From the 1980’s onwards the Groningen Institute of Archaeology (GIA) has carried out field surveys throughout the Pontine Region (Lazio, Central Italy) within the framework of the Pontine Region Project (fig. 1). These surveys have yielded ample evidence for the long-term development of the region from the protohistoric until the Late Medieval period. Surveys have produced large amounts of data regarding subsequent Late Roman and Early Medieval occupation (roughly AD 300 to 700). However, these data have appeared to contribute to the poor understanding of settlements dating to these periods. On a material level we had only limited insight in the repertoire of potteries and shapes in vogue and the presence of fine wares and amphorae after the 3rd century AD, whereas both periods are characterized by an apparent low level of consumed pottery. Moreover, sites of this date are often ‘hidden’ among high densities of Republican and Imperial period ceramics and appear to occupy only restricted areas, rendering their identification with commonly used survey methods, which use only partial spatial coverage, difficult.

Addressing this shortcoming in recent years a programme of small-scale excavations, dedicated pottery studies and field surveys adopting more intensive sampling and surveying strategies has been established within the project with considerable success. This specific methodology is in line with for example the Tiber Valley Project (e.g. Patterson et al., 2004), which proved successful in uncovering local contexts for the Late Roman and Early Medieval periods (and beyond). This paper summarizes and compares recent insights obtained by this integrated research program for two distinct parts of the Pontine Region: (1) the coastal area around the Roman colony of Astura and (2) as a case study the Roman road stations of Ad Medias and Forum Appii, situated in the Pontine plain along the Via Appia.

Case study 1: The coastal area

Acknowledging the need to study a reference site to obtain data on the array of shapes and shpapes circulating in the Pontine area in the relevant periods, we welcomed the opportunity to study a large section (ca. 100 metres) through its light by marine erosion, in the summers of 2007 and 2008 (fig. 2: Tol, 2012; Tol and Allema, 2014). This section exposed only a fraction of a large site, located in the eastern part of the Nettuno municipality at close distance of the famous villa of Torre Astura and the mouth of the Antron river. Based on the finds collected this settlement seems to represent a late period of occupation within the framework of the Pontine Region Project (fig. 3). The site was dated in the Late Roman and Early Medieval periods (roughly AD 300 to 700). The site exhibits similarities with contemporaneous settlements along the Tyrrhenian coast (fig. 7), yet occupies a restricted area with its date and location provides sufficient evidence for its identification as the ancient Roman station Astura, depicted on the 4th century Ptolemy map. It is probable that this settlement, with the continuous decline of Asturn, became the main economic, cultural, and religious focal point of settlement systems; “focus of accumulation” (from the 3rd and 4th centuries onwards). 

A subsequent re-assessment of the dataset compiled for the Carta Archeologica di Nettuno, which entailed extensive surveys in the hinterland of Astura and along the lower abdomen of the Antron (Allema et al., 2009 and 2010), led to the identification of a number of additional sites with Late Roman and Early Medieval phases (fig. 4). These sites were mainly situated close to the coast and the northeast of Astura, in correspondence to the main roads of the area. The documented area probably contained habitation in different forms and on different scales, including re-occupation of long since abandoned settlements and continuity of occupation – although often on a smaller-scale – on villa sites and in villages up till the late 5th or early 6th century AD.

Case study 2: The Pontine plain

Work in the Pontine plain has been undertaken by the GIA since 2005, and more extensively since 2011 (De Haes, 2011; Tol et al., 2014). This work comprises integrated non-invasive research (field surveys, geophysics and coring) and around two road stations along the Via Appia, Forum Appii and Ad Medias, situated in the low-laying part of the Pontine plain (fig. 5). This area throughout history has required constant effort in order to maintain its potential for large-scale habitation and agricultural exploitation, and massive drainage works have been carried out in several periods, most notably in the late 4th-early 3rd BC, under the reign of Tarquin the First (2nd century AD) and under the reign of Theodoric (dated around AD 510). The latter drainage works centered on the site of Forum Appii, as is clear from a passage by Cassius Dio and an inscription (CIL. X. 6850), mentioning Decumano, the canal that from Roman times onwards connected this site with the port of Tarquinia.

Our field surveys at Forum Appii yielded firm evidence for continuity of occupation until at least the first half of the 6th century AD, although covering a much more restricted area with respect to Republican and Early Imperial times (figs 6 and 7). Simultaneously, a few medieval sites, appears to have been largely abandoned even in early Imperial times, although dispersed finds of 4th and 5th century AD are documented directly along the Via Appia. In rural areas between the two road stations a small single and probably short-lived site, located on the Appia, woolled up an ex novo foundation of the late 4th or early 5th century AD. The material assemblage comprises mainly building materials, but includes a dozen ARS D shapes, as well as imported amphorae (Keay 52), demonstrating access to imported commodities, that were possibly re-distributed through the presumed river harbour at Forum Appii. Until now no new settlements have been identified that can be attributed to the reclamation works under Theodoric.

Geo-archaeological investigations show that sedimentation in the area increased from AD 400 onwards (Van Joolen, 2003). This may have resulted in the progressive decline of the Via Appia and the final abandonment of the road side settlements (not only Forum Appii and Ad Medias, but also Tres Tabernae to the north and surrounding rural areas in the Pontine plain). Another possible reason for the abandonment of these areas may have been their vulnerability for attacks from ‘barbarian’ tribes, several of which occurred in southern Lazio after the early 5th century AD. Adding to the (seasonal) inundations and the broken off travel route, malaria too may have had its impact on the living conditions in the plain. These developments may (partly) explain the synchronous recopucation of the material, free and well defendable places of Nova on the edges of the Lepine margins. Traffic in the centuries to come, but only in the 10th century new (written) evidence becomes available on activity in the plain, at Ad Medias.

Conclusions and future directions

A dedicated programme of fieldwork and pottery studies has in recent years increased our knowledge on Late Roman and Early Medieval occupation in different parts of the Pontine Region. At the same time we acknowledge that the current state of knowledge is still fragmentary and that much work remains to be done. Promising avenues for further research in our view include: the continuation of restudying material collected during previous Pontine Region Project (1995-2005) and other surveys (i.e. RUIV, 1994-2000); an integrated analysis of the collection of the Carta Archeologica di Nettuno; the collection of a comprehensive suite of material (typological and archaeometric) of Late Roman and Early Medieval coarse wares and shapes circulating in the Pontine area in the relevant periods, we conducted additional research (intensive, geophysical, excavation) on different types of sites with added Late Roman and Early Medieval phases in order to understand the nature of this activity and a more comprehensive study (both typological and archaeometric) of Late Roman and Early Medieval coarse wares, and wall building techniques (like opus vitatum). Incorporating the obtained data with already available topographical, historical cartographic and documentary information (as presently performed by the second author, Satijn, forthcoming) we will hopefully arrive at a more complete reconstitution of town and country in the Pontine Region in the near future.

References


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