Exploring Valmarecchia. Diachrony of Population Development from the Roman Age to the Late Middle Ages in Central/Northern Italy: a Case Study of Emilia-Romagna (Southern Area) and Marche (Northern Area)

Daniele Sacco
Università degli studi di Urbino Carlo Bo, Department of Communication and Humanities (DISCUm)
email: daniele.sacco@uniurb.it

Abstract

This paper summarises data gathered from an inter-regional research project conducted through land surveys, stratigraphic studies and the stratigraphic analysis of upstanding structures, within a program of the Department of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Urbino “Carlo Bo”. Surveys were carried out in the valley of the Marecchia River, Italy. The river flows through two regions, Emilia-Romagna and Marche, and two provinces, Rimini and Pesaro-Urbino. The project, which began in 2006, aims at presenting a diachronic landscape reconstruction by analysing landscapes transformation processes, from the Roman Age to the Renaissance. Special attention is devoted to the Middle Ages, the phenomenon of encastellation and to historical buildings. Within the project, extremely important, especially for the Middle Ages, are the surveys, carried out for the past 14 years at the archaeological site of the Castle of Monte Copiolo, hometown of the Counts of Montefeltro, who would later become Dukes of Urbino.

Keywords: Landscape archaeology, Late antiquity, Encastellation, Valmarecchia, Rimini, Monte Copiolo

In the Italian Peninsula lies a historical sub-region of 683 km², covering the southern portion of the Emilia Romagna region, and the northern portion of the Marche region. The area is famous for the development of the Villanovan Civilisation in Verucchio, the funding of the Late Medieval castrum of Mons Feret and the diocese-comitatus of Montefeltro, the establishment of the Republic of San Marino and the rise to power of the Duchy of Urbino.

The above-mentioned area can be identified with the historical sub-region of Montefeltro. It lies in central-northern Italy and it corresponds, partially, to the hinterland of the Provinces of Rimini (Emilia-Romagna) and Pesaro-Urbino (Marche) and to the entire national territory of the Republic of San Marino.

Among the different research projects led by the Chair of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Urbino, was the diachronic reconstruction, which began in 1996, of population development in this pivotal Italian area, from the Roman Age to the Middle Ages.

After a long preparatory research phase, looking at published works and documents, the project gained the attention of several local bodies leading to the launch, in 2006, of an inter-regional project supported by Emilia-Romagna and Marche, which was called Progetto Montefeltro, Atlante del Paesaggio Feretrano. The project was drafted under the auspices of the Archaeological Heritage Offices of the two regions, and supported by the Provincial Governments of Rimini and Pesaro-Urbin and fourteen local municipalities through a memorandum of understanding. It therefore managed to bring together a wide set of institutions whose aim was that of mapping, analysing, understanding and protecting the sub-region of interest. The need to archeologically explore the area was due to a lack of documentation concerning both the Roman Age and the Late Middle Ages. Those institutions also provided researchers with on-going logistical support during field analyses, supplying facilities, staff and access to information and maps widely available.

Research strategy was systematic: it included archaeological, geomorphological, anthropological, paleopathological, archaeobotanical studies, and many
other research techniques. The area was investigated by means of field surveys that were complemented, in the last few years, by a further research tool developed thanks to a research project on the protohistoric period carried out by the University of Innsbruck (Hye, Naso & Baur, 2014). The two research projects intertwined and complemented one another, offering a detailed diachronic overview of population development in the Montefeltro area.

Next to field surveys, which focussed mainly on the Roman Age and the Middle ages, topographical surveys were also undertaken (Sacco, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2009b; 2010a) together with three stratigraphic excavations in three sample castles (Ermeti & Sacco, 2006; 2007; Ermeti, Sacco & Vona, 2008; 2012; Sacco, 2009a). For the forth site, excavation was impossible, as it lies within one of the region’s natural parks. It was analysed through geomagnetic prospecting, aero photogrammetric surveys and “minimally invasive” archaeological excavations (Ermeti & Monacchi, 2006). Parish churches and their stone decoration were also taken into consideration, from an artistic and historical point of view, together with monastic complexes, hospitals [Sacco, in press], ancient and medieval road networks. The project also entailed the enumeration and analysis of quarries (Sacco, 2012) and the archaeological survey of upstanding structures in dozens of castles (for all these see Sacco & Tosarelli, 2016). Different surveys and analyses helped researchers draft a diachronic reconstruction of landscape transformation from Late Antiquity to Early Renaissance.

