

A View from the Margins: Interamna Lirenas and its Territory in the Long Term¹

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The Roman conquest of the Mediterranean created a unified political space, which brought about unprecedented conditions that favoured trade and exchange across the whole expanse of the ancient Mediterranean and beyond. It is impossible to deny the relevance and impressive scale of Mediterranean exchange and integration at the peak of the Roman Empire. But it is quite a different thing to assume that because of such remarkable levels of integration everything managed to get everywhere and in comparably high volumes. Such assumptions tend to over-emphasise the impact of overseas trade at the expense of (comparably less-understood) local production, distribution and consumption patterns. As a result, our understanding of landscapes located at the margins of the Mediterranean trade network could in fact be seriously affected by their reduced archaeological visibility. These problems can be properly framed and evaluated by exploring distribution and consumption patterns in an area that appears to have been only marginally affected by the input of overseas trade. Notwithstanding this, it does not appear to have declined, at least not for a while and not so dramatically.

Since 2010 the Roman town of Interamna Lirenas and its immediate hinterland, in the Liri Valley (Southern Lazio, Italy), have been the subject of an integrated research project run by the Faculty of Classics of the University of Cambridge, under the direction of Martin Millett and myself, in partnership with the Italian Soprintendenza (G. R. Bellini, SABAP-Lazio) and the Municipality of Pignataro Interamna (Bellini et al. 2014). Throughout history, the Valley has represented a natural inland corridor between Lazio and Campania, and Interamna appears to have been well-placed to play a part in the movement of people and goods across the region and far beyond it, through the Liri-Garigliano river and the port of Minturnae (Launaro 2019). One way to map the place of Interamna within these networks and also the relationship between the town and its territory is to look at the relative proportions of specific classes of material culture as they developed over time. In order to achieve that, two separate-but-related pottery datasets will be discussed: one derived from four seasons of intensive field survey across the countryside (2010–13), the other from the first two seasons of excavation of the theatre (2013–14).

If we consider the chronological distribution of finds, both town and countryside seem to have followed broadly similar trends. However, if we compare the absolute amount of imports to the total amount of finds across the period, it becomes obvious that they only represented a tiny fraction of the material culture consumed in both town and countryside. It is local/regional commonwares that represent the absolute majority of finds in both datasets and do in fact provide a far more comprehensive

and reliable picture of the development of production, distribution and consumption patterns in the area.

As a result, we find ourselves in the position to contrast and compare two views of the same landscape: a) one including commonwares, b) the other based only on the recovery of finewares and main amphorae types. For decades, the latter view has been the basis on which the practice of landscape archaeology in Italy appears to have rested. The resulting long-term settlement patterns would lend themselves to strikingly different interpretations: a) significant early growth and stability well into the 3rd century AD followed by decline, as opposed to b) limited growth followed by an early decline already by the end of the 1st century BC.

The fact that relative volumes of comparable material culture evolved in a similar way in both town and countryside supports the idea that town and countryside were mutually dependent and shared broadly similar patterns of material culture. However, the underlying distribution and consumption patterns were rooted in local/regional networks, whose existence and performance was largely independent of that Mediterranean-wide exchange and integration so visibly promoted by the Roman empire.

Notes

¹ This text provides an extended abstract of a study, which has since been published elsewhere: Launaro – Leone 2018.

References

Bellini et al. 2014

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