

# **Far from the Walls. Explaining Rural Settlement Dispersal within Roman, Mediterranean and Global Frameworks**

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## **Abstract**

One of the most outstanding findings of field surveys in South Etruria and Lazio was the identification of an expansive pattern of rural settlement dispersion along the Roman conquest of these regions (fifth to third century BC). Since the sixties, these findings have reshaped our images of the Roman countryside. Although the Roman pacification of the region initially was advanced as the crucial factor, soon the discovery of coeval similar patterns in regions of the Mediterranean outside of the area of Roman conquest urged other ways of explaining it. The purpose of this paper is to survey and evaluate the ways in which different scholars have tried to explain the dispersion of rural settlement on a Mediterranean scale. I analyse and compare the theoretical and methodological bases of these explanations to identify the general outlines of the current state of the debate. Then, I will consider this current state of the debate in a broader framework. I intend to reframe the dispersion of the Mediterranean settlement within a larger narrative of the global history of the development of complex agrarian societies, and of the specific way in which the Mediterranean countryside developed one.

## **Introduction**

Since the post-war period, Tyrrhenian central Italy has been surveyed by several archaeological projects.<sup>1</sup> One of their most outstanding results is the identification of an expansive pattern of rural settlement dispersion during the Roman conquest of these regions. Since the seminal South Etruria Survey, a large number of small sites, identified by the dispersion of scattered material datable to the “Roman period”, has been one of the most ubiquitous findings of surveys in Tyrrhenian central Italy.<sup>2</sup> There are plenty of methodological issues concerning these findings, ranging from technical questions of material visibility on the ground to conceptual questions of how to interpret and classify these sites.<sup>3</sup> I am not going to address these here, so I will develop my ideas from a simple assumption about them: the increasing number of small isolated sites in rural contexts in Tyrrhenian central Italy during the third quarter of the first millennium BC is a real (although not exactly proportional) index of increasing human occupation of the countryside.

Accepting this assumption provides a picture of expanding occupation of the countryside of Tyrrhenian central Italy in an increasing number of key areas by small and

discrete structures in these centuries. “Settlement dispersal” is a common label used to describe the process, since these field surveys identified the abandonment of many fortified hilltop settlements during this period that had dominated in previous centuries.<sup>4</sup> Anyway, it is important to consider two points: first, this was a time of increasing urbanization in this region;<sup>5</sup> and second, recent work on minor centres, such as *fora* and road stations, reveal that a complex hierarchical settlement pattern was emerging.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this dispersal of rural settlement was part of the development of a broader and more complex human occupation, with a more marked distinction between urban and rural settlements.

The aim of this paper is to sketch a general framework to make sense of how the change of settlement patterns that occurred in Tyrrhenian central Italy – *and beyond* – in the third quarter of the first millennium BC has been explained. Some decades ago, the first attempts to explain this process only considered the areas under Roman power. Later, scholars expanded their perspectives, using a new “Mediterranean framework” instead of the previous “Roman framework”. In my final remarks I will provide some thoughts on how to develop these ideas into an even broader perspective, in the direction of the trend for a global history.

### **From the Roman to the Mediterranean Framework**

The first attempts to explain this settlement change came from the archaeologists involved in the South Etruria Survey. Their hypotheses differ slightly between them but have a common core. On the one hand is the idea that Roman conquest brought peace and political stability to the region, allowing local peasants to live far from the walls. G. D. B. Jones, taking the *ager Capenas* into account, for instance, took this direction.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand is the idea that Roman power promoted this settlement dispersal either because of military or economic concerns. As Tim Potter stated, Romans desired the removal of people from easily defensible sites to avoid resistance as well as the occupation of new lands to raise levels of agricultural production.<sup>8</sup> In the end, both hypotheses take the Roman conquest as the historical context and the Roman State as the historical agent of the settlement change.

These two elements of this Roman framework have been criticized. Taking the Roman State as the main subject of settlement history is certainly anachronistic, because it assumes the early Roman state was a modern nation-state able to develop coherent and broad policies in its territory. Nonetheless, political history and state theory have been stressing the importance of analysing pre-modern states with specific approaches and categories.<sup>9</sup> Especially important to my argument, scholars studying early Roman colonization have shown that this historical process cannot be understood as an exclusively Roman process or solely as a state initiative.<sup>10</sup>

It is also important to bear in mind the fact that many wars took place in Italy after

its conquest by Rome – at least until the Civil Wars in the waning years of the Republic. Besides this, the end of wars did not mean complete pacification of the countryside.<sup>11</sup> Hence, isolated settlements inside Roman territory were not totally secure, and a more peaceful countryside seems not to be a sufficient cause for settlement dispersal.

