

Spanish Broom in the changes of Southern France agriculture, from the 17th to the 19th century

Paper for the panel “Innovation and change in European agriculture via the spread of new crops from the 16th to the 19th century” (first draft)
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Spanish Broom (*Spartium junceum* Linné) is very common in Mediterranean countries. There, naturalists used to consider it as a wild plant. Consequently, for archaeologists and environmental historians, the discovery of its presence, according to textual archives or paleobotanical remains, was also long understood as an indication as to the extent of fallow land, Spanish Broom being one of the plants which grow during the first stage of spontaneous reforestation, before the emergence of trees in the wild countryside. So, when Southern France was affected by a demographic collapse during the famous 17th century crisis, it is not surprising to find more and more broomfields in the cadastres of the province of Languedoc, particularly in the rough hillsides of the region of Lodève, very suitable to this plant and where many people died in a context of rural poverty and very strong epidemic phenomena around 1630. But, later on, during the 18th century, Spanish Broom remained very common, and even became a source of more and more conflicts between the peasants of the region of Lodève, although the demographic trend then switched to a strong and long growing phase making it necessary to clear a great deal of land to feed the population.

This apparent contradiction reveals that, in fact, Spanish Broom was not only a wild-growing vegetal spontaneously spreading all over many uncultivated lands. It also was one of the plants, in the vast amount of reputedly uncultivated land, that brought a great deal of resources to rural areas. Whether enjoyed communally or privately, plots where Spanish Broom grew were indeed maintained, and sometimes even ploughed and sown, as cultivated land. The main resource which this plant provided was textiles: it was used for its fibres, which could be made into a rough fabric. Its increased use occurred from the 17th to the 19th century in the Lodévois; even if Spanish Broom was not an unknown crop before its massive cultivation began in the Early Modern period. Indeed, it had already been present for a very long time in the Mediterranean basin and it even had been used for its fibres many centuries earlier, probably during Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The increasing cultivation of the Broom growing in the Lodévois during the modern period is involved in processes of complex cropping at the borders of cultivated areas. So, agricultural innovation occurred when Brooms ceased to be merely wild plants which local residents exploited and moved into the fields. Then, they were introduced into cropping systems. In these cases, the agricultural change lay not in the plant itself, but in its increased use. Of course, Spanish Broom remained a marginal crop, covering less than 15% of total acreages and, in most cases, less than 5%. But, in the rocky and unfertile Mediterranean lands, its spread played a role comparable to forage crops and artificial pastures in northwestern Europe. The exploitation of *Spartium junceum* L., seemingly marginal, does indeed contribute for a while in its own way to agricultural change from the 18th century onward. This shrub was a rustic *leguminosa*, which regenerated the unfertile soils of hills and protected them from erosion with its pivotal roots, while providing textile fibres and nourishment for livestock during the winter. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it became a massive presence giving rise to new agricultural practices: according to the rural leasing contracts, it was integrated into crop rotations in order to make use of uncultivated areas. Most of time, the peasants sowed Broom and cereal crops at the same time on the less fertile slopes, so that Broom could grow after wheat harvesting. After a few years of providing fibres, Broom was then cleared before a new short period of feeding cultures.

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