 1995, Banca di credito cooperativo di Caraglio; in 2000, following the incorporation of the Banca di credito cooperativo di Camporosso e della Val Nervia, the institution took the name of Banca di Caraglio e della Riviera dei Fiori, which was amended again the following year in the current Banca di Caraglio, del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori, following the incorporation of the Banca di credito cooperativo Cuneese (which in turn derived from the merger of the Banca di credito cooperativo di Margarita and the Cassa rurale e artigiana di Robilante).

Albero genealogico x

Banca di Caraglio del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo (17 settembre 1892 -)

- ↳ **Banca di Credito Cooperativo Cuneese** (novembre 1995 - 2001)
 - ↳ [fusione per unione] **Banca di Credito Cooperativo di Margarita** (12 aprile 1965 - 26 ottobre 1995)
 - ↳ [fusione per unione] **Credito Cooperativo Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Robilante** (23 agosto 1962 - 26 ottobre 1995)

Banca di Caraglio e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo (2000 - 2001)

- ↳ **Banca di Credito Cooperativo di Caraglio** (1995 - 2000)
 - ↳ **Banca di credito cooperativo di Camporosso e della Val Nervia** (1989 - 2000)

Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Caraglio (1938 - 1995)

Cassa Rurale di Prestiti di Caraglio (1892 - 1938)

Chiudi

Figure 3 The genealogical tree of the Banca di Caraglio, del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito cooperativo (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

The aim is to generate both a relational database – searchable using different variables such as denomination, chronological extremes, banking typologies, geographic areas, etc. – and a collection of stories that tell the story of how individual institutes have grown, expanded, and formed their relational networks. By way of example, Fig. 4 reproduces on the right the search mask and on the left a partial list of the results obtained, researching all the institutions in the province of Cuneo having in their name the words ‘cassa rurale’ and/or ‘credito cooperativo’.

The image shows a search interface with two main parts: search results on the left and a search mask on the right.

Search Results (Left):

- 15 risultati | Nuova ricerca**
- Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Boves Banca di Credito Cooperativo**
Boves (CN)
7 ottobre 1888 -
Altre denominazioni: Cassa Rurale di Prestiti con sede in Boves [1888]; Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Boves [1938]; Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Boves Banca di Credito Cooperativo [1995]
- Credito Cooperativo Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Robilante**
Robilante (CN)
23 agosto 1962 - 26 ottobre 1995
Altre denominazioni: Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Robilante [1962]; Credito Cooperativo Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Robilante [1994]
- Credito Cooperativo Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Rocca de' Baldi**
Rocca de' Baldi (CN)
15 gennaio 1959 - 31 dicembre 1995
Altre denominazioni: Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Rocca de' Baldi [1959]; Credito Cooperativo Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Rocca de' Baldi [1994]
- Banca di Caraglio del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo**
Caraglio (CN)
17 settembre 1892 -
Altre denominazioni: Cassa Rurale di Prestiti di Caraglio [1892]; Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Caraglio [1938]; Banca di Credito Cooperativo di Caraglio [1995]; Banca di Caraglio e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo [2000]; Banca di Caraglio, del Cuneese e della Riviera dei Fiori - Credito Cooperativo [2001]

Search Mask (Right):

- Ricerca libera** (with a magnifying glass icon)
- Input field:
- Nome istituto** (with a magnifying glass icon)
- Input field:
- Estremi cronologici**
- Da** Anno di fondazione
- Input field:
- A** Anno di cessazione
- Input field:
- Regione**
- Dropdown menu: Piemonte
- Provincia**
- Dropdown menu: Cuneo
- Sede legale** (with a magnifying glass icon)
- Input field:
- Categoria**
- Dropdown menu: --- tutte le categorie ---
- Cerca** button

Figure 4 The search box (right) and the partial list of results (left): the example of credit unions in the province of Cuneo from the Unity to today (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

The georeferenced map finally allows us to identify the banks’ distribution on the territory. In Fig. 5, which reproduces the spatial distribution of the subjects identified in the pilot project (Liguria, Piedmont and Valle d’Aosta), the number appearing in each circle corresponds to the number of subjects surveyed, while the colour of the circle corresponds to the density of banks in the area (higher density from green to orange). Increasing then the focus on the map also increases the level of detail for a more precise geographical location of the different subjects whose profiles are recorded in the repertoire. This functionality turns out to be especially useful for gaining an overview of those types of banks, such as credit unions, which traditionally were not concentrated in major urban centres, being dispersed in large rural areas.