The most persuasive criticism of the Roman Framework, however, is empirical. Nicola Terrenato has pointed that if we avoid a kind of Roman myopia, coeval processes of settlement dispersal can be identified in areas outside of those controlled by Rome.<sup>12</sup> In central Italy, surveys have identified settlements dispersed before the Roman conquest – for example, in the Rieti Basin.<sup>13</sup> In southern Italy many surveys have identified similar processes, like in the hinterlands of Sybaris and Metaponto, and in different areas of the Salento isthmus as well.<sup>14</sup> But this is not solely a peninsular trend. In different areas of the central Mediterranean basin, like Sicily, Sardinia and North Africa, surveys have also identified similar processes.<sup>15</sup> The same trend can be found in areas of the western<sup>16</sup> and eastern Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup> This is not a Mediterranean process in the sense that every region of the Mediterranean basin experienced it. But it is a Mediterranean trend in the sense that different areas around this region of the globe experienced it.

Here I must note that there are complicated methodological issues concerning the comparison of different surveys.<sup>18</sup> I will, however, not address these here, and work with the assumption that despite the different meaning given by each survey to the identification of dispersed archaeological material datable to the period of concern, they can be interpreted in a general sense of increasing scope and complexity of human occupation. This is the core historical process that we are facing in the Mediterranean basin, beginning in the second quarter of the first millennium BC and gaining significant momentum in the third quarter of that millennium: the development of social, economic and political complexity.<sup>19</sup> This settlement change is one of its faces.

A Mediterranean historical process requires a Mediterranean Framework for explanation. And scholars have been exploring it in recent decades. What most evidently links the settlement histories of these different Mediterranean regions is the Mediterranean itself. First, it has a climatic feature: the unifying Mediterranean climate of the region. For example, Willem Jongman pointed to climatic change as an important factor in the growth of the Mediterranean economy during the second half of the first millennium BC.<sup>20</sup> Better climatic conditions that increased agricultural productivity, for instance, would have resulted in increased population and therefore occupation of new lands and/or the intensification of agriculture, both related to settlement expansion and increasing complexity. More specific studies of the paleoclimatology of the Mediterranean basin are still incipient, so little information is available on how general climate changes affected specific areas. Therefore, we must be careful with climatic hypotheses.<sup>21</sup>

The second way in which the Mediterranean Sea could link these settlement histories is by its connectivity.<sup>22</sup> This has both demographic and economic features, since people as well as goods flowed through these connections. Local or regional demographic

growths could affect the entire Mediterranean by migration and colonization processes. The well-known Greek and Roman colonizations are part of a broader history of population movement through the Mediterranean. In this sense, a possible demographic increase would have caused settlement dispersal in different parts of the Mediterranean area. In fact, some scholars, like de Haas and Yntema, pointed to demographic pressure as the main cause of settlement dispersal in the areas they studied.<sup>23</sup>

Besides demographic pressure, the diffusion of specific kinds of crops, farming techniques and instruments through the Mediterranean basin could have led to the intensification of agriculture and higher per capita productivity. There is a longstanding debate on the agrarian systems of the ancient Mediterranean,<sup>24</sup> but its most recent developments point to the existence of a variety of agrarian systems coexisting in the area.<sup>25</sup> So, it is important to notice the historical development and diffusion of more intensive agrarian systems in different regions of the Mediterranean basin to understand its economic foundations. We have good data to understand the diffusion of labour-intensive crops like grapes and olives during the second and third quarters of the first millennium BC.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, we have evidence of the diffusion of iron farming tools around the Mediterranean, especially important to the expansion of agriculture in heavier soils.<sup>27</sup> There is some evidence of increased animal husbandry and the use of manure, as well as the development and diffusion of irrigation and drainage techniques.<sup>28</sup> In the big picture, we have a solid image of intensification and expansion of Mediterranean agriculture during these centuries.

The increasing commercialization of production is usually suggested as the main cause of agricultural intensification, and thus of settlement change. Studying the South Argolid, Curtis Runnels and Tjeerd Van Andel stated that “the number and density of settlements increased, usually with an increase of population, whenever access to external commercial markets was available”.<sup>29</sup> In this model, the possibility of earning profits stimulated the intensification of production, which demanded more dispersed settlement. Therefore, the development of maritime trade can explain settlement dispersal along the Mediterranean coast, and there is also solid evidence of more comprehensive Mediterranean economic integration.

