

Rural Poverty in the Roman Empire

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Introduction

The rural poor composed some 80-90% of the Roman population (Hopkins 1978). Despite their demographic importance, they remain, if not entirely a “people without history” (Wolf 1982), certainly a people about whom much is assumed and very little is known. The degree of our ignorance is, from the vantage point of other historical periods, somewhat shocking: we have only the vaguest idea where the rural poor lived, how many there were, what they ate, how long they lived and how they managed their resources. In short, as I shall outline below, we have very little unambiguous data from which to define Roman “poverty.”

The problem is one of evidence: from an ancient world of which only an estimated 3-5% of textual sources survive, virtually all of the extant sources are written by and for elite audiences. With the exception of Egyptian papyri that document small-scale property and exchanges, the rural poor play only walk-on roles in a literary, legal and epigraphic corpus whose purpose was never to document the lives of poor people. The lack of data has produced, if not a lack of interest, a paucity of studies dedicated specifically to the problem of rural poverty. The studies that do touch on these issues are principally concerned with other things – with land tenure and manpower, with macro-economic questions of growth and productivity, with agricultural practice. Because at least some of these are issues that elites cared about, these are topics on which our sources are more forthcoming, and thus the “sideways” approach to the problem makes a certain amount of sense. However understandable the bias, Roman historians have found it increasingly uncomfortable that their topic has proceeded with so little attempts to make systematic sense of the majority of their population.

This paper stems from my own interventions in this problem as an archaeologist. Its first half presents a state of the field on many (but not all) of the major issues confronting an understanding of the Roman rural poor. It focuses specifically on the work done by Roman historians and archaeologists, and only references the broader field of “peasant studies” as it has influenced these studies (c.f. Bernstein and Byers 2001). The second half presents in summary form the results of my excavations in western Tuscany designed to analyze the spaces and economies of Roman rural poor in this region. The project is the first systematic attempt to excavate Roman peasant farms and houses, to use archaeological data to understand diet and agricultural strategies, and to integrate this data within an investigation of landscape. In brief, the preliminary data from the project suggest a more adaptive, economically-dynamic vision of the Roman poor than has been heretofore assumed, with a wide diversity of wealth, a potentially different diet and agricultural regime than many have supposed, and with greater access to and intervention in external markets.

In the work that follows, I shall use the short-hand “peasant.” While the term carries potentially unhelpful historical baggage, it remains widely used by ancient historians. I shall define the term here simply to refer to small-scale agriculturalists. This is a terse and purposefully broad definition and differs significantly from the classical definition, proposed by Shanin and adopted by most ancient historians, of “small producers who, with the help of simple equipment, their own labor and that of their

families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for meeting obligations of the holders of political and economic power and reach nearly total self-sufficiency....” (Shanin 1980, 39) In the summary that follows, I shall suggest that it is precisely the layered assumptions contained in this definition – particularly about peasant economies – that have made progress on the problem difficult (c.f. the debate in peasant studies: Chayanov 1966; Shanin 1980; vs. Popkin 1979, DeVries 1974). The problem of peasant economies are particularly pertinent to my own project, as economic indicators as material remains are more readily found in the archaeological record than other factors, such as social relationships. That being said, the project has also attempted to use proxy data to understand other aspects of peasant experience, particularly their perceptions and shaping of space.

1. State of the Field

The below is intended as a basic introduction to Roman peasants. It does not pretend to be comprehensive, either in subject matter or bibliography, but focuses on those issues upon which our project was able to cast some light.

1. 1 Finding Peasants

In a 1979 article, historian Peter Garnsey attempted to gather the limited textual, and more abundant ethnographic data on Roman peasants to analyze where they might have lived (Garnsey 1979). He suggest, largely based on early modern comparisons, that northern and central Italian Roman peasants lived in dispersed small farms, while southern peasants lived in villages and commuted to distant and dispersed fields. Garnsey’s article remains one the only study dedicated specifically to finding peasants (c.f. Witcher 2006), and it was written prior to the widespread application of the technique now held to be the most useful to the problem – namely archaeological field survey.

Archaeological field survey is held to present the best possibility of locating peasant farms and habitations. Surface survey, the most widely used survey technique, assumes that concentrated scatters of artifacts on the surface represent places of human activity below the surface – typically termed “sites” (Haselgrove, Millett and Smith 1991; Francovich, Patterson and Barker 2000). More sporadic surface finds that lack any spatial cohesion and are particularly sparse in their coverage have been termed “off-sites,” and their significance has been debated (Bintliff and Snodgrass 1991). Surface survey involves teams of surveyors, spaced at regular intervals, walking in lines across the countryside, observing and/or collecting surface artifacts, especially ceramics, recording the size of the scatters and mapping them. These artifacts are then dated, if they contain datable ceramics, and the function of the site is estimated by the size of the scatter and its artifactual composition. Typical functional categories employed in Italian surface survey include villa (at the wealthiest end of the spectrum), “fattoria,” a combination farm/processing site, in the middle, and farm or habitation at the smallest/poorest end.

Field survey in Italy was begun with what remains the most ambitious survey project to-date, the South Etruria Survey, that covered a large area NE of Rome (Potter 1979). Never completely published and now undergoing major revisions in its mapping and chronology (Patterson 2004), the South Etruria Survey nonetheless presented a sprawling and at the time, convincing picture of overall settlement and its changes over

time in the Roman *suburbium*, and established surface survey as an accepted tool in the study of the Roman landscape. Furthermore, the South Etruria Survey excavated some of the sites it detected, including a few of the smallest recorded scatters. Subsequent, more limited surveys followed on its heels, around the city of Cosa, along the Tuscan coast and inland valleys, and in the Apennine valleys in Molise (usefully summarized and reviewed in Barker ed. 1995; Morely 1996; Patterson 2006; Vaccaro 2011).

Most of these surveys have assumed that isolated peasant homes are represented by the smallest, poorest scatters found in a given survey, or by large, but poor scatters that represent “villages” (c.f. Greek surveys, which propose a variety of functions for these scatters: Bintliff et al 2002). The size and “poorness” of the smallest/poorest category, however, varies enormously by individual survey and thus what is considered a peasant site likewise varies enormously and is difficult to compare from region to region (Alcock and Cherry 2004). In part based on the results of the few excavation of these sites by the South Etruria and other Tuscan surveys (Jones 1963; Delano Smith and Gadd 1986; Perkins and Attolini 1987; Motta 1997) it has been suggested that even the smallest-poorest “sites” are too large and grandiose to be the homes of the poorest rural dwellers (Garnsey and Saller 1976, 76). Rather, these might be represented by the so-called “off-sites,” whose sparse and fragmentary remains might reflect the few durable remnants of buildings primarily built of mud, wood and straw, and whose denizens made little use of bulk-manufactured ceramics (Pettegrew 2001; c.f. Bintliff and Snodgrass 1988). Finally, others have claimed that peasant houses are not recoverable through surface survey (Garnsey and Saller 1976, 44). Surface survey is by nature a sampling strategy, and its results are strongly impacted by visibility caused by modern land use. Furthermore, it has been argued that even in land under regular aeration, small sites only sporadically produce surface scatter and thus even the most comprehensive survey can detect only a percentage of historically extant sites (Terrenato and Ammerman 1996). These limitations might suggest that peasant sites were simply too small and too friable to be regularly detectable through any survey techniques.

Other problems accrue to the data from surface survey. No surface survey to-date in Italy has been designed specifically to investigate peasants as a comprehensive issue. Rather most have been aimed either to elucidate the process of “Romanization” – how the coming of Roman domination impacted ‘indigenous’ (Etruscan, Samnite) land use, and/or to describe the economic changes wrought by the formation of empire – the development of slave agriculture and the development of commercial wine-export industries. The data on the poorest rural settlements is thus typically inserted one of two teleological narratives – the decline (or more limited survival) of the peasant village with the coming of Roman hegemony and economies, and the decline (or more limited survival) of the peasant free-holder with the advent of the slave-run, wine-producing villa (e.g. Potter 1979; Carandini et al 2002; Cambi 2004; Patterson 2006; Launaro 2011). These narratives impact even the data-gathering process; variability within small or poor sites is largely unrecorded as material footprint of the peasant in question is largely assumed, while analysis is restricted to questions of date and topography – i.e. when did peasants “decline,” and in what topographic pockets did they survive.

In part for this reason and in part because of a tacit importation of modern Anglo-American rural site types onto Roman landscapes, the functional categories applied to surface scatters have seen only minimal discussion. While the definition of “villa” has

seen a certain amount of debate (Potter 1980; Marzano 2007), the other categories – farm, house, fattoria, are largely accepted as reasonably reliable (c.f. Witcher 2006 a and b). In particular, only a few surveys have raised the possibility that small surface “sites” may not represent habitations as all, but other kinds of installations – animal byres, processing sites, seasonal work camps, shelters etc (Roman: Barker and Grant 1991; Rasmussen 2001; Greek: Bintliff et al 2002). Were this the case, the implications for not only finding peasants, but also for the use of field survey to estimate rural population size (discussed below) would be significant.

These functional questions point to the biggest problem with survey evidence: in only a tiny handful of cases has it been checked by excavation. Only about 5-6 examples of smaller surface scatters have been excavated prior to the advent of our project: all of these were scatters of 1200-1750m² or more, and were found to represent buildings of a certain size (100-200m²) regularity of plan, and multitude of rooms (Jones 1963; Perkins and Attolini 1987; Barker 1995; Motta 1997) All had either courtyard or porch spaces, often used for agricultural processing (millstones, tanks, etc.), with other spaces presumed to be habitations, all contained under the roof of a single building. Other examples even larger and more elaborate than these are being excavated systematically around the city of Lucca (Ciampoltrini 2004; idem 2005). Thus, the very little excavation of the “smallest” surface scatters has focused on the largest/richest of these; the smaller scatters remain untested.

1. 2 Demographics

If Romanists are uncertain as to where peasants live, they are even more uncertain as to how many there were. It is widely assumed, largely on the basis of comparisons with other pre-industrial societies, that peasants formed around 90% of the Roman population, probably somewhat less (estimates range from 70-80%) for Italy (Hopkins 1978), where the enormous size of the city of Rome skewed the demographic profile. For those who assume a Malthusian dynamic governed all pre-industrial populations, the question is central to the problem of poverty and quality of life: if rural population numbers could be shown to be particularly high, pressure on land, food shortages and low wages would have pushed Roman rural dwellers down the poverty scale towards destitution (Jongman 1988; Lo Cascio 2009; Harris 2011).

Indeed, the evidence, such as it is, has led many scholars to these conclusions. Debate over the Roman population has focused on a series of Republican-period census figures reported by Pliny, Polybius and Livy and a consecutive series in 28 B.C., 8 and 14 B.C. reported by Augustus in his *Res Gestae*. The problem distills to this: the 69/70 B.C. census reports a number of 910,000, while some 60 years later, in 28A.D. Augustus reports 4,063,000. But what do the numbers record and do they record the same thing? Livy and others report that the Republican-period census counted only free men eligible for military service. If the Augustan numbers count the same thing, the population jump is extraordinary, bordering on the demographically impossible. Thus, the majority of scholars, including the first serious studies of the problem, understood the Augustan census as including other populations – women and children, although perhaps not infants (Beloch 1886; Brunt 1971; Hopkins 1978; Scheidel 2005). Other scholars note the absence of any evidence for a change in census-taking techniques, and prefer to read the figures *ad litteram* (Frank 1924; Lo Cascio 1994). The corresponding calculations for the

population of Augustan-period Italy have thus ranged from about 5-7 million (the so-called ‘low count’) to 14 million (the so-called ‘high-count’), for which the latter posit a high-water mark of 20 million by the early 2nd century.

