

Ceramics sherds and Roman Economic Strategies in Picenian Landscapes

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The Pisa South Picenum Survey Project concerns the Tenna, Ete, Aso River Valleys from the Adriatic Sea to the Sibillini Mountains, in the Marche region (fig. 1).¹

In this district the main urban centres were the Latin colony of *Firmum* (today Fermo), founded in 264 BC along the coast, and inland *Novana*, on the site of today's Comunanza, which was most probably a *forum* and later became a small *municipium*, referred to by Pliny (N.H, III, 11). Moreover, the main Harbour settlement of *Castellum Firmanum* and the Sanctuary of Monterinaldo played an important economic role in the *Firmum* territory.²

Starting from the 3rd century, survey results permit us to reconstruct maior socio-economic transformations and therefore great changes – especially in the landscapes – which can be classified as part of the “Romanization” processes.

They were evident in the new agrarian assets (in particular the viridane centuriation connected with the *lex Flaminia* (232 BC) in the Comunanza territory) and in the ceramics

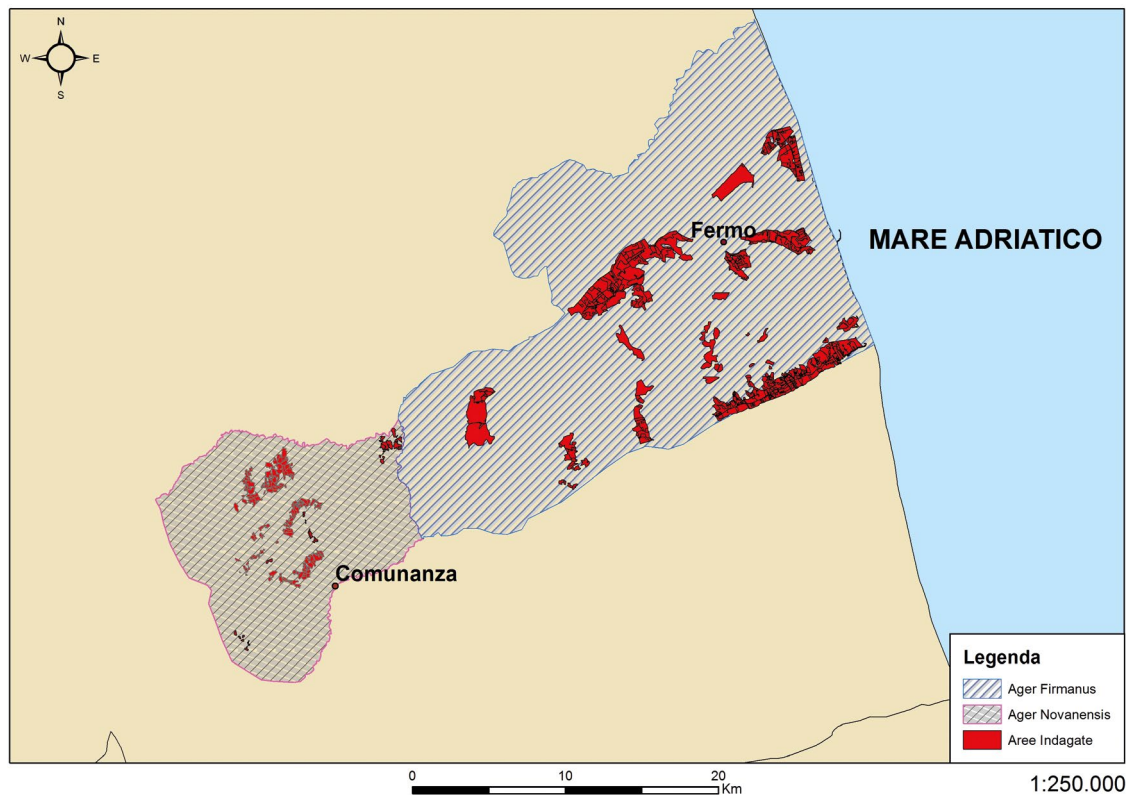


Fig. 1: The studied area.



Fig. 2: Some Picenian impasto curved tiles and vessels.

findings, for example the cutaway tiles, typical in Roman military constructions, as well as the abundant Black Glazed and cooking wares, mainly from the Southern Etruscan-Latial workshops.