In this sense, we must explain further why this integration took place. Runnels and Van Andel take market relations as a natural development of historical economies; as soon as it was possible for Mediterranean people to connect in market relationships, they did so. But there are two alternative ways to explain the increase of trade and economic integration in the Mediterranean basin. On the one hand, Horden and Purcell identify the circulation of goods as part of the Mediterranean peasantry’s strategy to avoid insecurity.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Peter Bang states that the “substance of pre-capitalist commerce is the product of surplus extraction – rather than the product of labor division seeking profits”.<sup>31</sup> Taking these approaches, then, the explanation for this process can be linked to the strategies of an increasing peasant population to avoid risk as well as of the ruling classes to increase surplus extraction. Regarding Mediterranean

ruling classes, it is important to bear in mind that the development of Roman power in central Italy was part of a broader Mediterranean context of expanding imperial powers. These included the Hellenistic kingdoms in the eastern Mediterranean, some powerful Greek cities in southern Italy, and the Carthaginians in North Africa and the western Mediterranean.

### From the Mediterranean to a Global Framework

To sum up, the explanation for the change of settlement patterns inside the Mediterranean framework can be sketched along the following lines. The dispersion of rural settlement in different places in the Mediterranean basin was related to: 1) some possible climatic changes that improved conditions for Mediterranean agriculture (which allowed intensification and expansion of cultivated areas); 2) the probable development of new farming implements and techniques, as well the diffusion of some crops (which also allowed intensification and expansion of cultivated areas); 3) the clear intensification of the circulation of products and integration of the Mediterranean basin (which encouraged intensification and expansion of cultivated areas); 4) and *last but not least*, the visible formation of dominant supralocal and imperial classes in several of these regions (which pushed intensification and expansion of cultivated areas).

As can be noted, intensification of agriculture is at the heart of the framework to explain this change in settlement patterns. And here lies a problem. The more perennial presence of farmers suggested by the existence of such structures is coherent with intensification of agriculture. However, this is not a necessary relationship. There are famous cases of agrarian intensification coeval with nucleation of rural settlement, the most evident case being Medieval Europe, when what some call the “medieval agrarian revolution” is correlated with the emergence of peasant villages.<sup>32</sup>

We need to use the *jeux d'échelles*. The Mediterranean framework has been important to identify new questions and models of analysis. However, there are different processes that demand more specific or broader scales of analysis. First, let me take some examples of more specific scales of analysis that can be useful to understand the change in settlement pattern. Even if the idea of pacification is flawed, changes in warfare, such as lesser risk of raids, can be an important local or regional factor to understand the settlement history. Worker exploitation might have played an important role as well, as suggested by Stephen Hodkinson, who related the settlement pattern in Laconia and Messenia with Spartan helotism.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Carter,<sup>34</sup> studying Metaponto, and Terrenato,<sup>35</sup> writing about early Roman times, related changes in settlement patterns with changes in land ownership schemes. It is important, therefore, to combine these different scales of analyses to produce convincing historical explanations.

In the opposite direction, there is room to consider whether the Mediterranean scale is the broadest scale that can be studied regarding the settlement process. Some scholars

have been stressing the need to go further and place the Mediterranean in the context of global history.<sup>36</sup> The Mediterranean scale is between the scale of specific societies (or “civilizations”) and the broader scale of global comparisons or global history. So, if it allows us to go beyond some limits of the former, the combination of both with the global scale can be important as well.

The ancient Mediterranean has indeed been placed inside global comparativism in recent decades. Comparisons between the ancient Mediterranean and East Asia, especially between the Roman and Chinese empires, and broader comparison between ancient empires including the Roman Empire, were made by important scholars like Walter Scheidel and Peter Bang.<sup>37</sup> However, what I want to propose here is slightly different. Some global historians have proposed what they call relational and historical global comparativism. It consists of the study of historical connections and entanglements between different societies that drive their coeval historical processes, comparing those different but connected histories. This allows us to go beyond the more usual formal study of structural similarities and differences between discrete societies. Along these lines we must go beyond comparing the Mediterranean with other areas of the globe and place the Mediterranean *into* the global connections.

But which connections? Talking about a different topic, the Italian scholar Aldo Schiavone, in his book *The End of the Past*, suggested a thoughtful idea of a specific Mediterranean path in a broader historical development led by the Neolithic Revolution.<sup>38</sup> The picture that Schiavone paints is a primeval process rooted in the transition to agrarian and state societies in the Near East expanding to different regions and taking different paths. We can root the historical developments of the Iron Age Mediterranean in a deeper history of Western Eurasia using this image. It can be useful in two different temporalities and two different approaches to better understand the increasing complexity around the Mediterranean in the Iron Age, of which the change in settlement pattern is part.

