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VILLAGES AND CASTRA
IN THE WESTERN ALPINE AREAS OF ITALY.
THE CONTRIBUTION OF ARCHAEOLOGY
TO OUR KNOWLEDGE OF LATE ANTIQUE
AND EARLY MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENTS

Paolo de Vingo

The period between the death of Theodosius and the brief Byzantine reconquest of the area of northern Italy, between 395 and 566, witnessed a gradual decline of towns and cities in the north-west, due partly to the transfer of the capital of the *pars occidentis* from Milan to Ravenna in 402. This led to the migration of more powerful individuals (*potentiores*) attached to the imperial court and a consequent transformation of the ownership of land and the distribution of wealth¹. In particular, levels of wealth were reduced, partly due to imperial taxation which confiscated a share of the income of each urban centre², making public intervention impossible beyond the reuse material from buildings that were being dismantled. The reuse of stone was regulated by specially drafted legislation from the 4th century onwards³, and would culminate in the Gothic period with the decrees issued by Theodoric, who displayed great interest in recycling building materials⁴.

The “dismantling” of ancient towns and cities also coincided with a change in the function of various buildings which, especially during the turbulent years of the Greco-Gothic war, witnessed an increase in military use and a decline in civilian use. This was especially true of buildings for entertainment, which were transformed into fortified settlements to which the inhabitants withdrew – if they had not already been dismantled, as in the case, at a very early stage, of the amphitheatre in Milan; it was literally taken to pieces in order to reuse the ashlar for the construction of the church of San Lorenzo⁵.

Due to a combination of the decline of the ruling classes and the change of function of public buildings, together with the increasing importance of religious power over civic power, the polarities of towns and cities underwent changes. The dilapidation of the forums and the failure of forms of urban government were accompanied by the development of episcopal complexes, which sometimes constituted actual “citadels”; for instance, at *Mediolanum* (Milan), *Novaria* (Novara), *Hasta* (Asti) and *Augusta Taurinorum* (Turin).

If this was the general scenario for urban settlements, the situation was very different in the countryside, where the large villas of the landowners (*possessores*) gradually fell into a state of extreme disrepair and their plans and functions became radically altered, to the extent that some were even transformed into cemeteries⁶. This, too, may be ascribed to the crisis caused by the transfer of the capital from *Mediolanum*/Milan to Ravenna, leading to the physical movement from one centre to the other of those

¹ Brogiolo 1996; Brogiolo/Gelichi 1998; Augenti 2007, 199–201; Brogiolo 2010, 75–76; Brogiolo 2011, 73–76.

² Fauvinet Ranson 2006, 206; Augenti 2006, 194–195; Christie 2006, 108–109; 232–233.

³ COD. Theod. 16,10,15; 15,1,14; 16,1,1.

⁴ CASSIOD. var. 3,31,4–5.

⁵ Fauvinet Ranson 2006, 210; Rossignani 1990.

⁶ Augenti 2006, 196–200; Brogiolo/Delogu 2006, 615–622; Ferreri 2014, 112–119.

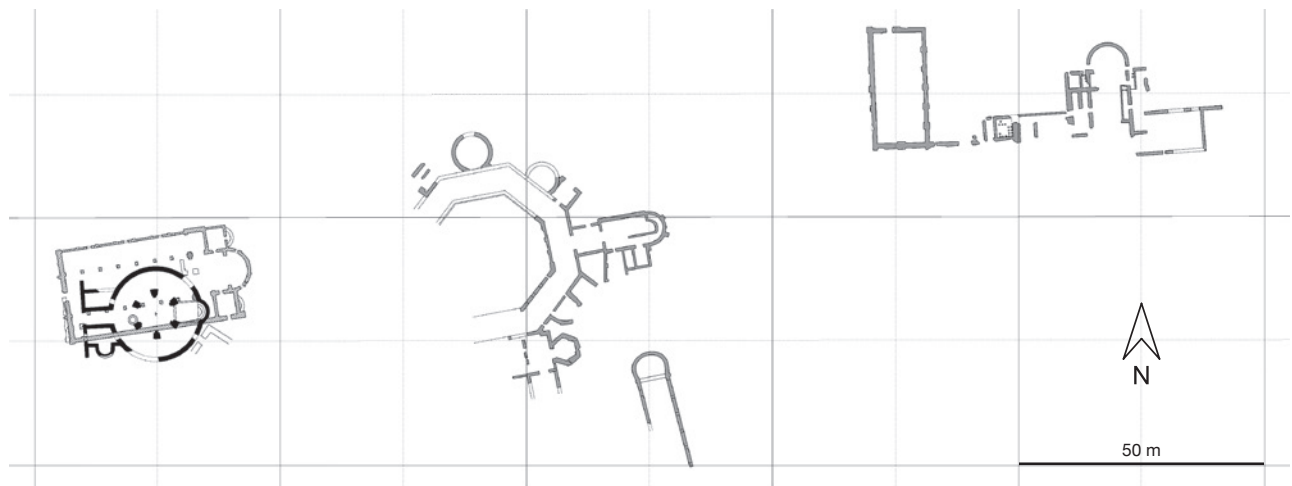


Fig. 1. Planimetric survey of the *pars urbana* of Palazzo Pignano.

members of the ruling classes attached to the court who had played a leading role during the previous century in the flowering of large villas such as “Palazzo Pignano”⁷ (Fig. 1).

While villas were being partially abandoned or transformed into minor settlements, small cult buildings and cemeteries emerged, linked to a new kind of use of the sites which were now inhabited by rural communities. The cemeteries created within the rooms of villas, in particular, suggest the existence of groups that formed as the final outcome of the disasters of the 5th and 6th centuries, when the territories of north-western Italy suffered the dire repercussions of various wars and raids: the invasions of Alaric and Athaulf in 402, 403 and 408–410, of Radagaisus in 405, the war of reconquest of Theodoric in 489, and the raid of the Burgundi in 490–491 which, according to the account of Ennodius, left the territory ransacked and depopulated, the inhabitants having been enslaved and deported *en masse* to France⁸.

The effect of the Greco-Gothic war on settlements and the brief Frankish rule of Theudebert I and his son Theudebald, who enforced a certain degree of stability through forms of territorial control, should be analysed by combining the historical sources and the scant archaeological evidence. These historical events led to the abandonment of the plain and the resurgence of settlements controlling the territories bordering the Franks, linked previously to the *Tractus circa Alpes* and subsequently to the *limes bizantino*, in a process that was partly spontaneous, based on civilians’ need for self-defence, and partly controlled by Byzantine authorities⁹ (Fig. 2).

Rather like the principle of communicating vessels, it could therefore be argued that the depopulation of the countryside, with the agricultural landscape reverting to a more natural state, and the ruralisation and decline of urban centres, were counterbalanced by the development of hilltop sites and other sites controlling the landscape, especially along the *clausurae* in the Alps and the routes through the foothills.

Exceptions tend to prove the rule and the most important cities retained their role. This is the case for Pavia, the site of the second capital of the Gothic kingdom, where the Late Antique city survived without major upheavals, to the extent that the amphitheatre was still active well into the 6th century¹⁰.

⁷ Lavizzari Pedrazzini 1990; Brogiolo 1996, 110; Sannazaro 2003, 47; Brogiolo 2006, 16; Brogiolo 2007, 12–13; de Vingo 2013, 52.

⁸ ENNOD. opusc. 10,121 [Vita Epifani].

⁹ Micheletto 1998a; Christie 2006, 308–314.

¹⁰ ANON. Vales. 2,12,71; Fauvinet Ranson 2006, 210.



Fig. 2. Late Roman fortifications mentioned in *Notitia Dignitatum Occidentis* as *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* (ms. Landi 9/Biblioteca Passerini-Landi, Piacenza).

Likewise, in *Mediolanum*/Milan, while the amphitheatre was dismantled to build the church of San Lorenzo, the circus of Theodoric the Great was even run by a specially appointed magistrate, the *tribunus voluptatum*, and the charioteers received a state salary¹¹.

In order to gain a better understanding of these complex phenomena, I shall examine the band of territory that corresponds to an imaginary quadrilateral enclosed by a line that begins at Milan, continues north along the foothills, then moves west to the Cottian Alps, before descending south towards the River Po, the area corresponding roughly to the *regio Transpadana* and the province of *Alpes Cottiae*, known as *Liguria* in the 6th century (Fig. 3).

We will begin the analysis of this large territory in the northernmost area, where a series of *castra* was established along the line of the foothills, following the *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* of the late 4th century, controlling *Mediolanum*/Milan, Pavia, the main road and river routes and, especially, the Alpine passes¹². Behind Milan, in particular, a series of fan-shaped passes linked the Po Basin with the valleys of the Rhône, the Rhine and the Danube: the Lukmanier (Lucomagno) Pass, the San Bernardino Pass (above Bellinzona), the Splügen Pass, the Septimer Pass and the Maloja Pass.

¹¹ CASSIOD. var. 3,39; 5,25; Brogiolo 2011, 59–65.

¹² CASSIOD. var. 1,17; 3,48; Brogiolo 1997.

Moving further westwards, behind *Novaria*/Novara, *Vercellae*/Vercelli and *Augusta Taurinorum*/Turin, the area includes the Monte Moro Pass (Macugnaga), the Little St Bernard Pass, the Great St Bernard Pass and the Montgenèvre (Monginevro) Pass.

In each pass, the fortified settlements of the old *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* were reconfigured during the Gothic and Byzantine periods to create a network whose layout was not just the result of the initiatives of military and public authorities but also of private authorities linked to the church, as will be seen below. After the Greco-Gothic war, this network would also prove crucial to resisting the expansionist aims of the Franks, a constant threat which, after Narses, the Lombards also had to address. These important settlements will now be examined, beginning with the “atypical” case of a *castrum* in the plain linked to road networks, proof that the significance of these sites was mainly due, not so much to their location on high ground, as to their relationship with the infrastructure network.

THE CASTRA-FORTIFICATION SYSTEM

1. Lomello, Prov. Pavia. Situated in a low-lying plain to the west of Pavia, not far from the point where the River Agogna flows into the Po, on the route to the Montgenèvre (Monginevro) Pass, the *castrum* was enclosed by a defensive wall between the 4th and 5th centuries¹³.

2. Chiavenna, Prov. Sondrio. Already a *clausura* during the Gothic period, it was established to provide military defence for the important routes to *Raetia* mentioned by Cassiodorus and Procopius¹⁴. From Chiavenna, two routes led to the Rhaetian capital at Coira (Chur), the first crossing the Septimer Pass, the other the Maloja Pass¹⁵.

3. Isola Comacina, Prov. Como. Identified as the site mentioned by George of Cyprus¹⁶, the island was linked to the control of Lake Como and was still under Gothic control in 539, as can be inferred from the agreement signed between Theodahad and Witiges, on the one hand, and the Alemanni and the Burgundi, on the other, against Belisarius¹⁷. After the period of Gothic rule, it fell under the control of Narses, who appointed Francione as *magister militum*. The general governed for twenty years, surrendering only in 585 to the Lombards¹⁸. The settlement had a watch tower to protect the walls with a double-apsed baptismal hall inside.