To summarize, the repertoire’s structure and specific features – such as the historical sequence of the name changes and the genealogical tree, in addition to the georeferenced map – are crucial for studying not only large banks but also other types of banks. Indeed, large institutions are typically characterized by a long history that is reflected in numerous legal and dimensional changes, as well as in several ‘crossings’ (mergers and acquisitions) with other banks. This tool is also highly effective for studying systematically small subjects like credit unions. It is extremely powerful for this purpose, as the traditional historiographical approach to banking history struggles to effectively represent small banking enterprises, due to the lack of sources and because of the high number of institutes belonging to this category.

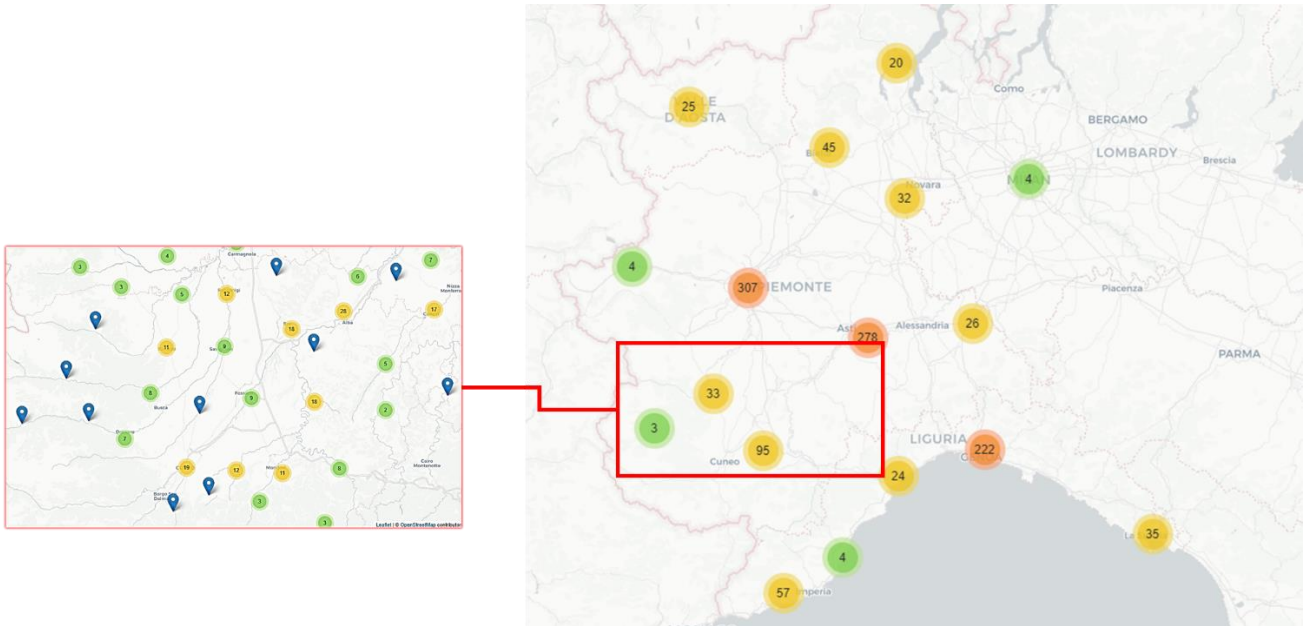


Figure 5 The georeferenced map of the banks surveyed in the pilot project (right), with a focus on the province of Cuneo (left) (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

