The results of the surveys made in the Brindisi area, territory of Mesagne, have produced new data demonstrating the importance of systematic explorations to increase the knowledge of the forms of territorial organisation. Between the main historical phases that have characterised this area, we intend to present the one between the Roman Age and the Late Antiquity. A period that, unlike other districts (even neighbouring), reveals for the Brindisi area a clear increase of the rural population and deep changes in forms of land use.

**Keywords:** Settlement Development, Roman Imperial Age, Rural Economy, Land Use, Road Network

The results of systematic explorations recently carried out in the territory of Mesagne, in the province of Brindisi, have provided interesting new elements with regard to settlement development and rural economy. Here we focus our attention on the Roman Imperial Age and on Late Antiquity. A period that, unlike other districts (even neighbouring), reveals for the Brindisi area a clear increase of the rural population and deep changes in forms of land use.

The situation outlined for this territory seems analogous to that documented in the district of Oria (Yntema, 1993: 216, 220-23) and of Valesio (Boersma, Burgers & Yntema, 1991: 124-30). It shows instead many differences from the trend observed in the Brindisino (Aprosio, 2008: 121-31) or in some areas of Daunia region also: in these places there is a significant reduction in the number of settlements between the Late Republican and the Early Imperial Age (Goffredo, 2011: 40-41). Therefore, the settlement organisation appears more composite than in the past. Extensive and articulated building complexes now make their appearance in addition to medium sized existing farmsteads. At the same time, small farms disappear almost entirely; their possessions were presumably incorporated into ever wider properties belonging to new landowners. In most cases, these new rural sites represent the expansion and renovation of previous buildings. The sites reached sizes between a minimum of about 1500 m² and a maximum of two hectares.

In fact, as shown by artefact concentrations, a progressive increase of findings related to the Imperial Age, and especially to the Late Imperial and Late Antiquity, can be observed. Moreover, the presence, often substantial, of fine ceramics, most
Fig. 1. A schematic map of the territory of Mesagne (BR) in the Imperial Age: archaeological evidence and reconstruction of the road network (by author).
of them imported, testifies to a certain comfort of owners and a lively interregional trade (fig. 2). The significant increase in claims of amphorae from Africa and Eastern Europe recorded on the main rural sites in use during the Imperial Age demonstrates the hegemony of wine and oil imports, especially of those from the provinces, compared to local product.

Beginning at the end of the first century AD, intense trade relations with North Africa are also well documented by fragments of African Red Slip and Cooking Wares. Together with these classes of materials (in smaller amounts, however) are, Eastern imported pottery (Eastern Sigillata A and B) and “Illyrian cooking ware”; the latter, made in Albania (and maybe in Corfu), is very well documented around the Salento in the middle and especially in the Late Imperial Age, third-beginning of the fourth century AD

Sometimes artefacts like mosaic tiles, fragments of painted plaster, marble slabs for wall cladding or flooring are indicative of the refined decoration of building complexes, as documented at De Nitto, Materdomini, Sant’Anna e Calce. The reasons for this change in the settlement patterns are probably the result of the development of large landed property based on a reorganisation of land use systems and so, on different modes of production management.

The epigraphic evidence of Roman times reveals that the presence of villaci, freedmen and slaves, operating within many holdings in the area, is becoming more frequent in the early Imperial period and especially during the second and third
centuries AD (fig. 3). This suggests the existence of a complex system of agricultural work and production activities, as well as development of the extension of land ownership.

Observing all the data collected during this territorial survey, it can be seen that the distribution of Imperial Age findings is not uniform, depending on the areas. A significant number of sites (located about 1 km from each other) is placed south of the via Appia, as well as in the southern edge of this countryside, along the road called “Limitone dei Greci” (connecting Taranto and Otranto, without going through Brindisi).

If we look at the northernmost area, on the contrary, we can see only few settlements (although, in some cases, quite significant), situated mostly along a Roman path, alternative to the via Appia, whereas the central band of this territory would seem completely depopulated.

The scarcity, or the almost total absence, of rural sites recorded in some areas might suggest that large portions of territory were uninhabited because they were uncultivated or covered by forest, on the one hand; or because they were used for pasture, farming and extensive cultivations.

Nor should we exclude, in some areas, the presence of large landholdings, also Imperial ownership. In fact, as we deduce from literary sources (Tac., Ann. 4.27; 12.65) the occurrence of servile revolts suggest a massive presence in this region of slaves and servants-herders, employed in agricultural and pastoral activities within extended fundi (Manacorda, 1995: 148-49).