4. Castelmarte, Prov. Como. This may be the “*kastron Ilbas*” mentioned by George of Cyprus, a *castrum* that controlled the Lambro Valley, and therefore the routes from Milan and Monza to *Larium* (Lake Como)¹⁹.

5. Lecco, Prov. Lecco. Giampiero Bognetti attributes the traces of the walls of the tower of Sasso di S. Stefano to the Byzantine period. The church of S. Stefano constituted the cult building of the *castrum* designed to monitor the right-hand part of Lake Como at the point where the land route to Monza and

¹³ Blake/Maccabruni 1984; Brogiolo 1994a; Maccabruni 1993; De Marchi 1995, 36; Brogiolo/Gelichi 1996, 15.

¹⁴ CASSIOD. var. 1,17; 3; PROC. Goth. 2,28.

¹⁵ Mariotti 1989; de Vingo 2016.

¹⁶ Conti 1975.

¹⁷ Monneret De Villard 1914, 15; De Marchi 1995, 36; Christie 2006, 341.

¹⁸ PAUL. hist. Langobardorum 3,27.

¹⁹ Pavoni 2011, 136.

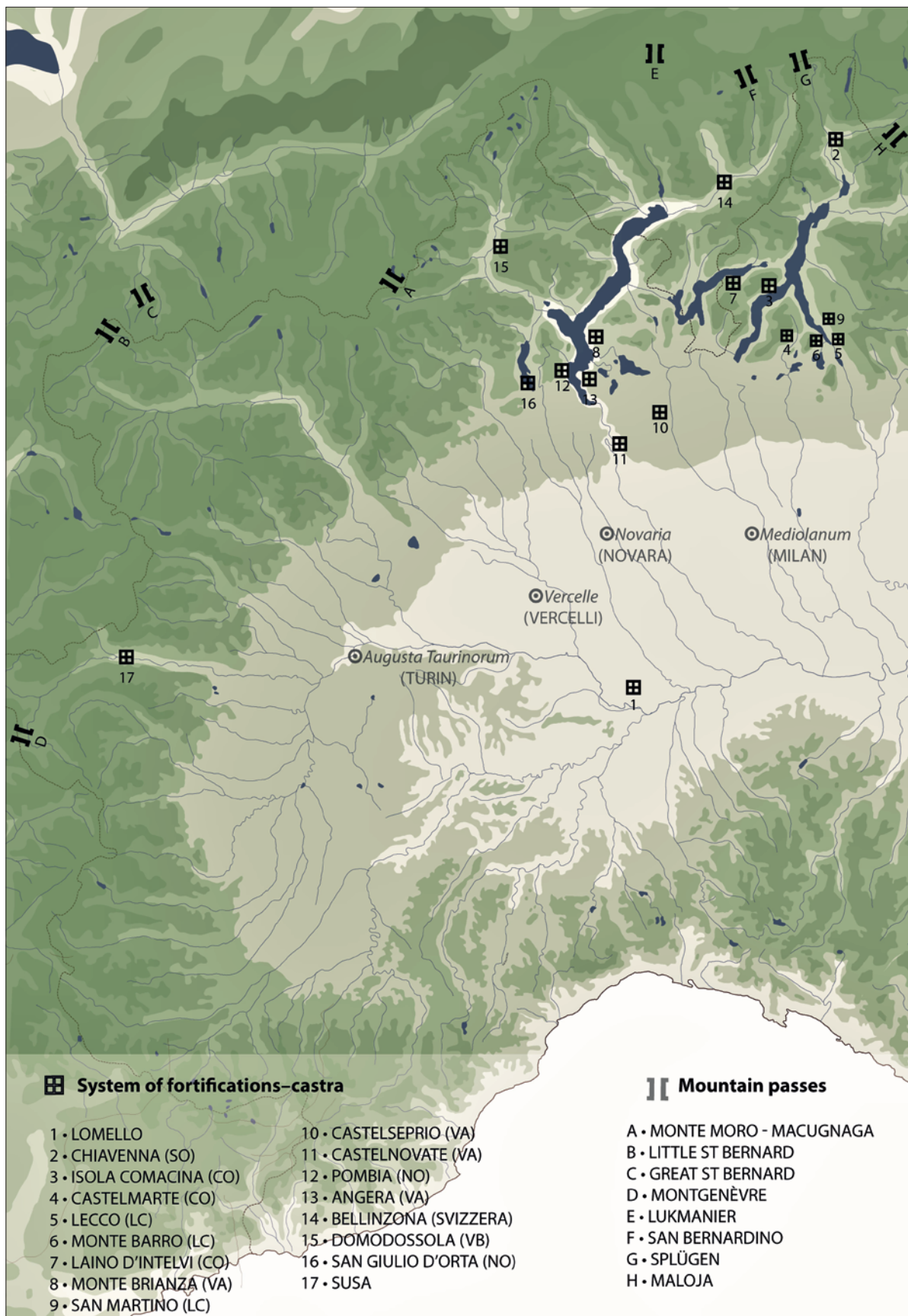


Fig. 3. Map illustrating the passes linking Milan and Pavia to the Rhine and Danube Valleys, the passes linking Novara, Vercelli and Turin to the Rhône Valley and the system of fortifications/castra in the territory examined in the study.

Milan began. The site has been identified, though not uncontroversially, as *Leuceria*, described by the Anonymous Geographer of Ravenna²⁰.

6. Monte Barro, Prov. Lecco. Situated 900 m asl on the ridge that separates the territory of Brianza, including Lake Annone and the left arm of Lake Como, from the river-lake system of Lake Olginate, Lake Garlate and the River Adda, the site has a proper layout, planned between the 5th and the 6th centuries, and contains a large masonry building consisting of three wings arranged around a courtyard and surrounded by a defensive wall with towers²¹.

7. Laino d'Intelvi, Prov. Como. This is an interesting example of a *castrum* built by a private individual during the Greco-Gothic war; in 556, as described in an inscription, Marcellinus, the *famulus Christi* ("servant of Christ"), supervised its construction to protect the local population²². The site is situated on a rocky spur between the Intelvi and Osteno valleys at the mouth of Lake Lugano. It contains a church dedicated to St Victor. Unlike the settlement of Monte Barro, the *castrum* seems rather improvised and modest in scale.

8. Monte Brianza, Prov. Varese. The *castrum* stands on a hill overlooking the valley of the River Bevera and was an observation post linked to the defensive system of Lake Como²³. It seems to have been organised around the church of San Vittore, where the burial of Merobaudes was found with an inscription dating to the 6th century²⁴.

9. San Martino, Prov. Lecco. The cliff-top settlement, interpreted as an observation post within the defensive system of Lake Como, has traces of nine buildings hewn from the rock with added parts in masonry²⁵.

10. Castelseprio, Prov. Varese. The site of *Sibrium* described by the Anonymous Geographer of Ravenna. The settlement stands on a hilltop on the right bank of the River Olona. In the mid-5th century, a defensive wall with quadrangular towers was built, surrounding an area of 4.5 hectares that contained a basilica dedicated to St John the Evangelist, with an octagonal baptistery and tower, a chapel dedicated to St Paul, and a cemetery. To the east of the main site, another defensive wall encloses the area of Torba, with the church of S. Maria, possibly dating to the Early Middle Ages, while to the west, a settlement outside the walls is linked to another church, S. Maria *foris portas*²⁶.

11. Castelnovate, Prov. Varese. The site stands in a spectacular setting on a promontory 250 m asl, with a sheer drop to the left bank of the River Ticino. Despite the lack of clear evidence, the presence of the church of S. Eusebio suggests that it was a Byzantine guard post²⁷.

²⁰ Bognetti 1966, 236–239.

²¹ Brogiolo 1991, 26–49; Brogiolo 1994a; Brogiolo 1994b, 104; Brogiolo/Gelichi 1996, 31; Brogiolo 2001, 79–104; Christie 2006, 456–458; Brogiolo/Chavarria Arnau 2020, 95.

²² CIL V 5418; Monneret De Villard 1912, 65–66; Giusani 1913; De Marchi 1995, 36; Sannazaro 2003, 43; Christie 2006, 367. – With new archaeological data: Nobile de Agostini in this volume.

²³ De Marchi 1995, 37.

²⁴ Beretta 1960; Longoni 1995, 34–36.

²⁵ Brambilla et al. 1991; De Marchi 1995, 57–62; Brogiolo 1997, 72.

²⁶ Dabrowska et al. 1978–1979; Brogiolo/Lusuardi Siena 1980; Carver 1986; De Marchi 1995, 54–56; Christie 2006, 339; Tibiletti 2013, 56–85; Brogiolo/Chavarria Arnau 2020, 103–104. – De Marchi/Masseroli in this volume

²⁷ Balbi 1991; De Marchi 1995, 55; De Marchi 2013, 38.

12. Pombia, Prov. Novara. The site of *Plumbia* described by the Anonymous Geographer of Ravenna. Situated on a hilltop 285 m asl overlooking the right bank of the River Ticino, the site has not revealed evidence related to the *castrum*, which was probably destroyed to make way for the castle built in the 10th–11th century²⁸.

13. Angera, Prov. Varese. The site of *Scationa* described by the Anonymous Geographer of Ravenna, possibly the base for a military fleet on Lake Maggiore during the late Imperial period and the point of departure for goods and equipment to support the Alpine strongholds. This important settlement was also linked by a military road running through the foothills from Aquileia²⁹. Having already fulfilled an important role in the late Republican and Imperial periods, the site enjoyed a new lease of life as a military settlement between the 4th and 5th centuries, when a necropolis of Pannonian and oriental auxiliaries developed and a moat was dug around the settlement, whose houses were made of perishable materials³⁰. However, it was during the Gothic period that a properly fortified *castrum* was built in the westernmost part of the old settlement, near a rocky spur overlooking Lake Maggiore³¹.

14. Bellinzona, Svizzera. The site of *Bellitiona* described by the Anonymous Geographer of Ravenna. The densely inhabited Late Antique settlement³² was fortified for the first time in the 4th century, before undergoing redevelopment during the Byzantine period³³. Bellinzona was a northern outpost situated on Lake Maggiore, the arrival point of routes across the lake and the point of departure for land routes through the Monte Ceneri and Lucomagno/Lukmanier passes, as well as a network of minor passes³⁴. The ruins of Late Antique fortifications, dating to the 4th century, were found during the excavation of the southern area of Castel Grande³⁵.

15. Domodossola, Prov. Verbano-Cusio-Ossola. The site of *Oxila* described by the Anonymous Geographer of Ravenna. The settlement was situated to control the routes to *Raetia* via Lake Maggiore-Valle Del Toce³⁶.

16. S. Giulio d'Orta, Prov. Novara. The island in the centre of Lake Orta was already the site of a fort dating to the 5th century, linked to the *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes*. In the following century, a fortified *castrum* was built, possibly at the behest of Onorato, bishop of Novara³⁷. The site's importance was underlined by the burial in the mid-6th century of Filacrius, bishop of Novara, in a church with a cruciform plan³⁸.