The debate has become increasingly fierce in recent decades, and given the lacunose and problematic evidence, has polarized (with a couple exceptions) around the high or low numbers (Scheidel ed 2001; Launaro 2011). In attempt to broaden the evidentially basis of the debate, archaeologists have recently waded into the dispute (Perkins 1999; Carandini ed. 2002; Witcher 2005; Fentress 2009; Launaro 2011). Using the data from field survey as either direct or indirect evidence for population, scholars have extrapolated from individual or combined surveys (themselves only samples of a total landscape) to estimate total population sizes. In Italy most such estimates have proceeded by extrapolating from the sampled area a density per site type for the total area (e.g. 2 farms and 1 villas per km² in the suburbium) (Witcher 2005), either assigning each functional category an estimated population size (e.g. a villa= 15-50 people, a farm = 5-15 people), and multiplying these populations by site density. While only two of these studies addressed the problem of Italian population more broadly, they have tended to support lower population numbers. A more recent attempt has more simply catalogued site-type increase or decrease from 200-100 A.D., and used these crude directional indicators to test the high and low-count scenarios (Launaro 2011). This study concluded that site types of all kinds generally increase in number across the peninsula, that population free population must be increasing, and thus that the high-count numbers must be more or less correct.

When peasants enter the demographic debate it is typically as a foil to slaves: the low-count methodology typically requires an overall decline in the free, male population of Italy since the 2nd century B.C. and a concomitant rise in the slave population. Those who favor the high count tend to see a general demographic expansion that included small landowners. Less commonly demographic size has been related to issues of impoverishment. Both the high and low estimates have been seen as representing high pressure on land and resources. The low count has been seen to translate (assumingly only 40% of the land was in use at a given time, due to fallowing, non-productive land, etc.) into population densities not reached until the early Modern period, and thus for “unusually” (and unsustainably) high pressure on land and food resources (Jongman 1988; Frier 2001; Morley 2006; Lo Cascio 2009). High-counters have tended to assume that high population numbers lead through Malthusian pressures to increasingly straightened circumstances on the part of the rural poor such that the majority would have hovered between subsistence and destitution. Others have suggested socio-structural strategies that would have mitigated population pressures on the land – migration to the city of Rome or into the army, permitting the expansion of the most viable farms, albeit briefly (Rosenstein 2004). Finally, proponents of massive Roman economic growth between the late Republic and 2nd c. A.D., have pointed to historical associations between increased economic growth and population growth – up to a point – and to the many indices for Roman economic expansion in this period, from numbers of shipwrecks to pollution data. For the most part, these studies have not concerned themselves with whether or not rural dwellers partook of these developments, although some have suggested that the “trickle-down” was significant (Wilson 2002; Jongman 2009; Temin 2006).

1.3 Property and Status

This is the vantage point on peasant circumstances that has seen the most study, most of it in the context of two debates: the fate of the small freeholder during the late Republic, and the development of the “colonate” during the late empire. Both of these are arguments about the nature of Roman land tenure, while the first is additionally a debate about Roman modes of production.

Ever since Toynbee’s great study of the Hannibalic Wars and its impact on peninsular Italy, it has been assumed that Rome’s overseas conquests wrought fundamental changes on the lives of the rural poor at home (Toynbee 1965). Central to this notion is the importation of large quantities of slave labor, derived from these conquests, for use on Italian agricultural estates. The size of this slave population has been hotly debated, as has its extent (summary in de Ligt 2006): while original theories had the “slave villa” dominant throughout the whole of Italy, more recent assessments recognize a more limited range in central Italy, perhaps only along the Tuscan and Campanian coasts (Morely 1996; Marzano 2007). It has been widely accepted, at least until recently, that the spread of rural slavery spelled the decline of the small freeholder. Slave labor, one influential argument goes, was at preferred by landowners (even though it wasn’t cheap), and allowed landowners to expand their holdings and engage in specialized cash crops, particularly wine, destined for the urban domestic and by the mid-2nd B.C. through the late 1st c. A.D., overseas market. The size of such slave-run, surplus-driven estates was large, and thus land-grabs drove peasants from their farms into the cities or the army (Hopkins 1978).

The field surveys of the 1970’s and 80’s seemed to confirm this narrative, documenting a dramatic decline in the number of small sites and the continuation of many large ones. The chronology and topography of this shift, however, fail to wholly support the “death of the small farmer” narrative: it is now clear that small sites expand as villas expand and are often spatially attracted to them, while the decline of villas beginning the late 1st and early 2nd c. A.D. is accompanied by a decreasing number of small sites (Laurano 2011). More recent analysis of the textual basis for the argument has likewise documented a continuity of small freeholders, as well as a mixture of slavery and tenancy in most, if not the majority, of central Italian villas (de Neeve 1984; Rosafio 1993; Kehoe 1997). Furthermore, survey in inland areas has suggested that the villa versus freeholder/tenant binary may not have been prevalent everywhere (Cambi et al. 1994). The discovery of large, stable sites that have been labeled “villages” might indicate other modes of land-tenure, or simply different kinds of settlement still managed by small farms or tenancy (c.f. Foxhall 1990).

The second debate concerns tenancy and has also been framed as a downward slanted teleology in which the rural dweller ultimately loses. Later imperial law codes and other sources make increasing reference to *coloni*, or tenants, and seem to describe tenancy as something akin to slavery, in which tenants or their heirs were prevented from leaving their plots. Taken in combination with more anecdotal sources describing increasing indebtedness and tax burdens, and well as greater dependency on landlords or patrons, the late antique situation was held to represent a new kind of tenurial relationship – the colonate – in which rural tenancy was fast replacing what was left of small proprietorship, and in which tenants, always assumed to have occupied the lowest rung of

the rural ladder due to their lack of property – were forced into situations that only worsened their lot – farming marginal land, paying ever higher rents and taxes and unable to better their lot (Rostovtzeff 1910; Jones 1964).

Like the slave-villa argument, the late Roman “colonate” has been recently criticized (Carrié 1982; idem 1997; Banaji 1997; Grey 2007). The most cogent critiques have suggested that the term “colonus” is principally a tax category, and that the increasing attention to tenants is not an indication of the increasing commonality of rental, versus ownership, but is entirely motivated by the need to correctly assess tax obligation. More careful readings of the other sources describing tenant’s misery have noted their sharp rhetorical character – ranging from Christian apocalyptic to losers in an increasingly competitive market for rural patronage and influence (Grey 2006). Evidence from Egyptian papyri for rents and taxes are ambiguous: by some calculations one or both increase, decrease, or stay roughly the same (c.f. Bowman 1980; Bagnall 1985; Krause 1987, 311; versus Jones 1959; idem 1964, 468-9; Wickham 2005, 62-6). In short, neither the “rise” of tenancy nor its transformation into a new, more desperate kind of social category, is likely for the late empire.

What both of the traditional narratives share is not only a certainty in the decreasing fortunes of the rural poor as a constant of history, but a tendency to read onto peasants *a priori* ideas about the period in question: the wealth and luxury that marked the beginnings of the empire required the death of the virtuous small farmer of the Republic; likewise, the final centuries of that empire required a widening gap between rich and poor as indicative of moral and economic imbalance. Thus, the Roman rural dweller is readily, even obligatorily condensed into a monolithic category to better suite various decline-and-fall narrative. Salubrious, then, are recent attempts to draw attention to the wide range of wealth and status included in this category (Scheidel 2006; c.f. Brown forthcoming). Recent work on Italian and Egyptian land registers, for instance, has read these not simply as documenting the top 3-5% of the population’s grip on the majority of land (which they undoubtedly had), but somewhat less income disparity in rural villages that one might expect (Gini coefficients c. 0.4, with 1 being extreme disparity). These registers also describe a range of lower wealth categories who, based on rough calculations of their income via grain production, would have been able to comfortably live above subsistence levels. According to some calculations, these “middling” groups would have constituted perhaps 20-30% of the population. Similar observations from anecdotal sources have been made of the later Roman “coloni,” who exhibited an enormous range of wealth and status (Vera 1997). The possibility, if not probability that even the most basic legal and property categories conceal very real variation in peasant land sizes and wealth, has major implications when considering peasant lives.

1.4 Agricultural Practices

Until relatively recently, schematic readings of the Roman agricultural manuals suggested that Roman agriculture, particularly as practiced by small farmers, was relatively primitive and/or technologically unchanging. Extensive practices, involving low investment, low labor and low yields but carried out over larger areas, were thought to be the norm, at least by the late Republic (Jones 1964; White 1967; Frayn 1979). Recent work has, if not overturned this picture, at least complicated it. From a wide array of subjects, this discussion focuses on fallowing practices, the use of animal traction and

crops grown for cash. I draw on work for the Greek world where it is thought to be applicable in Italy.

Dry-farming was assumed to be the norm in Roman Italy, in which two years rainfall is collected to raise one year's crop by allowing fields to remain in fallow (White 1970). Thus, at any given time, half or less of the arable land was under cultivation. Manuring and legume-grain alternation were assumed to be known, but probably only practiced by large landowners. The Roman plow, with wooden ard, likewise seemed incapable of the plowing that would release deep moisture reserves – thus supporting the dry-farming scenario. More recent work has cast doubt on these assumptions, both through comparative ethnographic data, and through a re-reading of the Roman agronomists (Spurr 1986, Halstead 1987, Sallares 1991). A variety of fallowing regimes are described by Cato, Varro and Columella, including intercropping, biannual fallow, and alternation with legumes, and there seems no reason to suppose that these practices were not used by small landowners. The Roman plow has also been reinterpreted to suggest that a new, variable-depth, metal ard plough may have been introduced sometime between the 1st c. B.C. and the 2nd c. A.D., capable of varying depth depending on soil type and moisture (Spurr 1986).

The most pessimistic assessments of Roman peasant agriculture have the peasants themselves hitched to their own ploughs (Jongman 1988, 83-84; White 1970, 345; Sallares 1991, 312). Assuming that the expense of an oxen, donkey or horse would have been prohibitive, these assessments suggest a concomitantly bleak picture of the peasantry highly restricted in the amount of land they could bring under cultivation, and the relatively light (and thus low-moisture) soils they were able to plough. While this assumption is still repeated, it has been sharply contested by both studies of Greek agriculture (an environment even more inimical to animals than Italy) (Halstead 1987), which has suggested that even small landowners regularly used traction animals – either by owning them outright or sharing them (Lirb 1993). The costs of traction animals were outweighed by increased land under cultivation, increased yields and potentially decreased fallowing if manure was sufficient.

The new assessments that emphasize the diversity of fallowing regimes and use of animal traction cumulatively suggested that for most of our period, Roman (and Greek) agriculture might have been highly intensive rather than extensive, putting significant investment of both infrastructure and labor to produce maximum yields per unit area (Spurr 1986; Halstead 1987; Sallares 1991). Intensive strategies were, according to the agronomists, tailored to make the use of the significant variability in soil and climate found even within micro-regions. The agronomists' interest in purpose-built drainage, even of pasture land, maintenance of certain kinds of pasture, and manuring practices are likewise adduced in support of intensive intents. It should be noted that these studies do not necessarily suggest that Roman agriculture in Italy was “advanced,” but rather that it was directed, even at the level of the small holder, towards maximum productivity. What precisely that productivity was in terms of yields remains a vexed, and probably unsolvable question – the agronomists provide numbers anywhere from 13 to 4:1 and sorting exuberant exaggeration from moralizing pessimism have proven hard (Evans 1981; Garnsey and Saller 1987, 77-82; Sallares 1991; Gallant 1991). Were the upper end of the spectrum correct (one suggestion has 8-9:1 for Italian peasant freeholders) (Garnsey and Saller 1987, 81-2), this would suggest historically relatively high yield rates

(one medieval estimate for Tuscany is 5:1), while the more prevalent, pessimistic assessments (Frayn 1979; Evans 1981; Sallares 1991, 374-6, Gallant 1991) point to yields that would place small landowners in frequently precarious positions given the periodic crop failure typical of variable Italian rainfall. The more pertinent point is that yields probably varied enormously, not only between regions but even within them, and that “productivity” is a factor of both yield, size of holdings and the populations it must support (Sallares 1991), on the latter two of which we are no better informed than the former.

