TERRE DI MARE
L'ARCHEOLOGIA DEI PAESAGGI COSTIERI E LE VARIAZIONI CLIMATICHE

Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi
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a cura di
Rita Auriemma e Snježana Karinja

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A CURA DI
RITA AURIEMMA E SNEŽANA KARINJA
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Indice

Presentazione

Gino Bandelli ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 11
Monika Verzar ....................................................................................................................................................................................... 12
Martina Gambaz .................................................................................................................................................................................... 14
Flavio Bonin ........................................................................................................................................................................................... 15
Il Progetto Interreg Italia-Slovenia IIIA AltoAdriatico: risultati e prospettive
Rita Auriemma, Snježana Karinja .......................................................................................................................................................... 17

I Sessione

Il progetto Interreg “AltoAdriatico”: risultati e prospettive

I castellieri di Trieste tra Carso e mare
Ambra Betic, Federico Bernardini, Emanuela Montagnari Kokelj .................................................................................................................. 25
Il sito di Zaule presso Trieste (Italia nord-orientale)
Federico Bernardini, Ambra Betic ......................................................................................................................................................... 38
Sermino protostorica e i castellieri del litorale sloveno
Maša Sakara Sučević ............................................................................................................................................................................. 44
Archaeological research of maritime infrastructure of Roman settlements on the Slovenian coast of Istria (1993-2007)
Marko Stokin, Andrej Gaspari, Snježana Karinja, Miran Erič .................................................................................................................. 56
Terre di mare: paesaggi costieri dal Timavo alla penisola muggesana
Rita Auriemma, Valentina Degrassi, Patrizia Donat, Dario Gaddi, Susanna Mauro, Flaviana Oriolo, Dorotea Riccobono ............... 75
I sistemi portuali e gli insediamenti costieri in epoca medievale dalle Foci del Timavo a Muggia
Pietro Riavez ....................................................................................................................................................................................... 213

Archaeological and geomorphological data to deduce sea level changes during the late Holocene in the Northeastern Adriatic
F. Antonioli, S. Furlani, K. Lambeck, F. Stravisi, R. Auriemma, D. Gaddi, A. Gaspari, S. Karinja, V. Kovačić ........................................... 221

II Sessione

Geomorfologia: dal paleopaesaggio agli assetti costieri del futuro.
Le evidenze archeologiche sommerse come markers delle variazioni del livello del mare

Sea level change and archaeological coastal sites: an interdisciplinary approach applied along the south-eastern coast of Sicily
Gianfranco Scicchitano, Fabrizio Antonioli, Elena Flavia Castagnino Berlinghieri, Carmelo Monaco .......................................................... 239
Modificazioni della linea di costa nella laguna di Sulki in epoca punico-romana (Isola di S. Antioco, Sardegna sud-occidentale)
Paolo Orrù, Emanuela Solinas, Elisabetta Frau ................................................................................................................................. 247
Notch development inferred by limestone lowering rates in Northeastern Adriatic
Stefano Furlani, Franco Cucchi, Anna Rossi, Roberto Odorico .............................................................................................................. 257
Il porto e la peschiera di Miseno (NA): nuovi dati archeologici per lo studio delle variazioni del livello del mare nell’area flegrea
Alessandra Benini...............................................................................................................................................................................269

Strutture portuali di Via dei Cavazzeni (Trieste): indicazioni sul livello del mare
Valentina Degrassi, Stefano Furlani, Franca Maselli Scotti, Romana Melis, Fabrizio Antonioli, Giulia Fonda....................................... 275

III Sessione
Portualità marittima e infrastrutture nel Mediterraneo.
Tipologie edilizie, tecniche costruttive e rapporti con il territorio

Recenti scoperte sottomarine nella baia di Kaštela
Irena Radić Rossi .................................................................................................................................................................................285

Underwater archaeological research at the Vižula peninsula near Medulin
Igor Miholjek.......................................................................................................................................................................................299