17. Susa, Città metropolitana di Torino. The site had already been a fortified *civitas restricta* in the 3rd century. It subsequently became an integral part of the *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* and was transformed during the Greco-Gothic war into a *castrum* commanded by *magister Sisinnius* – Sisige, a Goth who had changed allegiances and formed an alliance with the Byzantines and who, like Francione on the isola Comacina, was still in charge in 574³⁹.

²⁸ Venturino 1988; De Marchi 1995, 55; Christie 2006, 363.

²⁹ De Marchi 1995, 54.

³⁰ Sena Chiesa 2014, 145.

³¹ Sergi 1975, 479; Pavoni 2011, 135 fn. 21; Sena Chiesa 2014, 135–173.

³² De Marchi 1997.

³³ De Marchi 1995, 53 fn. 72; Pavoni 2011, 136 fn. 34.

³⁴ Foletti 1997, 116.

³⁵ Foletti 1997, 145.

³⁶ Pavoni 2011, 135.

³⁷ Micheletto 1998a, 64–66; Pejrani Baricco 2003, 70–72.

³⁸ Christie 2006, 341; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, 257.

³⁹ De Marchi 1995, 38; Christie 2006, 326–331; Pavoni 2011, 135 fn. 18.

NOT JUST CASTRA: THE SETTLEMENTS IN THE PLAIN AND THE FOOTHILLS

After this brief survey of the main sites involved in the territorial control of the foothills, it is necessary to review the situation for urban and rural settlements. During this period of crisis, intensified by the upheavals of the Greco-Gothic war, these settlements witnessed a phase of decline. Life continued nevertheless and new landscapes were created by the changing culture of the protagonists of these episodes, with the late 5th century marking the onset of the lengthy “age of timber” (“*età del legno*”).

This overview starts from the westernmost part of the territory, where the enduring importance of the road network of the Val Susa clearly emerges. The valley had long been a strategic axis and had, for many centuries, been the route of roads leading to Gaul. Many hilltop settlements were still occupied, indicating fairly widespread anthropisation, as shown by the excavations at Cesana Torinese⁴⁰, near the south-western slopes of Monte Fraiteve, between the Rivers Vernet and Pré Claud. Here, at an altitude of 1615 m asl, two contemporary buildings of differing typology were discovered, proving the coexistence of different construction techniques: the former had a masonry base and a wooden elevation, while the latter was built entirely of wood (*Fig. 4*). These buildings are related to a hypothetical settlement associated with a burial area found about thirty metres away, with numerous inhumations dating from the 4th to the 7th centuries, underlining the long period of occupation of the site. It was probably part of a widespread network of settlements scattered along the upper and the lower valley, linked to the control of the road to the Montgenèvre Pass. Twelve tombs discovered at Bardonecchia, dating to between the 5th and the 7th centuries (and therefore roughly contemporary with the burials at Cesana Torinese), provide evidence for another such settlement in the surrounding area⁴¹ (*Fig. 5*).

A basilica with three naves dedicated to St Maximus, bishop of Turin, was built in the 5th century at the *mansio ad Quinctum* at Collegno in the lower valley, very close to the urban centre of Turin. Between the 5th and 6th centuries, a necropolis grew up around it, above the structure of a *domus*: it was therefore a plot of land which had already been built on and, despite being in a state of ruin, must have become the property of the church, which used it as a cemetery⁴². In the same context, a new necropolis, this time linked to a group of Goths who had settled there, confirms the presence of this population in Val Susa before, during, and after the Greco-Gothic war; it yielded eight burials linked to a village of the 5th–6th century, overlying a Roman and Late Antique settlement⁴³ (*Fig. 6*).

The Val Susa settlement system, linked to the main road along the Dora Riparia River from the Montgenèvre Pass, ended in the plain of *Augusta Taurinorum*/Turin. The city had undergone an initial phase of decline after the 4th century, but survived, though with a different appearance, thanks to its location at the confluence of the Dora Riparia and the River Po, and its function as a link between the above-mentioned route to Gaul and major routes along the Po Valley. We will now focus our analysis on *Augusta Taurinorum*, in order to provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics involved.

The context of Turin between the 5th and 6th centuries can be reconstructed from a series of excavations which, over the years, have confirmed, in various parts of the urban centre, the same trend

⁴⁰ Barello/Subbrizio 2009; Barello 2017, 78.

⁴¹ Barello/Ferrero/Uggé 2013, 48; Pejrani Baricco 2017a, 76.

⁴² Crosetto 2003, 122–126; Crosetto 2004, 261–266; Pejrani Baricco 2007a, 364; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, 260; Negro Ponzi 2010, 16; Barello/Ferrero/Uggé 2013, 54–55.

⁴³ Pejrani Baricco 2004, 19–21; Pejrani Baricco 2007a, 365–366; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, 259–260; Pejrani Baricco et al. 2019, 373–374; Pejrani Baricco 2017b.



Fig. 4. Cesana Torinese-Pariol. Roman and Early Medieval settlement with cemetery area.

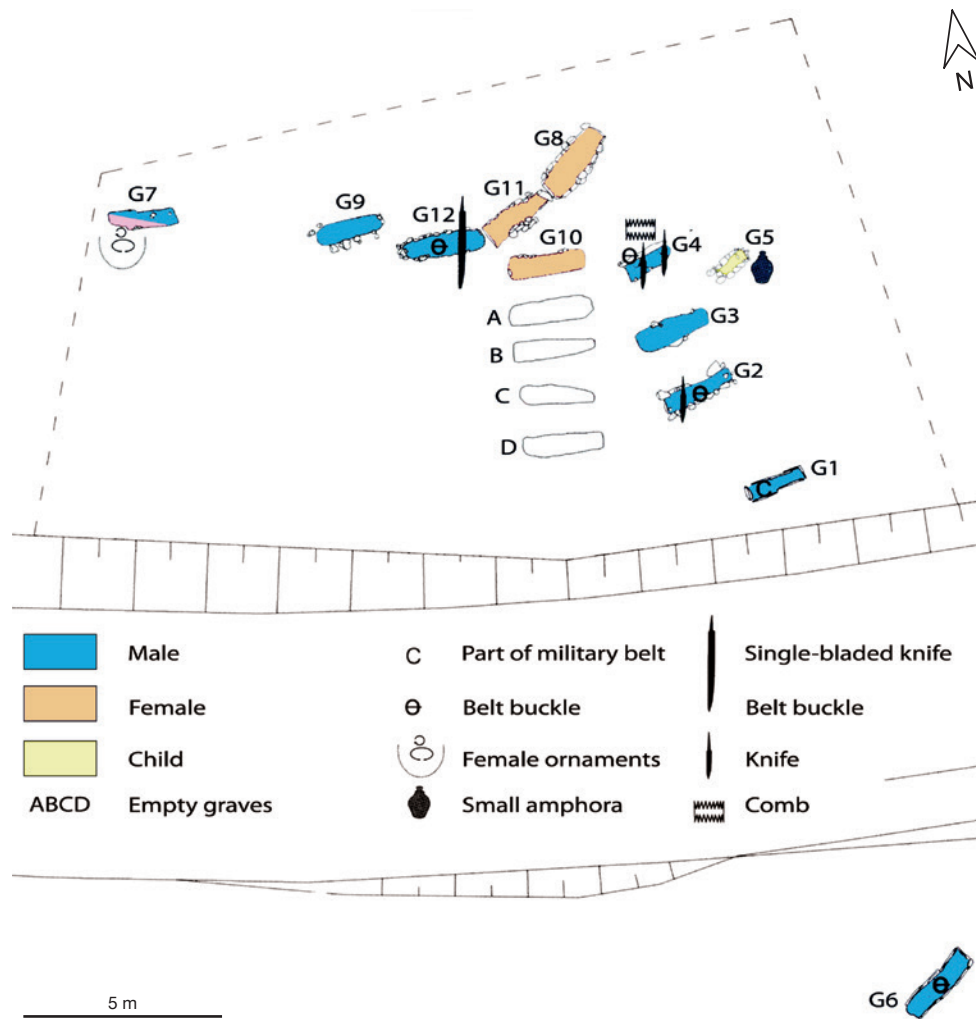


Fig. 5. Bardonecchia (Turin). Early Medieval Necropolis.

towards a polarisation of the settlement, involving the abandonment of several areas of the Roman city. It is a context in which the church and the bishop seem to have represented the only true political power. This is demonstrated in the written sources by the role of Bishop Victor, who in 493 is reported to have accompanied Epiphanius, the bishop of Pavia, on his mission to recover the six thousand prisoners deported by the Burgundi after their raid in the northern part of Italy three years earlier⁴⁴.

In terms of archaeological material, the excavations at Palazzo Carignano have highlighted the presence of a necropolis in the area immediately outside the centre, which grew up over land that was subject to frequent flooding, proof of the abandonment and decline of the territory⁴⁵. The same situation can be observed at the *insula* of San Martiniano, close to the city walls, where, between the 5th and the 6th centuries, a late Imperial residential district was demolished. This activity took place on the cusp between Late Antiquity, during which stone was still used as a building material, as demonstrated by robber trenches, and the 6th century, when wood began to dominate the urban landscape and ancient

⁴⁴ ENNOD. opusc. 136, 145–146.

⁴⁵ Filippi 1991, 23–41; Cantino Wataghin 1997, 374–375.

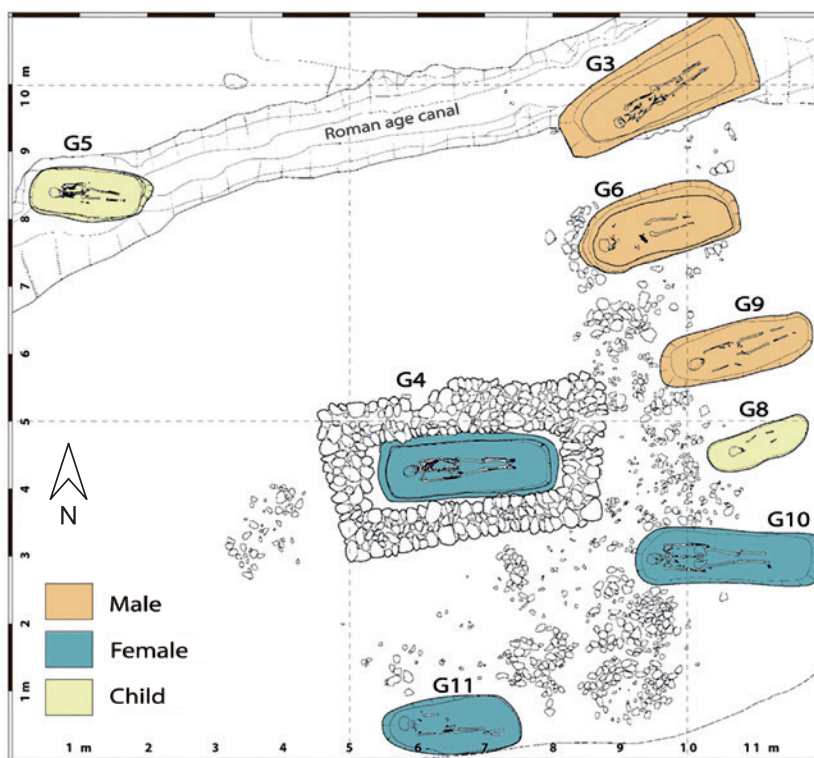


Fig. 6. Collegno (Turin). Plan of the Gothic burials discovered during excavation work.

buildings were often simply razed and the ground repurposed⁴⁶. In the *insula* of Santo Stefano, the *domus* of the “Via Barbaroux” and the “Via Basilica” were also demolished after the 5th century; however, two rectangular buildings were constructed in “Via Basilica” using dry stone walling, raised with piling, and with floors made of beaten earth and wooden floorboards respectively, in accordance with a dynamic which Gian Pietro Brogiolo defines as mixed recycling of building materials (“*edilizia mista di riutilizzo*”)⁴⁷. Meanwhile, the *domus* that was discovered in the *insula* of “San Giacomo”, between Via di Santa Chiara, Via Sant’Agostino, Via delle Orfane and Piazza Emanuele Filiberto, displayed traces of continuous occupation and restoration throughout the 5th century⁴⁸. Similarly, the presence of post holes in the dark soil in the *insula* of “San Giacomo” does not suggest the abandonment of the area, but rather the presence of dwellings made of perishable material, possibly linked to a partly rural use of the territory⁴⁹.