1.5 Diet and Mortality

Roman peasant diets seem to have been heterogeneous – or heterogeneous around a limited set of food groups. Literary sources name a wide range of wild cereals, legumes and root vegetables as being grown and/or collected by the rural poor (Frayn 1979, ch.4). The major staple food was grain – not only wheat, but barley, oats, emmer, and spelt – and by some estimates constituted some 70-75% of the diet (Foxhall and Forbes 1982). A dish of boiled pulses (any of the leguminous cereals) is specifically named as the quintessential peasant dish by several sources, while barley is described as an undesirable, but serviceable food for humans in times of shortage, as well as animal fodder. In general, it is assumed that the rural poor consumed only limited quantities of olive oil and wine – the other elements of the Mediterranean Triad.

It is likewise universally assumed that meat was too expensive – either on the market or as an inefficient use of extant vegetable resources – to form a regular part of the Roman peasant diet (Garnsey 1999; MacKinnon 2004). Isotope analyses on skeletons from a predominantly poor urban cemetery at Velia on the southern Italian coast confirm this, and suggest that even poorer urban coastal populations may not have had widespread access to fish protein (Craig et al 2009). However, the same study showed significant variation in diet, and access to protein, which did not correspond to differences in the wealth of graves/grave goods and thus to social class. More prevalent were differences between sexes, with women consuming less protein than men overall – a finding echoed in similar studies at Ostia (Prowse 2005). Less convincing, but worth noting is the results from a cemetery at Vallerano, in the Roman *suburbium*, which is thought to represent workers from a nearby villa (Cucina et al. 2006). Caries, or dental cavities, were considerably lower here than at contemporary urban necropoleis, suggesting to the excavators a diet relatively lower in cavity-causing carbohydrates and higher in protein. The absence of isotope analysis and for the most part, analysis of any kind on rural necropoleis leaves this hypothesis unconfirmed.

Were inland peasants eating significant protein, the chief candidates for such protein would be sheep and goat; these are the easiest of the domesticated animals to raise, they graze on a variety of pasture types, they provide wool and milk over their life cycle, and numerically they dominate in Roman Italian faunal assemblages (MacKinnon 2004). However, in many of these assemblages, cattle often represent more overall meat. Unfortunately, the faunal evidence from very few rural non-elite sites has been studied in Italy, and thus the faunal data has yet to verify these claims.

In general, mortality in the Roman world seems to be quite high, with life expectancies of about 30 and with mortality concentrated in infancy: evidence from tomb stones, comparison with modern mortality tables from non-industrialized populations,

and the limited (and controversial) skeletal data, all broadly confirm this (overview in Scheidel 2001). The much-publicized data from Herculaneum which documented a group of tall, well-fed persons fleeing from Vesuvius, cannot, at this stage, be said to present a major challenge to the *communis opinio* (Bisel 1991) but even with the populations of Rome there appears to be major variation in health and mortality (Kilgrove, unpublished paper). Somewhat more compelling, but still problematic, are the studies on stature: stature has come to be widely used as an indicator for nutritional status, and thus a potential window on standards of living (Floud et al. 2011). However, two major studies on exclusively Italian populations from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. came to opposite conclusions, one finding that mean stature over the whole period was high relative to early modern populations (c. 168.3m for males) (Kron 2005), while another, more chronologically specific study, found Roman mean stature to be considerably lower (164.4m), and lower than both the Iron Age and Medieval populations before and after (Giannecchini and Moggi-Cecchi 2008).

High mortality was seemingly caused by the same factors that produced similar rates in pre-industrial Europe, namely disease along with the acerbating affects of periodic malnutrition. Malnutrition is thought to have been endemic, a notion supported by most of the skeletal studies, and caused principally by the Mediterranean climate's low annual rainfall whose fluctuations produced periodic crops shortages (Garnsey 1999). The preponderance of cereals, and lack of protein in the diet has also been blamed, a notion perhaps supported by isotope analysis from Ostian skeletons, where those with the greatest longevity seem to have been eating relatively more protein (in this case probably fish) (Prowse et al 2005).

To what extent these circumstances were exacerbated or mitigated in the rural poor we simply do not know. Ancient written evidence on mortality – from tombstones and mummy tags – is almost entirely urban. The few skeletal collections from Roman-period Italy to have been scientifically analyzed are also overwhelmingly from urban populations – although it is not clear to what extent the population of a small city like Lucus Feronie or Isernia (Manzi et al. 1999; Belcastro et al. 2007) should be considered exclusively “urban” since many of the population will doubtless have farmed the lands around.

1. 6 Subsistence and Markets

One of the classic definitions of the peasant, from any period/place, is their practice of subsistence economies, producing enough to meet the needs of the household, relying principally on the household for labor, and avoiding significant exposure to outside markets in the form of cash crops. It is a truism in Roman history that the Roman peasant practiced subsistence agriculture, although it is a conclusion reached more by the assumptions of the “peasant” definition than through systematic study. The few attempts at calculations have either used the presumed plot size of the smallest freeholder (Evans 1981) or the average wages of agricultural workers in Egypt (Prell 1996; Harris 2011) to estimate either agricultural yield or food purchasing capacity (c.f. Gallant 1991). Many of the former class of studies assume a subsistence-only caloric value as one of their constants, and thus many calculations of agricultural yield are actually founded on subsistence-only production (Evans 1981, Jongman 1988), while the second approach has

calculated that the wages of agricultural workers were barely sufficient to support themselves, let alone a family.

Objections to this scenario have not only critiqued the assumptions upon which such calculations rest – the unknown quantity of yields, the enormously varying price of wheat, the fact that agricultural laborers almost certainly did not rely on wages as their sole source of income – but have noted also the problematic definition of subsistence which underlies them. Classic definitions of subsistence, it is argued, wrongly omit surplus production both for storage in lean years (Forbes and Foxhall 1995), and for market sale, which Greco-Roman peasants, particularly tenants, almost certainly engaged in to meet tax and rent demands (Foxhall 1990). The equation of “peasant” with “subsistence” also ignores the range of socio-economic categories to which rural dwellers belonged; as described above, some calculations of the sizes of rural properties (Osborn 2006; Scheidel 2006) found a sizable group with “middling” wealth, who, when one applies the same (admittedly problematic) productive/caloric calculations, would have been well above survival levels.

The issue of market interaction is particularly interesting: by any comparative estimates, the Rome empire witnessed the production of “consumer goods” on a major scale, archaeologically most visible of which are table ceramics, but probably also included textiles, glass and other “durable” goods. That is, while Roman economists debate the nature of the Roman economy and Roman growth, even the so-called primitivists would agree that consumer-good production was on a scale not witnessed again until perhaps the Late Middle Ages (Finley 1999). The consensus is that Roman peasants did not participate in these markets either as producers or consumers to any significant degree – to produce cash crops for market would endanger their own subsistence-oriented food supply (Garnsey 1999), while the autarchic impulse, either through custom or exigency, lead them to make or purchase most non-agricultural goods within their own communities. The fact that these communities were in many cases incapable of producing these essentials – salt, iron, millstones, etc. – and thus the requirement that some rural dwellers must have been engaged with trade and exchange, has not been seen as particularly problematic. The theory is buttressed by the general acceptance of Finley’s “consumer city” model, which holds that Roman cities and urban elites, were the principal and indeed, only real consumers of consequence, while the countryside simply provided the agrarian wealth that supported consumption (Finley 1999; Jongman 1983, c.f. Mattingly and Salmon eds. 1990; Parkins ed. 1997).

While archaeologists have noted in passing that the widespread presence of imported ceramics on even the smallest surface scatters points to the expansion of Roman consumer goods outside the city (e.g. Ward-Perkins 2005), the problem has seen little focused attention. The work that has been done tends to challenge the extra-market peasant model. In a pair of studies, one scholar combined an anecdotal collection of literary evidence describing peasant market interactions, with alternative models of peasant activity that emphasize their dependence on markets for consumer goods (de Ligt 1990, idem 1991). The study concluded that peasants represented a major consumer group and their consumer needs were met through the intermediary of the village (c.f. Whittaker 1990), which acted as both a seat of local craft production and as a intermediary between urban-made goods and rural farmers. The second study is explicitly archaeological, and although it does not address Roman Italy, its methodologies make it

worthy of consideration here. The excavation of two Roman-period villages in the Netherlands provided an opportunity to document storage facilities, and through archaeobotanical and faunal analysis, compare production with the estimated caloric needs of the population (Goot et al). The study was able to document significant production beyond subsistence needs in both grains and animals, which the excavators assumed was marketed for extra-village sale (rather than storage for lean years). The significant presence of imported ceramics and glass further indicated the use of market surplus to buy consumer goods.

Directly allied to the question of the market is the issue of monetization. In general, it has been assumed that the Roman countryside had little use for and/or exposure to money, except perhaps at major consumption points like way-stations or villas. The peasant, it is assumed, largely engaged in barter. The relatively smaller quantities of coins found on rural sites (Greene 1986), and the fact that rural hoards in the northern provinces contain only high-value coins, unusable for everyday exchange (Crawford 1970), have been seen to support the claim. Neither of these claims are made on the basis of systematic study: the few such studies that have been carried out for Italy have pointed to considerable monetization of the countryside which only ends in the mid-6th c. A.D. (Patterson and Rovelli 2004).

1.7 Conclusions

Aside from emphasizing our paucity of knowledge and great uncertainty about the most basic of issues, some other observations of an evidentiary and historiographic nature suggest themselves. The absence of systematic data on the Roman peasantry has had two major effects on the extant scholarship. The first is, as noted at the outset, that the most influential studies have been targeted at adjacent topics – the nature of the Roman economy, the problem of slavery and tenancy, broader questions of mortality and diet – rather than addressing the lives of the Roman poor directly. The influence of Finley's seminal study of the ancient economy is an important case in point: Finley's influential argument for a "primitive" Roman economy, centered around consumer cities and underdeveloped countryside, lurks behind many of the assumptions and claims made about the peasantry, even though Finley himself had little to say on the subject of peasants. The lack of data has also resulted in a widely acknowledged, but nonetheless prevalent practice of using anecdotal evidence – typically a cherry-picking of ancient sources of always problematic rhetorical cast – or at best case studies (mostly the Egyptian papyri). The result has been arguments which make radically different claims from the same data and thus, at least in recent years, a kind of paralysis around many issues such as demographics, productivity, and "growth." It is noteworthy in this respect the minor role archaeology has played in these debates, which are almost entirely dominated by historians. Material culture represents a potentially enormous cache of data, one which also has its problems and particularities of interpretation, but is no less important for these. The fact that this cache has gone largely untapped was one of the motivations for our own project

2. The Roman Peasant Project, 2009-2011

The Roman Peasant Project was founded in 2009 by myself, Emanuele Vaccaro (Cambridge University) and Mariaelena Ghisleni (Università di Siena) in a relatively

remote part of western Tuscany¹. The purpose of the project, it should be noted at the outset, was not to prove or disprove any of the extant scholarly models on peasants described above. Its goals were more modest: 1. to prove that peasant farms could be successfully detected, using a combination of surface and geophysical survey, and excavated; 2. to demonstrate that evidence about architecture, diet, and land-use could be successfully extracted from those remains, and thus show that archaeology might contribute more substantively than it has done to the problem of the Roman rural poor. Over the past three years we have excavated six sites associated with Roman peasant life (plus one medieval site), and compiled considerable, if still very preliminary, data sets on rural life, including some addressing the models that have been described above. However, I have generally tried to avoid quantitative extrapolations of the type that would make our results more immediately comparable to the *communis opinio*. The results presented here represent only six peasant sites, within one small region, of the millions that would have dotted the countryside of Roman Italy, not to mention the rest of the Mediterranean. They are thus no more representative of “peasant life,” at least at this juncture, than the kind of anecdotal textual evidence and its quantitative extrapolations that have characterized the field to date.

