ISTRIA (CROATIA): ANCIENT SETTLEMENTS IN LANDSCAPE

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PREHISTORY

The Mediterranean setting of Istria, a Kuro-Balkan region in the Northern Adriatic, has deeply influenced the settlement of the territory. The relationship between the geomorphology of the land and the anthropogenic/antropic landscape is clearly visible since the earliest prehistoric periods (caves in the and later in the open in the Mousterian, Neolithic, Eneolithic). With the Egtalian Age, the scheme changes, and new settlements were built on hilltops (ris: castellum, crast, protov). The natural landscape is well suited for this purpose, because Istria has plenty of hilltop areas, with promontories 20-40 m above the surrounding terrain. This is especially true of the area around Rovinj and Poreč, but also elsewhere on the whole peninsula. They are easily defended, and were chosen for permanent settlement in the Bronze Age (1500-1000 BC) and Iron Age (1000-100 BC). They had at least three complementary functions: habitation, housing and shelter for animals. A lot of attention was given to the planning and construction of the enclosures in the Kifflum.

The analysis of the territory has revealed that the hilltops were not randomly positioned, but one on the most important point, was the centre of a group of settlements that were somewhat socially connected. The grouping of hilltops reflects the social organisation, but the lack of other data makes it impossible to be more specific.

The hilltops appear to be the centre of a group of similar but smaller settlements are always in a protected position, not visible from far away, never above the open coast. This is the case of Asinonc, Pola, Albion, and others.

THE FIRST TRANSITION

The hilltop settlements were conquered by the Romans in 177-BC, but the Romanisation proper started after 50 BC, when the colonies of Pola and Poreč were founded on the southern coast. During these 120 years, the Romans did not intervene blindly in the region. It seems that they only placed military observation points along the coast, because their main aim was to safeguard the sea route along the coast, by controlling the uninhabited coast. Fortunately, no traces of such settlements have been found, or identified. Only recently a study of such hilltops that present traces of roman age occupation has started to give some new data.

The excavation of one hilltop, Monte Roccas near Venar, started in 2014, and at the moment it seems that it was inhabited in the Bronze Age, and then again during the 2nd-1st century BC, but not after that. In the site is a prominent position, with a view over the sea, and also over part of the interior plain with a lot of potential hilltops. It may not be impossible that the settlement on the hilltops (only the beginning) no military-related material has been found.

CONCLUSIONS

From profusuity to the beginning of the Middle Ages, the anthropic landscape of Istria was transformed several times. Although the data at our disposal may be incomplete and non-conclusive, the main trends can be defined in a few general statements and/or hypotheses that should be verified and refined in future research.

- The hilltop settlements were not abandoned immediately after the Roman conquest, but the process started after the 1st century AD.
- In the period 100-AD, the hilltops descended into the valley and the coast, nearer to the lines of communication, giving birth to the villas system between the 1st and 2nd century.
- During Late Antiquity, some hilltops, particularly in the interior, have been heavily degraded in architectural quality and production quantity.
- Some villas in the coast have started to grow into new coastal and urban settlements some earlier hilltops have been reoccupied.
- Almost all villas in the interior have been abandoned after the 7th century, but some were transformed into villages, already Christened.

THE SECOND TRANSITION

The economy of the Roman agriculture lasted for a little more than a century. In the 2nd century the quantity of olive oil produced along the western coast diminished steadily in Late Antiquity after the 4th century AD. The production was for local sale only, but this did not result in drastic changes in the economic and natural landscape. Some land was abandoned, but the villa system persisted, although in different circumstances. In the 5th century, the economic crisis was a sharp decrease in production, and were converted into small agglomerations, confirming the previous hypothesis. Diagonal and Novigrad were called Camerini on the island of Rijeka. All those open from the 5th to the 7th century when they were abandoned.

Villae were transformed into small agglomerations under the pressure of refugees from Pannonia in the 5th – 6th century, when some hilltop settlements were resettled, giving birth to fortified medical towns on the coast (Pegae, Novigrad, Diagonal / Venar, Cutrofiano / Montiglione and Alvona / Tomal). In the interior (Vipavica / Strait, Rovinj / Dol, Albos / Latin and Poreč / Porec). Their revival only was confirmed in the 6th – 7th century, when the towns started to slowly settle in the postmedial, Christianised in the monasteries.

The archaeological remains of early medieval churches and churches in the open fields today are generally a diagnostic sign of a settlement site, but they are also most often situated in the remains of a classical roman villae rustic. So there are many instances of continuity, even in the case of villages which were abandoned in the Middle Ages after the post epidemics.

THE ROMAN PERIOD

The establishment of the colonies changed everything. The forum of several thousand Roman citizens was provided by the contractual organisation of the territory of the new towns, Felix and Poreč. Large portion of the best land along the western coast were requisitioned, the Istrian countryside newly renamed further Island, so almost all hilltops were abandoned. The new settlers received a land lot per head unit within the settlement grid, while the more distant areas were probably for communal use. In those areas some local inhabitants may have been given permission to remain, became a number of epigraphic monuments testify to the survival of pre-Roman names.

The main integrating factor was the economy. The Romans introduced the villa system (villa rustica), in which a farm was the centre of an agricultural insufficient estate. Olive oil and wine were produced and exported in great quantities, particularly to the Hellenistic region. The villae were a powerful means of romanisation, they represented the new way of life that became the model for the subdivided population to emulate.

The protection offered by the hilltops was no longer needed, and they were gradually abandoned. The field was transferred from the top of the hill to the valley beneath it (Alvona, Poreč, Pegae, ...). Romanisation led to the intensification of settlements to place less protected, but more comfortable.

The economic boom of the 1st century AD, when they were abandoned.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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