As well as building evidence, the material from the excavations at Palazzo Madama provides a snapshot of an urban centre incorporated within a network of international trade. The decline of several areas of the city did not, therefore, automatically imply that it was moribund, especially since *Augusta Taurinorum* was part of an active infrastructural network⁵⁰, as indicated by the excavations at Piazza Castello⁵¹. Here the Roman paving stones outside Porta Decumana were overlaid by a layer of beaten earth, confirming the continued use of the road which, starting from the Asti area, headed towards Gaul

⁴⁶ Greppi et al. 2009.

⁴⁷ Brogiolo 1994b, 108–109.

⁴⁸ Filippi/Levati/Pejrani Baricco 1994, 329; Cantino Wataghin 1997, 372–373.

⁴⁹ Filippi/Levati/Pejrani Baricco 1994, 328; Cantino Wataghin 1997, 374–375.

⁵⁰ Cantino Wataghin 1997, 373; Filippi 1982.

⁵¹ Filippi 1982; Cantino Wataghin 1997, 376.

through the Val Susa⁵². Several Late Antique and Early Medieval burials have been discovered along this route, including one in the church of S. Giovanni dated *ad annum* 523. Containing the remains of a girl named Anteria⁵³, it is recognised as a burial *ad sanctos* near the relics of St John, within the episcopal complex which, as outlined above, seems to have been the only “political-cum-civic” presence in Turin between the late 5th and the mid-6th centuries. This presence is also confirmed by the literary sources, which describe how Bishop Victor was responsible for the construction of the martyrial basilica of Solutor, Adventor and Octavius, a monumental building with an atrium⁵⁴.

Essentially, Turin witnessed two phases, separated by an interphase: initially a phase of decline and subsequently a phase of growth marked by layers of reconstruction with new materials, part of a consciously planned policy in response to the city’s function as a transit point between the Po Valley and the western Alpine passes, in which the church played a preeminent role. Archaeological evidence shows a city that was fully esconced in the “age of timber” (*età del legno*) which would be a typical feature of the following three centuries.

In the territory to the east of the city, along the two main roads running parallel to the River Po and leading to Vercelli, Novara and Milan, and to Asti and Pavia, respectively, there are traces of continuity of life, albeit of different kinds. The zone was divided between the *municipia* of *Augusta Taurinorum* and *Carreum*/Chieri, towns between which lay the hill of Pecetto, 624 m asl, with the site of “Bric San Vito”, where the *castrum Monsferatus* would be built in the Early Middle Ages in a territory already occupied during the Iron Age. The archaeological material, including three-winged *àvaro* arrowheads and swallowtail arrowheads, shows military occupation dating to between the 5th and 6th centuries, possibly linked to the settlements in the foothills on the right bank of the River Po; the location of this site, in particular, and the partial and random nature of the finds appear to suggest a role as military look-out point, controlling road and river routes⁵⁵.

The case of the hill of Piobesi is rather different, since the occupation of the site was mainly civilian: the dismantling of the paving stones of the Imperial road connecting Turin to Chieri was followed by their reuse in the construction of a cult building whose apse, linked to a circular baptismal font of the late 5th to early 6th century, has been discovered. Far from leading to the abandonment of the site, therefore, the dismantling of the road confirmed its increased importance, shown by the presence of a church with a baptismal font⁵⁶. Although the evidence may appear contradictory, it is possible that the dismantling of the paving did not, in fact, coincide with the closure of the road, but that it continued to exist, further proof that a major transformation of settlement type, and even of a civilisation, does not imply a collapse.

The densely settled districts of Moncalieri and Testona, along the same road, provide a vivid picture of continuity between the Imperial period, Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages⁵⁷. Testona has yielded significant evidence from Late Antiquity linked to a craft settlement, equipped with canal and irrigation systems – a hub that would prove to have a key role in the Lombard period. The area was strategically important, since it was situated close to the point where the land route running parallel to the river branched off in two directions: on the one hand, after crossing the river, it headed westwards towards Turin, situated only five kilometres away, and the Val Susa; on the other hand, heading eastwards, it ascended the hill of Moncalieri, the *Mons Calerius*, 283 m asl, descended towards Testona, and proceeded onwards in the direction of Asti⁵⁸.

⁵² Cantino Wataghin 1997, 377; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, 260.

⁵³ CIL V 7137; Cantino Wataghin 1997, 377.

⁵⁴ Cantino Wataghin 1997, 373–374.

⁵⁵ Pantò 1994a; Pantò 2008; Pantò 2010a, 67–70.

⁵⁶ Micheletto 1998b; Micheletto 2003, 111.

⁵⁷ Pantò 2010b.

⁵⁸ Pantò 2017.

The presence of place names such as *Mairanum*, referring to a site abandoned in the thirteenth century, situated near the present-day *cascina* of Arpino in the locality of “Fioccardo”, reveals how the settlement system of the area, besides its relationship with the transport network, was linked to agricultural use. As well as the “eloquent” place name, the physical existence of a settlement is also demonstrated by the discovery of a Late Antique and Early Medieval necropolis⁵⁹. To the east of Testona, the road continued towards *Carream/Chieri*, a town which, despite the change of settlement context, was still inhabited and organised according to the pattern of the new *civitas Christiana*; this has been underlined by the excavations beneath the Duomo of Santa Maria della Scala, where an Early Christian phase has been identified, linked to a burial ground which has yielded a slab with an inscription dated to the day: 8 June 488. The cemetery was laid out on Late Antique walls related to a porticoed building, in accordance with a procedure which suggests, as in the above-mentioned case of Collegno, the gradual “privatisation” of urban spaces by the religious authorities, which reorganised the plots according to their own needs⁶⁰.

To end this overview of the settlements in the area around Turin, it is also worth mentioning the district of San Mauro Torinese, along the northernmost of the roads that led from *Augusta Taurinorum* towards *Industria* and Casale Monferrato. Beneath the proto-Romanesque church of San Mauro, in the locality of “Pulcherada”, the apse of an earlier cult building, dating to between the 5th and 6th centuries, has been discovered. The remains consisted of cobbles arranged in a “herringbone” pattern and surrounded by a necropolis that was used over the following two centuries⁶¹.

We will now turn to the eastern sector of the route that linked *Augusta Taurinorum* to *Industrial/Monteu da Po*, *Vercellae/Vercelli* and *Novaria/Novara*. Signs of life persisted, albeit under altered circumstances, from the 4th to the 6th century, as has been revealed at Monteu da Po; the *insula* of the ancient settlement of “Iseion” remained inhabited as part of a settlement dynamic scattered within the urban perimeter⁶².

The same phenomenon can be seen at Vercelli, described during the 4th century in a well-known passage by St Jerome⁶³ as almost uninhabited. While credible, this description nevertheless seeks – a common feature of Christian thought during this period – to create a parallel between the disasters described in the Bible and the contemporary era, within a framework of the transformation of history into Christian teleology⁶⁴. The town did indeed undergo a phase of decline during a very early phase. However, it nevertheless appears not only to have been inhabited during this period but also, as shown by both archaeological material and the ruins of structures identified in various zones, to have been incorporated within a long-distance transport network⁶⁵. A particularly vivid example is the Monastery of the Visitation, where fragments of walls made of cobblestones and brick, arranged in a herringbone pattern and bound with clay, dating to Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, have been brought to light⁶⁶.

In other areas of the city, there seems to have been a change in designated use of spaces previously related to *domus* of the early Imperial period, as shown by the case of Via Fratelli Bandiera. Between the 4th and 5th centuries, the area above an abandoned house of the Imperial period, which had by then fallen into disrepair, was levelled and rearranged, with the subsequent construction of a courtyard surrounded by a building made of a conglomerate of cobbles and re-used material, subdivided into two rooms in which hearths have been identified⁶⁷. This Late Antique settlement sequence can be divided into three

⁵⁹ Pantò 1999a, 82.

⁶⁰ Pantò/Sciavolino 1994.

⁶¹ Pantò/Bedini 2006; Pantò 2003, 103–104.

⁶² Zanda 1984.

⁶³ Hier. epist. 49.

⁶⁴ Lançon 2017.

⁶⁵ Panero 2000, 220.

⁶⁶ Pantò/Gallesio 1986; Brecciaroli Taborelli 1996.

⁶⁷ Spagnolo Garzoli/Pantò 1995, 377.

phases – the abandonment of Imperial structures, the levelling of the buildings, and the reconstruction on the same site of new buildings made of re-used material. Despite the appearance of decline, this seems to suggest some form of re-appropriation of the old *insulae* and urban re-planning – in other words, a picture that contrasts completely with the disorder suggested by the catastrophe theories put forward about Late Antiquity whenever there are signs of changes in the settlement patterns of the classical period.

It would therefore be interesting to try to identify the people who commissioned this building intervention, which suggests money and organisation as opposed to improvisation. In the context of the crisis of the curial class between the 4th and 5th centuries, together with the physical transfer of the large landowners (*possessores*) from the north-western Cisalpine area to Ravenna, following the court, we can infer that the work must have been commissioned by the sole authority with political and economic power at the time: the church. Bishops had a guiding role and position of economic hegemony in urban centres during this period.

While there may be doubts with regard to private and civic buildings, they disappear in the case of burial areas which occupied urban plots that had previously been inhabited. Even in Vercelli there is at least one example: the plot at Cinema Corso, also in Via Fratelli Bandiera, where the dismantling of the large 1st-century *domus* was followed by two inhumations, preceded by an intermediate phase with re-used masonry and trenches that is hard to interpret⁶⁸.

Desana is situated to the south-west of Vercelli, where the route that led from Pavia through Lomellina to Turin met the route leading north to Sempione/Simplon. It is an area which has yielded traces of Late Antique occupation at various sites, in continuity with preceding phases, despite an environmental framework that displays upheavals in the hydrographic equilibrium between the 5th and 6th centuries⁶⁹.

