

The Riverine Landscape of the Ombrone Valley in the Roman Period. Preliminary Data from Southern Tuscany

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Introduction

The study of the classical settlement networks along riverine landscapes in central Italy started with the Tiber Valley Project, directed by John Ward-Perkins, in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The idea behind the project was simple: to record all the archaeological sites before they could be destroyed by the introduction of mechanized agricultural activities. The selected territory lay at the heart of the Roman civilization – from its origins until the collapse of the western Roman Empire, the Tiber river valley symbolized the wealth of Rome by providing direct access to both the Mediterranean and local markets, flowing through the city that was destined to become the capital of the *mare nostrum* region. The collected data from the project was impressive and still stands at the base of any further detailed analysis on the settlement networks of southern Etruria, the precise study of the recovered material culture, or the economic paradigms that the project originated.¹

At the end of the 1970s, a new project was established, initiating a series of field surveys to comprehend another crucial and puzzling piece of the Etrurian landscape: the territory of the ancient colony at Cosa.² The Albegna River Valley Project commenced while the colony itself was under excavation, within which Frank Brown glimpsed the possibility of investigating the origins and successive developments of an early Roman colony. The timing was ideal as wider debates on the Romanization process, such as those concerning the city of Vulci and its related territory, had just begun. Thus, the Albegna River valley represented an invaluable opportunity to understand Roman expansion through the analysis of scattered (and, at the time, unknown) settlements. The role of the Albegna survey project and the excavations of the Republican villas at Settefinestre³ and Le Colonne⁴ in originating new narratives around the rise of the slave-based economy and its climax around the late Republican period⁵ is well known. The survey data emphasized what field archaeology expressed: that between the end of the 2nd century BC and the beginning of the 1st century BC, the economy of the area exploited agrarian resources (mainly wine and olive oil) and distributed them across western Mediterranean markets through a network of villas (producing and processing agrarian goods), manufacturing districts (providing the necessary amphorae), and a peculiar web of suburban and riverine harbors (allowing for international supply).

With the Severan period, this organized network saw a dramatic decline. It is only with the late Roman period that a revival can be attested in agrarian productions, with a key role played by the revitalized villas in the territory.