Moreover, it is highly significant that these ceramics were widespread in the urban centres and in the countryside well before the military conquest, evidence of a long-term acculturation process.

The Roman presence determined a productive development through the transmission of new technologies, for example the change from the Picenian *impasto* (fig. 2) to Roman ceramics, and gave the impetus for starting local workshops which very soon imitated the Latial-Campanian ceramics.

According to the data survey, in this first phase (3rd century–early-2nd century BC), the Romans improved the pre-existing economic activities without imposing major changes in the rural settlements patterns, which invariably consisted of small-medium farmsteads.

In the Firmum territory, as well as in a large part of *Picenum*, a structural change took place starting from the late 2nd century, and mainly in the first part of the 1st century BC, when the villa landscape spread: the Romans took into account the local agricultural potentialities, by utilizing investments by both Pompeus's entourage and the Picenian elites, developed specialized cultivations, linking the results of this intensive production with the Roman globalizing trade. In fact, the Lamboglia 2 amphorae, which have been



Fig. 3: Remains of the centuriated landscape in the Novana territory.

found in large numbers in the East and West Mediterranean,³ can be considered a symbol of this economic growth. This phase of expansion also continued in the following decades: in the Triumviral period, the *Firmum* territory was centuriated and the related farmsteads, which occupied the previously uninhabited valley floors, gave rise to an exponential agricultural exploitation of the territory.

In this expansive phase, which persisted until the 2nd century, the close relationship between the city and its territory is evident in the survey findings because *Firmum* and the other sites appear to have been part of the same integrated market system. The rural sites, *villae* and farmsteads, were not only centres of production but also of consumption, as shown by the wares imported through Roman globalizing trade. In the same way, in trying to overcome the *Consumer City/Producer Countryside* dichotomy,⁴ we can presume that *Firmum Picenum*, apart from providing administrative and commercial services, was also the site of the productive activities referred to by the sources and which were not found in the countryside (for example the metal and textile productions).

In the inland district, the settlement patterns were much uniform, characterized by the urban centre of *Novana*, small farmsteads in the centuriated territory (fig. 3) and a few *villae*, the latter dating from the 1st century BC, but much smaller than those of the *ager Firmanus*. Only these *villae*, and naturally *Novana*, present evidence of imported goods (fig.4).

The farmstead allotments could not have been larger than 40 *iugera* and for the colonists the complementary use of the *ager publicus* would have been particularly important for breeding, collecting wood, the rapid cyclus cultivations and so on.



Fig. 4: Some sigillata vessels from the Novana territory.

In this area, structural changes took place in the early Imperial Age because the small rural sites did not survive beyond the 2nd century AD and only the *villae* present finds from a slightly later age, and similarly the *municipium* of *Novana*, after having been mentioned by Pliny was not referred to in any other later source.⁵

Most probably the reason for this crisis was due to the market-oriented Roman economy which involved this territory in an intensive exploitation of its resources for industrial rearing, mainly transhumant. Latin *gentes*, such as the *Caesii*, locally documented in the Toponym *Cisiana*, invested capital for these activities, by utilizing vast tracts of the *ager publicus* for private use, therefore leading to a crisis in the agrarian system based on the complementarity of the small allotments with the community use of woods and pasturelands.

Novana gradually disappeared but, after a long interval, in the 8th century its territory was occupied by many properties of the Abbey of Farfa, and the church of Santa Maria a Terme became the nucleus of the new centre, which began to be called Comunanza. Therefore in these valleys the continuity of the settlement hierarchy is evident as proved by Fermo and *Novana/Comunanza* which remain the main centres in their respective districts. Moreover, in the Firman territory all the early Medieval Parishes arose in important Roman sites, mainly *villae* and *vici*.

In conclusion, the impact of the Roman global economy on the local economies was enormous, and these economic processes were carried out by developing the natural potentialities: not by chance still today Picenian landscapes maintain some characteristics which can be considered as deriving from Roman economic decisions.⁶

Notes

- ¹Regarding the theoretical approach of the project see Menchelli 2018; Attema et al. 2020.
²Menchelli 2012; Menchelli – Iacopini 2016.
³Van Limbergen 2018.
⁴About this topic see Parkins 1997.
⁵See Menchelli 2018, 180 note 45.
⁶Menchelli – Iacopini 2020

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Fig. 1: Eleonora Iacopini. – Fig. 2–4: by the author.

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