The territory is already renowned for the discovery of a treasure dating to the period of Theodoric the Great, interestingly related to a mixed pair of high-ranking individuals, the Roman Stefanus and the Goth Valatruda⁷⁰. The treasure probably constituted their grave goods. Material from the territory has been found in two districts: aligned buildings facing onto a courtyard, dating to Late Antiquity⁷¹, were discovered in the locality of “Settime”, an eloquent place-name, above a late Imperial settlement interpreted as a possible *mansio*⁷² (Fig. 7), together with a cult building and an associated necropolis, around which the new settlement seems to have formed from the 6th century, surviving uninterruptedly until the Carolingian period⁷³. A settlement and an apsidal cult building surrounded by a necropolis, dating to the 5th century, have been found in the locality of “Ciapéli”, a place-name that refers to the presence of fragmentary bricks, to the north of a ruined Late Antique building⁷⁴. In this case, the re-use of an area previously occupied by a monumental building, whose presence must still have been partly visible, even though in a state of ruin, was probably not fortuitous; it raises questions with regard to the social composition of the residents and their relationship with the local ruling classes, and the ownership of the area on which the cult building was situated (Fig. 8).

To the south-west of Desana, one of the territories that best reflects the transformation of the countryside in the area around Vercelli between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages is that of Trino Vercellese, in particular the area of San Michele, which had been an important Roman settlement with

⁶⁸ Spagnolo Garzoli/Pantò 1995, 380.

⁶⁹ Panero 2016.

⁷⁰ Chiarlone 2000, 88; Pantò 2000, 111; Aimone 2010, 101–102.

⁷¹ Pantò 2000, 151; Brogiolo/Chavarria 2003, 11; Aimone 2010, 50–52.

⁷² Pantò 1994b, 353; Pantò 2000, 119; Aimone 2010, 47–49.

⁷³ Pantò 1994b, 354; Pantò 2000, 133.

⁷⁴ Pantò 2000, 151; Pantò 2003, 101; Brogiolo/Chavarria Arnau 2004, 58; Aimone 2010, 45–46.

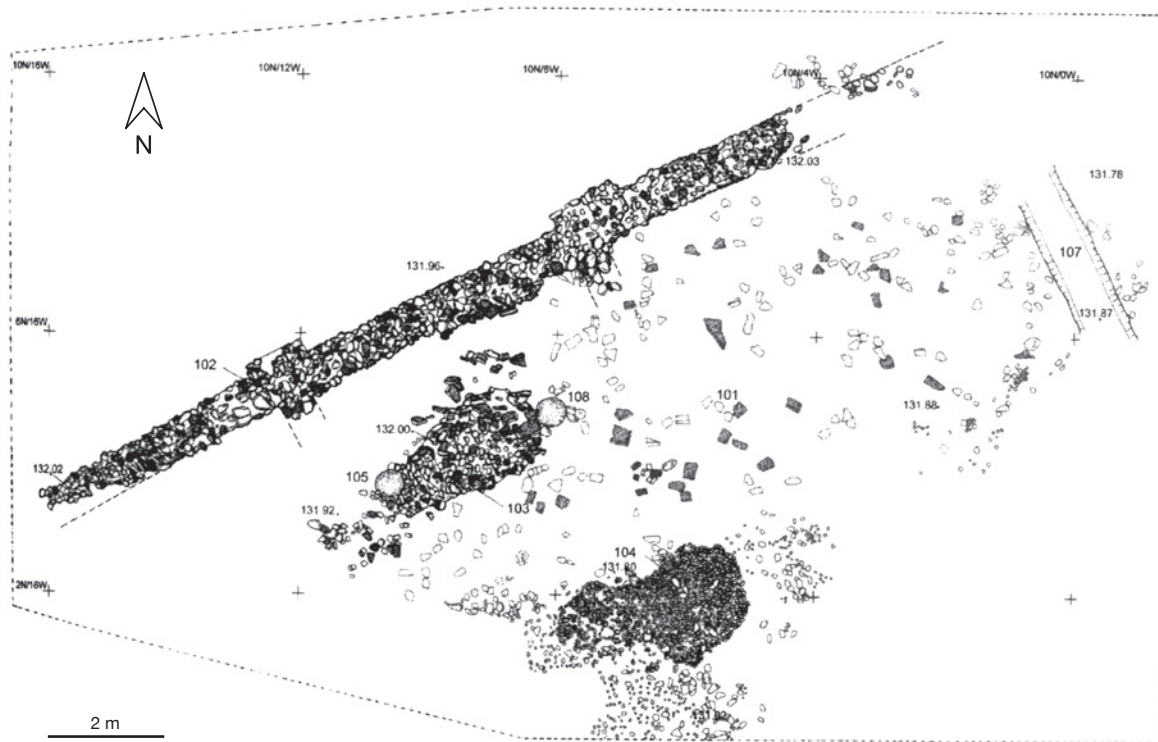


Fig. 7. Desana. Plan of the structures identified to the north of cascina Settime.

the inn (*mansio*) of *Rigomagus* (a name which, intriguingly, derives from the Celtic suffix *-magus*, indicating a market area). In this context, a fortified settlement with a defensive wall and walkways was built between the late 5th and the 6th century above a Late Antique *vicus* on the road route from *Ticinum* to *Augusta Taurinorum*⁷⁵. The settlement contained various structures which, although they were contemporary, were made using different techniques according to their function and, possibly, the social status of the occupants.

The techniques ranged from walls built of river pebbles with an elevation in perishable material, to walls made with reused bricks in a “herringbone pattern”, related to buildings used for craft activities, to a quadrangular building with a porticoed façade and pilasters with square masonry bases, related to Romano-Byzantine prototypes and linked to a possible political function; this may have been connected to the terrible complex period of the Greco-Gothic war, when the changed productive needs of the territories were accompanied by the defensive requirements of political powers and local aristocracies, to which the porticoed building may refer⁷⁶.

In conclusion, the cases of Desana and Trino highlight the fact that the Vercelli area was still inhabited, despite losing economic importance following the transfer of the imperial capital from Milan to Ravenna in 402 and, in particular, despite the tragic events of the 5th and mid-6th centuries. This was by no means inevitable, especially considering the transformation of the environment mentioned above.

⁷⁵ Christie 2006, 339; Aimone 2010, 53–54; Panero 2016, 41.

⁷⁶ Negro Ponzi 1985; Negro Ponzi 1986; Negro Ponzi 1988; Negro Ponzi Mancini 1999, 73–76.



Fig. 8. Planimetric survey of the masonry structures attributed to a Roman villa with a U-shaped layout in Desana “Ciapéli”.

The territory between the areas of Vercelli and Novara, through which runs the River Sesia, was a natural route for entering the Alpine valleys. It provides plenty of evidence related to the relationships between *possessores*, political power and religious power, the diocese of Vercelli being an interesting

case study⁷⁷. Here we find evidence of an urban, topographic and ideological system based on a series of roads, linked to the course of the River Sesia, around which three areas of settlement formed: one on an axis running north-east towards Lake Maggiore through the territory of Novara, related to the Roman district of *Pagus Agaminus*⁷⁸, an area situated between the high plains and the first hills; another on an axis running north-west, along the route *Mediolanum – Novaria – Vercellae – Eporedia – Augusta Praetoria* towards important passes connecting to the Rhine and Rhône valleys; and the third on an east-west axis, along the route *Mediolanum – Ticinum – Vercellae – Augusta Taurinorum* towards the Val Susa and Gaul⁷⁹.

Despite the environmental instability caused by the shifting beds of the River Sesia, the River Cervo, and other minor rivers of the Vercelli and western Novara areas, the road network around which most of the Late Antique settlements clustered ran northwards. A series of settlements that were occupied continuously until the 9th to 10th centuries were founded on both banks of the River Sesia⁸⁰.

Starting from the south and moving northwards, the first of these contexts is Sizzano, on the left bank of the River Sesia, where an apsidal cult building was constructed in the 5th century in the south-eastern corner of a villa that had remained in use. Given that it was contemporary with the phases of occupation of the villa, it would seem to have been a private oratory, which is consistent with the evidence for the role played by landowners (*possessores*) in the process of Christianisation of the local countryside. Subsequently, from the 6th century – which in this area seems to mark a break with respect to preceding settlement patterns – the villa lost its function, while the church outlived it, turning into a cult building with a cemetery, surrounded by a necropolis that grew up over the rooms of the abandoned villa⁸¹.

Continuing northwards, the route running along the left bank of the Val Sesia veered left, leaving the river to the west and reaching the shores of Lake Orta, a strategic point for control of the territory, as already seen, and the departure point of a transport route towards Lake Maggiore and the Val d'Ossola. Immediately to the south of the lake, in Gozzano, a cenotaph was built in a contemporary single-apse church with a floor of *opus sectile* and *opus signinum*, dedicated to St Lawrence and related to the cult of St Julian, who spread the Gospel in Cusio together with St Julius, worshipped on the island of Orta. It was surrounded by a necropolis arranged according to the traditional layout of burials *ad sanctos*⁸².

Various settlements sprang up along the road network heading towards *Eporedia* on the right bank of the River Sesia: at Lenta, the village developed in Late Antiquity around the Pieve of Santo Stefano, an Early Christian building linked directly to the important work of evangelisation carried out by Eusebius, bishop of Vercelli⁸³. The heavily anthropised territory, which was intensively cultivated during the Roman period, was known as *Silva Rovaxinda* during the Middle Ages, suggesting a radical transformation of the landscape.

However, this does not necessarily imply depopulation, as shown by the archaeological evidence, pointing to a need for reassessment of hastily reached conclusions about “decline” whenever there are signs of a decrease in agricultural activity. Such conclusions ignore a basic but underestimated fact: a smaller population requires a smaller area of cultivation but should not necessarily be considered a non-civilian population. This tallies with evidence for the Early Middle Ages when woodland and wetland biomass also offered sources of subsistence.

A similar conclusion can be reached in the case of the northernmost site in the commune of Dorzano, lying in the morainic plateau of Bessa, a mineral-rich area already exploited during the period of

⁷⁷ Cracco Ruggini 1995, 75–76; 186–190; Ferraris 2016, 90.

⁷⁸ Panero 2016, 45 fn. 38.

⁷⁹ Sommo 1990, 1; Banzi 1999, 48–54; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, 260; Ferraris 2016, 83; Panero 2016, 41–45.

⁸⁰ Ferraris 2016, 80–82.

⁸¹ Pantò/Pejrani Baricco 2001; Pejrani Baricco 2003, 63–70; Brogiolo/Chavarria Arnau 2004, 130–131.

⁸² Pantò/Pejrani Baricco 2001, 43–48; Pantò 1999b, 204–206.

