Recent insights into the development of town and country in the Pontine Region (Lazio, Central Italy) between AD 300 and 700

Tol, Gijs; Satijn, Olaf

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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 prehistoric times to the Middle Ages. However, this research program has somewhat been hampered by the lack of a common methodology for data gathering and its interpretation, leading to a poor understanding of settlements dating to these periods. On a material level we had only documented sites probably represent habitation in different forms and on different scales, including re-occupation of long since abandoned settlements and development of new focal points of settlement systems (“focus of aggregation”) from the 10th century onwards (Francovich and Hodges, 2003). The Pontine plain exhibits large similarities with contemporaneous settlements along the Tyrrhenian coast (Antium and Portus), depicted on the 4th century Peutinger map. It is probable that this settlement, with the continuous decline of Antium, became the main economic- and demographic focus of the area. The development of Astura may fit into the general development on the Italian peninsula in which villages became the new focal points of settlement systems (“focus of aggregation”) from the 3rd and 4th century onwards (Francovich and Hodges, 2003).

A recent re-assessment of the dataset compiled for the Carta Archeologica di Neulonia, which entailed extensive surveys in the hinterland of Astura and along the lower course of the Astura (Attema 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 to the northeast of Astura, in correspondence to the main roads of the area. The documented area probably represent 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 village sites and in villages up the late 5th or early 6th century AD.

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 combination of re-examining material collected during previous Pontine Region projects; conducting additional research (intensive gridwalking, geophysics, excavation) on different sites with aerial Late Roman and Early Medieval phases in order to understand the nature of this activity and a more comprehensive study (both typological and architectural) of Late Roman and Early Medieval ceramic wares, and wall facing techniques (like opus vittatum, opus incertum). 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 reconstruction of town and country in the Pontine Region in the near future.

References

Graaf, K. & J. van der Linden (2006) Malaria and settlement patterns in the eastern part of the Nettuno municipality at close distance of the famous villa of Torre Astura and the mouth of the Astura river. Based on the finds collected this settlement phase develops in the 4th century and is followed by a subsequent phase of occupation in the High Middle Ages (11th-12th century). The many ceramic-, glass- and metal fragments (including over 150 coins) indicate that between the Late Roman and Early Medieval period the site formed part of long distance trade networks, probably using the nearby harbour at Torre Astura. The site exhibits large similarities with contemporaneous settlements along the Tyrrhenian coast (Antium and Portus) (fig. 3). The site has been extensively surveyed with its date and provides sufficient evidence for its identification as the ancient road station Ad Medias, depicted on the 4th century Peutinger map. It is probable that this settlement, with the continuous decline of Antium, became the main economic- and demographic focus of the area. The development of Astura may fit into the general development on the Italian peninsula in which villages became the new focal points of settlement systems (“focus of aggregation”) from the 3rd and 4th century onwards (Francovich and Hodges, 2003). A recent re-assessment of the dataset compiled for the Carta Archeologica di Neulonia, which entailed extensive surveys in the hinterland of Astura and along the lower course of the Astura (Attema 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 road and to the northeast of Astura, in correspondence to the main roads of the area. The documented area probably represent 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 village sites and in villages up the late 5th or early 6th century AD.

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