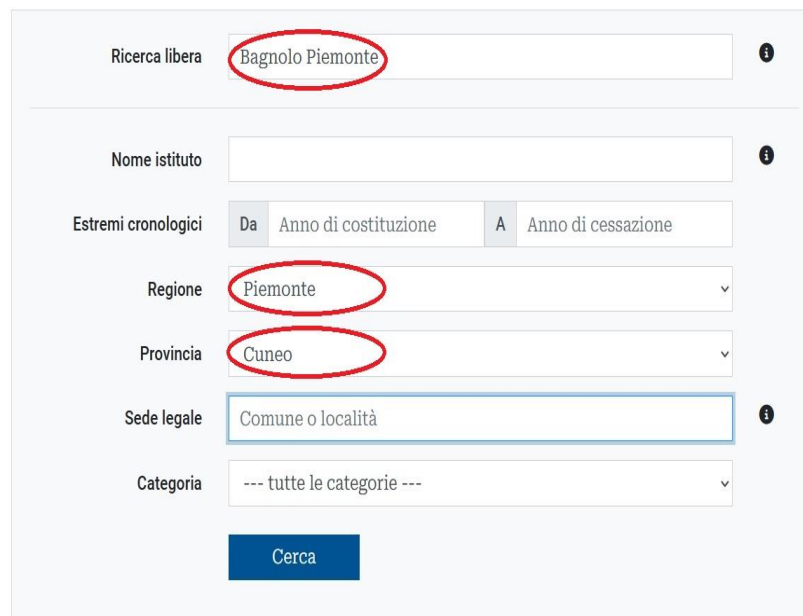
3. The case of the Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte (1908-1923)

The history of credit unions provides one of the best examples of the heuristic potential of the repertoire: this is because this segment of credit is one of the least recorded in terms of the number of institutions and because the database's interrelated structure makes it possible to rebuild the network that connects them and the many processes of absorption/confluence that characterized this banking component, especially between the two world wars.

A fitting proof is the history of the Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte. Fig. 6 shows how its descriptive profile can be searched in the *Repertorio*, e.g. by conducting a free keyword search (Bagnolo Piemonte). Other searches can be extended to all banking institutes in the same region (Piedmont) or province (Cuneo).

The Cassa di Bagnolo is one of the 856 banking institutions of the Piedmont region included and analysed in the pilot project. The life of this rural bank, located in a village in the province of Cuneo, was rather short, only 15 years, and the volume of business managed by this institution was not the most important even in the provincial context, of which it represents one of the 206 cooperative credit cases surveyed in the database.

Ricerca schede



Ricerca libera

Nome istituto

Estremi cronologici Anno di costituzione Anno di cessazione

Regione

Provincia

Sede legale

Categoria

Figure 6 Examples of keyword search: free search, search by region, search by province (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

Nevertheless, the Cassa di Bagnolo was the most emblematic example of mismanagement and financial instability originating from the collapse of a network of interconnected rural financial institutions, so much so that its corporate affairs marked the beginning of the decline of the Catholic credit system in Piedmont.

Banche Italiane Fonti Ricerca Mappa

PROGETTO METODOLOGIA COMITATO SCIENTIFICO GRUPPO DI LAVORO

« Risultati della ricerca

Cassa Rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte

Bagnolo Piemonte (CN)

Data di costituzione: 29 novembre 1908

Data di fallimento: 14 maggio 1923

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Con atto rogato dal notaio Piccato, il 29 novembre 1908 viene fondata la Cassa Rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte (CN), posta sotto la ragione sociale "Piccato, Genovesio, Piano e C.". Suo principale promotore è il parroco della chiesa di San Pietro in Bagnolo don Gianbattista Cavallotti, sacerdote molto attivo nelle opere sociali, che pur non ricoprendo cariche nell'ente (abbandonate in osservanza all'ordinanza pontificia del 1912 che vieta ai religiosi di amministrare aziende di tipo commerciale) ne detiene la direzione di fatto in qualità di assistente ecclesiastico con diritto di veto. La Cassa fa registrare un promettente avvio e ai 44 soci iniziali se ne aggiungono rapidamente altri. Nel 1912 ne diviene procuratore generale (con mansioni ufficiose di consigliere del "dimissionario" don Cavallotti) il commendator Giovanni Zaccone, esponente del Partito popolare, consigliere comunale di Torino e direttore della Federazione Agricola Torinese. Sorta allo scopo di esercitare il credito fino a un massimo di 5.000 lire su cambiali e 20.000 su ipoteca, dal 1911 la Cassa promuove e gestisce un consorzio per la vendita della frutta denominato Cooperativa frutta, con la partecipazione di 28 casse rurali della zona, che iniziano a depositare parte delle somme ricevute a risparmio presso la consorella di Bagnolo. Avvalendosi dei capitali a disposizione, l'ente assume inoltre in appalto le esattorie di Bagnolo, Benevagienna, Saluzzo e Paesana, acquista poderi, impianta magazzini per la vendita di frutta e prodotti agricoli, gestisce una segheria e distillerie per la fabbricazione di liquori e profumi, promuove l'apertura di un collegio per educande e...