The study area is the hinterland of the coastal cities of Rimini and Pesaro, in central-northern Italy, right between the Apennines and the Adriatic Sea. It includes the upper and lower basins of five rivers that flow into the Adriatic Sea (the Uso, Savio, Marecchia, Conca and Foglia Rivers).

The coastal colony of Ariminum (268 BC) was settled after the Battle of Sentinum (295 BC). With the enact-
ment the Lex Flaminia [230 BC], where settlers were given lands to cultivate (fig. 1). During the Roman Age, most of the Montefeltro area belonged, by decision of Augustus, to the VI Italian region, Regio VI -Umbria-; it was included only much later, by Hadrian, into the XI Region: Flaminia et Picenum. The municipium of Ariminum (modern day Rimini, Emilia-Romagna) was the main city in the entire area and a major road junction: it connected the consular road, via Flaminia (from Rome to Rimini), the Via Emilia (from Rimini to Piacenza) and the Via Popollia/Annia, from Rimini to Aquileia (north-western and north-eastern Italy). From Ariminum, a hilly road called via Ariminensis (Rodriguez, 2004; Sacco, 2014), whose presence is documented at least during the Iron Age (Hye, Naso & Baur, 2014), crossed the Apennines and led to the municipium of Arretium from where travellers could get to Rome, taking the consular road Via Cassia. This ancient road, carved-out by nature, was well known to men even before Roman colonisation, as proved by the many archaeological sites, dating back to the protohistoric era, that can be observed along the road, at least along the river Marecchia (De Marini, 2003; 2006), on hills and mountains at medium-high altitude.

In Late Antiquity the consular road Via Flaminia was strategic, especially during the Gothic war (Montanari, 1994; 2000; Zanini, 1998), just as the control of coastal cities (Ariminum, Pisaurum, Fanum Fortunae) and mountain passes (Castrum of Petra Pertusa, the Furlo Pass, PU) along the road. In the Roman Age the via Ariminensis, continued to be important, as it connected Rome and the Po Valley with diverticula getting as far as the municipia of Sassina, FC, Sestinum, AR and Pitinum Pisaurense (today’s Macerata Feltria, PU).

The historical sub-region of Montefeltro, which became known as such during the Late Middle Ages, was portioned, during the Roman Age, into the municipia of Sestinum (Province of Arezzo, Tuscany), Pitinum Pisaurense (Province of Pesaro-Urbino, Marche), partly in the municipium of Sassina (Province of Forlì-Cesena, Emil-
municipia were considered as portioned into the three above-mentioned valley of the Marecchia River, which should therefore be municipalities in the documents proving the existence of a Aside (and trying not to wax lyrical), we have today no documents proving the existence of a municipality in the valley of the Marecchia River, which should therefore be considered as portioned into the three above-mentioned municipalities.

Available data show that, in Valmarecchia, relevant Roman settlements were established only in the hamlets of Secchiano (Novafeltria) and Ponte Messa (Pennabilli). In the area around Secchiano, lying right between the Marecchia River (left bank) and the medieval parish church of Santa Maria in Vico, a relevant number of historical artefacts were found, together with epigraphic material. Here traces of Roman settlements can be found both on the left bank of the river (quite consistent ones) and on the right one (less numerous). The presence of the nearby medieval parish church of Secchiano, erected where a Roman settlement once stood, excludes the possibility that the existing forum Druentinorum was also a municipium. The Church is named after Saint Mary, but its names also carries the suffix “in vico” which rules out the chance of a municipium, as we know that the urban structure of a vicus is much different from that of a municipium, although it was also suggested (Bonacini & Bottazzi, 1994) that a depopulated municipium could later have evolved into, or be considered a vicus. In our opinion, this interpretation would be stretching things a little bit too far: without urban excavations, it is impossible to determine the scope of the Roman settlement in Secchiano and therefore we support, until proven otherwise, the idea that it was simply a vicus.