Dragonera. Due ville romane.
Alka Starac ..........................................................................................................................................................................................304

Quatre ans de recherches sur les littoraux parentin
M.-B. Carre, V. Kovačić, F. Tassaux ...................................................................................................................................................... 310

Il porto di Tergeste: riflessioni a seguito dei recenti rinvenimenti
Franca Maselli Scotti........................................................................................................................................................................... 317

Le strutture portuali di via Cavana a Trieste
Paola Ventura, Valentina Degrassi, Gabriella Petrucci......................................................................................................................... 328

Il paesaggio costiero antico nella Laguna nord di Venezia: recenti acquisizioni dall’archeologia subacquea
Marco D’Agostino, Luigi Fozzati, Alberto Lezziero, Marco Marchesini, Stefano Medas ................................................................................. 340

La dinamica insediativa della Laguna di Venezia: alcuni casi di studio dalla Laguna nord
Massimo Capulli, Luigi Fozzati, Alberto Lezziero, Alessandro Pellegrini ..............................................................................................349

Archeologia della costa: la situazione marchigiana
Maria Cecilia Profumo .........................................................................................................................................................................360

Le strutture portuali romane in cementizio: questioni progettuali, problemi cronologici.
Enrico Felici.........................................................................................................................................................................................369

The construction of the Herodian harbour of Caesarea Palaestina
Christopher J. Brandon .......................................................................................................................................................................377

IV Sessione
Paesaggi e modelli insediativi

Le ville costiere tra la fine della Repubblica e gli inizi dell’Impero:
il quadro delle fonti letterarie
Pasquale Rosafio................................................................................................................................................................................387

L’indagine archeologica e paleoambientale del complesso costiero di Loron - Istria:
spunti per un modello interpretativo.
Antonio Marchiori, Daniele Giardino....................................................................................................................................................... 392

Il Porto Quieto e il fiume: un mutare di funzioni e di paesaggi tra l’Istria costiera e l’interno
Chiara D’Incà .........................................................................................................................................................................................400

Analiza razmerja med rimsko poselitvijo in bližino obale v severozahodni Istri
Sašo Poglajen................................................................................................................................................................................................408
Il quartiere episcopale di un emporio altomedievale.
Gli scavi nel centro storico di Comacchio e la sequenza dei materiali.
Sauro Gelichi, Claudio Negrelli, Diego Calaon, Elena Grandi................................................................................................................ 416

V Sessione

Merci, trasporti e contatti nell’alto Adriatico

Rapporti circumadriatici in età preromana:
la diffusione della ceramica di produzione daunia in alto Adriatico
Nicoletta Poli .................................................................................................................................................................................. 431

La ceramica grigia nei siti costieri dell’Alto Adriatico orientale.
Una produzione a Stramare di Muggia?
Patrizia Donat, Renata Merlatti .................................................................................................................................................. 435

The beginning of Roman commerce along the main route Aquileia - Emona
Jana Horvat ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 444

Merci, trasporti e contatti nella Venetia:
le importazioni di anfore olearie dal Mediterraneo orientale
Chiara Belotti ...................................................................................................................................................................................... 454

Trade and consumption of foodstuffs in Northern Adriatic:
the case of the villa Školarice
Tina Žerjal .......................................................................................................................................................................................... 462

Lo sfruttamento delle risorse marine a Trieste in età romana:
i dati dai recenti scavi di Crosada di Cavana
Gabriella Petrucci ................................................................................................................................................................................ 470

La mostra “Terre di Mare”

La mostra “Terre di mare”
Rita Auriemma, Snježana Karinja.............................................................................................................................................. 479

L’atleta della villa di Barcola
Giulia Mian..........................................................................................................................................................................................486

Elenco Autori.................................................................................................................................................................................. 492