Talking about the approaches, we can work with the identification of connections and entanglements among these different global regions and the consequences as well as comparisons among the different paths by which these regions developed. This can be done in two temporalities. The first is a very *longue durée*, or deep history, which identifies the deep layers of historical sedimentation deposited by those connections on which the historical processes happens. The second analyses the synchronic temporality of coeval and connected historical processes. This global history approach sounds very fruitful to the study of the process described in this paper. Some of the processes envisioned in the Mediterranean framework are easily recognizable as broader processes. The diffusion of ironworking is the most obvious example. If we zoom out spatially and chronologically, we can grasp the diffusion of agrarian systems and crops around the Mediterranean on the same scale, since Mediterranean farming systems are historical products of the Near Eastern centre of agriculture origin.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Syntheses in Goodchild 2013; Terrenato 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> Duncan – Reynolds 1958; Hemphill, 1975; Jones, 1962, 1963; Kahane et al. 1968; Potter, 1979.
- <sup>3</sup> Barker 1991; Schörner 2012; Terrenato 2000; Witcher 2006, 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> Goodchild 2013, 200; Terrenato 2012, 147–149.
- <sup>5</sup> Andersen 1997; Attema 2004; Osborne – Cunliffe, 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> Tol et al. 2014.
- <sup>7</sup> Jones 1963, 129.
- <sup>8</sup> Potter 1979, 93.
- <sup>9</sup> Hespanha 2012; Spruyt 1994.
- <sup>10</sup> Bispham 2006; Bradley 2006; Pelgrom 2012; Pelgrom – Stek 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> E.g. Varro *De Re Rustica* 1.12.4 on the danger of bandits' raids.
- <sup>12</sup> Terrenato 2012, 147
- <sup>13</sup> Coccia et al. 1992, 1995.
- <sup>14</sup> Attema et al. 2010; Carter 2006; Yntema 1993.
- <sup>15</sup> Fentress – Docter, 2008; van Dommelen – Finocchi, 2008; van Dommelen et al. 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> Gómez Bellard 2008; López Castro 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> Alcock 1994.
- <sup>18</sup> Alcock – Cherry, 2004.
- <sup>19</sup> Attema et al. 2010.
- <sup>20</sup> Jongman 2014.
- <sup>21</sup> Luterbacher et al. 2012; Manning 2013, 106. 108.
- <sup>22</sup> Horden – Purcell 2000.
- <sup>23</sup> De Haas 2011, 93; Yntema 1993, 186.
- <sup>24</sup> Traditional approach in Jardé, 1925; Michell 1940; Semple 1932. Critics in Halstead 1987. Debate on Attica: Gallant 1982; Garnsey 1989, 93 f.; Jameson 1978 *versus* Isager – Skydsgaard 2001, 108–113; Sallares 1991, 300 f.
- <sup>25</sup> On intensive farming in Roman times: Kron, 2000, 2005.
- <sup>26</sup> Brun 2004, 80–88; Sallares 1991, 305 f.
- <sup>27</sup> Attema et al. 2010, 90; Craddock, 1995, 259 f.; van Joolen 2003, 113; van Dommelen – Gómez Bellard 2008, 236.
- <sup>28</sup> On the debate of off-site material as evidence for manuring: Alcock et al. 1994; Bintliff – Snodgrass 1988, 508; Coccia et al. 1995; De Haas 2012, 60 f.; Fentress 2000; Hayes 1991. On literary evidence for manuring: Kron 2008, 76; Pliny *Naturalia Historia*, 17.50; Columella *De Re Rustica*, 2.15.1; Palladius *Opus Agriculturae*, 10.3.2. On *cuniculi*: Attema 1993, 223 f.; Judson – Kahane 1963, 88 f.; Ravelli – Howart 1984.
- <sup>29</sup> Runnels – Andel 1987, 303.
- <sup>30</sup> Horden – Purcell 2000.
- <sup>31</sup> Bang 2008.
- <sup>32</sup> On the medieval agrarian revolution: Duby 1968; Dyer 1989; Fossier 2015; Lopez 1976. On the *encellulement*: Curtis 2013; Fossier 1982.

<sup>33</sup> Hodkinson 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Carter 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Terrenato 2012, 148.

<sup>36</sup> Harris 2005; Horden – Purcell 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Bang – Kolodziejczyk 2012; Scheidel 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Schiavone 2002.

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