[+ Espandi]

Figure 7 Descriptive profile of the Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

The bank's descriptive profile allows for the reconstruction of the main events (Fig. 7). The Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte was founded on 29 November 1908, in the legal form of a cooperative general partnership with unlimited liability. The primary characteristic of this kind of institution was the strictly symbolic value of the paid-up share capital and the exiguity of earmarked reserves, and thus the exclusive role of private assets as a guarantee for social activity.

The Cassa di Bagnolo was part of the Catholic-inspired credit institutions, that from the last decades of the 19th century spread widely in Italy, especially in rural areas, to support agrarian populations affected by the agricultural crisis. Their objectives included overcoming the widespread individualism of small farm owners, bringing them together in cooperative-type activities, and combating the phenomenon of usury, which plagued the subsistence incomes of the countryside.

Inspired by the formula of the Raiffeisen banks, typical of German-speaking countries, the Catholic rural banks aimed at improving the material and moral conditions of their members, making productive financial resources that were destined to remain unproductive. Leveraging the social cohesion of the small rural communities of reference, they realised a model of credit intermediation functional to the activation of financial resources of a purely local origin. The village, the hamlet or even the parish was usually the social unit of reference of the rural banks, which as a rule excluded non-residents unless they owned land or real estate locally. It was therefore a restricted environment, socially and culturally homogeneous, offering competitive advantages in terms of reduced costs of management control and circulation of information.

Their founders and first directors often included priests rooted in the local reality, who enjoyed the trust and respect of the rural population. Within a few decades, these banks became the point of reference for the modest economic activity of the rural world, granted loans to private and Catholic institutions, and supported social works.

The institute of Bagnolo was established by 44 founding members, but its main promoter was the parish priest of the church of San Pietro in Bagnolo don Gianbattista Cavallotti, a clergyman very active in local social initiatives. The initial objective of the institution was to exercise credit for the exclusive benefit of its members, providing them with the working capital they needed for their small rural investments. The institute would acquire the financial means necessary to carry out its activities by obtaining money in savings deposits from members or third parties, and by opening a free or restricted current account in favour of each payer.

The Cassa di Bagnolo had a very promising start and many members quickly joined the 44 founders. In 1912, a papal decree was promulgated forbidding religious from administering commercial businesses and don Cavallotti had to give up the positions he held in the institute. However, crucially, he continued to exercise de facto management as an ecclesiastical assistant with veto power. With the formal resignation of don Cavallotti, the eminent local figure Giovanni Zaccone became general procurator of the rural bank. Zaccone was an exponent of the Italian People's Party, municipal councillor of the city of Turin and director of the Turin Agricultural Federation coordinating the social initiatives of Catholics in the countryside, which made him an esteemed representative of the Piedmontese Catholic group.

Although the Cassa di Bagnolo was set up to exercise credit up to a maximum of 5,000 lire on bills of exchange and 20,000 on mortgages, from 1911 it promoted and managed a consortium for the sale of fruit called Cooperativa frutta. The cooperative aimed to encourage the direct sale of winter fruits, a speciality of the area, without resorting to the work of middlemen, who collected it at a low price from the farmers, profiting handsomely on the subsequent sale of the goods in urban markets. Twenty-eight rural banks in the area participated in the consortium, which began to deposit part of the sums they received in savings with their sister bank in Bagnolo.