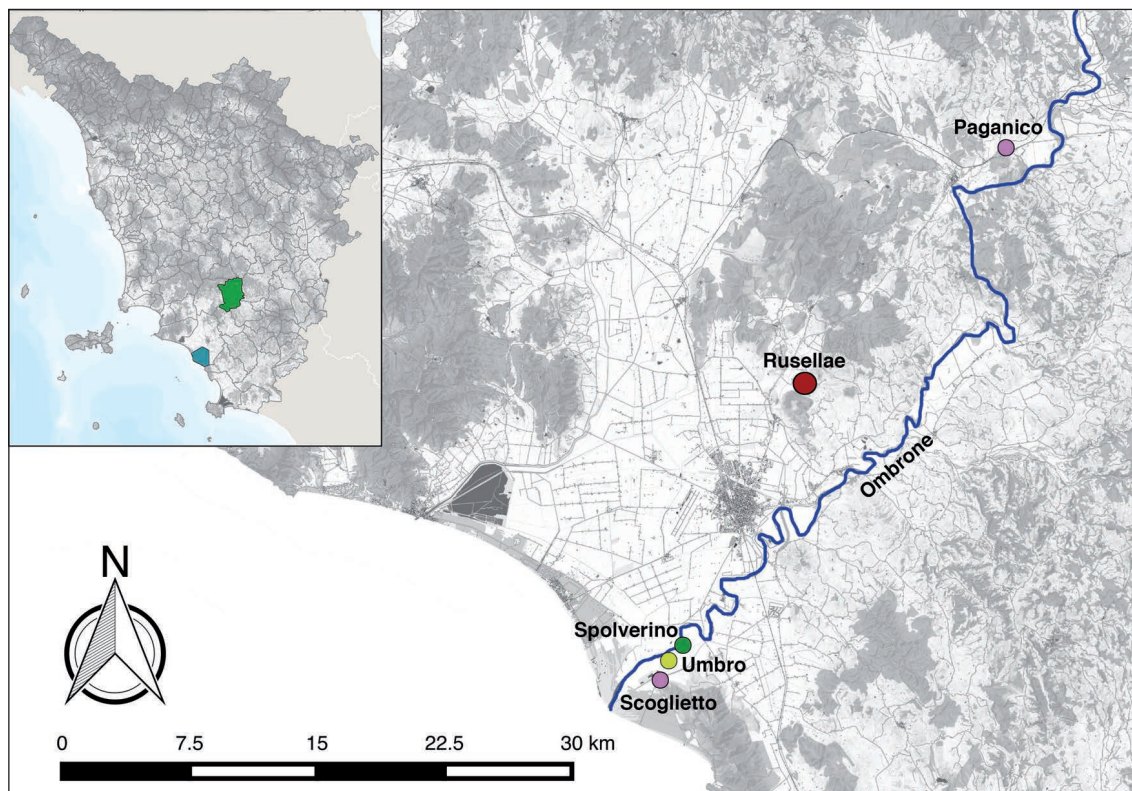


Fig. 1: Map of the area, with cited sites in the text.

Recent archaeological research in the area of Etruria aims to investigate this widely accepted scenario within the middle to lower valley of the Ombrone River (modern Province of Grosseto – Tuscany). This territory coincides with a large portion of the *ager Rusellanus*, set immediately north of the *ager Cosanus*. Unfortunately, a synthesis for the Roman period of this landscape has yet to be produced, although an abundance of results from programmed and rescue archaeological initiatives will soon be available to better define the settlement networks and their related economies. This paper aims to introduce recent archaeological data to explore new, possible narratives around the Roman economy, settlement patterns, and society of the *ager Rusellanus*, drawing from the results of two research projects currently active in the hinterland and the coastal areas.⁶ Three sites were investigated along the Tyrrhenian coast (Alberese Project) while other information can be retrieved from ongoing excavations at Civitella Paganico (Impero Project) (fig. 1). Given the limited space for this contribution, the paper presents only a partial assessment of the available archaeological data for the region. When possible, to assist in reading the data, a division between the settlements on the coast and the hinterland is provided.

The Republican Period (3rd century BC – 1st century BC)

For the Republican period, data from two sanctuaries and a possible *positio* at the mouth of the Ombrone River can be used to describe the characterization of the post-Romanization landscape.

The Hinterland (Civitella Paganico)

The recovery of the excavations at the site of Podere Cannicci allowed for the discovery of several new structures connected with a nearby late Etruscan and Republican sanctuary.

At the end of the 1980s, the layout of a gas pipeline revealed the existence of an articulate network of Roman structures, initially interpreted as a *villa rustica*.⁷ A number of anatomical votive offerings were recovered⁸ as well, suggesting the presence of a sanctuary related to fertility cults that exploited the abundance of natural springs for its location (fig. 2). Main excavations were carried out within a large complex where *dolia* still *in situ* evidenced the agrarian character of the local economy. The recent excavations have, however, started to demonstrate that the economic scenario was more articulate, owing to the discovery of manufacturing infrastructures connected to metal



Fig. 2: One of the anatomical votive offerings from the 1980s excavations at Podere Cannicci.



Fig. 3: Geophysics anomalies at Podere Cannicci showing Republican and Imperial buildings and the area of the sanctuary.

and pottery productions.⁹ These latter focused on the *dolia*, bricks, cooking ware, and, especially, black gloss ware. Although the excavations of these facilities are still ongoing, one can expect the evidence to show that the typology of black gloss ware produced at Podere Cannicci was clearly inspired or directly initiated by seasonal workforces coming from the *ager Volterraris*.