Going further up river, a number of Roman remains were also found at the plain of Ponte Messa di Pennabilli (Monacchi, 2000: 71-72; Olivieri, 1880: 30; Rodriguez, 2004), on the right bank of the river (Municipalities of Pennabilli/Badia Tedalda. Here, most likely, stood a vicus or better, a statio, right at the junction of the Ariminum – Arretium road, where three small roads, or diverticula, ran into the Ariminensis:

1) The first one crossed an area belonging today to the Municipality of Sant’Agata Feltria and led to the municipium of Sassina, thus connecting the Valley of the Marecchia River to the Valley of the Savio River (Fig. 3-4).
2) The second one went all the way up the Valley of the Senatello Creek (where today stands the Municipality of Casteldelci) up to Mount Fumaiolo, offering travellers who crossed the Apennines an alternative to the mountain pass of Viamaggio (from Latin Via Major) on the Ariminensis road.
3) The third one bypassed Mount Carpegna and connected the Valmarecchia area with the municipium of Pitium Pisaurense in the valley of the Foglia River. The Ariminensis road, coming to Rimini, went all the way up to Verucchio, thus also connecting the settlements of “Secchiano” and “Ponte Messa” (see fig. 1). Quite likely, from a diachronic point of view, settlements developed along the road corridor. The same is true for the municipia of Ariminum and Arretium, which appeared along an already existing road.

Data from land surveys and published works and documents concerning population in the Roman Age show that population development in the central and high valley of the Marecchia River was closely linked to landscape morphology, slope exposure, water supply sources and roads existing before Roman colonisation. In the Roman Age, this area was a rural, mountain and marginal area, explaining why it became important as a historical sub-region only from Late Antiquity onwards.

This Apennine landscape was dotted with just a handful of farms (and tuguria) of small dimensions, mainly because of very low soil productivity. Farms began developing when Ariminum was settled, during the Republican Age (from the third to the second century BC), but they achieved maximum development between the first and the second century AD. In the vast majority of cases, they rose in areas already settled in the Iron Age (or very close), next to perennial water sources and
Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the Roman road network, based on GIS data, in the area between Ponte Messa and the municipium of Sassina [area belonging today to the Municipality of Sant'Agata Feltria].
Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the Medieval road network, based on GIS data, in the area between Ponte Messa and the town of Sarsina (area belonging today to the Municipality of Sant'Agata Feltria).
on slopes exposed South/South-west, never on slopes exposed North or East. Many farms lay between 300 and 600 m.a.s.l. and their reference municipia were quite small. Rustic villas were but a few, very far from one another; the most relevant one, whose presence is testified by documents from the nineteenth century, was located in Petrella, municipality of Sant’Agata Feltria (RN) but unfortunately it didn’t survive the fifth century. Mountains, landslides and low soil productivity influenced colonisation, leading to the development of large plots and making it hard for experts, especially for areas corresponding to central and upper river basins, to retrace their Roman centurial system.

Most rustic villas and almost all farmhouses in the area started declining in the fourth century, in line with the trend observed at a national level (for an overview see Delogu & Gaspari, 2010). In the fifth century we assist to a process of depopulation of several sites and villages, which were progressively and almost completely abandoned (Brogiolo, Chavarria Arnau & Valenti, 2005; Valenti, 2008; 2010).

In Montefeltro, just like in many other areas in Italy, the ancient organisation of landscape started collapsing in the fifth century (for a detailed analysis of the phenomenon see Valenti, 2010), entering a serious crisis that will become, in the sixth century, a demic one. Scattered farms, tuguria and villas simply ceased to exist and there is no evidence, in general, that they were later occupied again, nor that they were replaced by new agricultural settlements. The same happened to major settlements in the area. From Ponte Messa to Secchiano, aero photogrammetric surveys show no significant evidence of settlements after the fifth and the sixth century.

The municipium of Pitinum Pisaurense itself (today’s Macerata Feltria, in the valley of the Foglia River) was in the midst of a crisis in the fourth century. Rather than destructuring and reorganizing the municipium in islands in order to preserve the city centre, there was a progressive abandon of settlements, becoming definitive in the fifth century. It was not chosen as the seat of the new diocese as the castrum of San Leo will become, quite unexpectedly, the new one. Nevertheless, in the area of Macerata, in the sixth century, some areas were occupied, although by the Goths. In the seventh century there is no evidence of human settlement anymore, only of the Lombards transiting in the area.

It is almost certain that, in all these cases, what was left of the old empire’s population hastily abandoned roads, settlements in ruins and flooded valley floors and moved to higher lands. We believe that the towns known today under the names of Macerata Feltria and Pennabilleti (just like other towns) are the result of population moving uphill and settling there, without a specific urban plan, following a pattern known as “Modello toscano”, or “Tuscan model” (Valenti, 2012).