Using the available capital, the Bagnolo institution also undertook the contracts for the tax collection offices in Bagnolo and three other towns in the area (Benevagienna, Saluzzo and Paesana). The management of the rural bank also purchased several farms and managed warehouses for the sale of fruit and agricultural products, a sawmill and distilleries for the manufacture of liqueurs and perfumes. The institute even financially promoted the opening of a boarding school for girls and an orphanage. Lastly, it granted loans for the purchase of seeds and fertilisers needed to cope with the agricultural year, with repayment at harvest time; it bought agricultural machinery and rented it out to members; it created two mutual insurance companies against fire and livestock mortality.

As a result of the costs incurred in these undertakings, the interests to be paid on the loans requested, the reduction in managed deposits, the devaluation of government bonds in the portfolio, some investments that turned out to be unproductive, in addition to various episodes of embezzlement caused by the management, from 1916 the Cassa was operating at a loss, a situation that worsened year by year until it accumulated a deficit of 4 million Lire in 1920. Moreover, in the early post-war period, the occurrence of the fall in demand for agricultural products and the

stabilisation of prices also put the Cooperativa frutta in difficulty, as it had large stocks of unsold products and began to accumulate losses. At the suggestion of Zaccone, who had in the meantime been elected to the Italian parliament, an attempt was then made to rescue the Bagnolo institute by forming a new consortium with the other banks involved, but the situation was further compromised. As a result of this decision, Cassa's operating deficit exceeded 7.7 million lire in 1922. At the time, the institution managed fiduciary deposits and current account debts totalling 23.5 million lire and operated in the municipality in which it was based and in 28 other surrounding towns, where it opened branch warehouses for the sale of fruit, agricultural goods and other types of merchandise, as well as owning three establishments in Bagnolo, one in Turin and Fossano and three others in as many municipalities in the area.

However, rumours of the institute's imminent bankruptcy had by then spread irreparably, which led to a proliferation of requests from depositors to repay their savings. The serious situation continued until the rural bank of the village of Andezeno, one of the institutions involved in the consortium led by the Bagnolo institution, sued its sister bank that had by then become insolvent, causing its bankruptcy, declared by the Court of Saluzzo on 14 May 1923. The sentence had great resonance throughout the region because of the losses incurred and the notoriety of the bankrupt institute, which until then had been considered an ideal example of cooperative work conducted according to the principles of Christian social doctrine. According to the sentence issued by judges, the main reasons for the bankruptcy lay in the managerial responsibilities of Don Cavallotti, who arbitrarily disposed of the fate of the Cassa and launched it into the most disparate and risky economic ventures. The priest was therefore sentenced in 1924 to 5 years imprisonment and a fine for simple and fraudulent bankruptcy, falsification of accounting records and destruction of company assets. A further 6 years imprisonment and fine were also imposed on the former deputy Zaccone, who was found guilty of the same charges with the aggravating circumstance of continued fraud for having robbed numerous rural banks of a large quantity of securities in the form of deposits and for having set up the refinancing consortium of the Cassa di Bagnolo.

Together with them, the peasants on the board of directors, three priests found to be accomplices in the alleged crimes, and the company's two accountants, brothers of Zaccone, were sentenced to between 25 days and four years imprisonment. The 227 jointly liable partners of the Bagnolo company, residing in more than 20 municipalities in the area, were also declared bankrupt. Finally, the bankruptcy involved about 700 creditors of the Cassa scattered in more than 50 municipalities in Piedmont and beyond, ruining many small landowners and colonists and giving rise to numerous legal disputes. The bankruptcy and subsequent trial caused a great scandal and it goes without saying that from that moment on, a severe blow was dealt to the credibility of the rural bank category. Thirty or so rural banks in the provinces of Cuneo and Turin, which were financially committed to the sister bank in Bagnolo, were also dragged into the crisis, suffering substantial losses that in some cases led to their early dissolution (e.g. Racconigi).