Following a geophysics survey in 2018, it appears clearer that the Republican settlement is not limited to a single building. As shown in fig. 3, in fact, other structures are related to the main one currently under investigation. Finally, the two archaeological seasons in 2017 and 2018 have confirmed the final moments of the settlement: it was destroyed by a violent fire at the beginning of the 1st century BC in conjunction with the battles between Marius and Sulla.¹⁰

The Coast (Alberese)

Here, set at the outlet of the Ombrone River, a quadrangular building was constructed around the 3rd century BC (fig. 4). Archaeological excavations showed that the site was arranged around a central area with an *atrium* since its very beginning and that it continued to maintain the original plan until the Antonine period. The research has focused



Fig. 4: Overlay of the different structures found at the site of *Umbro* (Alberese) together with crop marks.

mainly on the Imperial phases of the site, and no further information is yet available for this phase;¹¹ however, the settlement can be recognized in the *Umbro flumen positio* in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*.

Less than a mile away, a small temple was constructed during the 2nd century BC on top of the Scoglietto promontory (fig. 5a).¹² Surrounded by a *temenos* wall, the structure has been dated through the votive offerings recovered at its entrance.¹³ Its location, facing the Tyrrhenian Sea, allowed for a full control over maritime and riverine routes.

Discussion

The data retrieved from the Republican sites points to a different approach that Rome had on this part of the territory soon after the conquest of *Rusellae* in 294 BC. The Etruscan temple at Podere Cannicci survived into the Republican phase, although we currently lack substantial evidence of its structures. The analysis of the votive offerings offers a continuity of the cults until, at least, the late 2nd – beginning of the 1st century BC. Interesting information comes from the foundation of a settlement around it, which dates to the 3rd century BC; apparently, these structures were built to sustain the economy of the sanctuary, and the new settlers had Volterra as their reference point. This is an intriguing aspect of the Romanization period in this part of Etruria, as *Rusellae* was expected to be the urban central place. Further investigations will define the economical