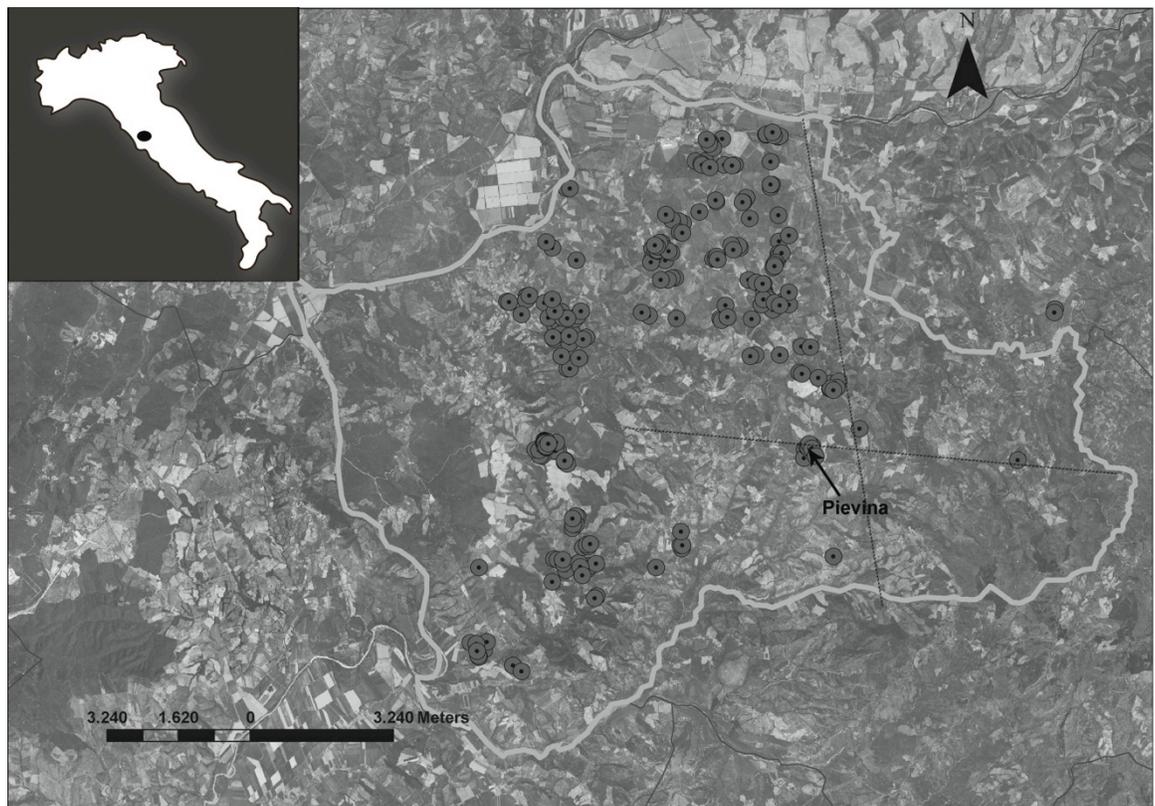


Figure 1: Study area and location of Roman-period sites and off-sites from surface survey.

2.1 Study Area:

¹ Team members include: C. Gray (History/Movement studies); A. Arnoldus (Geoarchaeology); M. MacKinnon (Zooarchaeology); A.M. Mercuri (Archaeobotany); F. Marani (Numismatics); P. Nanini (Kite Photography).

² Sizes categories: >0.05; 0.15-0.05; 0.15-0.5; 0.5-1; 1-2ha and 2+ha. Functional categories, which were

Based in the *comune* of Cinigiano (GR), the study area lies at the interface between the coastal plains, and the more mountainous inland territory of Montalcino (Figure 1). As such, it is topographically diverse – gently rolling hills and open valleys to the west, hilly vineyard-covered regions to the north, and the forested slopes of Monte Amiata to the east. Set between the via Aurelia and via Cassia, and some distance from the nearest Roman cities (c. 30km from Roselle or Saturnia), its position in the Roman period was peripheral – at least to the major axes of communication, loci of administration, and the major littoral production regions of southern Etruria. Archaeologically the region has seen little attention and the first systematic work was undertaken from 2006-2010 by one of the project directors.

That study used surface survey, combined with aerial photography and select geophysical survey to reveal some 467 sites and off-site scatters, nearly all of which were documented for the first time (Ghisleni 2010) (Figure 1). The region seemed ideal for the study of Roman peasant. Most sites were identified as small farms or agglomerated nuclei termed ‘villages’: only one villa was found. Owing to the continued centrality of modern grain production and relatively recent spread of viticulture with its deep plowing regimes, site preservation is relatively good. Relatively lower-level or ‘poor’ material culture outweighs signs of wealth, potentially simplifying the tracing of hierarchical relationships. Disadvantages also accrued to the study area. Its peripheral geography and concomitantly different material profile, including the more subdued villa presence, mean that many of the results would not necessarily apply to the coastal littoral and its seemingly distinct socio-economies.

2.2 Methodology:

One of the founding suppositions of the Project was that heterogeneity within the Roman rural poor probably greater than supposed. We also wanted to avoid the field’s tendency towards inductive conclusions based on case studies or anecdotal evidence, and instead recognize archaeology’s potential to produce multiple, systematically-derived data-sets. We also wanted to find ways to bridge the gap between excavation, with its emphasis on the single site, and field survey, with its more superficial data from many sites (cf. Haselgrove, Millett and Smith 1988, 2; Cunningham and Dreissen 2004; Attema and de Haas, 2005). We do so by excavating multiple small sites, at speed. We also attempt to excavate entire sites, including their yards and outlying areas; this both expands our collection of faunal, ceramic and botanical materials, and provides some sense of the use of “negative space,” outside the built environment.

The project focuses on the three smallest size categories identified by the 2006-2010 survey (>0.05; 0.15-0.05; 0.15-0.5ha), and any functional categories thereby included, as well as some scatters classed as off-sites.² However, rather than reinforcing

² Sizes categories: >0.05; 0.15-0.05; 0.15-0.5; 0.5-1; 1-2ha and 2+ha. Functional categories, which were developed to match only those size categories actually found: Village: 1-2ha; distinct concentrations of ceramic and construction material AND presence of artisanal installations, e.g. kilns; Villa: 1-3ha., abundant ceramic, presence of luxury architectural remains such as mosaics, columns, etc.; Large Settlement: 1-3ha.; spatial and wealth characteristics unclear; Farm: 0.05-0.15ha; ceramic and construction materials; presence of storage and/or transport ceramics (amphorae, dolia, etc.); House: 0.01-0.05ha; characteristics as above; interpreted as single-family house in small cases; Kiln: identified by presence of over-fired or waster ceramics, and/or darkened soil. Off-sites were defined as scatters measuring a meter or less, or somewhat larger, diffuse scatter producing 1-2 sherds. See Ghisleni, 2010.

a presumed association between peasants and small site size, other materially poor but spatially and functionally diverse sites are also examined, including sites classed as larger farms and villages.

All sites in the project were subjected to magnetometry survey prior to excavation, both to gain some insights as to their spatial relationship with surface scatter and to their functional character. The results have been mixed (see below), suggesting that magnetometry is mostly useful in determining the precise location of structures and other features within a scatter, but not for revealing the nature of those remains. We have not attempted other geophysical techniques, such as resistivity or ground penetrating radar (GPR) that might be more revealing.

In order to produce the multiple data clusters required by the project, we integrate practices common to rescue archaeology with standards of research archaeology (cf. Andrews, Barrett and Lewis, 2000), including use of mechanical excavation equipment to remove topsoil, high-resolution kite and boom-photography, in-process site photos, and more restricted use of hand-drawing. All sites are backfilled at the end of the season, permitting land to be returned to agricultural use immediately and fostering good relationships with local landowners. The micro-region around each site is subject to an environmental and topographic assessment, analyzing soil potential, geological and hydrological resources, and potential route-ways and barriers. Pollen samples are extracted from sealed contexts, while hand-sieving of both randomized and high-value contexts provides controls over faunal and paleobotanical samples.

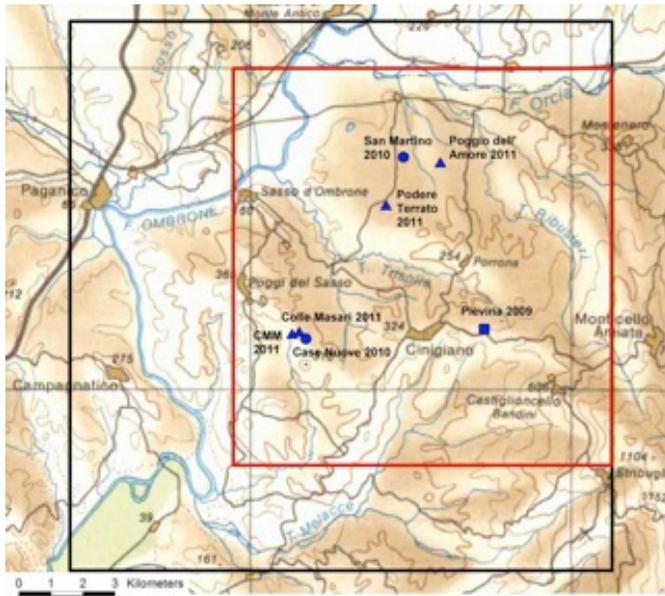


Figure 2: Map of sites excavated as of July 2011.

As of July 2011, we have excavated six Roman-period sites (Figure 2). These were: a possible late Republican farm *cum* late antique house at Pieveina (2009); a possible seasonal work site at San Martino (2010); an agro-processing point at Case Nuove (2010); another possible seasonal work site at Poggio del'Amore (2011); a

possible house with animal stabling at Podere Terrato (2011); and a field drain at Colle Massari (2011). The functional attributions are discussed more fully below³.

2.3 Finding Peasants and Rural Demographics

One of the most surprising results of the project, and the one with perhaps the most far-reaching implications, has been our difficulty in locating and defining peasant “houses.” Possibly two of the six sites can be identified as “habitations,” while the others represent other site-types, or through their ambiguous material culture, challenge our traditional functional categories.

The most unambiguous site is that of Pievina (Figures 3-4) (Ghisleni, Vaccaro and Bowes 2011). This was our pilot site and we made many mistakes in its excavation, not least choosing a site far too large to excavate in a single season. Thus, we uncovered only c. 21% of the site. The late Republican remains included a possible cistern for storing the outflow from a point of water seepage, a kiln, seemingly for tiles but also possibly for domestic ceramics, and a possible granary whose floor was raised on a series of piers. The “habitation” of this phase probably lay in an unexcavated area to the north. In the early 5th c. A.D. the site was reoccupied. The late antique building reused one of the granary walls for a small (4 x 4m), stoned-socled building with pisé walls and a tiled roof. To the east, a post-built extension to this building seemingly had thin wood/straw and mud walls and lay open at one end. Drains protected the site from inundation at two sides, while at the sides of the structure accumulated a rich midden, full of domestic and cooking wares, faunal and botanical material, and some 37 low value bronze coins. The relatively well-preserved stratigraphy, careful analysis of the changing ceramic patterns and a series of C-14 dates tentatively suggest that this phase lasted at most for a period of c. 50 years (c. 400-450A.D.), perhaps less. We tentatively identified this as a small house with extension for storage and/or animals (Figure 5).

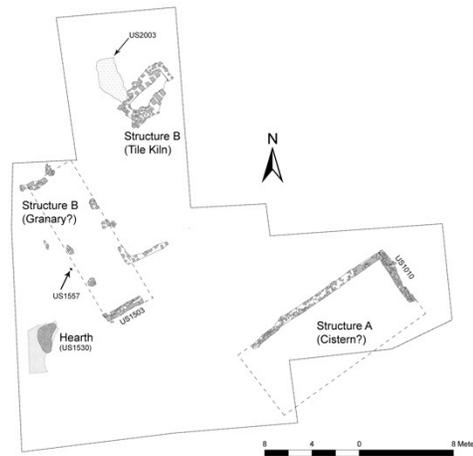


Figure 3: Pievina, late Republican phase

³ Preliminary results and data for the 2009 and 2010 seasons can be found at <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/romanpeasants/reports.html>. Final report for 2009 is Ghisleni, Vaccaro and Bowes 2011.



