

# Prologue

## Wind of Change from the Ural Mountains to Atlantic Lusitania between the Fourth and the Seventh Centuries AD

**Francesca Carboni**

Department of Archaeology, Ghent University  
email: francesca.carboni@ugent.be

In the course of the last twenty years, a novel interest in the transitional phases between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages has emerged while an endless flow of new data about the concerned period has become available. The session proposed to address the debate about landscape archaeology's approaches to this specific phase using regional and subregional synthesis, balancing the presentation of new data, with methodological discussion (see C. Corsi, in this volume).

Contributors were invited to present regional case studies in light of the newest acquisitions in our knowledge on trade and productions and, with the support of the geosciences, on changes in the ecological conditions. We asked for topics such as the relationship between town and country, the settlement patterns, the transformations in land use and communication networks. We focused our attention on issues related to the transformation of urban space and the suburbs, as well as the dynamics of expansion, reduction or abandonment of towns, inserted into the wider evaluation of the surrounding landscape and catchment area. Any geographical scope for setting the possible regional analysis was indicated, with the aim of covering the widest range of fields and approaches. The choice of the time span delimited by the fourth and seventh centuries was made, knowing full well that the different historical conditions among geographically distant regions would have determined the moving of both its lower and higher chronological limits.

Indeed, we experimented practically on how one of the main problems in the periodisation

about Late Antiquity is determined by the progress of the research, which complicated and extended the geographic and ethnic framework. We must also warn that the resulting final overview, which seems to extremely relativise the divide between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages and also overcome the "Romanocentric" premise, is mainly caused by the particular subject of the selected proposals and the abundant data regarding the peculiar regions of different extensions, the easternmost of which is located at the extreme border of the European continent.

Nonetheless, one of the most significant outcomes of the session was the fact that we could compare how human resilience, societal vulnerability and sustainability have changed through an almost synchronic span of time in several European regional frameworks, resulting in a long-term "wind" of transformation and complexity.

As it is now ascertained, in the increasingly vast territory of physical and anthropic Late Antiquity, the traditional separation of the Byzantine world weakens, and the observation points and their hierarchies translate. This is evident in the case of near-eastern regions, which can be considered as the scenario where some of the phenomena typical of this era appeared in a complete and striking way. This is one of the reasons why the paper concerning ten different regional case studies, each one following particular methodologies and purposing different targets, is presented in geographical order, unusually moving from East to West.

Far east to the North Caucasus, the first contribution (D. Korobov) concerns the evidence

of the Kislovodsk basin, a relatively well-studied district that enabled the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences to create an archaeological geographic information system for the microregion. This paper reveals that the period dating from the fifth to eighth centuries AD was characterised by the highest population density, consisting of 120 fortified and unfortified settlements of the early medieval Alanic tribes. Pieces of ethnographic and archaeological evidence were used for modelling and interpreting the results. They indicate a dispersed model of settlement for that period, composed of small patronymic villages, inhabited by few families' clans, located at 1800 m of altitude and higher, inside the resource zones that could provide sufficient food for them.

The second paper (V. Iacomi & V. Cassiani) aims to assess some meaningful data emerging from the studies of the two authors, members of the Missione Italiana at Elaiussa Sebaste, about urban transformation and productive patterns of the countryside in the Isaurian territory corresponding to Roman Rough Cilicia. Archaeological evidence, consisting of rural and suburban productive settlements which included olive/wine presses and urban kilns for the fabrication of Late Roman 1 amphoras, shows that in Late Antiquity, coastal Isauria fostered previous economic activities and developed a new approach to the exploitation of natural resources. The most important example, in this sense, was represented by the cultivation of grapevine and olive trees, which were connected to an unprecedentedly wide production of wine and olive oil. This phase of evidently increasing commercial activity projected coastal Isauria into the Mediterranean routes to the West.

Moving to this direction, the following paper (C. Röhl et al) presents a truly relevant project started in 2014 by the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Mainz in cooperation with the Archaeological Institute in Belgrade and the École française de Rome, concerning the Byzantine town of Iustiniana Prima (at the site of Caričin Grad in southeastern Serbia). The short life of the city, newly founded by the Emperor Justinian as the episcopal and administrative centre of the region in around 530 and

abandoned in 615, is for the first time investigated from the perspective of human ecology and social sciences, using methods of archaeozoology, archaeobotany, geoarchaeology, soil science and GIS.