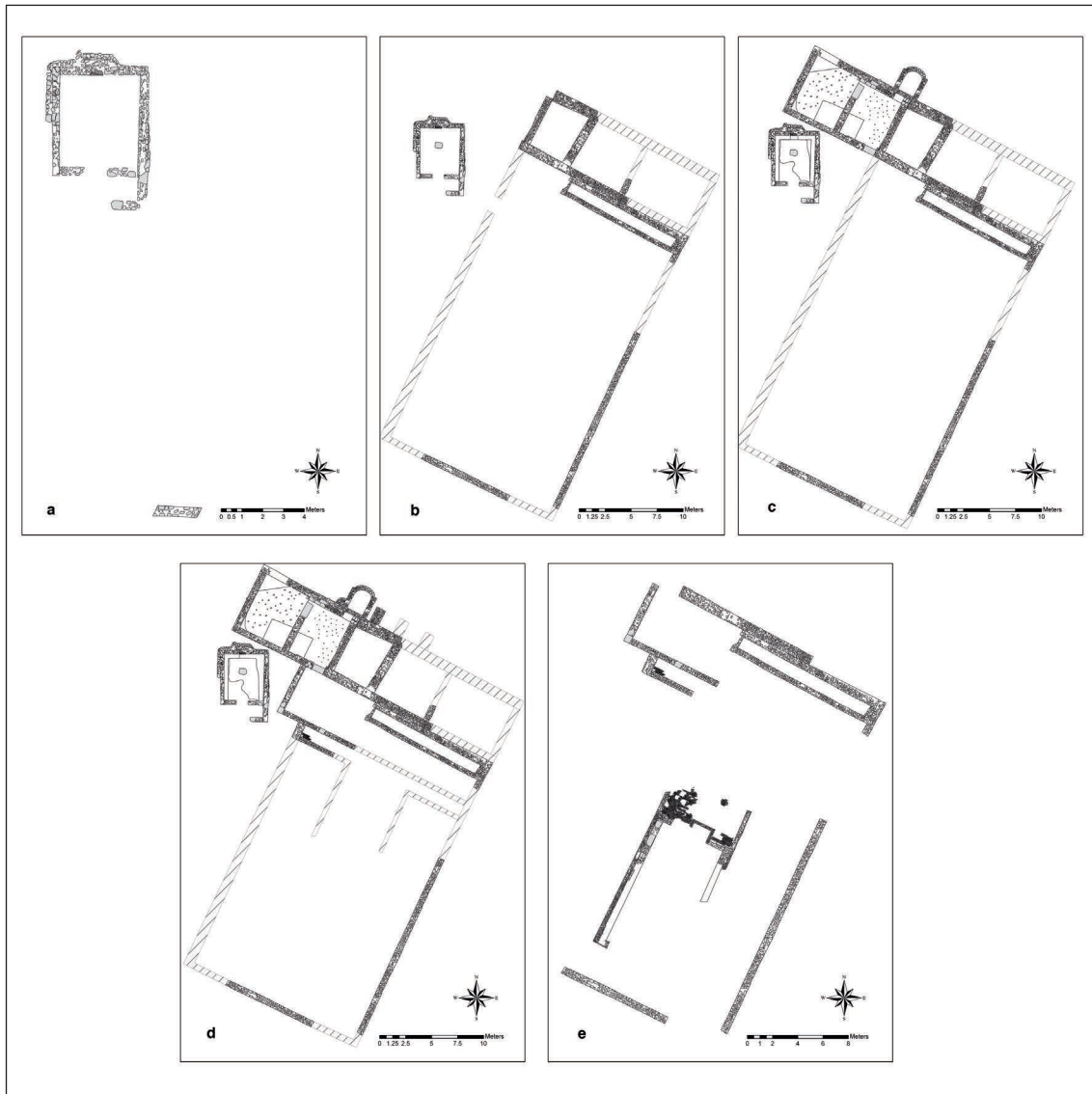


Fig. 5: Chronological plans of the sanctuary at Scoglietto (Alberese) a – Republican phase; b – Late 1st century BC; c – Late 1st century AD; d – Second half of the 2nd century AD; e – Severan period.

and productive relationships of the sanctuary area with the two urban centers, its connectivity through the road system and riverine facilities, as well as the chronological span of use.

On the coastal side, the period after the romanization shows the construction of a number of new settlements: the archaeological research uncovered the remains of a *positio*, the establishment, of which has to be sought in the generation of veterans and colonists who settled the area. A century after, the sanctuary area at Scoglietto was established to define the administrative boundaries with the southern *ager Cosanus* and to impose a visual landmark along the maritime trade routes – an action that the Severan period confirms.

The High Imperial Period (late 1st century BC – 2nd century AD)

The Hinterland (Civitella Paganico)

The excavations at Cannicci provide little data for the Imperial period. As the settlement was destroyed in the aftermath of the Civil War, no structures were reoccupied. The 2018 geophysics survey has, however, shown the existence of a large settled area on the western part (fig. 3), where field surveys carried out in the 1990s recovered Caesarian to late Antonine pottery;¹⁴ it is possible that a new complex was built, possibly serving the main road system.

The Coast (Alberese)

The situation is rather different on the coast.

The sanctuary at Scoglietto underwent a significant refurbishment at the end of the 1st century BC¹⁵ (fig. 5b): a new temple and enclosing *temenos* wall were erected, both sharing a NE-SW orientation. This cut off the previous, smaller temple, now reduced to a *thēsauros*. The newly enclosed sacred area housed a capacious cistern and at least two rooms with earth-beaten floors. The sanctuary continued to grow under the reign of Domitian where rooms with *opus signinum* floors and frescoed walls were added; further, a small *nymphaeum* was added with a simple black and white tesserae mosaic (fig. 5c). By the reign of Commodus, the sanctuary reached its maximum expansion with the construction of a new room, paved with plain mortar, which was accessed by the main square facing the temple (fig. 5d).

Little structural changes can be seen at *Umbro*, although the analysis of the residual material culture of the late Republican and mid Imperial period clearly shows the lavishness of the site. Later spoliation and refurbishing activities of the late Roman period have severely damaged the preservation of any Imperial strata, preventing any more detailed examination of the site.

At the end of the 1st century AD, the manufacturing settlement at Spolverino (fig. 6) was built along the final flow of the Ombrone River.¹⁶ Until the late Antonine period,



Fig. 6: Aerial view of the manufacturing settlement at Spolverino.

the site based its economy on twofold revenues: the surplus of agrarian goods (and subsequent processing and trade) and glass-working activities. The site presented a possible plan distributed around a central area, and rooms were accessible through arcades, possibly to better serve a cabotage port.¹⁷

Discussion

The settlement network experienced a phase of reorganization starting in the Augustan period. In the hinterland, where there is a scarcity of data at this stage of the research, the situation is less clear. The site at Cannicci underwent a shift towards the west with the construction of a new complex, the origins and functions of which future investigations will determine.