Progetto Interreg Italia-Slovenia IIIA AltoAdriatico: Carta Archeologica
Projekt Interreg Italija-Slovenija IIIA AltoAdriatico: Arheološka karta
Elenco UT | Koda TE Poimenovanje.............................................................................................................................................. 496

Tavola fuori testo

Progetto Interreg Italia-Slovenia IIIA AltoAdriatico: Carta Archeologica
Projekt Interreg Italija-Slovenija IIIA AltoAdriatico: Arheološka karta
The beginning of Roman commerce along the main route Aquileia - Emona

Abstract

An important old route connecting the Italian peninsula with the central Danube region began at Aquileia and crossed the low-lying passes between the Julian Alps and the Dinaric Mountains. Selected archaeological sites in the Postojna and Ljubljana basins are discussed with the aim of identifying the stages of the trade development during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC: Grad near Smihel (the first half of the 2nd century BC), numismatic evidence (the middle of the 2nd century BC), the Razdrto Pass (the end of the 2nd and the first third of the 1st century BC), Naupactus and Emona (Augustan period).

The founding of the Roman colony of Aquileia in 181 BC and the occupation of Histria in 178/177 BC had a profound effect on the north-eastern Adriatic area. 1

By the middle of the 2nd century BC, Roman ceramics (and other goods) were well represented in the coastal sites of north-western Istria. The best evidence for this was provided by the site of Sermin, probably a kind of a coastal emporium, where a large amount of later Greco-Italic amphoras originating from the Adriatic production centres had been deposited.2 The settlements multiplied from the end of the 2nd century BC onwards, offering an insight into the wide diffusion of the Roman material, e.g. fine and common ceramics as well as amphoras Lamboglia 2, in the coastal zone.3 On the other hand, the archaeological traces of the Romans in the mainland territory east of Aquileia in the 2nd century BC are very sparse. Contacts and trading with the peoples of the south-eastern Alpine area were of primary importance to Aquileia from the outset.4 An important old route connecting the Italian peninsula with the central Danube region began at Aquileia and crossed the low-lying passes between the Julian Alps and the Dinaric Mountains (Fig. 1). Going eastwards from Aquileia, the first pass was Razdrto (598 m asl), situated at the western edge of the Postojna basin. The latter represented the crossroads of routes leading from Aquileia, Tergeste, northern Istria and the Kvarner Bay. After that, the main route descended down to the Ljubljana basin, to the springs of the Ljubljanica river. There an old navigable route began that enabled transport far into the East along the Ljubljanica, Sava and Danube rivers.5 Actually, two old long-distance communications fork in the area of the Ljubljana basin, the so-called Amber Route leading northwards (Aquileia - Celeia - Caruntum - the Baltic Sea) and the route along the Sava river, also called the Argonaut’s Route (Caput Adriae - the Sava - the Danube - the Black Sea).6 The text below will discuss selected archaeological sites along the main south-eastern Alpine route, in the Postojna and Ljubljana basins, with the aim of identifying the stages of the trade development during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. The specific types of material traded will, for the most part, be neglected.7

The Postojna basin

Grad near Smihel

An important prehistoric hillfort at Grad near Smihel commanded the Postojna basin and the 7 km distant Razdrto Pass. A large hoard was discovered there, which predominantly contained Roman weapons for distance fighting: heavy and light pilae, incendiary pilae, javelins, catapult bolts, arrowheads and swords. Many of them were deformed - evidently previously used in battle. Based on the pilae with flat hafts, the hoard could be dated to the end of the 3rd and the first half of the 2nd century BC. Historical circumstances, on the other hand, rather indicate a burial from the first half of the 2nd century BC. The hoard should be tied to the otherwise unknown Roman military activity in the hinterland of Aquileia, which probably intended to establish control over the route and open the path for Roman trade towards the east.8