As shown by the list in Fig. 8, on 18 August 1924 a partial recovery of credits with 18 of these entities, equal to about one-fifth of the sums deposited, was established in the bankruptcy agreement (Rural Banks of Bra, Bricco, Busca, Canale, Piccolo Credito di Castellinaldo, Cavallermaggiore, Chieri, Diano d'Alba, Fossano, Marene, Montà d'Alba, Monticello d'Alba, Narzole, Priocca, Riva di Chieri, Tarantasca, Vezza d'Alba, Villafranca Piemonte, followed by Sampeyre and Villanova Solaro, while those of Andezeno, Castagnole Lanze, Cherasco, Caramagna, Montaldo, Mondovì, Novello,

Sant’Ambrogio Torinese, Savigliano did not accept the arrangement). According to estimates made during the bankruptcy proceedings, the total losses caused by the bankruptcy of Cassa di Bagnolo amounted to approximately 14 million Lire. The institution’s bankruptcy proceedings were declared closed by a ruling of the Civil Court of Turin on 5 December 1930.

rifinanziamento della Cassa di Bagnolo. Insieme a loro vengono giudicati colpevoli con pene dai 25 giorni ai 4 anni di reclusione i contadini facenti parte del consiglio di amministrazione, 3 sacerdoti a vario titolo complici dei reati contestati e i due contabili della società, fratelli dello Zaccone. Oltre all'ente, sono dichiarati falliti i suoi 227 soci solidalmente responsabili, residenti in più di 20 comuni della zona. Il dissesto coinvolge circa 700 creditori della Cassa sparsi in oltre 50 comuni piemontesi e oltre regione, mandando in rovina molti piccoli proprietari e coloni e suscitando numerosissime liti giudiziarie, oltre ad assestare un duro colpo alla credibilità della categoria delle casse rurali. Vengono trascinate nella crisi anche una trentina di casse rurali della provincia di Cuneo e Torino impegnate finanziariamente con la consorella di Bagnolo, le quali subiscono consistenti perdite che in alcuni casi ne portano allo scioglimento anticipato (ad esempio Racconigi). Con 18 di questi enti il 18 agosto 1924 viene stabilito in sede di concordato fallimentare un recupero parziale dei crediti pari a circa un quinto delle somme depositate (casse rurali di Bra, Bricco, Busca, Canale, Piccolo Credito di Castellinaldo, Cavallermaggiore, Chieri, Diano d'Alba, Fossano, Marene, Montà d'Alba, Monticello d'Alba, Narzole, Priocca, Riva di Chieri, Tarantasca, Vezza d'Alba, Villafranca Piemonte, seguite poi da Sampeyre e Villanova Solaro, mentre non accettano il concordato quelle di Andezeno, Castagnole Lanze, Cherasco, Caramagna, Montaldo, Mondovì, Novello, Sant'Ambrogio Torinese, Savigliano). Secondo le stime effettuate in sede di procedura fallimentare, le perdite totali causate dal dissesto della Cassa di Bagnolo ammontano a circa 14 milioni di lire. La procedura fallimentare dell'ente viene dichiarata conclusa con sentenza del Tribunale civile di Torino in data 5 dicembre 1930.

[- Riduci]

Sede legale

Bagnolo Piemonte (CN)

Forma giuridica

[29 novembre 1908] Società cooperativa in nome collettivo a responsabilità illimitata

Categoria bancaria

[29 novembre 1908] Cassa rurale

Figure 8 Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte: list of the rural banks involved in its failure (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

The Piedmontese Catholic credit system was inevitably marked and only those institutions unrelated to Bagnolo’s activities, which had been wary of its rapid success or which had adequately diversified their lending, were saved. In the following years, the failed institutions were replaced by larger banks with greater managerial skills and who enjoyed greater sympathy with the rising fascist regime. From the 1930s onwards, it is possible to say that the confessionally inspired rural credit system had practically disappeared in Piedmont.

4. Concluding remarks

The initial development experienced by the Bagnolo institute confirms the assumption that the Catholic-minded credit model made a significant financial contribution to the operation of smallholdings and, in some cases, to the cooperative sale of agricultural commodities. However, thanks to the trust it enjoyed locally and the rapid growth of deposits, the Bagnolo rural bank also directed its investments outside the agricultural sphere, supporting social and religious works, electoral campaigns of Catholic exponents and some manufacturing activities that did not comply

with its statutory purposes. This was an absurd amount of assets for an institution almost devoid of share capital and reserves and founded on the joint and unlimited guarantee of its members.