For example, from Masseria Moreno comes the inscription dedicated to Saturninus, Imperial slave significantly defined as servus Caesaris. Exactly in this area the surface surveys have detected a very large rural building complex, whose isolated position indicates the considerable size of owned land, perhaps partly destined for grazing and breeding.

There are numerous remarks in the ancient sources about the importance of pastoralism and cattle breeding in Calabria and specifically in the Brindisi area; these activities are particularly profitable, here favored by abundant pastures. We can mention, for example, a reference by Horace to the famous flocks of Calabria, source of substantial profits (‘aestuosae grata Calabriae / armenta’: Hor. Carm., 1.31.5-6). Horace always talks about the transhumance of the flocks, before the warm season, with displacements from the pastures of Calabria (exploited during the winter months) to the mountain of Lucania (Hor., Epod. 1.27-28). This activity was also linked to trade and the manufacture of wool, as mentioned in a passage of Strabo about the Brindisi countryside (Strab. 6.3.6).

This quite large density of rural settlement remains more or less the same until Late Antiquity: most of the sites show, in fact, an uninterrupted continuity up to this time and generally their sizes also seem to remain the same (fig. 4). The general trend outlined for the Mesagne district is quite
Fig. 4. A schematic map of the territory of Mesagne (BR) in the Late Antiquity: archaeological evidence and reconstruction of the road network (by author).
different compared to the development that can
be observed for the same period in neighbouring
territory sectors of Salento (for example, the ter-
ritories of Brindisi, Oria and Valesio), where, from
the middle of the fourth century AD, there was a
marked decline in the number of farms and villas
(‘\textit{Brindisi area: Aprosio, 2005; 444-55; 2008: 158;}
\textit{Oria: Yntema, 1993: 223-24; Valesio: Boersma,}
\textit{Burgers & Yntema, 1991: 130}).

The substantial stability of the settlements
attested in this region could be explained as a
consequence of its continuing agricultural produc-
tivity. After the prevailing stage of development
of olive growing and viticulture it is now probably
oriented mostly towards cereal crops and animal
farming.

The importance of cereal production compared
to other activities seems attested by some refer-
ences in the literary sources of the fourth, fifth
and sixth centuries, with specific references to
Calabria region and to loads of wheat and honey
being sent from the port of Brindisi (\textit{Expositio totius
mundi} 53; Sidon., \textit{Carm.} 7.145-48; 22.169-72, Cas-
siod. \textit{Var.}, 1.35.2; 2.26; \textit{Prok.}, 2.24.14).

The greater prosperity of the Mesagne coun-
tryside compared to others at the same time may
also depend on its favorable position in relation to
the road network. Judging from the distribution
of sites, in fact, all the Roman roads through this
area are active during Late Antiquity, especially
the \textit{via Appia} and the so-called Limitone dei Greci,
links of regional importance, which were also ren-
ovated at this time.

Strong evidence of this are two milestones
from Mesagne, related to the restoration carried
out by Constantine at the beginning of the fourth

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Fig. 5. Mesagne (BR). The Roman bath near Masseria
Malvindi (first-fourth century AD) [photo by author].
century on the final sector of the via Appia (CIL IX 6076-6077). Also evidence is the improved efficiency of cursus publicus, as we can deduce from the ancient sources: during the Early and Middle Imperial Age the only stopping places along the final stretch of this road were Taranto, Oria and Brindisi (Strab. 6.3.6-7; It. Ant., 119) whereas in the late Empire those of Mesochorum, between Oria and Taranto, and of Scamnum, between Oria and Brindisi (Tab. Peut., 7.1) are added.

It is interesting to note that along the route called Limitone dei Greci, in the locality Malvindi, a large thermal building was identified, erected in the first century AD, but remodeled during the fourth century and probably serving as a mansio (Cocchiaro, 1998: 113) (fig. 5).

As occurs in most of the peninsula and according to findings from neighboring districts, this area, for the period between the end of the fifth century AD and the half of next century, seems to experience a time of great changes, mostly related to the Greek-Gothic wars and to the Lombard conquest. The investigations carried out in the territory of Mesagne record a clear decline in archaeological findings that marks a moment of crisis in the settlement system; this gradual process of depopulation is even more evident in the centuries that followed and is one of the features that signal the transition from Late Antiquity to Early Middle Age.

References