Figure 4: Pievina, late antique phase

At Podere Terrato, similar features appear, albeit in a more damaged setting and with far less material culture (Figure 6). A 5 x 5m stone-socled pisé room was surrounded on three sides by L-shaped extensions. The western of these had a pier support at one corner and was connected to the main room, suggesting an open shed or porch (Room 2),

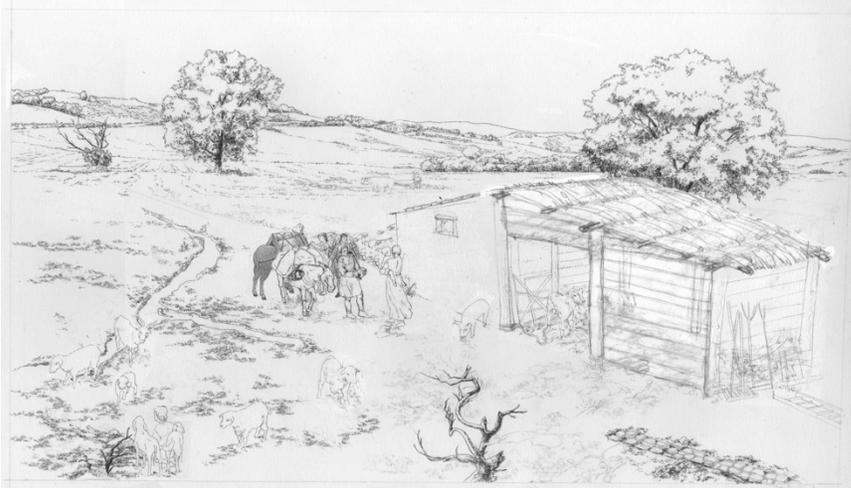


Figure 5: Pievina, reconstruction of the late antique phase

while the other extensions were also probably sheds or unroofed enclosures. The site was badly damaged by erosion and no installations or other in-situ remains were found. Just to the south, however, a large surface composed of multiple layers of beaten earth and broken tiles suggested the leveled surfaces of an outdoor yard. From these surfaces were found a series of five bronzes coins ranging from Augustus to Claudius, domestic and cooking wares, and a small collection of faunal material. 20m to the east of the site was excavated a portion of a substantial drain, whose large size and orientation parallel to the buildings suggested a field drain. We thus tentatively suppose that the structure was a small “domestic” space (Room 1) with approximately three-times its size in adjacent storage space, and that the occupants farmed the adjacent fields.

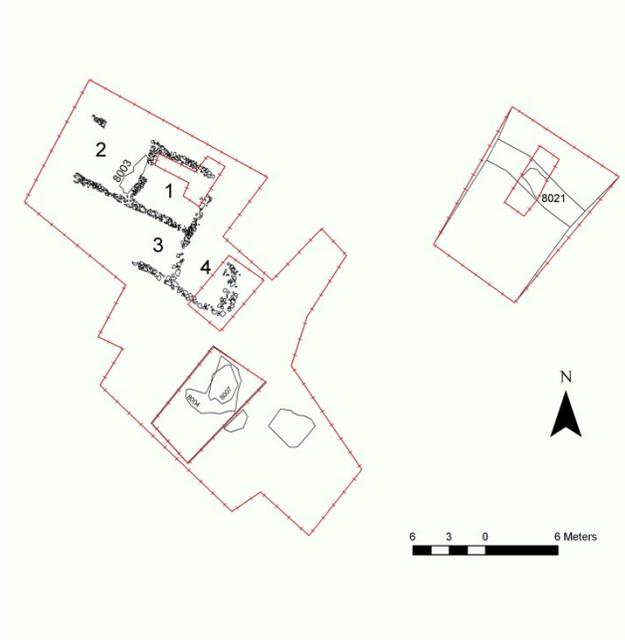


Figure 6: Podere Terrato

The other sites were revealed either very different types of functions, or challenged our assumptions about what constitutes “domestic” material culture. At Colle Massari, our first attempt to excavate an “off-site” scatter of very sparse ceramic and tiles revealed not a peasant house, but a substantial drain (Figure 7). Cut into the clay and then filled with a mixture of cobbles probably taken from the nearby fields, broken tiles and occasional cooking wares, the drain was found to empty an area marked by an intersection between clays and more sandy/loamy soils. The deposition here of fine clays suggests an ancient point of water seepage that had pooled at the surface. The drain was seemingly built to carry this water off and deposit it in a nearby natural ditch.

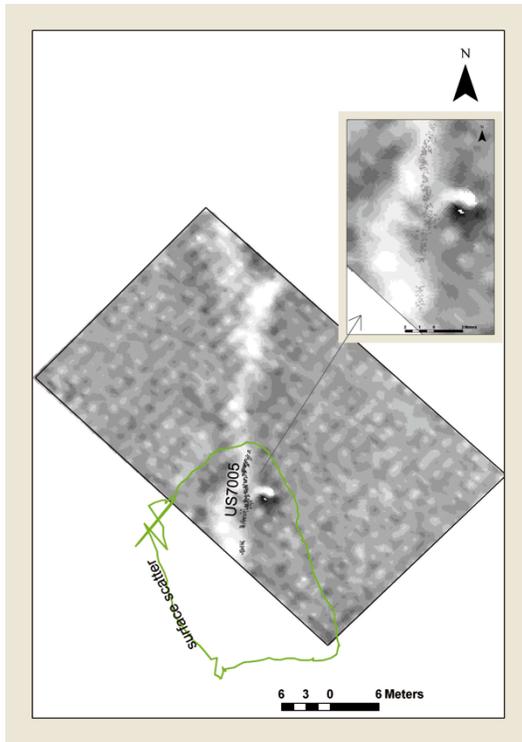


Figure 7: Colle Massari, showing geophysical results overlaid with excavated remains.

At Case Nuove, three hill-top surface scatters of 28x13m, 13x12 m, and 10x10m with small quantities of domestic ceramic were found to represent the various components of a small agro-processing point of late 1st c. B.C. origins (Figure 8). A waterproof cement (*opus signinum*) basin flanked by a deep-post holes and rectangular cuts in the virgin clay on one side, and the seat for a dolium or storage jar, on the other, seem to represent a press-installation. Residue analysis on the basin tentatively suggested the presence of a vegetable oil, while residues from discarded dolia point to wine. This, in conjunction with somewhat primitive arrangement of the press, may indicate a press used for a variety of functions (c.f. Foxhall 2007, 133). The small capacity of the tank (c. 60l), a fraction of the size of most excavated Roman wine/oil tanks, suggests small-scale activity. The possible multiple uses of the press may indicate collective use by the farmers of the immediate area, whose presence is suggested by c.40 surface scatters in the surrounding 5 km². The press was abandoned in the mid-1st c. A.D. – the time when surface survey indicates that the nearby villa (c. 500m to the NW) began to expand (Ghisleni 2009). In the 3rd c. the site received a cistern, while in late antiquity the site was reoccupied seemingly for winnowing (see below: Agricultural Strategies).

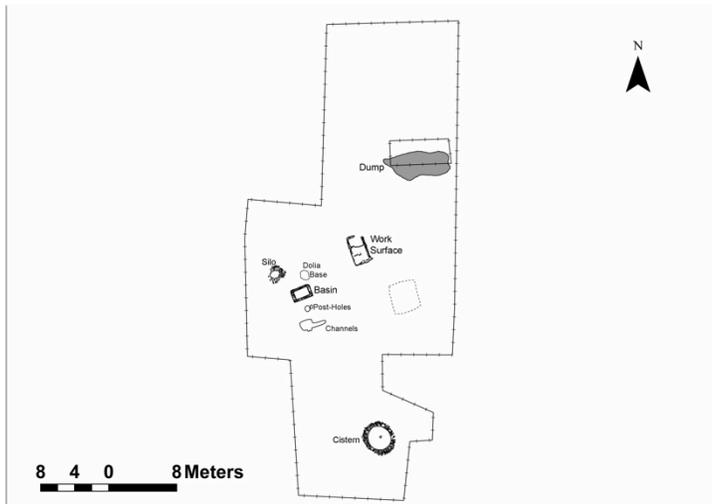


Figure 8: Case Nuove, all phases.

At San Martino and Poggio del' Amore, site definition becomes more ambiguous. Both were small (10x15-20m) surface scatters with tiny quantities of domestic ceramic, from which magnetometry survey revealed only the weakest anomalies. At San Martino was found a plough-damaged 7x6m structure, of which only the stone foundations of the walls and remains of a beaten-earth floor survived (Figure 10). The almost total absence of additional stone and roof tiles suggested a pisé structure atop a stone socle, entered via a north-facing door, with a single-pitched straw roof. Virtually no faunal material was recovered, and only tiny quantities of ceramics, mostly fine wares. No hearth or other installations were found. The site seems to have been in use only for a short time between

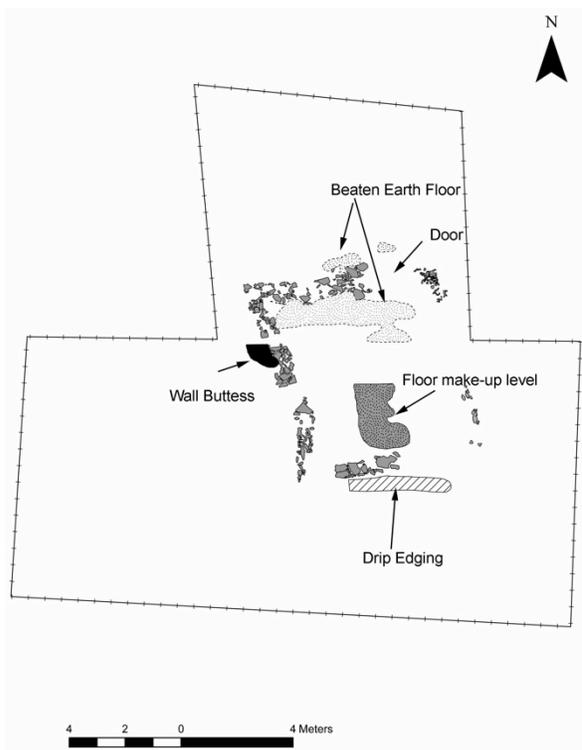


Figure 9: San Martino

the mid and late 1st c. B.C. and was abandoned by the Augustan era. Pollen analysis from the floor levels did not reveal any indication of the use of the structure for agricultural storage (an early hypothesis) (c.f. Figure 11). These factors, particularly the absence of clear evidence for routine cooking at the site which we assume to be one of the footprints of “the domestic,” lead us to suggest that the site was used only periodically, a shelter for work in the surrounding fields.



Figure 10: San Martino, reconstruction.

A similar situation was encountered at Poggio del'Amore where the site was far more badly damaged, but nonetheless produced a somewhat richer material culture (Figure 11). Here only one intact wall was found, plus the robbed out remains of a second, covered by a thick, intact layer of broken roof tiles. The latter suggests the structure had a roof and thus four walls, which must have been either purposefully robbed or destroyed by plowing. Outside the single preserved walls were two pits – one of which might have been a hearth except for the absence of charcoal and bones, and the second a seat for a *dolium* – perhaps to catch water. Virtually no faunal material and tiny quantities of ceramic echo the profile of San Martino, while a few sherds of vessel glass, representing perhaps two vessels, indicated a somewhat greater presence of consumer goods. Poggio del'Amore thus reveals yet a further spectrum of “domestic” activity: a similarly clear absence of cooking activity is combined with a sturdier structure and possible evidence for water storage. Does this amount to permanent occupation?