The coastal area provides more information. Although later activities marred the site, razing its structures and obscuring the evolution of the building, the lavish material culture at *Umbro* attests to growing wealth, while the sanctuary area continuously grew after a late 1st century BC reorganization of its spaces. The foundation of the manufacturing district at Spolverino represents an innovation in the landscape of Alberese:

its glass workshop and storage facility for agrarian surplus illuminates a dual economy that perpetuated until the late 2nd century AD, providing insights of different economical activities connected to maritime, riverine, and terrestrial trade routes.¹⁸

The Mid to Late Imperial Period (3rd – mid 5th century AD)

The Coast (Alberese)

Data for this period is available only from the coastal area. The Severan period marked a turning point in the Roman landscape at Alberese, as the three sites previously seen underwent radical changes that terminated in the mid 5th century AD.

The *Umbro positio* was abandoned during the mid 2nd century AD, and some of its rooms were converted into workshops during the 3rd century. The first atelier was located on the eastern side and was dedicated to metalworking. A sunken forge specialized in the production of rivets and fishhooks, largely found during the excavations (fig. 4). The *atrium* area was partially blocked by the construction of an oval furnace, surrounded by marble-shaped fragments of Egyptian blue, possibly its main products. As the 4th century started, the northern part of the *atrium* was blocked by a new rubble wall, which incorporated two pillars as foundations. This new room contained two hearths: one was a simple pit where cooking ware was still *in situ*, while the second accommodated a platform of reused bricks that has parallels with similar facilities at Settefinestre. Further north, a room was paved with an *opus spicatum* floor and housed a raised platform with possible spaces for a wine or olive press. Finally, on the northwest side, a simple mortar floor was laid out in a room that has returned a bronze stirrup during excavations. The rest of the complex has given no evidence of any sort of occupation, indicating that only a partial reuse of the structure occurred.

The productive site at Spolverino underwent a significant enlargement from the Severan period onwards.¹⁹ Workshops dedicated to the recycling of metal were built, remolding the high Imperial structure. The arcades were partially blocked to allow for new arrangements of rooms (fig. 7), while a large manufacturing space was added in the south. This included at least two circular kilns and a large furnace. The large amount of glass junks recovered here pointed to a possible glass workshop; however, recently, new ideas have been proposed.²⁰ The hectic sequence of kilns and workshops that were built over at least two centuries saw a definitive termination around the mid 5th century, when most of the complex was abandoned. Small activities continued, with a possible limekiln built in Room VI, while around the end of the century later users of the space fashioned humble floors by leveling some of the rubble materials in Rooms VII and IX.

Finally, the sanctuary area at Scoglietto was heavily modified. Between the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the successive century, the rooms of the sanctuary were abandoned and never rebuilt²¹ (fig. 5e). The rubble and any marble decorations were instead reused in the construction or refurbishment of the main temple that survived until