⁸³ Sardo 1988; Sommo 1990, 12–13.

the Roman Republic, where the gold mines of the *pagus* of *Victimulae* were to survive until the Early Middle Ages⁸⁴. A complex anthropised territory extended over the plain of San Secondo, including a large necropolis, dated on epigraphic evidence to the 5th to 6th centuries⁸⁵, and a villa with an apsidal room⁸⁶. A cult building with a striking plan was erected above these structures on a hill overlooking the plateau. It revealed two phases, one Late Antique and the other Early Medieval: initially, between the late 4th and early 5th centuries, the church had a basilica-like plan with three naves, the central nave having a semi-circular apse; subsequently, during a second phase dating to the 6th century, the structure was enlarged, an apse being added to the northern nave and floors in the interior paved with *opus sectile*, an intervention linked to the creation of a burial ground, which was previously absent, akin to the situation at Sizzano⁸⁷.

The “Ciota Ciara” cave is an example of long-term occupation in the uplands of the Val Sesia during Late Antiquity. This rock shelter is situated at 665 m asl on Montefenera, a mountain which rises to 899 m asl⁸⁸. Situated on the left bank of the River Sesia, overlooking the plain of Borgosesia, it lay at a major crossroads between the Val Sesia and the two valleys on either side: the Sessera Valley to the west, which heads towards the territory of Biella, and the valley of Strona di Valduggia to the east, which connects this territory to Lake Maggiore (Verbano) and Lake Orta (Cusio). The shelter, which had been occupied in prehistoric times, was even turned into a house (confirming a degree of stability of occupation) equipped with a forge. It was suddenly abandoned, presumably in the mid-6th century, following a fire whose origins are uncertain, but which may have been linked to the events of the Greco-Gothic war⁸⁹ (Fig. 9).

Situated immediately to the east of this territory, linked to the route from *Mediolanum*/Milan, *Novaria*/Novara retained its role as a crucial transport hub in Late Antiquity⁹⁰, with a fully functioning defensive wall⁹¹. Striking evidence for the economic prosperity of the local ruling classes of the city is provided by the most celebrated of the archaeological finds discovered in its territory, the cage cup known as the “*diatretra Trivulzio*”, now kept at Milan, originally discovered in 1680 in a Late Antique burial. It confirms that the processes of urban decline did not automatically imply widespread impoverishment, but should be interpreted from different perspectives, taking account of the undoubtedly calamitous historical events⁹². For example, in the case of the apparent contradiction between cities in decline and the private ostentation of wealth, it may be argued that there was a change in the form of displays of power, which shifted from late Imperial public euergetism to the private display of wealth by extremely learned Late Antique landowners (*possessores*), of whom Sidonius Apollinaris is one of the most vivid witnesses, who “withdrew to their villas” and displayed their extravagance or *tryphé* amongst a restricted circle of their fellows.

Following this “secession of the wealthy” (a far cry from social collapse), an episcopal complex was built in the mid-5th century in a dilapidated urban area situated to the south-west of the *decumanus maximus*, within an *insula* which had been heavily built on during the Imperial period and then turned into a *domus* that later fell into ruin⁹³. The complex consisted of a basilica with a cemetery area dedicated to St Mary and an octagonal baptistery with a central plan⁹⁴, providing tangible evidence of the

⁸⁴ AN. Rav. 4,30; PLIN. nat. 33,41,78; STRAB. geogr. 5,1,12.

⁸⁵ Pantò/Pejrani Baricco 2001, 37 fn. 63.

⁸⁶ Brecciaroli Taborelli 1995b.

⁸⁷ Pantò 1999b, 205; Pantò/Pejrani Baricco 2001, 38–39; Pantò 2003, 97–100.

⁸⁸ Brecciaroli Taborelli 1992; Brecciaroli Taborelli 1995a; Christie 2006, 479–481.

⁸⁹ Brecciaroli Taborelli 1995a, 79–105; Micheletto 1998a, 63; de Vingo 2018, 173–176.

⁹⁰ Panero 2000, 200 fn. 455.

⁹¹ Panero 2000, 204 fn. 463.

⁹² Mercado 1992, 244.

⁹³ Bonini 1999.

⁹⁴ Chierici 1967; Bolgiani 1982; Mercado 1992, 241; Panero 2000, 206 fn. 474.

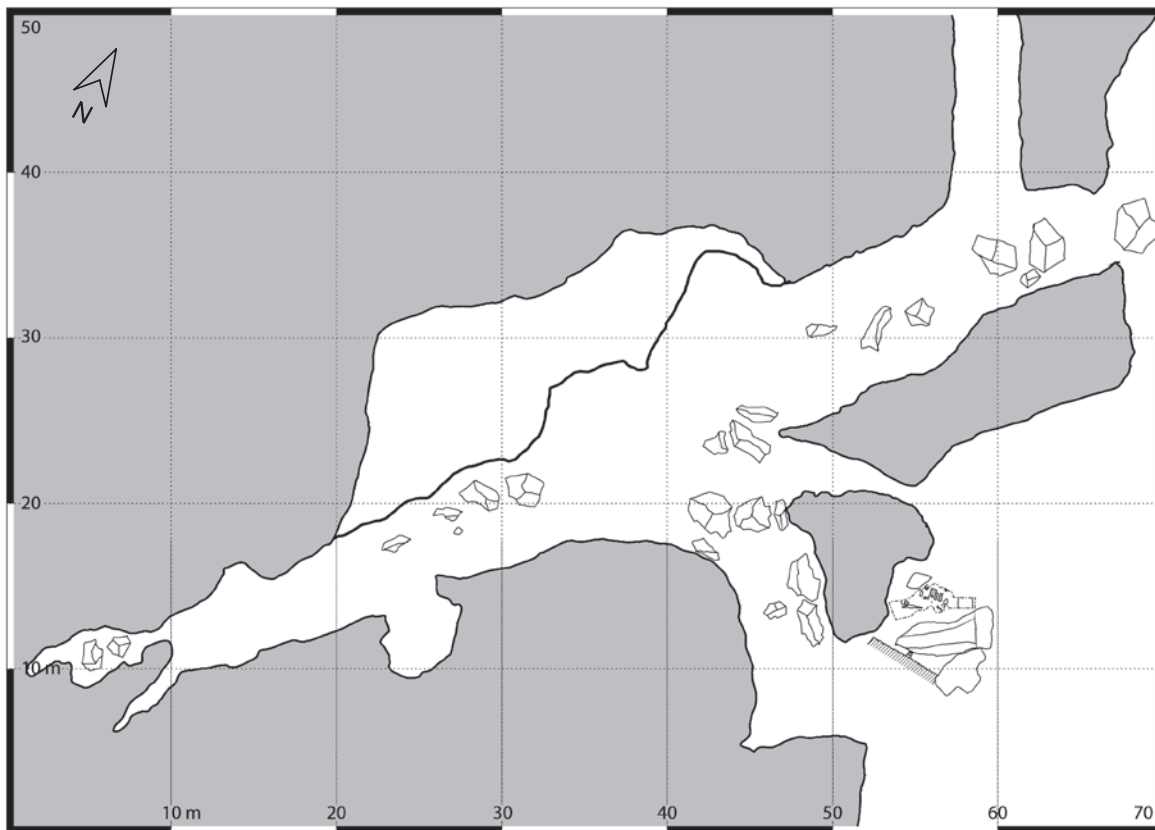


Fig. 9. Plan of “Ciota Ciara”.

presence of Christianity mentioned in the literary sources from the mid-4th century; for instance, the famous *incipit* of the Second Epistle of Eusebius of Vercelli which refers to the Christian communities of Vercelli, Novara and Ivrea⁹⁵.

The case of *Novaria*/Novara highlights the process of urbanism between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: the old *insulae* of the Imperial period, which had fallen into disuse, were taken over by the church, in accordance with procedures that have yet to be studied properly, in which a significant role seems to have been played by bequests left in the wills of owners, possibly the same *possessores* who had withdrawn to the countryside. Once the *insulae* had been acquired, the new ecclesiastical authorities, the only form of political and economic power that survived *intra moenia*, restructured them by constructing cult buildings and/or converting them to cemeteries, in a process that does not correspond with haphazard decline and could be more accurately defined as transformation.

We shall now broaden our gaze to take in the foothills of the large area between the plain and the Prealps, where a crucial role was played by the route leading northwards from Lake Maggiore (Verbanò) through the Valle del Toce, which was partly navigable – an important trans-Alpine route for those coming from *Mediolanum*/Milan and *Novaria*/Novara (and still vital today as the route of the Simplon Railway and the main road to the Simplon Pass)⁹⁶. It passed through a territory whose appearance differed in some ways from that of today.

⁹⁵ EUSEB. VERC. epist. 2.

⁹⁶ Spagnolo Garzoli 2012, 96.

The ancient orography of the territory should be carefully observed to grasp the links between the settlements and the reasons for their locations. During the Early Middle Ages, before a process of silting up during the Late Middle Ages led to the development of a new lake basin, the area of water currently known as Lake Mergozzo, now separated by a thin strip of land from Lake Maggiore, constituted the northernmost tip of the western arm of the latter, while the River Toce had a larger bed and flow than today, encouraging links in this area between land routes and river and lake transport. Everything was integrated within a traditional pastoral economy, which seems to have persisted alongside the dynamics of Romanisation, as shown by the evidence from “Balm d’la Vardaiola” where, between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, stone and wooden huts with hearths were built⁹⁷.

However, the clearest and most frequent traces of settlement continuity between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages are found at the southern entrances to the Valle del Toce, possibly related to early processes of Christianisation and thus of reorganisation of the territory, as will be seen below.

The case of Gravellona Toce, a site of stable settlement from at least the Second Iron Age, is particularly interesting. The site has residential structures dating to the 4th century, with evidence for stone buildings with craft functions, known as the “oven house” (“*casa del forno*”) and the “house of the fisherman” (“*casa del pescatore*”), set in the context, mentioned above, of the former tip of the western arm of Lake Maggiore (Verbano), and therefore in an important trading area⁹⁸.

Similar settlement dynamics can also be found at Mergozzo, a site that was continuously occupied from the Republican period, due to its position near the former north-western tip of *Lacus Verbanus*. In this case, the settlement site was still fully active during Late Antiquity, as shown by materials in the current historic centre⁹⁹ and the 4th century tombs in the necropolis of Praviaccio¹⁰⁰.

However, the most significant evidence for the first phase of Christianisation of the Alto Verbano comes from an area not far from the settlement. A cult room and a baptistery dating to the 5th and 6th centuries, with floors made of *opus signinum*, were found beneath a Romanesque church at San Giovanni in Montorfano, a site already occupied in Roman times. In particular, the baptistery was decorated with elegant painting, demonstrating the wealth of the person or persons who commissioned the work, a significant feature given a chronology which dates the construction to a turbulent period spanning three changes of political regime: the *pars occidentis*, the reign of Odoacer, and the reign of Theodoric the Great. Throughout these different phases, however, the ruling classes responsible for these interventions retained their economic and political status¹⁰¹.

Interestingly, this complex, built in the area of what used to be the end of the lake, appears to have been a cornerstone of the Christianisation of the territory, and the ownership of the land on which this religious complex was built appears to have been firmly in the hands of *possessores* who were able to plan major building work: this dynamic requires further study, both in relation to the secular ruling classes, and in relation to a possible role of the episcopal authorities of Novara.