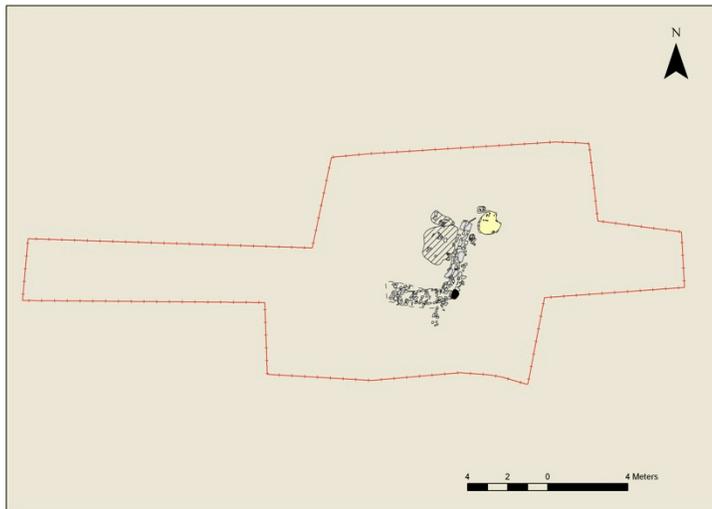


Figure 11: Poggio del'Amore

Further comparanda through further excavation may help, but simply assembling a “checklist” of domestic activity is unlikely to produce a satisfactory set of categories (c.f. Blanton 1994). For one, it is possible that the different material profiles are evident of different levels of wealth – as indicated by monetization, ceramic commodities and meat consumption – and control over the immediate environment – as evidenced by the construction of separate spaces for humans and animals and drainage. Alternatively and we believe more likely, these differences reveal a spectrum of “domestic” activity temporally defined, from the permanent/multi-generation to the seasonal/sporadic. That is, we believe the variety of different sites morphologies and material culture point to specialized functions ranging from permanent habitations to seasonal work sites to processing points.

The implications of this hypothesis are multiple. If the results from our region were duplicated in other regions (and it is far from certain that this is the case), it may emerge that only a fraction of the “sites” found in Roman-period field surveys represent actual habitations and thus populations. The use of field survey to estimate population size would thus be cast into serious doubt. Our results also problematize the method of using scatter size as a proxy for population, as some very small houses, like Podere Terrato and Pievina, yielded much larger scatters produced by the small houses’ surrounding beaten earth and tile yards (c.f. Pettegrew 2001; Bintliff et al. 2002). Thus, it is possible that the demographic calculations made using field survey rather than undercounting population numbers as is usually supposed, are actually over-counts.

The paucity of definite “habitations” and multitude of other site-types begs the question of where peasants did live. Garnsey’s idea of the commuting peasant, living in a village and walking out to distant fields, deserves reconsideration in this light. Our survey area includes a number of proposed Roman villages, most of which are within 1-2km of the hypothesized “seasonal/sporadic” sits of Poggio del'Amore and San Martino (one is slated for excavation in 2012-3). The presence of multiple site types and a spectrum of “domesticity” also suggests a relatively specialized use of the landscape. Rather than the self-contained peasant house with outbuildings, garden, etc., the possibility of processing sites and distant work shelters points to a diversification of workspaces. Both of these notions imply a highly mobile peasantry exploiting multiple, distant points in the

landscape (c.f. Horden and Purcell 2000). They might also point to fragmented properties (c.f. Duncan Jones 1980), located some distance from peasant habitations, for which work shelters might serve as rest/storage points, or the press site at Case Nuove for collective crop processing.

2.4 Agricultural Practices

The evidence for peasant agriculture is mostly secondary: in only one or possibly two cases have we found the actual fields cultivated by peasants, and we have found no agricultural implements. Our proxies are pollen data, which represent the collective human and natural activities of the surrounding area, faunal material, and evidence for the manipulation of the hydrological environment.

The pollen data has been completed only at San Martino and Case Nuove (Figures 12-13).

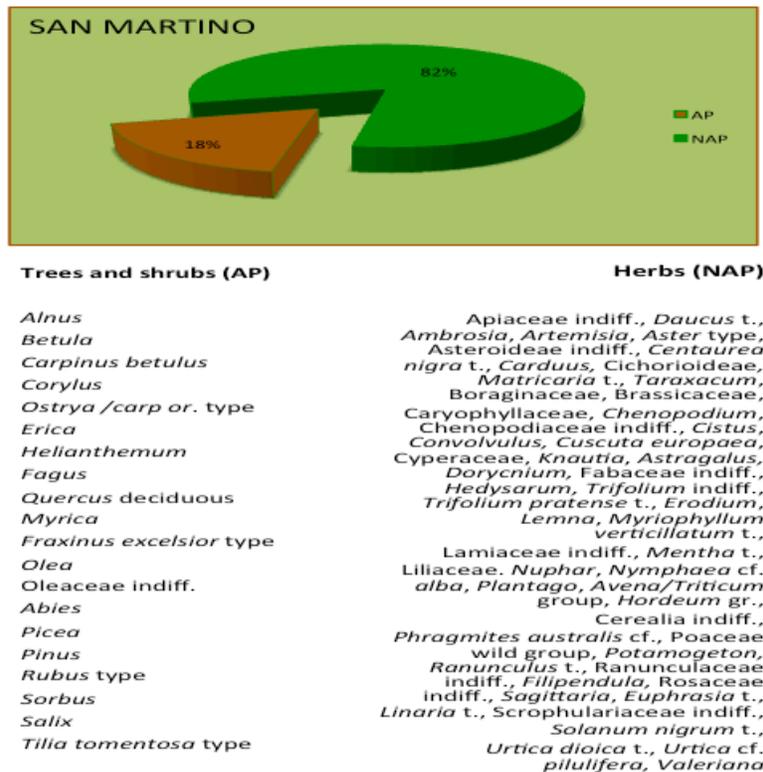


Figure 12: Pollen results, San Martino. AP=Arboreal Pollen, NAP=Non-arboreal pollen

The results were surprising in the sense they reveal very different land-uses than those today, and thus assumed by our land-use analysis of the surrounding area based on soils, hydrology and topography. The possible seasonal site at San Martino sits in a gently rolling valley, bisected by seasonal streams, whose geological and hydrological regimes suggested rich agricultural lands, optimal for gain – the current usage. The pollen data suggested a different landscape in the mid-1st century B.C.: the predominant pollens were those of grazed pasture plants, that is, pasture modified by the grazing of domesticated animals. Very little grain pollen was found, and virtually zero olive or vine. That is,

despite the obvious potential for grain production in this locale, and our assumption that rich land would necessarily be used for this staple, the users of the San Martino shelter were more likely to have using the land for pasturing sheep, goats or cattle. Pollen data from the nearby Podere Terrato, whose surrounding sheds might be equally interpreted as animal shelters or crop storage, is still in process.

On the other hand, arboreal pollen at San Martino was in the minority, suggesting that large woodlands were not proximate and thus that the forestation pattern may have been little changed from today. A parallel analysis of the area based only on modern soil types likewise suggested that even at maximum possible expansion of forest coverage the Roman environment would have not have had much more woodland than present. This hypothesis of largely conservative forestation is confirmed by data from Case Nuove (see below), but must obviously be tested more widely. Thus, at least in this area, no major deforestation seems to have taken place during the Roman period (c.f. Rackham 1996; Horden and Purcell 2000).

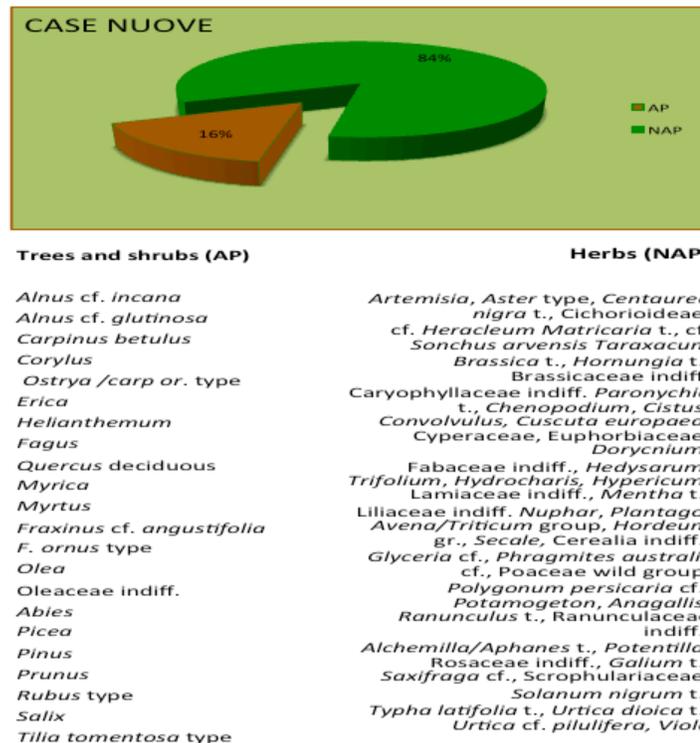


Figure 13: Pollen results, Case Nuove. AP=Arboreal Pollen, NAP=Non-arboreal pollen

At Case Nuove, the pollen samples were derived entirely from the late antique (late 4th-mid-5th c.) phases of the site and taken from within a deep square pit, filled during the early-mid 5th c. A.D. in a short time frame with successive tips of soil, stones and debris, and from the seat of the late republican dolium which had been robbed in antiquity and filled with mostly soil (probably wind-blown) and some ceramic debris. Again, pasture predominates and contrast with the current land-use as a major olive-wine production estate. Again, woodlands are a minor feature. Most important, however, is the cumulative presence through all the sampled contexts of grains. The percentages are

relatively high (4.4% on average, with some contexts having c. 6-10%), which, combined with the discovery of a hand mill and some carbonized grain caryopses in the same deposit, plus the windy-hill top site, all tentatively suggest that the place was used for winnowing. *Hordeum*, *Avena* and *Triticum* are all present, representing the barley, oats and wheat families, respectively, suggesting a mixed grain regime. Preliminary analysis of the macro-remains further suggest a combination of hulled (*Triticum monococcum*, *Triticum dicoccum*) and “naked” wheats (*Triticum aestivum*) – the former harder to thresh but potentially better for long-term storage, and the later a finer, more tasty variety. Finally, significant presence of legumes, both among the pollen and macro-remains, including lentils, may suggest that grain was alternated with legumes as a fallowing strategy. All of these finds suggest that the users of the site engaged in highly diversified strategies, probably for risk mitigation, while the possibility of legume/grain rotation points towards intensive techniques that maximize land-use.

The faunal collections from Pievina (see below) additionally suggest that both in a Republican-period farm and a tiny late antique house, cattle were being used as traction animals. The presence of cattle both periods’ middens represent their later use as meat, and their advanced age at slaughter strongly suggest they were principally used as beasts of burden. While we cannot prove they were used for plowing, this seems the most likely function.

The two probable field drains (Colle Massari, Podere Terrato) were a surprise, as both were large and thus represented significant investments in labor, yet in neither case is there evidence in the form of pollen or terracing, for a major cash crop, such as olives or vines, that would seem to justify the expense. The Colle Massari drain cleared a small water seepage point on an already rather steep slope, while the Podere Terrato serves a similar function in a flatter landscape, now used for grain and fodder and still criss-crossed by very similar modern drains. In both cases, it seems that regularized drainage was deemed necessary to prevent even minor water pooling in fields. It is worth noting that the agronomists, particularly Columella, show an almost fetishistic interest in controlling local hydrology, recommending the drainage of grain land and even of pasture land to prevent water-born parasites, and characterizing the yearly cleaning of the drains not unlike the harvest, as an urgent task that occupies the whole family group (Spurr 1986). The field drains, like the legume/grain alternation and the possible use of cattle for traction, points to intensive agricultural practices designed to maximize productivity.

