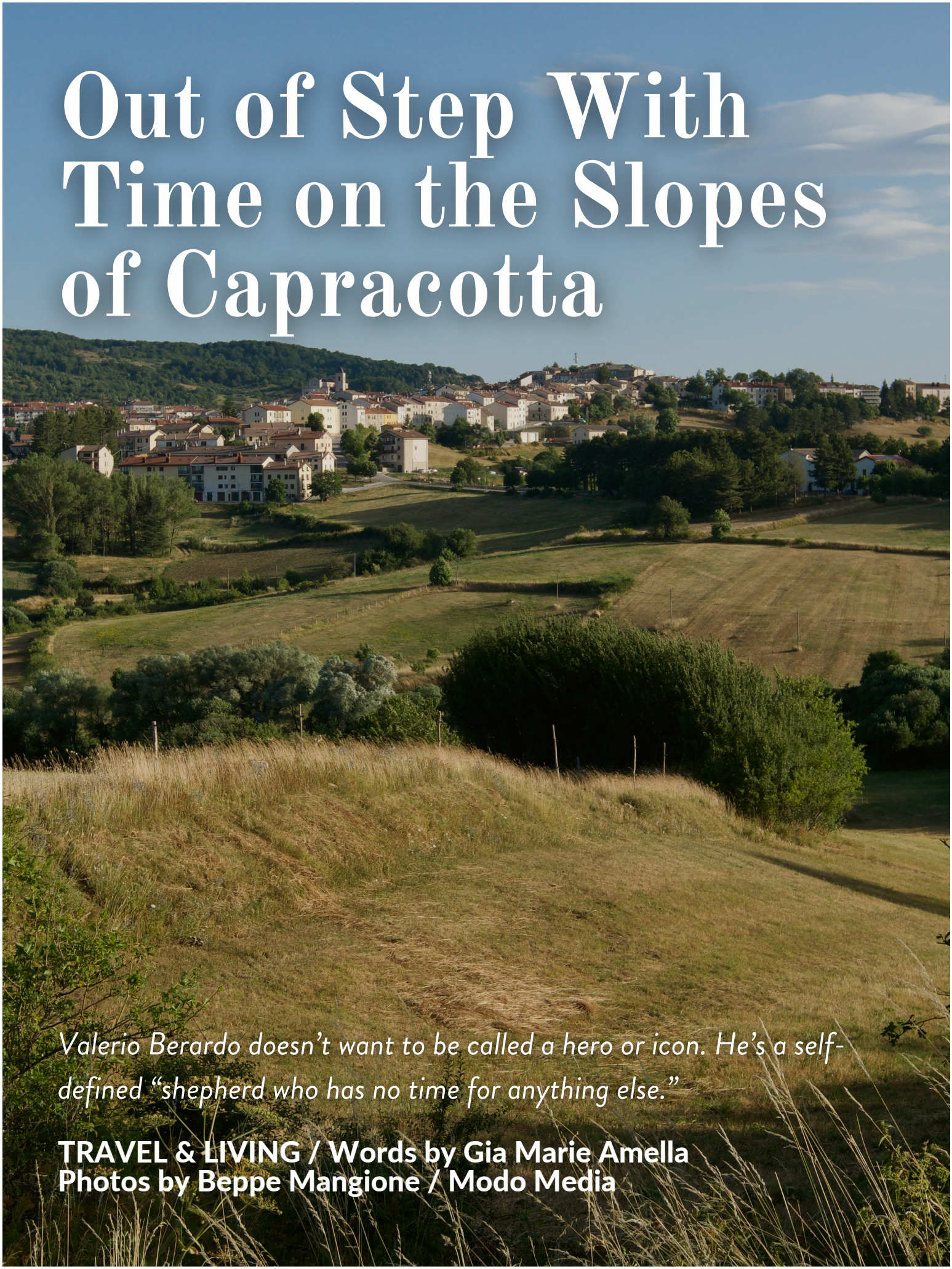
Out of Step With Time on the Slopes of Capracotta



Valerio Berardo doesn't want to be called a hero or icon. He's a self-defined "shepherd who has no time for anything else."

TRAVEL & LIVING / Words by Gia Marie Amella
Photos by Beppe Mangione / Modo Media

> **"MOLISE IS A LAND OF FARMERS."**
> **— Francesco Jovine, *Journeys in Molise***

Valerio Berardo keeps close watch over his herd of 150 alpine goats. "When they want something, they take off. There's no stopping them," he quips, pausing to lean against his shepherd's crook. Seven sheep recently joined Berardo's crew, too, but they move as a unit — likely to avoid getting tousled inside a goat mosh pit.

The animals are heading to graze further uphill; the scene is soundtracked by collar bells and bleats. The visual's magnificent, with sweeping vistas of the Alto Molise and Central Apennines, a short drive from the hamlet of Capracotta — pop.: 759 — located in the Isernia province. At almost 5,000 feet, Capracotta is the highest village in Molise, known for good skiing and record snowfalls. But it's high summer now, and a wooded patch further up teases with its promise of shade.

Berardo has his work cut out for him today. Though he's affectionate toward his charges — each has a name, at least "in theory," he says — right now, several females are in heat, and only his whistles and whoops keep the skittish bunch in check.

Still, the herd's movement is steady. Like a modern-day Moses, Berardo cuts a path with his long strides through the waist-high grass as his motley crew of dogs bounds ahead — except for the oldest, Kira, who stays close to his side.

A SHEPHERD IS BORN

Berardo's was a farming family stretching back many generations. Though he was born in Rome, the 40-year-old Berardo always seemed destined to return to the ancestral fold. On visits to his parents' native village, Duronia, in the Campobasso province, he loved tagging along while his grandfather tended sheep. Back in Rome, Berardo's father ran a gas station in the Tufello neighborhood, which the younger Berardo describes as full of "delinquents, stolen cars. They filmed *Bicycle Thieves* there."