1 Šašel Kos 1997.
3 Horvat 1995a; Horvat 1997a, pp. 120-130.
4 Šašel Kos 1997.
The forms of the black glazed pottery found at Mandrga (Fig. 4: 1-7) are common in various production circles of Campanian ceramics. Such forms, such as deep plates with curving walls (Fig. 4: 1), plates with very broad undulated rims (Fig. 4: 3-4), bowls with simple everted rims (Fig. 4: 2) and conical bowls with emphasized rim edges and rounded profile (Fig. 4: 5) date mostly to the end of the 2nd or in the first third of the 1st century BC. The absence of the so-called “porous fabric” known from Magdalensberg or the “central Padanian black glazed pottery” are also of chronological importance - they show that the site of Mandrga predates the large-scale distribution of the “porous fabric”. To conclude, the forms of the black glazed pottery and the Lamboglia 2 amphoras indicate the chronological position of Mandrga at the end of the 2nd or the first third of the 1st century BC.

The area revealed also the remains of the Roman road; they were excavated on the top of the pass - at Preval - and at Šušec west of the pass, on a sheltered terrace on the slopes of the Nanos. The archaeological remains can be interpreted as resting posts with an isolated building standing on each of the two sites. A small settlement site of Mandrga 500 m east of the pass is most likely not situated far from the Roman road. The sites at Goli vrh, Žingarca and Gradišče, on the other hand, were positioned above the pass, on the hills affording protection and a good view over a large area. In the shortage of extensive archaeological research, these can be regarded primary as control points.

The site of Mandrga provided a lot of Roman material, though no built structures were identified during the excavations. Studying the field documentation and the composition of small finds, however, led to the supposition that the remains of one or two wooden buildings were probably discovered there. The small finds are remarkably uniform, regarding both chronology and provenience. The site yielded almost exclusively Roman material of a Late Republican date; there were very few exceptions.

The site revealed a large amount of potsherds belonging to wine amphoras of the Lamboglia 2 type (Fig. 3). This amphora type was produced in the central and northern Adriatic area from the last quarter of the 2nd to the third quarter of the 1st century BC. The form did witness a certain development in the course of almost a century of production, but this is difficult to define and identify. For the amphoras from Razdrto it seems that they should be positioned well before the appearance of the latest forms that show traits of transition to the later amphoras Dr. 6 A. The forms of the black glazed pottery found at Mandrga (Fig. 4: 1-7) are common in various production circles of Campanian ceramics in the second half of the 2nd and in the 1st century BC. The fabric of most fragments is very uniform. Some forms, such as the conical bowls with emphasized rim edges (forms Morel 2652-2653; Fig. 4: 5) and the plate with a stamp in the form of a double C (Fig. 4: 7), indicate the origin of the whole group of ceramics in the north Etruscan circle of black glazed (Campanian) ceramics.

Forms such as deep plates with curving walls (Fig. 4: 1), plates with very broad undulated rims (Fig. 4: 3-4), bowls with simple everted rims (Fig. 4: 2) and conical bowls with emphasized rim edges and rounded profile (Fig. 4: 5) date mostly to the end of the 2nd or in the first third of the 1st century BC. The absence of the so-called “porous fabric” known from Magdalensberg or the “central Padanian black glazed pottery” are also of chronological importance - they show that the site of Mandrga predates the large-scale distribution of the “porous fabric”. To conclude, the forms of the black glazed pottery and the Lamboglia 2 amphoras indicate the chronological position of Mandrga at the end of the 2nd or the first third of the 1st century BC.

Other types of ceramics were also being imported from Italy in that period: high thin-walled beakers (types Marabini 3 and 4; Fig. 4: 8), Italian common ware (jugs, bowls in grey ware of the Venetian tradition; Fig. 4: 9) and Italian cooking ware (pots with almond rims, baking dishes without a slip and accompanying lids; Fig. 4: 10-13). The cooking ware of local tradition is very poorly represented (perhaps a small part of pots and baking rings).
Fig. 1. The main route Aquileia - Emona in the 1st century BC.