As well as evidence for monumental buildings, the area has also produced traces of human occupation in the form of pottery and earthenware, further proof of secular as well as religious use of the site¹⁰².

An analogous situation can be observed in the neighbouring locality of “Candoglia”, an important marble quarry site, already used in Roman times, where chance finds in the early twentieth century prompted excavations in the area of the Romanesque church of S. Graziano. These led to the discovery of a room with productive functions, constructed between the 4th and 5th centuries above a Roman settlement with a cult *sacellum* which has been interpreted as an inn (*mansio*).

⁹⁷ Spagnolo Garzoli 2012, 97.

⁹⁸ Pattaroni 1960; Panero 2003, 263–270; Spagnolo Garzoli 2012, 110–111.

⁹⁹ Poletti Ecclesia 2012, 119–120.

¹⁰⁰ Panero 2003, 261–262; Poletti Ecclesia 2012, 122.

¹⁰¹ Pejrani Baricco 2003, 79; Garanzini/Proverbio 2016, 308–310.

¹⁰² Poletti Ecclesia 2012, 130–131.

The productive nature of the room was shown by the discovery of a millstone. It is further evidence of a characteristic feature of Late Antiquity: the repurposing of residential areas, transforming them into productive areas for economic requirements that still need to be explored. A necropolis was later established on the site, in a period after the 5th century. The necropolis has not yet been associated with any cult site. However, this may be due to the fact that no excavations have been carried out inside the church of S. Graziano, which could hypothetically be the reconstruction of a previous cult building, especially considering that it acted as a church associated with a cemetery until the 17th century, demonstrating the possible functional continuity of the area¹⁰³.

In conclusion, this case also suggests the possible acquisition of old Late Roman residential areas that had fallen into disuse by ecclesiastical authorities who repurposed them. This seems to have been a constant feature, rather than a random one.

Settlements in the foothills further west seem to have hinged around a route that led through Ivrea to Aosta and from there to the passes of *Alpis Graia* (Little St Bernard) and *Alpis Poenina* (Great St Bernard), which provided links with western *Raetia* and Gaul. The importance of the route still “reverberated” around the territory during the period under consideration, especially through the process of Christianisation, promoted by the dioceses of Vercelli, Novara and Ivrea, already mentioned in the passage from Eusebius.

Biella fits into this framework. Although it is situated in an area with sporadic material of Imperial date, the actual settlement seems to have developed in the mid-4th century with the construction of poor-quality buildings whose archaeological material still reflects its role within Mediterranean trading networks¹⁰⁴. In this case, it seems plausible to associate the development of the site with the direct intervention of the episcopal authorities of Vercelli, since the whole context seems to revolve around the only monumental building in the area: the church of S. Stefano, demolished in 1872, around which an important cemetery was located.

Evidence for this episcopal role comes from the discovery of a 6th-century inscription mentioning the presbyter Albinus which, together with the find of a gold Ravenna tremissis struck during the reign of Johannes, highlights the social status of the people buried there¹⁰⁵. This assemblage is emblematic, since it suggests early processes of Christianisation, linked in turn to new centres of population, within a territory that was densely occupied in Late Antiquity. Vigliano Biellese presents a similar case, albeit on a different scale. This latter site has masonry structures made of river pebbles and material dating to the 5th and 6th centuries in an area later occupied by the church of S. Maria Assunta, providing (admittedly later) evidence for the usual potential link between settlements and churches¹⁰⁶.

Ivrea is a classic example of urban continuity, with the survival of the street network, albeit within an altered settlement layout. The city owed its importance to its location on the road which, starting from Milan, led initially to *Alpis Graia* and then to *Alpis Poenina* through the valley of the Dora Baltea¹⁰⁷. The road also constituted the *decumanus maximus* of the city whose role did not change even in Late Antiquity when, following the collapse of Imperial Roman buildings, a new floor level was formed by accretion¹⁰⁸.

The same phenomenon of collapse and reoccupation can also be seen in other peripheral urban areas, for example in “Via S. Martino” where, within two residential rooms of Imperial date, reduced to ruins during Late Antiquity, there is evidence for forms of occupation which, although they have yet to be explored¹⁰⁹, point to the city’s role as an active “international” trading centre – a role which it continued

¹⁰³ Poletti *Ecclesia/Clerici* 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Brecciaroli Taborelli 2000; Aimone 2009, 20.

¹⁰⁵ CIL V 2,6776a; Pantò 1992, 73–81; Pantò 1993; Pantò 1999c; Pantò 2003, 100.

¹⁰⁶ Pantò 1994c.

¹⁰⁷ Banzi 1999, 57.

¹⁰⁸ Brecciaroli Taborelli 1987; Brecciaroli Taborelli 1989.

¹⁰⁹ Pejrani Baricco/Occelli/Boni 2011.

to play in the 5th century, thanks to its geographical location. It even hosted merchants from the eastern Mediterranean, as shown by the tomb inscription of a *mercator* from the east which was found there¹¹⁰.

The inscription, both as material and “anthropological-cultural” evidence, offers invaluable information about the community of *Eporedia* (Ivrea) between the 5th and 6th centuries, providing a picture of the composite *societas Christiana* already documented in the mid-4th century by the famous letter of Eusebius. It initially formed part of the diocese of Vercelli, whose bishop Eusebius, according to the *Vita Gaudenti*, originally came from Ivrea¹¹¹. It then became an autonomous centre, at least from the mid-5th century, a period for which there is evidence for the first local bishop, Eulogius. He was a figure involved in pastoral care linked to the construction of the city’s first cathedral of S. Maria, built above a pagan sacred area, traces of which have emerged beneath the apse¹¹². It is an intriguing case of topographical homology, albeit not direct or linked to the de-consecration of a pagan temple. Although the temple building was still standing in the 5th century and was literally dismantled to build the church, it nevertheless had a different function for at least a century. This is demonstrated by the traces of occupation within it, related to its transformation into residential spaces which, at the time of its demolition, no longer reflected its original use as a temple¹¹³.

The excavation provided fleeting evidence of the first cathedral below the Romanesque building; the traces of the Early Christian layout consisted of fragments of *opus signinum* related to the floor of the westernmost side aisle and the foundations of the colonnades of the three naves, whose total lengths are unknown, although it is possible to reconstruct the plan of a basilica with three naves facing east.

There is currently no sign of a contemporary baptistery, although the site of the Romanesque baptistery of S. Giovanni, still visible in the seventeenth century, may be the location of a previous building¹¹⁴.

The Via della Gallie, which started at *Mediolanum*, led through *Eporedia* and continued along the valley of the Dora Baltea in the direction of *Vitricium* (Verrès), passing on the way through the sites of Montalto Dora, where there is a Late Antique villa, and Pont-Saint-Martin¹¹⁵, on the River Lys, the boundary between the province (*pertica*) of *Eporedia* and the province of *Augusta Praetoria*. From Pont-Saint-Martin to Villeneuve, the route hugged the left bank of the River Dora, cutting through a series of agricultural-pastoral settlements situated between 600 and 1000 m asl, such as Montjovet, Saint Pierre and Châtillon¹¹⁶.

Augusta Praetoria/Aosta, founded in 25 BC above the *castra stativa* of Varro Murena, involved in the war against the Salassi, was the main centre of the entire territory. It was situated at the intersection of the routes leading west towards *Alpis Graia* and north towards *Alpis Poenina*; this strategic position ensured continuity of settlement in Late Antiquity, but also exposed the city to the dangers of a period of crisis. Although it is not proven that it suffered from the raids of the Burgundi¹¹⁷, it must at least have been at risk. Cassiodorus describes in his *Variae* how Theodoric the Great sent sixty soldiers to the stronghold of *Augustana clausura* (Bard)¹¹⁸.

Saint-Vincent is an emblematic example of the relationship between the road network and continuity in Late Antiquity. An apsidal structure of uncertain function, transformed into a cult and burial site in the 5th century, was built above a Late Antique bath complex linked to a *mansio*¹¹⁹.

Saint-Vincent was part of the prefecture of the Gauls in the 3rd century, but it came under the religious authority of the metropolitan bishop of Milan in the following century. The city underwent an initial change in its layout during the rise of *Mediolanum/Milan*, whose trajectory it would follow.

¹¹⁰ Banzi 1999, 57.

¹¹¹ Mennella 2014, 177; Pejrani Baricco 2014, 190.

¹¹² Mennella 2014, 177.

¹¹³ Pejrani Baricco 2014, 186–187; 189.

¹¹⁴ Pejrani Baricco 2014, 191.

¹¹⁵ Banzi 1999, 58.

¹¹⁶ Mollo Mezzena 1992, 278–279.

¹¹⁷ De Gattis/Cortelazzo 2008, 152.

¹¹⁸ CASSIOD. var. 2,5.

¹¹⁹ Mollo Mezzena 1992, 279; Banzi 1999, 60–61.

The first signs of the break-up/re-functionalisation of its late Imperial urban layout had already begun in the 3rd century: during this phase, the baths were restored and warehouses (*horrea*) were constructed, possibly due to the need to provision military units, while the suburban necropolises shrank in size, leading to a concentration of burials in the areas adjoining the southern city walls and the abandonment of the necropolis along the road to *Alpis Graia*¹²⁰.

Judging from these transformations, the newly Christianised city became fairly firmly established in the 4th century and even more so in the 5th century¹²¹, following a similar pattern to the rest of north-western Italy¹²². The “Christian landscape” of *Augusta Praetoria* was marked by an urban hub and a suburban hub; however, unlike cities such as Pavia, where the cathedral *intra moenia* developed later than the extramural *memoriae*, these hubs were contemporary at Aosta. A *domus ecclesiae* was created inside the city walls, right in the urban centre, next to the cryptoporticus of the Forum, in a Late Imperial *domus* which was reconstructed between the late 3rd and the early 4th centuries. A baptismal hall was built in the eastern wing of the adjacent cryptoporticus, followed by interventions that involved both private and public building work, within a probable context of appropriation of both spaces by the religious authorities. In the late 4th century, this room underwent further restoration, and was transformed into the first city cathedral, with a single-nave layout and two baptisteries, which in turn were modified during the 5th and 6th centuries, when the flooring was restored¹²³.

Between the late 4th century and the first half of the 5th century, three rectangular martyr shrines (*cellae memoriae*), aligned along a north–south axis, and a cemeterial basilica oriented east–west were constructed in the western *suburbium* of the *municipium*, along the barycentre of the Roman necropolis. Meanwhile, the complex of S. Lorenzo was built in the second quarter of the 5th century near the important eastern entrance to the *municipium* – the main approach for those coming from the Po Valley or from other areas of Italy. The cruciform basilica was built in the Ambrosian tradition and the first bishops were buried within it; a second funerary church with a portico was constructed opposite the complex, above a 4th century mausoleum, in the area where the collegiate church of S. Orso would be built in the Middle Ages, creating a complex of “corpi santi” of the utmost importance in the defence of the city¹²⁴ (Fig. 10).

With regard to secular and private building work, the 5th century marked a clear break for the city, possibly due to the changing conditions in north-western Italy following the transfer of the capital from Milan to Ravenna. However, this hiatus did not imply abandonment, but a process of urban reorganisation which, as will be seen, shows a certain spirit of resilience and self-organisation, as well as the survival of local patrons who were still involved in town planning.