The bankruptcy of the Cassa di Bagnolo confirms that this model ceased to be sustainable at the same time as the recessionary phase of the Italian economy in the early 1920s, when the heavy losses recorded by some companies and banks in which Catholic institutions had invested or deposited their deposits led to a series of bankruptcies that brought to light the limited professional training of the administrators and the lack of coordination and adequate policies for controlling risks. Rather than the fragility of the rural bank model per se, the case examined thus highlights the relative ease with which this model could be distorted and, precisely for this reason, made vulnerable to the blows of the crisis.

Against this backdrop, the repertoire can be particularly useful in tracing the links between several credit unions. In this specific case, in fact, a simple search with keywords allows to single out all the institutions that somehow came into contact with the Cassa di Bagnolo and that have been led to disruption (Fig. 9).

The screenshot shows the 'Banche Italiane' website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Banche Italiane' on the left and 'Fonti', 'Ricerca', 'Mappa', and a lock icon on the right. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with 'PROGETTO', 'METODOLOGIA', 'COMITATO SCIENTIFICO', and 'GRUPPO DI LAVORO'. The main content area is titled 'Ricerca schede' and displays search results for the query 'Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte'. The search bar on the right is highlighted with a red circle and contains the text 'Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte'. The search results on the left are listed in a vertical column, with three entries highlighted by red boxes: 'Cassa Rurale di Savigliano', 'Cassa Rurale di Prestiti di Villafranca Piemonte', and 'Cassa Rurale di Prestiti dei SS. Giuliano e Basilissa di Chieri'. Each entry includes the name of the institution, its location, and its operational dates. The search bar on the right also includes fields for 'Nome istituto', 'Estremi cronologici' (Da and A), 'Regione', 'Provincia', 'Sede legale', and 'Categoria', along with a 'Cerca' button.

Figure 9 The search box (right) and the partial list of results (left): rural banks involved in the failure of the Cassa rurale di Bagnolo Piemonte (Source: <https://www.bancheitaliane.org/>, Last accessed 01/23/2024)

The crisis also emphasized the legal weakness of the rural banks, which assumed by statute the form of a cooperative company with unlimited liability, entailing dangers and consequences of which the members, mostly farmers, were unaware. The collective share capital contributed by the members, which was very small compared to the size of the deposits received under management and the resulting investments, led to the limited liability of the assets to offer sufficient guarantees of solvency.

All these factors, brought to light and aggravated by the economic crises of the 1920s, led to the almost complete dismantling of Piedmont's Catholic credit system, causing severe hardship for thousands of small savers in the countryside. The collapse of the Catholic rural banking network, on the other hand, brought considerable benefits to the larger banks, which took over from the failed institutions, spreading rapidly in the agricultural areas of the region, opening the door to the system change that occurred with the subsequent phase of banking concentration and State intervention in the financial sector. However, while the literature has mostly focused on large banks and their resilience – compared to small ones – in the face of the post-war crisis, the case of Bagnolo attests to the need to overcome the methodological bias by which crises are usually studied, i.e. by focusing on the vicissitudes of the big companies and often overlooking local or smaller institutions. For this reason, the repertoire, guaranteeing the maximum coverage of the banking population, can help identify some aspects and relationships that more traditional historiographical approaches are not always able to discover.

To conclude, the repertoire project is proposed as the first systematic attempt to reckon the Italian banking population and its evolution along the unitary history. For cooperative credit this will mean reconstructing for the first time the entire development of its territorial presence in Italy, from the late nineteenth century to today. And it will also show up the existing connections between the different credit unions.

This database is extremely powerful for this purpose, as the traditional historiographical approach to banking history struggles to effectively represent small banking enterprises, because of the absence of sources and the high number of institutes belonging to this category. The tracing of a 'genealogy' of the cooperative credit movement will allow, therefore, to bring out several aspects (aggregative processes, episodic crisis, social composition of the stakeholders, etc.) which could increase the identity awareness of cooperative credit banking and could also help identify new research fields in the future.

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