We have one further piece of data that might, at a stretch, be used as proxy for agricultural activity - the stones used to build the various structures uncovered at these sites. As part of the project to understand resource use among our populations, a geoarchaeologist traced the nearest sources for every building stone found in each of our sites (Figure 14 shows results from late Republican-period Pievina only). The results were surprising: all but one site (late antique phase of Pievina) were built with stones deriving from more than one place. The nearest sources of these stones varied from 1km to up to 18km distant from the site itself. That is, rather than quarrying stone for a given project, the builders seem to have collected stone from various places – either from different quarrying points in the landscape, or, as suggested by the robbed walls at Poggio del’ Amore, from extant buildings. It seems highly unlikely that these far-flung collecting efforts, sometimes simply to bring 2 or 3 stones from a distant source (e.g. San Martino,

Poggio del' Amore), were engaged in solely for the purposes of gathering stones. Rather, a more likely scenario has the peasants traveling to these areas for other purposes and bringing back building stone on their return journey. Visits to friends/relatives or trading trips provide some explanations but the most frequent journeys were likely for agricultural purposes - to visit distant fields or herd animals to better pasture. The possibility points in the same direction as the specialized, dispersed site types – namely a population that worked fragmented holdings and/or communal pasture, and made maximum use of a heterogeneous micro-region by spatially diversifying their activities (c.f. Horden and Purcell 2000).

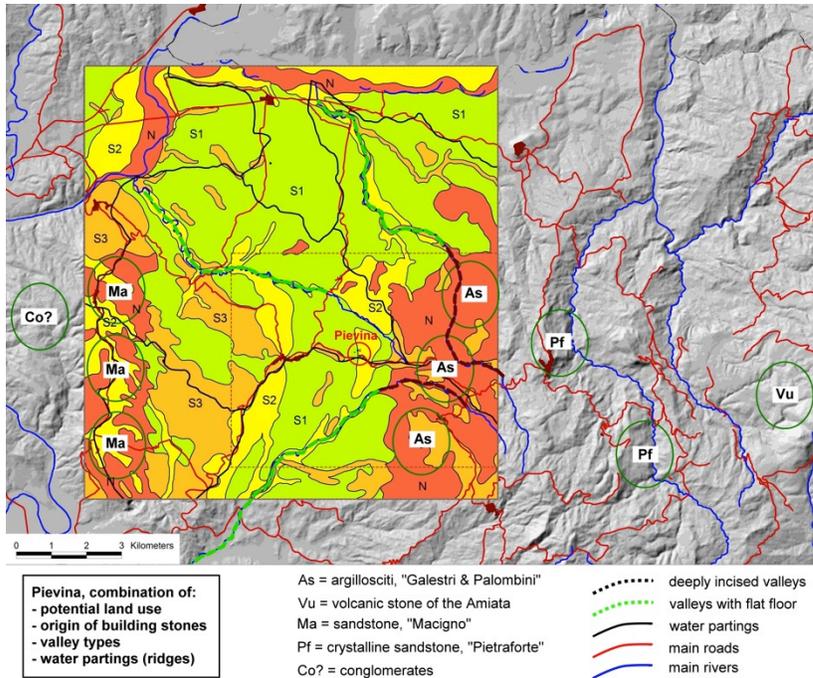


Figure 14: Nearest outcrops of building stones found at Pieveina (all phases), overlaid with map of potential land-use, showing land potential for non-tree crops: S1=good; S2=moderate; S3=poor.

2.5 Diet

As yet we have neither located nor excavated any necropoleis, and thus have no human skeletal data that would contribute to a study of peasant mortality/morbidity. We do have some data on diet derived both from faunal and botanical analysis.

	Late Republican/early Imperial		Late Antiquity	
	NISP	MNI	NISP	MNI
Cattle (<i>Bos taurus</i>)	3	1	60	3
Sheep/goat (<i>Ovis aries/Capra hircus</i>)	6	1	115	5
Pig (<i>Sus scrofa dom.</i>)	14	2	94	8
Equid (<i>Equus sp.</i>)	-	-	4	1
Dog (<i>Canis familiaris</i>)	1	1	1	1
Domestic fowl (<i>Gallus gallus</i>)	1	1	2	1
Red deer (<i>Cervus elaphus</i>)	1	1	2	1
Roe deer (<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>)	-	-	1	1
Wild boar (<i>Sus scrofa fer.</i>)	-	-	6	1
Hare (<i>Lepus europaeus</i>)	1	1	-	-
Badger (<i>Meles meles</i>)	-	-	2	1
Tortoise (<i>Testudo sp.</i>)	-	-	5	1
TOTAL	27		292	

Figure 15: Faunal remains from Pievina, by species.

The above-mentioned pollen data, describing a preponderance of animal-grazed pasture lands around two of our sites (Case Nove, San Martino) not only suggest a somewhat different landscape than we might have suggested, but indirectly and tentatively a greater emphasis on pastoralism as part of a broader agricultural strategy. If these animals were principally sheep and goat we might assume that their chief usage was for secondary products – wool, hides and milk – and thus that pastoralism need not have made a significant impact on diet. However, to assume that old sheep/goat were not eaten after their prime seems unlikely, and thus any agricultural strategies that emphasized pastoralism would seemingly yield a diet with a significant contribution of meat.

Site	Site Type	Date	NISP total (cattle +s/g+ pig)	% cattle	% sheep/goat	% pig	NISP of other principal mammalian and avian taxa present	Reference
ETRUSCAN								
San Giovenale (spring-building)	small settlement	8-7 BC	280	62.1	15.7	22.1	3 equid, 16 dog	Sorrentino 1981
Ficana	small settlement	8-6 BC	691	37.6	32.6	29.8	na	De Grossi Mazzorin 1996
Acquarossa	settlement	7-6 BC	374	82.7	12.9	4.3	3 equid, 1 red deer, 2 auroch	Gejvall 1982
Roselle	large settlement	6 BC	194	31.4	26.3	42.3	4 equid, 11 dog, 7 red deer	Corridi 1989
Cerveteri	large settlement	6-5 BC	472	37.0	34.3	28.6	4 equid, 16 dog, 3 red deer	Clark 1989
Tarquinia	urban settlement	6-5 BC	392	17.1	33.7	49.2	4 equid, 9 dog, 3 red deer, 1 roe deer, 2 hare	Bedini 1997
Montecatino	small settlement	6-5 BC	262	32.4	37.0	30.5	1 dog, 10 red deer, 2 roe deer, 5 boar, 1 hare	Ciampolini <i>et al</i> 1991
Capena	settlement	5-4 BC	185	33.0	38.9	28.1	2 horse, 42 dog, 12 hare	Salari 2005
Populonia	large settlement	3 BC	1988	10.3	43.0	46.7	1 equid, 9 roe deer, 2 boar, 12 hare, 7 domestic fowl, 16 other avian	De Grossi Mazzorin 1985
Tarquinia	large settlement	3-2 BC	85	27.1	31.7	41.2	2 dog, 2 roe deer	Bedini 1997
Volterra	ritual	3-2 BC	40	12.5	42.5	45.0	2 avian	Sorrentino 2003
Bolsena	settlement	2 BC-1 AD	1093	12.3	50.0	37.7	1 equid, 1 dog, 15 hare, 35 domestic fowl, 13 other avian	Tagliacozzo 1995
ROMAN IMPERIAL								
Pievina (NISP)	rural	1 BC-1AD	23	13.0	26.9	60.9	1 dog, 1 red deer, 1 hare, 1 domestic fowl	
Chianciano Terme	settlement/spa	1-3 AD	25	16.0	32.0	52.0	1 boar, 2 domestic fowl	
Monte Gelato	villa	1-2 AD	294	6.8	21.8	71.4	1 equid, 3 dog burials, 1 red deer, 28 domestic fowl, 27 other avian	King 1997
Le Colonne	villa	1-2 AD	508	22.6	28.7	48.6	13 equid, 1 dog, 21 red deer, 3 fallow deer, 1 hare	King, n.d.
Settefinestre	villa	1-3 AD	2234	10.8	16.6	72.6	11 equid, 24 dog, 9 cat, 164 red deer, 5 roe deer, 3 fallow deer, 72 hare, 121 domestic fowl, 214 other avian	King 1985
Lugnano	villa	1-3 AD	21	14.3	23.8	61.9	1 equid, 18 red deer, 1 roe deer, 4 domestic fowl	MacKinnon 1999
Ossaia	villa	1-4 AD	1722	16.2	21.0	62.8	15 equid, 9 dog, 1 cat, 29 red deer, 18 roe deer, 1 fallow deer, 32 boar, 123 hare, 112 domestic fowl, 18 other avian	Bokonyi, n.d.
Vacanas (Valle di Baccano)	<i>mansio</i>	1-2 AD	117	41.9	44.4	13.7	-	Cerilli 2005
Vacanas (Valle di Baccano)	<i>mansio</i>	2-4 AD	19	10.5	68.4	21.1	-	Cerilli 2005
Tenuta di Vallerano (near Rome)	rural	1-2 AD	231	50.2	35.9	13.9	174 horse, 49 dog, 4 red deer, 5 hare, 7 domestic fowl	Minniti 2005
Filattiera (near Luni)	settlement	1-3 AD	65	12.3	33.8	53.8		Giovinazzo 1998
Villa dei Quintili	urban	1-2 AD	132	-	13.6	86.4		De Grossi Mazzorin 1987
LATE ANTIQUE								
Pievina (NISP)	rural	4-5 AD	269	22.3	42.8	34.9	4 equid, 6 wild boar, 2 red deer, 1 roe deer?, 2 badger, 2 domestic fowl, 5 tortoise	
Chianciano Terme	watering hole	4-5 AD	178	44.4	29.8	25.8	5 equid, 2 dog, 2 cat, 2 boar, 1 fallow deer, 4 domestic fowl	
Settefinestre	villa	4 AD	751	16.8	30.2	53.0	16 equid, 25 dog, 76 red deer, 6 fallow deer, 6 hare, 13 domestic fowl, 7 other avian	King 1985
Monte Gelato	villa	4-5 AD	344	7.8	51.2	41.0	1 equid, 5 dog, 1 roe deer, 2 fallow deer, 23 domestic fowl, 4 other avian	King 1997
Filattiera (near Luni)	settlement	4-6 AD	95	4.2	47.4	47.4	1 equid	Giovinazzo 1998
Lugnano	villa	5 AD	27	11.1	22.2	66.7	3 equid, 7 dog, 1 hare, 17 domestic fowl	MacKinnon 1999

Figure 16: Comparison of Pievina faunal remains with other central Italian Etruscan/Roman sites.

The best faunal collections we have to date support this. These derive from both the late Republican and late antique phases at Pievina (Figs. 15 and 16), where two large middens represented the domestic rubbish of each phase. In both phases, wild animals and chickens were scarce, a surprise considering that the former should have been seemingly abundant and free, and the later a cheap and easy source of both eggs and

meat. All three major domesticated faunal groups, however, are represented – sheep/goat, pig and cattle. The most numerous, by numbers (NISP = number of individual specimens, MNI= minimum number of individuals) are sheep/goat – typical for most Roman sites. The age of animals at slaughter was relatively high, typical of a regime in which principal uses were wool/milk and older, less productive animals were culled. In both periods pigs were present – the least cost-effective domestic mammal as it produces only meat; the decline in pig numbers in late antiquity is part of a general trend seemingly not limited to peasant sites (MacKinnon 2004). The most important finding, however, is the presence of cattle, which increased as a proportion of the diet in late antiquity. As noted above, these cattle were very old when slaughtered, suggesting their principal use as traction animals. However, it should be noted that the three individuals found in the late antique midden represented approximately 600kg in useable meat (MacKinnon 2004) for a house only 4x4m, in use for only perhaps one generation. The near absence of faunal material on the smaller, putative seasonal/sporadic use sites makes it difficult to generalize from these conclusions, but at least in the case of the family(?) at Pievina, meat composed a significant part of the diet.

The ceramic evidence was also informative in this regard. A significant percentage of the cooking wares and dining wares were pots, bowls and other shapes designed to hold liquids (see Figure 17). This, in combination with an absence of burning from roasting on the majority of the bones, plus the age of the animals, suggest that stews, soups and other liquid-based foods formed an important part of the diet.