The *tabernae* and the portico of the Forum collapsed after the 5th century. The architectural elements were removed, and the spaces were transformed into domestic structures with the use of piling and the partial re-use of the walls¹²⁵.

Further repurposing interventions after the 4th century can be seen in *insula* 52, to the south of the *decumanus maximus* and to the south-east of the Forum, where structures built of dry-stone walls were constructed on top of buildings that were still in use during the 4th and 5th centuries, altering their orientations. In *insula* 35, the dismantling of a *domus* with a peristyle in the 4th century was followed by the conversion of its rooms for more modest residential use¹²⁶.

¹²⁰ Mollo Mezzena 1992, 275; Cantino Wataghin/Gurt Esparraguera/Guyon 1996, 30–33; De Gattis/Cortelazzo 2008, 153.

¹²¹ Perinetti/Cortelazzo 2012, 228.

¹²² Perinetti/Cortelazzo 2012, 228.

¹²³ Perinetti/Cortelazzo 2012, 233–235.

¹²⁴ Ronc 2017, 80.

¹²⁵ Cantino Wataghin 1994, 90.

¹²⁶ Cantino Wataghin 1994, 90.

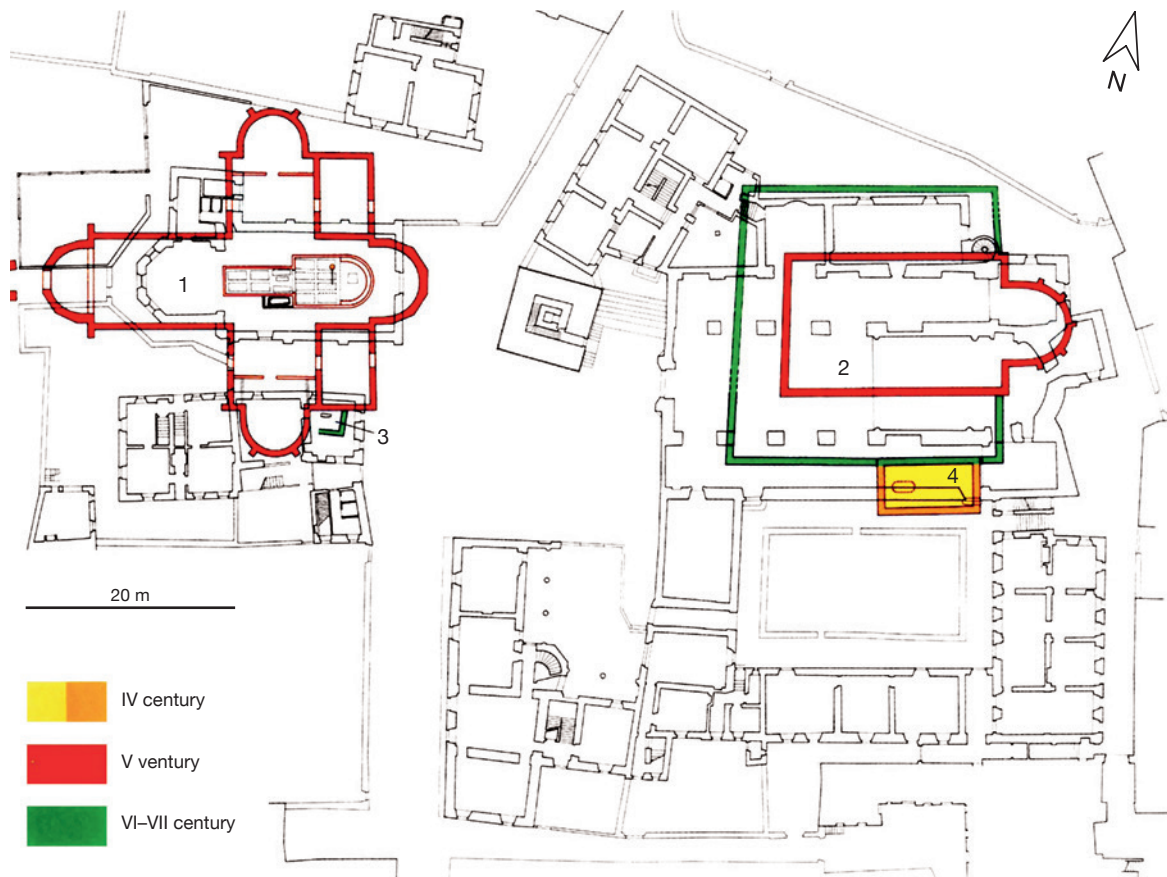


Fig. 10. Aosta. Funerary church of S. Lorenzo (1), collegiate church of SS Pietro e Orso (2), Burgundian graves (3), mausoleum (4).

Between the 4th and the 5th centuries, above a late Imperial *domus* on the *cardo maximus*, a barn and a basement room were constructed in the building known as Maison Savouret, occupying the empty spaces of the *domus*. During the 6th century, these elements were replaced by a hut and a vegetable garden, indicating a gradual process of ruralisation of the *insula*. After the 5th century, several rooms with wooden structures were created to the north-east of *Augusta Praetoria/Aosta* in the space between the corner tower of the walls (which would become the “Torre dei Balivi” in the Early Middle Ages) and the amphitheatre, which is still extant and surrounded by radial concentric structures. The rooms with wooden structures also had a basement level which may have similarities with forms of Germanic *Grubenhäuser*.

However, the functional changes resulting in the rearrangement of the urban plan in this strategic area of the city were aimed at coping with a situation of emergency in a manner that was in no way improvised: during a phase prior to the 6th century, probably between the 4th and 5th centuries, the city walls were reinforced in Via Aubert, sealing off an arch of the Porta Decumana, the western entrance to the city, with blocks of puddingstone recovered from the ruins of a public building¹²⁷.

¹²⁷ De Gattis/Cortelazzo 2008, 161–175.

To conclude this analysis of the *suburbium* of Aosta, it is worth noting the establishment of a necropolis of the 4th–5th century in the important area of Saint-Martin-de-Corleans in the northern sector of the *suburbium*, and in particular the contemporary development of a necropolis with fossa tombs or cist graves with plastered masonry – indicating the relatively high social status of the deceased – to the north-west of the terracing wall of the suburban villa of the “Consolata”, where the territory is crossed by a foothill track¹²⁸.

Lastly, a settlement with phases from the 4th to the 7th century was built at Villeneuve, near the church of S. Maria, above a rocky spur controlling the territory. The settlement also had a church and a baptistery, thus representing a material and spiritual stronghold in the area¹²⁹.

SUMMARY

During the 5th century, in the aftermath of the attacks by the Visigoths (402–403, 408–410), Ostrogoths (405) and the Burgundians (490–494) it became clear that the Alps were no longer the impregnable protective barrier for the Po Basin which they had once been. The attacks have been linked to the widespread abandonment of the Roman *municipia* and impoverishment of the countryside. This picture is too simplistic and reductive, however, and fails to take sufficient account of a number of variables on which archaeological sources have recently shed new light. One of the most significant changes which occurred in reaction to the precarious new political situation was the emergence of the first hilltop settlements. While these undoubtedly constitute evidence of the local population’s need for security, protection and defence against external threats, it is nevertheless impossible to ascribe to them either a purely military or a purely civilian function. This article proposes to examine the reasons that might have determined or influenced the development of individual communities and, at the same time, to investigate their capacity not only to develop commercial relations but also to disseminate transformative ideas that would outlive the decline of Rome and lead to the slow and gradual establishment of Early Medieval society.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Verlauf des 5. Jahrhunderts hatten die Überfälle der Westgoten (402–403, 408–410), der Ostgoten (405) und der Burgunder (490–494) deutlich gemacht, dass die Alpen nicht mehr das unüberwindbare Hindernis waren, das sie lange dargestellt hatten, um die Gebiete der Po-Ebene zu schützen. Die Überfälle wurden auch mit einer Verarmung der Siedlungslandschaft und dem Auflösen von *municipia* in Verbindung gebracht. Dieses Bild war aber zu vereinfacht, da es nicht alle Variablen berücksichtigte. Archäologische Quellen liefern mittlerweile wichtige neue Beiträge zu dieser Fragestellung. Als eines der auffälligsten Phänomene zeugt als Reaktion auf die prekäre politische Lage das Entstehen befestigter Höhengründungen von einem Bedürfnis nach Sicherheit, Schutz und Verteidigung der Landbevölkerung gegen Gefahren von außen, jedoch ohne dass es möglich ist, diesen Siedlungen rein militärische oder zivile Funktionen zuzuschreiben. Ausgehend davon untersucht der Beitrag die jeweiligen Gründe,

¹²⁸ Mollo Mezzena 1992, 277–278.

¹²⁹ Banzi 1999, 65.

die für diese siedlungsgeschichtlichen Entwicklungen ausschlaggebend gewesen sein können und die daraus folgende Ausbreitung befestigter Höhengiedlungen im Westalpenraum. Parallel dazu werden die Möglichkeiten einzelner Siedelgemeinschaften überprüft, die ökonomischen Grundlagen hierfür sicherzustellen, aber auch deren Möglichkeiten, diese Ideen zur Veränderung und Transformation zu verbreiten. In einer Phase des Übergangs zwischen Spätantike und Mittelalter, und damit einhergehend dem Ende Westroms, wurde so eine langsame, aber progressive Entwicklung hin zur frühmittelalterlichen Gesellschaft in Gang gesetzt.

RIASSUNTO

Nel corso del V secolo le conseguenze delle scorrerie dei Visigoti (402–403, 408–410), degli Ostrogoti (405) e dei Burgundi (490–494) resero evidente che le Alpi non costituivano alcuna barriera a protezione per le aree padane. Se queste incursioni sono state messe in relazione con un panorama di abbandono dei *municipia* romani e di impoverimento delle campagne, questo quadro – fin troppo riduttivo e semplicistico – non ha tenuto in considerazione alcune varianti del sistema, sulle quali le fonti archeologiche hanno fornito nuovi elementi di conoscenza. Uno dei fenomeni più rilevanti della diversa modulazione assunta dall'insediamento in risposta alla precaria situazione politica creatasi è stata la nascita dei primi villaggi in altura, che documentano il bisogno di protezione e di difesa da pericoli esterni della popolazione senza che sia però possibile attribuire loro una funzione esclusivamente militare o civile. Questo contributo si propone di esaminare quali siano state le ragioni che determinarono o influenzarono questa tipologia di scelta e, parallelamente, verificare la capacità delle singole comunità non solo di gestire rapporti commerciali, ma anche di diffondere quelle idee di cambiamento e di trasformazione che videro il tramonto di Roma e la lenta e progressiva affermazione della società altomedievale.

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Figure credits:

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Fig. 2: from Brogiolo/Gelichi 1996.

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Fig. 4: from Barello 2017.

Fig. 5: from Pejrani Baricco 2017a.

Fig. 6: from Pejrani Baricco 2017b.

Fig. 7: from Aimone 2010.

Fig. 10: from Ronc 2017.