Like Bruno, the young boy in the film, Berardo worked at the station and excelled at his job. For a time, he moved to Australia and cooked in Italian restaurants, but something was missing. "I looked at the sky in Australia and thought, 'The night sky in my grandfather's village looks beautiful,'" he recalls of his adventures in Oz. He returned to Duronia, where he acquired his first goats and began experimenting

with cheesemaking (sometimes with disastrous results). His herd expanded, along with a desire to graze his goats following the seasons.

Now, twice-yearly, Berardo practices the millenary tradition of transhumance — the seasonal movement of livestock from one grazing area to another — along Molise's ancient sheep tracks, known as *tratturi* and dating back to the ancient Samnites. Berardo's transhumance kicks off in May at his winter grazing spot at the feet of Civita, a craggy massif, now part of a reserve that dominates the rugged landscape, and ends at Capracotta's nutrient-rich slopes. As temperatures drop, generally in October, the transhumance is repeated in reverse.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SHEPHERDS PAST

Berardo's transhumance covers roughly 23 miles along two main sheep tracks: Celano-Foggia and Castel di Sangro-Lucera. The route first came to his attention through La Terra, an association focused on revitalizing the region's neglected inner areas, keeping a moribund tradition alive and bringing wider attention to one of the region's agricultural cornerstones.

La Terra representative Domenico Germano, who has coordinated Berardo's biannual journey since 2022, explains that by consulting documents and talking to locals, Germano and his colleagues were able to pinpoint abandoned sheep tracks and, with help from interested individuals, clear them of debris and test their viability. Still today, through La Terra's mediation, a small segment of the general public can take an active role in Berardo's work activities, from cleaning stalls and milking to corralling stray goats. "It's not a holiday," Germano cautions. The association's larger purpose "is to make participants aware of the difficulty of this type of work, and to champion Berardo's right to access water, to graze and to produce cheese."

HOW HISTORIC SHEEP TRACKS CONNECT THREE REGIONS

Berardo's path may be unusual in today's world, but it's not uncharted. In this territory, shepherds traveled on five major sheep tracks carved out over time by humans and grazing animals, with some cutting through historical sites, like the Ancient Roman city of Saepinum.

"All of the tracks coming from various directions converged on Molise," explains Dr. Letizia Bindi, a cultural anthropologist with the University of Molise and the director of BioCult, a research center involved in the mapping, conservation and protection of sheep tracks. In Roman times, and likely even earlier, she says, the network was so

well-established that travelers were required to pay duties at designated points — a practice that Spanish rulers later enforced on shepherds, based on their animal head count. The intricate network of tracks formed the backbone of Molise's agricultural might, conveying flocks from "an area of Abruzzo, higher, lower, further inland, closer to the coast, [before descending] toward the plains of Puglia," Dr. Bindi says.

Today, the tracks have largely succumbed to overgrowth. "Because the sheep track is a grass road, if the animals don't use it, or if shrubs or woods take over, it completely disappears," Dr. Bindi continues, adding that urban sprawl and new infrastructure are partly to blame. And while sheep tracks have enjoyed protected status as archaeological and cultural assets since 1939, there are "very few points in Molise, and [even fewer] in Abruzzo, where it's still possible to see a sheep track," Dr. Bindi says. (On the day we spoke, the anthropologist noted that she was standing on a sheep track, though there were no outward signs it ever existed.)

There's at least one bright spot. In 2019, transhumance, and by association sheep tracks, were added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List — an extra spotlight on a tradition that has, in some ways, become synonymous with the region.

But this kind of recognition can feel at odds with the reality on the ground: "Imagine that this place was once filled with cattle," Berardo says with a dramatic arm sweep. "All this yellow grass you see is the result of…no one being here to graze."

HEEDING THE ANCESTORS' CALL

A few whistles and whoops and Berardo's herd is back on the move again. "You know, I'm really attached to my roots," he muses, his tall form silhouetted against the green-yellow-brown palette of the Molisan mountains. "I feel something ancestral within me that won't allow me to leave."

But keeping his dream alive and his goats healthy goes hand-in-hand with stress triggers, including rising costs and red tape. Berardo pays the city rent based on the number of animals he's allowed to graze per square hectare (or approximately 2.5 acres). At the time of writing, the government is planning to reduce that number, which, for Berardo, means going head-to-head with increased overgrowth on precious grazing land and potential income loss. Then there are Berardo's transhumances that require permits from various civic agencies — a massive undertaking for which La Terra (Germano's association) provides indispensable logistical support.

Perhaps surprisingly, even the zeitgeist-y topic of green energy gets Berardo's goat, so to speak. Once, thousands of animals grazed on Capracotta's slopes — "27,000 sheep alone," he estimates. Pointing out a cluster of wind turbines in the distance, he continues, "38,000 cubic meters of concrete are poured for each blade that produces energy. Instead of bringing in 27,000 sheep, they're pouring 38,000 cubic meters of concrete. This is the mountain's fate."

It's a lot for him to shoulder, with few guarantees or rewards. But Berardo categorically rejects the label of "folkloric icon" or hometown hero and wants to be known "as a shepherd who has no time for anything else."

Does Berardo see his son following in his footsteps? If he likes the job and the demands that come with it, Berardo chuckles.

His main wish, for now, is to find some company. If he bumped into another shepherd on the trail, Berardo suggests, he imagines he'd say something like this: "In the morning, grab your stick and your cows and we'll go grazing together. Bring a sandwich and we'll drink a bottle of wine."