After the economic and structural collapse of ancient landscape there was a period of perpetual war (the Gothic war) and plague epidemic. Due to hostile geomorphological conditions (Conti, 1989), made worst by the pessimum climaticum of the Late Middle Ages (Veggiani, 1985), at the end of the sixth and the seventh centuries, what was left of rural population in Montefeltro abandoned settlements and isolated farms. They stuck together to help each other out, creating clustered settlements similar to the ones described in the Modello toscano, although the area belonged at the time to the Exarchate of Ravenna, Duchy of Pentapolis, with Ravenna as capital city (on the area also see Augenti et al, 2010), an area traditionally characterised by unclustered settlements.

We believe that the fact that major towns in the area today are set on hills and mountains overlooking the valleys where former Roman settlements once lay, and that major medieval castles in Montefeltro were built right on those hills and mountains is further evidence that people stayed close to ancient Roman villages, creating clustered settlements in more or less the same area. Settlement forms changed but the area was the same suggesting some kind of continuity (in terms of areal in diversity of type of settlement).

In the stratigraphy of major castles built in Montefeltro, on hills and mountains, a few hundred metres from old Roman settlements, could be the remains of late medieval villages later occupied and widened under different local Lords. We are certain about two of them: Casteldelci and Sant’Agata Feltria (Ermeti & Sacco, 2007; Sacco, 2015).

Our diachronic analysis of population development in the area also shows that, during the seventh and eighth century, Valmarecchia and Valconca were vectors of Lombard penetration of the Exarchate of Ravenna [Fu-
Fig. 5. Stratigraphic analysis of walls and diachronic reading of the Monumental Complex of the Fortress of San Leo (RN).
churches built in the diocese’s key areas, both in terms of manoeuvre and power, made stronger by having parish states, bishop-counts enjoyed considerable room for the authority of the Frankish kings and the Papal religious and political power. Although still subject to the Frankish kings and the Papal States, bishop-counts enjoyed considerable room for manoeuvre and power, made stronger by having parish churches built in the diocese’s key areas, both in terms of circulation and population (on the power of bishops and their role in encastellation also see Cambrini & Di Carpegna Falconieri, 2007). All of the seventeen (or nineteen?) parish churches in Montefeltro area rose on former Roman settlements (whether they were vici, pagi or municipia), so those downhill areas were still frequented by the population encastelled on the top of the hills (Lombardi, 1991; Vasina, 1978). Settlements didn’t stand too far from former Roman centres, but they had to be relocated on hilltops in new centralised villages. It is now generally accepted that parish churches in the Montefeltro area were erected right where uphill villages where hastily built following the Modello toscano. It was observed that, in areas where no parish churches were erected, the first castles were built only from the tenth century onwards (following the Modello Toubertian). Quite likely this is due to the fact that, before that date, there wasn’t a big enough concentration of population to justify the building of villages and, later, parish churches.

Results of land surveys show no evidence of loose-knit population in the open country, on valley floors or on mountains at medium altitude. They show, nevertheless, traces of material culture around sites that would later be encastellated (e.g. the castles of Casteldelci, Senatello, Fragheto, Frassineto, Monte Benedetto, Sant’Agata Feltria, etc.). “Casal d’Ylice” (Casteldelci), whose presence as a castrum is documented from AD 1125 onwards, between the ninth and the tenth centuries (Ermeti & Sacco, 2007) was a centralised uphill village. The bishops of Montefeltro turned the hamlet into a castle between the XI and the second decade of the twelfth century. There, in the thirteenth century, the Lords of Casteldelci/della Faggiola laid the bases for their rule on the area, during the “second big encastellation process of Montefeltro” (twelfth-thirteenth centuries). The hamlet of Petra Anellaria (Sant’Agata Feltria) became a castrum too, following the same pattern. These are just a few examples, in line with the Modello toscano (Valenti, 2012), emerging from land surveys and from the analysis of sources and showing that, after the decline of ancient landscape, in other to help each other out, people gathered in village-like centralised settlements, in uphill areas not too far from old Roman settlements. These villages were later turned into castles.
Encastellation examples consistent with the model known as “Toubert’s model” were found (Toubert, 1973). According to Toubert, castles were erected ex novo, on hilltop sites uninhabited in the Late Antiquity, due to the strong will of local lords around the tenth century. The castle of Monte Copiolo (PU) was built at 1033 m.a.s.l. in the tenth century: it was a strategic position, right between the two valleys of Valmarecchia and Valconca. There are traces of human presence in the area in the Musterian and Eneolithic Ages and throughout the protohistoric and the Roman Age nevertheless, the archaeological excavations that have been carried out since 2002 (Ermeti & Sacco, 2006; Ermeti, Sacco & Vona 2008; 2012; 2014) found no evidence of settlements in the area between the fourth and the ninth centuries. Conversely, as for the period going from the tenth century onwards, extensive excavations resulted in the discovery of building material sufficient to erect a stone building of 3000 m², a castle tower with a walled courtyard. According to stratigraphic analysis, just like Monte Copiolo, the nearby settlement of Pietrarubbia (Valfoglia), established in a new site probably by the bishop or his tenants (Cerioni, Cosi & Vannini, 2006), seems to be following the same encastellation pattern.

Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the power of bishops in Montefeltro declined. This decline was influenced by the rise to power of a series of local lords, whose rule on the area’s estate later became real political power. They settled new hamlets and towns or reshaped the existing ones. In Valmarecchia and Valconca among emerging lords were the Counts of Bertinoro, the Counts of Carpegna, the Counts of Montefeltro and other minor seigniors. Sometimes these were episcopal or papal tenants, quite often pro-imperial Ghibellines. This second encastellation phase concerned a higher number of sites if compared to the previous one. In this second phase, a special mention deserves the castle of San Sisto (Pesaro e Urbino) as we were able to retrace its founding deed, drafted on 24 March 1124 AD on a mountain called Monte dei Fabbrì. Likewise, the castle of Faggiola Nuova (Valmarecchia, RN), investigated through stratigraphic analysis (Ermèti & Sacco, 2006), was established on a completely new site over the thirteen century by the Lords della Faggiola who would become, shortly after, one of the most powerful Ghibelline families in the area’s political arena.

At this particular moment in history, secular and religious power took advantage of an optimum climaticum and built castles and monasteries on hilltops. The Benedictine monastery of San Michele Arcangelo del Sasso (Simone) was built at 1200 m.a.s.l., whereas the hermitage of Madonna del Faggio (Monte Copiolo) stands at about 1400 m.a.s.l. and the castles of Monte Acuto (PU) and Faggiola Vecchia (RN) were established at 1100 m.a.s.l.

In the diocese’s cathedral, in parish churches and chapels stone decoration is renovated, also thanks to travelling workers and artisans specialised in stone moulding (Bianchi, 1996) like the famous Magistri Comacini, from Lombardy. The analysis of material culture by means of stratigraphic surveys shows that trade resumed and that a considerable amount of money also started circulating thanks to the wages paid to soldiers of fortune, for which the area was well known.

The landscape, as a whole, evolve: land surveys results show that the area became densely populated, especially hilltops, although settlements took different forms. Dozens of churches were built and hospitals were erected along the main roads, to help both pilgrims and the less fortunate. Among these a special mention deserves the hospital of Serra degli Olmi, whose presence is documented from AD 1150 onwards, the hospital of Pietracuta, on the Ariminensis road, the hospital of San Lazzaro dei Lebbrosi in Ponte Cappuccini and the hospital della Misericordia di Monte Copiolo (Sacco, in press). Mills (and fulling mills) were built along the rivers. The oldest one is the mill “Mulino Bosco di Monte Copiolo” (basin of River Conca) whose presence is documented from the fourteenth century and which is still functioning today.

Between the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century, population increased and some castles in Montefeltro were not able to host the increase within their walls anymore. The first built-up outside the castles’ walls areas started being built. Some of these had no defence walls (like the castles of Piagnano, PU); some others did, thus turning turning castles into broader settlements. At the same time, survey results suggest that the area became one of loose-knit population, winning lands back through the founding or spontaneous growth of new villages without defence walls in the countryside (often called, in the Montefeltro
area: Vile or Ca'; Sorrentino, 2007). Place-name data show that soils underwent major ploughing between the twelfth and the thirteenth century. Uncultivated lands were reclaimed with a phenomenon called "ronchi" (from the Latin verb runco/are meaning to weed, to reap, to eradicate weeds, from which we have the terms runco/onis = hoe and runcatio = weeding). Meanwhile tower-houses were still being built at least until the fifteenth century, as testified by many a painting, among which are the works by Piero della Francesca.

The fourteenth century black death pandemic quite likely hit the area, affecting the increase in population, but new forms of settlement such as castles, hamlets, villages and isolated houses had laid a solid foundation, rooting them in an area, Valmarecchia and Valconca, that is still famous today for its landscape bearing clear traces of medieval monuments (Fig. 5).

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