Another contribution (C. Tsigonaky & A. Sarris) illustrates the first results of a project launched in 2014 to highlight the changes in Cretan settlements from the fourth century to the early ninth century. During this long period, major changes in political, social and economic life influenced settlements in terms of both their form and function. The crucial question has been to understand why certain settlements survived the crisis of the seventh to eighth centuries, while others disappeared forever. The paper has focused on two distinctive cases: the group of coastal settlements, facing towards the sea, but isolated from the mainland by mountains, and the group of semimountainous cities, the economy of which made them economically self-sufficient even in times of crisis.

Surprisingly, two articles concern Sicily. A. Facella focuses on some interpretative aspects that he considers essential for the reconstruction of the settlement trends which characterised from the fourth to seventh centuries, the territory of the modern municipality of Contessa Entellina (province of Palermo) in western Sicily. A systematic archaeological survey was conducted there from 1998 to 2004 by the Laboratorio di Scienze dell'Antichità of the Scuola Normale di Pisa.

The author reflects brilliantly on how

*our success in extracting sensible meanings and applying models depends not only on the reliability of the data under analysis, always subject to improvement and refinement to the best, but also on our ability to filter them through a correct scheme of interpretation.*

In this way, the rise in the number of detected sites dating from the beginning of the fifth century, in comparison with the sites attributed to the previous period, could have been dependent on a much higher density of fifth-century diagnostic artefacts, when compared with the previous and the two following centuries.

*The massive presence of fifth-century artefacts may not be exclusively caused by a population increase: economic and sociocultural factors most likely also came into play, distorting the resulting settlement picture. More precisely, a possible higher tendency towards a grain monoculture may have caused a massive import of African foodstuffs (attested by amphorae) between the late fourth and the middle fifth centuries, and peculiar dietary customs could explain the all-pervading diffusion of African red slip ware cups belonging to particular forms.*

Another paper (L. Zambito) presents a very interesting study on the sulphur mining in the territory at the east of Agrigentum. The author planned the survey as the base of his research, considering the historical and topographical data which proved mining activity. The evidence on the ancient mining production, such as the detection of *tegulae sulphuris*, has been implemented by other objective data: the sulphur vein when looking for the entrance to the mine and some indication, related to the continuity of use through time of both the extraction sites and the exploitation techniques.

The analysis of the pottery record allowed dating the ancient sulphur production from the late Hellenistic age to the Byzantine time. New settlement patterns, consisting of “villages”, have been connected to the mining activities from the end of the fourth century. Agrigentum, which seems to lose the function of fiscal centre at the beginning of the sixth century, maintained an important commercial vitality and a strategic role as harbour until the ninth century, maybe precisely thanks to the sulphur trade.

Continuing north along peninsular Italy, the contribution of F. Redi illustrates the transformation which occurred to the urban settlements located in the territory of L’Aquila (Abruzzo region) in the transitional period between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages. The paper demonstrates the research progress of the recent years on urban archaeology, focusing on the material aspects of the settlement transformations, recognising the

most common patterns in which this phenomenon occurred.

The paper of C. Bassi and V. Amoretti reports the results of the archaeological excavation conducted in the site of San Cassiano, in the northern part of Garda Lake. It debates the related anthropological studies concerning two separated burial areas linked to a rural settlement of Imperial Age, the productive part of which was occupied in the fifth to sixth centuries by a church. Thanks to the crossing of archaeological and anthropological data, this small area of 6,000 m<sup>2</sup> adds an important contribution to the reconstruction of the landscape history of the Garda territory in the considered transitional era.

Still following westward the geographic location of the areas concerned by the covered topics, it happens that both the two last papers from our collection discuss the phenomenon of Christianisation of urban and suburban landscapes, in Italy (A. Luciano) and in central Lusitania (E. Gallo), respectively. The synthesis essay on Italy shows how the settlement of early Christian sanctuaries, connected with the development of a relics’ cult, was crucial in transforming the Italian landscape. Meanwhile, two different case studies are presented for the Portuguese area, using new topographical data from the excavations conducted in the abandoned town of Ammaia and in the bigger town of Evora, which was seat of the diocese from the fourth century AD and has had continuity of occupation until the current era.