Fig. 2. Archaeological sites in the area of the Razdrto Pass.
The archaeological material from Mandrgra does not differ from the contemporary deposits in north-eastern Italy and Istria. Probably the best comparison is that of the deposit from Fornače near Piran, on the coast of north-western Istria. It revealed a great quantity of the earlier Lamboglia 2 amphoras, but also black glazed pottery similar to that from Mandrgra, a Megarian cup of the Ephesian-Ionian type, thin-walled Marabini 1 and 3 beakers and Italian cooking ware (baking dishes and lids).  

The area of Notranjska, where Mandrgra is situated, saw the prevalence of fortified hilltop settlements in the La Tène period. Contacts with the Roman world, which can be observed on these indigenous sites, were mostly limited to the circulation of Roman coins - alongside Celtic silver coins. The profound influence and wide-scale use of Roman products in daily life can be noticed only from the middle Augustan period onwards. Therefore, Mandrgra appears to be a foreign element within the autochthonous environment at the end of the 2nd or beginning of the 1st century BC - an outpost of the Romans on a strategic site that exerted control over the road towards the east. It seems that the Roman wine amphoras from Razdrto - Mandrgra represent a material proof for the wine trade at the end of the 2nd or beginning of the 1st century BC. The scarce finds from the consumer sites, with the only exception of Magdalensberg, indicate a limited extent of the wine trade in the Eastern Alps and Middle Danubian area. It should also be noted that no oil amphoras were found at Razdrto - Mandrgra.

The Ljubljana basin

Nauportus

The key strategic point in central Slovenia was Nauportus, situated at the western edge of the Ljubljana basin, in the area of present-day Vrhnika, and at the beginning of the river route along the Ljubljanica, Sava and Danube. Strabo reports, for the 2nd century BC, that goods were being transported by wagons from Aquileia to Nauportus, a settlement of the Celtic Taurisci, then reloaded onto ships that navigated the rivers to the Danube. The settlement’s name and historical analogies provide the basis for inferring that a toll station existed at Nauportus. However, the position of the Celtic Nauportus from the 2nd century BC is not known.

The settlement enjoyed the status of vicus in the territory of Aquileia from the middle of the 1st century BC onwards. During the 1st century BC, important Aquileian merchant families maintained control over the vicus via their freedmen; they also controlled the transit of the long-distance traffic that passed by Nauportus. The historical and epigraphic data lead to the conclusion that immigration from Italy was quite considerable from the very start.

The Early Roman Nauportus was situated on the plain, where the Ljubljanica bends towards the moor of the Ljubljansko barje. The Roman road Aquileia - Emona, which was probably constructed under Augustus, led along the western bank of the Ljubljanica through the settlement area at Breg. This part of the settlement has its origins in the Middle Augustan period and was uninterruptedly occupied through to the 4th century.

Dolge njive, the eastern and best known part of the Early Roman settlement, lay inside the meander of the Ljubljanica river bend. The new ground plan of the site, which was engendered by geophysical prospection and the combination of this with the ground plans resulting from former excavations, has a good interpretative potential (Fig. 5).

The Dolge njive site measured 130 x 144 m. The Ljubljanica river flows along two sides of the site; while a defence ditch filled with water ran along the eastern and probably also the southern sides. The defence wall with four protruding square towers was 2-3 m wide at the southern and eastern sides, while the back walls of the buildings formed a less than 1 m wide defence wall at the western and northern ends.

The central market, which has an irregular form of a parallelogram, covers about 30 % of the site surface. A large area is built-up with storehouses - horrea: rows of buildings with long and narrow rooms, wide entrances and a portico. They occupy about 30 % of the area, that is about 5,500 m² (Buildings 2-5, 11-17, 19-20, 22-23). The entrances face towards the market and cover the entire width of the rooms. The type of horrea with rooms lined in a row was well known throughout the Roman world primarily in ports; the entrances to the rows of storehouses were frequently open towards the piers in ports. The type appears in various parts of the Empire during a large chronological span from the 1st century BC through to the 2nd century AD.