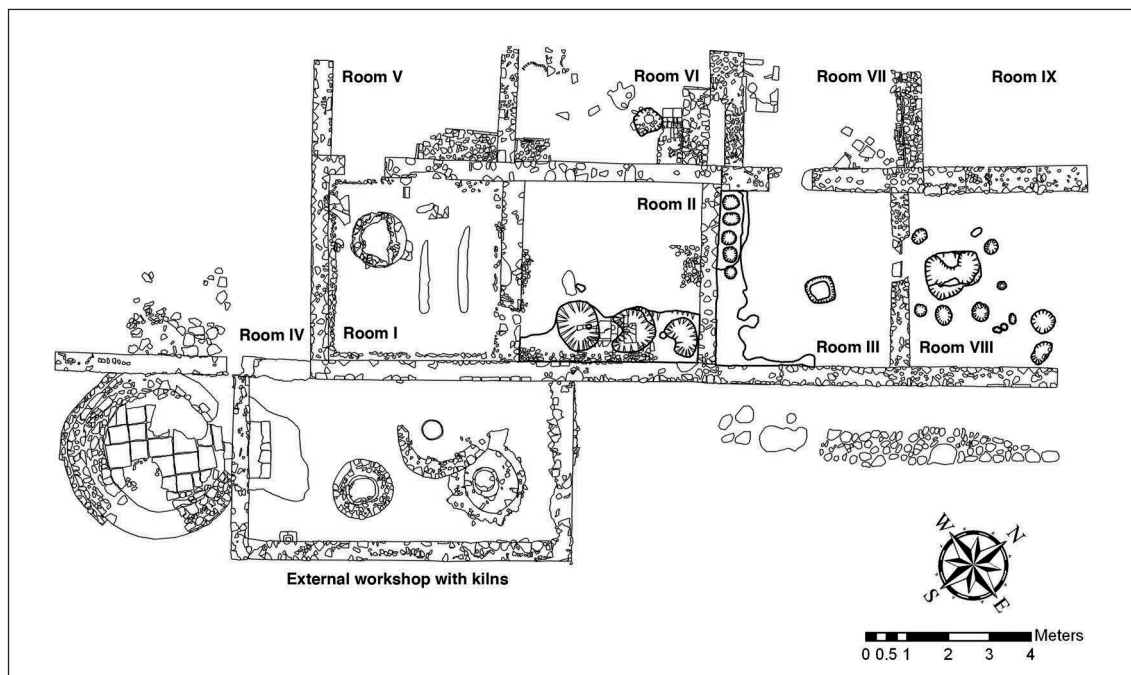


Fig. 7: Plan of the manufacturing settlement at Spolverino.

the mid 4th century; only the cistern of the former sanctuary and the latest room with the simple mortar floor continued to be in use in this phase. During the mid 4th century, the temple started a slow decline that culminated in a violent destruction at the end of the century. A small necropolis was made in the sacred area of the *temenos*, although only one burial survived *in situ*. The remains of seven other skeletons were found instead in the backfilling of the cistern, which occurred when the temple was systematically dismantled at the end of the century.²² During this dramatic event, the votive offerings and the main cult statue were destroyed in the open square in front of the temple, and the building was demolished – as several blocks of masonry found all around its perimeter attest.²³ Rituals continued nonetheless. The recovery of an interesting assemblage of early 5th century AD African lamps suggests that local communities and traders along the Tyrrhenian routes perpetuated the cult of *Diana Umbronensis* for further decades before the settlement was forgotten.²⁴

Discussion

The data for the mid to late Imperial period introduces several theories, mainly related to the economy of this part of Etruria. At the end of the 2nd century AD, the coastal territory began the construction of manufacturing facilities dedicated to the production of Egyptian blue (fig. 8), glass and metal recycling, and the production of bone objects. The decline of the agrarian supremacy of Italy would have facilitated a general re-organization of the economies, possibly alongside the introduction of new social agents



Fig. 8: Egyptian Blue pigments found at *Umbro*.

who emerged from the 3rd century AD.²⁵ The settlement at Spolverino played a key role in the restructuring of the landscape, emerging and continuously expanding until the mid 5th century. Its workshops are contemporaneous with those that inhabit the ruined *Umbro*, where a blacksmith forged rivets to fix ships sailing the Tyrrhenian coast along the cabotage routes and where the Egyptian blue could have fed the urban markets. The construction of what seems to be a two-story dwelling at *Umbro* in the 4th century AD appears to signal the permanent presence of one or two families involved with wine or olive oil production as well as secondary industries that continued from the previous century.

In this hectic economic panorama, the spatially diminished sacred area at Scoglietto still had a role to play. The refurbishment of the temple, in contrast with the abandonment of the rest of the sanctuary, emphasizes its function as a visual landmark to guarantee the necessary connectivity among those trading along the Tyrrhenian and those producing and collecting the goods in the workshops.

Late Roman Period (late 5th – mid 6th century AD)

The Coast (Alberese)

The coastal area alone provides data for this period.