2.6 Subsistence and Markets

Our contribution to the problem and definition of peasant subsistence is thus far limited, although some speculative conclusions might be drawn from the above-described faunal and botanical evidence. Perhaps the most interesting data we have is on storage: storage facilities are found only at Pievina and possibly Podere Terrato, both sites identified (tentatively in the case of Podere Terrato) as permanent habitations. In the late Republican phase at Pievina the inhabitants stored both water, in the form of the cistern, and possibly, grain or other crops in the possible granary. The identification of this building as a granary is not certain: there are no excavations of small-scale granaries in Italy with which to compare it, but the double lines of piers suggest either a raised floor and/or external (probably wooden) supports designed to permit airflow between them. Either scenario suggests crop storage, but erosional damage in this area removed any chance of ascertaining what type through botanical analysis. Were the crop wheat, the 60m² granary could have held c. 16,800kg (Groot et al. 2009). By way of comparison, Groot et al estimated that each person in a Roman Dutch village required 1.16m² of granary space (or 448kg) for caloric needs, reserve storage and seed. Since we failed to excavate the habitation portion of the site, we have little idea to what size group this might have belonged, but it was unlikely to been as many as the 50+ people existing on subsistence suggested by the granary size. Rather, it is more likely that some of this crop went for sale on the market.

The faunal evidence, on the other hand, points towards extreme economy. The preponderance of “multi-use” animals, their old age at slaughter, the presence of most of body parts on site, the evidence for unprofessional, and thus domestic slaughtering techniques, even the common extraction of marrow from long-bones all suggest the

careful efforts to extract maximum use out of valuable animal assets. Age profiles further tentatively suggest sheep/goat herds that were never allowed to pasture too far from home and thus were carefully monitored and culled at opportune moments.

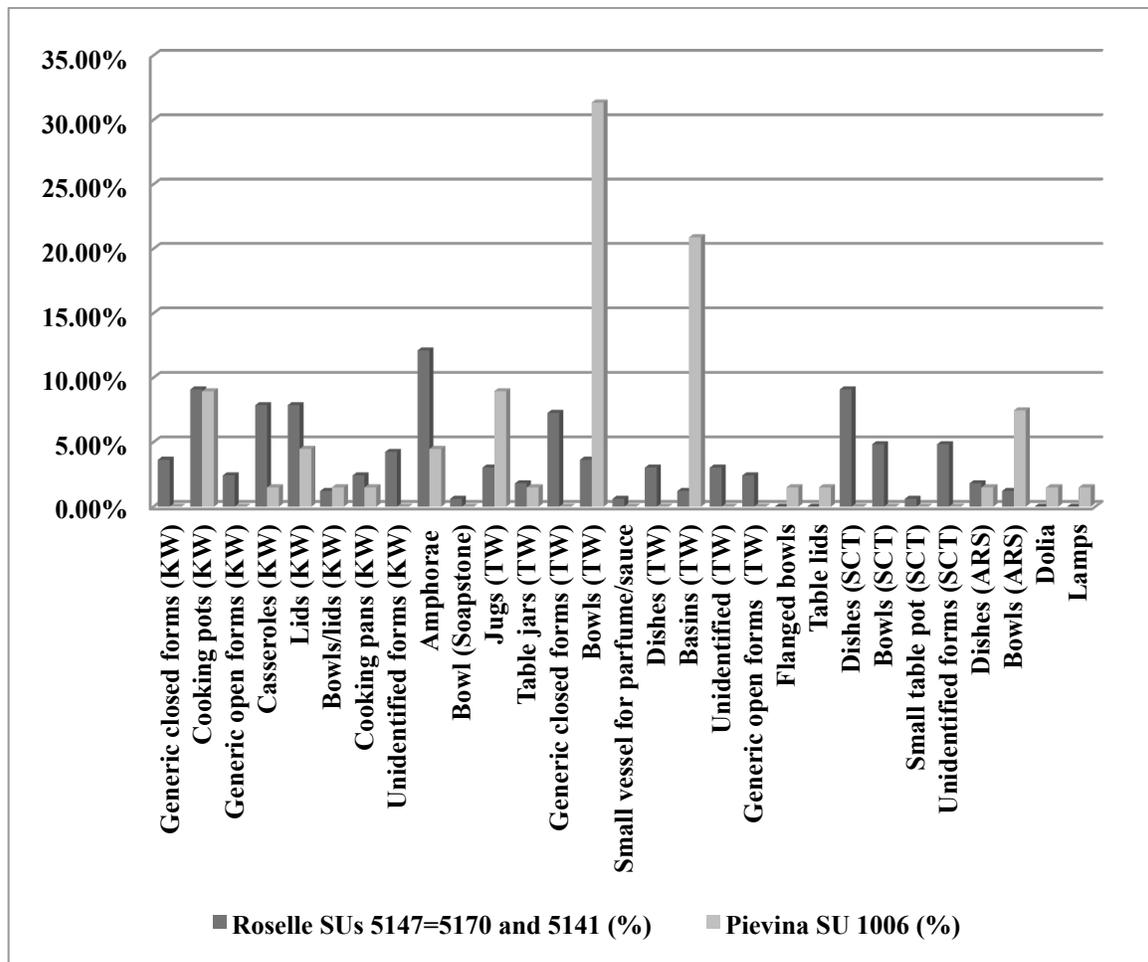


Figure 17: Ceramic functional types, Pievina compared to the city of Roselle

We are somewhat better informed about contacts with external markets via ceramics analysis. The scarce ceramics at Poggio del’ Amore and San Martino show only that regionally-manufactured fine wares for dining common to the era(s) – Black Glazed Wares and Arretine Sigillata – made their way onto the smallest, even more ephemerally used sites. The numbers are too small, however, to permit any detailed analysis – at least until we have a number of similar sites with which to compare them. For comparative purposes our best collections come from Pievina. For the late antique phase, we have comparative data for the types of cooking and dining wares with the nearest city, Roselle located some c. 30km to the west (Figure 17). In both city and country the major dining wares were the same – imported African Red Slip Ware and more commonly, its local/regional imitations. One less prevalent ware, the regionally-manufactured *Sigillata Chiara Tarda dell’Italia Centro-Settentrionale*, was present in the city but not found in Pievina. A comparison of the different functional classes of ceramics – bowls, platters, cooking pots, tops, etc. – showed almost identical profiles, that is, the same variety and

types of cooking and dining wares were found in both peasant house and urban dump. Tiny quantities of long-distance transport amphorae from Tunisia and Portugal, as well as central Italian sources, attest to imported wine and oil at the site. In short, so close are the ceramic profiles between Roselle and Pievina that it would seem the later was directly supplied from the city itself. This conclusion both suggests that, at least in this case, a local village may not have been an intermediary (c.f. de Ligt 1990; 1991). This finding is particularly surprising given that by the 5th century A.D., connections of any kind between city and country, particularly for non-elite sites, are thought have ceased (c.f. Ward-Perkins 2005).

The presence of low-denomination coins at both of the sites tentatively identified as permanent residences is also noteworthy. At Podere Terrato and at Pievina in its late Republican phase these were small in number; at late antique Pievina they were numerous. The devaluation of coinage in the late empire is thought to be responsible for the numeric increase in coins of this period, and the Pievina coins are composed largely of *nummi* and somewhat higher value bronzes. Thus, even the 37 coins do not represent significant purchasing power, but they do point to a monetized exchange being used in at least some transactions.

Other data point in the opposite direction – towards local or domestic production and consumption. The tile kiln at late Republican Pievina is one of dozens that were found in Ghisleni's field survey and building tiles were doubtless both produced and marketed locally. We are planning a thin-section analysis combined with micro-mapping of the area's clays to try to map patterns of distribution. The tile industry may have been one of the few means we have of documenting purely local exchange.

Conclusions

Our project has three more years to run, in which time we hope to excavate one of the area's villages, as well as c. 2-4 more smaller sites. Even at project's end, however, we will still have excavated only a small fraction of the possible peasant spaces in our own region, and whether or not our results reflect the experiences in other regions – such as those closer to major cities like Rome, near transportation routes or with different environmental conditions – is an open question, one probably answerable in the negative.

Our preliminary results point both with and against the grain of the current scholarly consensus. On the one hand, we have many indicators, admittedly of a secondary nature, that peasant agriculture was intensive and was not simply aimed at grain production for subsistence (c.f. Horden and Purcell 2000). The possible dispersed seasonal work sites and mobility between these sites implied by the building stone, the likelihood of grain/legume alternation, and the prevalence of field drains all seem designed to extract maximum return on each micro-region's soil, hydrological and climatic possibilities, and wherever possible, particularly in the case of hydrological and fallowing regimes, attempts were made to shape the environment towards those ends. These later efforts were relatively energy intensive (e.g. the construction of 10-20m long field drains) and describe a real investment in agricultural outputs at even the smallest scale. Animals were almost certainly used for plowing, likewise pointing to investment in more costly resources with the expectation of increased productivity. The evidence for meat as a significant element of the diet, as well as extensive pasture, points against the "vegetarian" peasant of most histories and possibly towards more meat-intensive

agricultural strategies – strategies more often attributed to Etruscan and Germanic rural dwellers, but not Romans (Belcastro et al 2007). A collective processing point for wine/oil similarly points to elements largely thought absent from peasant diet. The evidence for exposure to outside markets is likewise fairly convincing, particularly for consumption of extra-local goods, while the use of coin as a medium of exchange seems to be clear at sites associated with “permanent” habitation.

Other data confirm the image of a risky, uncertain world. The mixed grain regime and the high mobility of our populations describe uncertain climate and unreliable crop returns. Likewise, the extreme economy of animal resources – as secondary products and meat – and the similar diversification of species points to a careful portioning of a precious resource. The reuse of building stone, potentially carried dozens of kilometers, paints the same picture. Finally, the very scale of everything from buildings to sherd and faunal counts describe lives lived within tiny spaces, using tiny amounts of consumer good purchased with small sums of money.

That the optimistic and pessimistic accounts of peasants seem to be both partially true and partially false is perhaps no surprise: the nature of the textual sources and their resistance to “factual” interpretation has necessarily yielded black and white caricatures. Thus, perhaps our most useful data point beyond the current models towards another stories entirely.

For instance, the richest site we’ve uncovered so far is the early-mid-5th c. A.D. “house” at Pievina, stuffed with ceramics, faunal materials and coins. I have heavily relied upon it to structure the above hypotheses, particularly regarding diet and market exchange. That it presents the very opposite picture we have been lead to expect for the late empire is itself noteworthy (c.f. Ward-Perkins 2005), but perhaps more intriguing is the possibility that the model of peasant consumption, protein rich diets and monetized economies I outlined above might have been either heightened in late antiquity, or even an exclusively late antique phenomenon. Thus, the chronologically monolithic “Roman peasant” I have described is probably itself a caricature and that we should expect major shifts in peasant lives within the period. Whether or not these changes mirrored or contrasted shifts in the Roman macro-economy will be a critical question as we move forward.

The very short occupation of most of our sites is interesting in this regard. With the exception of Pievina, our sites have extremely short lives, probably shorter than our ceramic chronologies can reveal and thus on the scale of a generation or two. The phenomenon could be readily interpreted as either a sign of their occupants’ precarious lives, or as another signal of ever shifting agricultural strategies aimed at maximization. At a greater stretch, it might also be read as evidence of partible inheritance, a proxy for lands being divided and changing hands through the death/marriage cycles of a generation. Whatever our interpretation, these short site-lives reveal a human landscape in constant motion as settlements appear and disappear, perhaps along with their agricultural activities (c.f. Osborne 1991; Foxhall 2000; Horden and Purcell 2000). Given the importance of various kinds of mobility– from daily “commuting” to periodic exchange trips to generational site-shifting – we are attempting a series of GIS models to understand how people may have moved around this landscape and particularly the decision-making and visual process this might have involved. We hope this project will

begin to reveal how peasants saw, and how those habits of seeing were both conditioned by and influenced interactions with their environment (c.f. Llobera 1996).

These are very early days for this project, and as a consequence, our interpretive apparatus has yet to totally free itself from the strictures of the textually-based work that has come before. In proving, I think, that archaeology has something to contribute to the study of the Roman rural poor, our next task is juxtapose model-testing, whose gaze is top-down, with Gerzian “thick-descriptions” of peasant experience that see this world from the ground up.

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