The long and narrow building with eight rooms (21) probably functioned, based on its form and dimensions, as a row of tabernae. The relatively small building (25), situated in the corner of the market and not holding a dominant position, had a ground plan similar to that of a particular type of sanctuaries withambulatories in which the Christian tradition intermingled with Roman elements.

28 Sašel 1966; Sašel Kos 1990, pp. 20, 146-147.
30 Horvat 1990.
35 Mušić, Horvat 2007, pp. 244-245, 264.
Fig. 3. Lamboglia 2 amphoras from Razdrto. Scale 1:4
Fig. 4. Black glazed ware, thin-walled pottery, grey pottery of Venetian tradition and Italian cooking ware from Razdrto. Scale 1:4 (a stamp 1:1).
The majority of small finds from the old archaeological excavations at Dolge njive lacks detailed stratigraphic data. However, the forms of the black glazed pottery and its distribution demonstrate that most of the settlement was probably constructed in the Pre-Augustan or Early Augustan period. Small finds also show that the decline of the settlement at Dolge njive occurred during the first half of the 1st century AD.37 The main characteristic of Nauportus - Dolge njive is its key position at the junction between land routes leading from north-eastern Italy and Istria and water routes leading eastwards. The large storehouses, market and fortifications lead us to infer that the site of Dolge njive acted as a reloading trading post, where long-distance transit traffic and trade could operate. The extensiveness of the complex points to an exceptionally large amount of traffic and goods, particularly in the Augustan period. In addition to the regular merchant traffic, military shifts and supplies also passed through Nauportus. It has to be noted that further down along the Sava, in the Brežice gateway that opens into the Pannonian plain, a whole series of military camps dating to the Augustan period is known. 38

Emona

Emona was situated at an old crossroads in the centre of the Ljubljana basin, just 20 km east from Nauportus. The settlement existed there in the second half of the 1st century BC on the right bank of the Ljubljanica river, in the area of Stari and Gornji trg. The earliest strata from the Late Republican or Early Augustan period revealed local coarse wares, fine La Tène wares as well as several types of Italic pottery (black glazed and thin-walled ceramics). Terra sigillata appeared in the Middle Augustan period. 39 A tombstone, probably from the Late Republican period, testifies that Emona was important enough to attract settlers (merchants?) from Aquileia of a certain social position, such as the members of the Caesernii family.40 Emona was initially completely overshadowed by Nauportus, though it had a far more significant geo-political position: it was situated at the narrowest point of the Ljubljana basin, on the crossroads of mainland routes (directed towards Italy, Noricum and Pannonia) and near the confluence of the navigable Ljubljanica and Sava rivers. It could secure the route to Italy much better than Nauportus.41 A colony was founded in Emona perhaps already in the time of Octavian.42 However, a new Roman settlement with orthogonal grid-plan, forum and defence walls was built on the left bank of the Ljubljanica river only at the beginning of the 1st century AD.43 In that century, Nauportus witnessed a decline and Emona became the main regional centre.44

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43 Vičič 2003.
44 Horvat, Mušič 2007.
Fig. 5. Nauportus - Dolge njive. The fortified settlement of the Augustan period: central market place, horrea, tabernae and sanctuary. The river port was situated north of this site. (After Mušič, Horvat 2002, fig. 39).

Šašel Kos M. 1997 = The End of the Norican Kingdom and the Formation of the Provinces of Noricum and Pannonia, in Akten des IV. internationalen Kolloquiums über Probleme des provinzidrömischen Kunstschaffens, Situla, 36, Ljubljana, pp. 21-42.


Šašel Kos M. 2003 = Emona was in Italy, not in Pannonia, in M. Šašel Kos, P. Scherrer (eds.), The autonomous towns of Noricum and Pannonia, Pannonia I, Situla 41, Ljubljana, pp. 11-19.