The abandoned sacred area at Scoglietto was altered by the construction of a small, sunken hut during the first half of the 6th century. The humble dwelling was accompanied by a few small satellite infrastructures, most likely little fences to recover flocks. The recovery of the first Byzantine *nummus* of the entire *ager Rusellanus* dates to the end of this occupation phase around the mid 6th century. After this point, the ruins of the temple became overgrown and slowly disappeared in the memory of local communities. No other traces of permanent occupation of the promontory have been found, although a few fragments of Renaissance pottery suggest that some wayfarers passed by, possibly on their way to the late Medieval watchtower of Collelungo that is located less than three miles away.²⁶

After a complete abandonment of the manufacturing district, a small necropolis was retrieved. This consisted of four burials deployed into 3 former rooms of the complex. The anthropological analysis did not produce any cause of death, although it emphasized the stress on the bones, a clear sign of heavy daily work.²⁷

Finally, the site at *Umbro* was fully abandoned by the late 5th century AD. No signs of violent abandonment or collapse have been found during the excavations, while a thick deposit of sand, brought by a tide, was discovered between the rubble, suggesting that the ruined building underwent a slow decline.

Discussion

The late 5th century AD marked the moment when all the settlements analyzed in this paper were abandoned. The temple area at Scoglietto saw a temporary reoccupation, but only as the location for a hut built with perishable materials. Likewise, Spolverino was occupied by a small necropolis, but all the workshops had finished their activities around the mid 5th century. *Umbro*, where the late Imperial revival did not last more than a few decades, experienced an uncertain cessation. The changing economic and political panoramas, fueled by the fall of the western Empire, and the progressive decline of a globalized market concluded the experience of the manufacturing district at Spolverino as well as the agrarian and artisanal productions at *Umbro*. The gradual worsening of the environmental riverine conditions, with an increasing number of floods and the

impaired maintenance of the river banks, caused the slow, yet incessant silting of the settlement at Spolverino, while tides and coastal storms sealed the site at *Umbro*.

Final Remarks

The dataset presented in this paper does not aspire to delineate a definitive pattern along the riverine landscape of the Ombrone valley for the Roman period.

On the contrary, further research is needed to produce data for the hinterland area where a lack of Imperial and late Roman settlements undermines our general comprehension of this part of Etruria. At the same time, it is necessary to correlate and integrate datasets coming from other research projects that operate in this territory in order to produce a detailed, refined, and complete settlement and economic sequence that could compete with the results produced in other Roman riverine valleys of central Italy.

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Notes

¹ Patterson 2004; Di Giuseppe 2005; Patterson – Coarelli 2008.

² Carandini – Cambi 2002.

³ Carandini 1985.

⁴ Dyson 2002.

⁵ Carandini 1988. For a much more recent review on the debates around the slave-based economy and the role that villas played in the establishment of this kind of economy, see Marzano 2007; Bowman – Wilson 2013 and related bibliography.

⁶ Sebastiani 2017.

⁷ For a detailed report, see Barbieri 2005.

⁸ Detailed studies of the votive offerings: Fabbri 2005; Fabbri 2009.

⁹ For a first interim report, see Sebastiani et al. 2018.

¹⁰ The recovery of a hoard of silver *denarii*, found below a *dolium* smashed by the collapse of the roof, helps to tie the final chronology of the site (Adembri 2001).

- ¹¹ Sebastiani et al. 2016.
¹² Sebastiani et al. 2015.
¹³ Vanni 2015.
¹⁴ Barbieri 2005.
¹⁵ Sebastiani – Chirico 2015.
¹⁶ Sebastiani 2014.
¹⁷ Sebastiani 2014, 5.
¹⁸ Sebastiani 2016b.
¹⁹ Sebastiani 2014.
²⁰ Sebastiani forthcoming; Sebastiani – Derrick 2016; Sebastiani – Derrick forthcoming.
²¹ Chirico – Colombini 2015.
²² Aniceti 2015.
²³ Sebastiani 2015a.
²⁴ Brando 2015; Brando – Sebastiani 2016.
²⁵ Sebastiani 2016a.
²⁶ Sebastiani 2015b.
²⁷ Sebastiani 2014.

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