

ISTRIA (CROATIA): ANCIENT SETTLEMENTS IN LANDSCAPE

*Klara Buršić-Matijašić, Robert Matijašić,
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Croatia,
Faculty of Humanities, Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Landscape Archaeology (CIRLA)*



Monkodonja near Rovinj, Bronze Age hillfort



Picući near Poreč, three Iron Age hillforts

THE FIRST TRANSITION

The Istrian peninsula was conquered by the Romans in 177 B.C., but the Romanization proper started after 50 B.C., when the colonies of *Pola* and *Parentium* were founded on the western coast. During those 120 years, the Romans did not intervene heavily in the region. It seems that they only placed some military observation points along the coast, because their main aim was to safeguard the sea route along the coast, by controlling the subdued Histri. Unfortunately, no traces of such settlements have been found, or identified. Only recently a study of those hillforts that present traces of Roman age occupation has started to give some new data. The excavation of one such site, Monte Ricco near Vrsar, started in 2014, and at the moment it seems that it was inhabited in the Bronze Age, and then again during the 2nd – 1st century B.C., but not after that. As the site is in a prominent position, with a view over the sea, but also over part of the interior plain with a lot of prehistoric hilltops, it may not be impossible that the settlement was a Roman outpost, although for the moment (the excavation is only at the beginning) no military-related material has been found.



Stanzia Pelicetti near Pula



Dragonera near Peroj

Roman centuriation, Bulčić 2012

CONCLUSIONS

From prehistory to the beginning of the Middle Ages, the anthropic landscape of Istria was transformed several times. Although the data at our disposal may be incomplete and non-conclusive, the main trends can be defined in a few general statements and/or hypotheses that should be verified and revised in future research:

- the prehistoric hillforts were not abandoned immediately after the Roman conquest, but the process started after the foundation of the Roman colonies;
- in the Roman period, life from the hilltops descended into the valleys and to the coast, nearer to the lines of communication, giving birth to the villa system between the 1st and 3rd century;
- during Late Antiquity, some villas, particularly in the interior, have been heavily downgraded in architectural quality and productive quantity;
- some villas on the coast have started to grow into semi-urban and urban settlements; some earlier hill-forts have been resettled;
- almost all villas in the interior have been abandoned after the 7th century, but some were transformed into villages, already Christianized.

PREHISTORY

The Mediterranean setting of Istria, a Karstic region in the Northern Adriatic has deeply influenced the settlement of the territory. The relationship between the geomorphology of the land and the anthropized/anthropic landscape is clearly visible since the older prehistoric periods (caves in the and later in the open in the Mesolithic, Neolithic, Eneolithic). With the Bronze Age, the scheme changes, and new settlements were built on hilltops (ital. *castellieri*, croat. *gradine*). The natural landscape is well suited for this purpose, because Istria has plenty of hilly areas, with prominences 20-40 m above the surrounding terrain. This is especially true of the areas around Rovinj and Poreč, but the prehistoric hilltop settlements are fairly evenly distributed in the whole peninsula. They are easily defended, and were chosen for permanent settlements in the Bronze Age (2000 – 1000 B.C.) and Iron Age (1000 – 100 B.C.). They had at least three complementary functions: defense, housing and shelter for animals. A lot of attention was given to the planning and construction of the entrances into the hillfort.

The analysis of the territory has revealed that the hillforts were not randomly positioned, but one of them, on the most important point, was the centre of a group of settlements that were somehow socially connected. The grouping of hillforts reflects the social organization, but the lack of other data makes it impossible to be more specific.

The hillforts that appear to be the centre of a group of similar but smaller settlements are always in a protected position, not visible from far away, never above the open coast. This is the case of *Nesactium*, *Pola*, *Alvona*, and others.



Monte Ricco near Vrsar, view from the site to the west

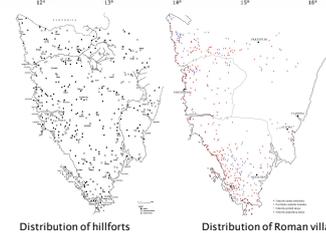
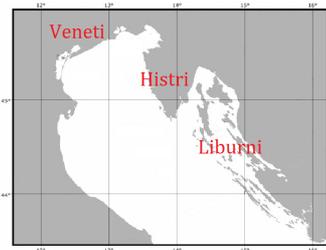


Monte Ricco near Vrsar, Roman cistern

THE SECOND TRANSITION

The economic boom of the Istrian agriculture lasted for a little more than a century. In the 2nd century the quantity of olive oil produced along the western coast diminished sensibly. In Late Antiquity, after the 4th century AD, the production was for local use only, but this did not result in dramatic changes in the economic and natural landscape. Some land was abandoned, but the villa system persisted, although in different circumstances. Several examples of villas that were used for a long period of time, and were converted into small agglomerations, confirm the dynamics of this process: Dragonera near Peroj, Vrsar, so-called "Castrum" on the Island of Brijuni. All these span from the 1st to the 7th century, when they were abandoned. Villas were first transformed into small agglomerations under the pressure of refugees from Pannonia in the 4th – 5th century, when some hilltop settlements were resettled, giving birth to fortified medieval towns on the coast (*Ruginium* / Rovinj, *Ursaria* / Vrsar, *Civitas Nova* / Novigrad and *Humagum* / Umag) and in the interior (*Piquentium* / Buzet, *Rotium* / Roč, *Alvona* / Labin and *Flanona* / Plomin). Their *raison d'être* was confirmed in the 6th – 7th century, when the Slavs started to slowly settle in the peninsula, Christianized in the meantime.

The archaeological remains of early medieval churches and chapels in the open fields today are generally a diagnostic sign of a settlement site, but they are also most often situated on the remains of a classical Roman *villa rustica*. So there are many instances of continuity, even in the case of villages which were abandoned in the Middle Ages after the pest epidemics.



Distribution of hillforts

Distribution of Roman villas

THE ROMAN PERIOD

The establishment of the colonies changed everything. The arrival of several thousands Roman citizens was preceded by the centuriated organization of the territories of the new towns, *Pola* and *Parentium*. Large portions of the best land along the western coast were requisitioned, the Istrian occupants forcibly removed further inland, so almost all hillforts were abandoned. The new settlers received a land lot per family unit within the centuriation grid, while the more distant areas were probably for communal use. In those areas some local inhabitants may have been given permission to remain, because a number of epigraphic monuments testify to the survival of pre-Roman names.

The main integrating factor was the economy. The Romans introduced the villa system (*villa rustica*), in which a farm was the centre of an agricultural self-sufficient estate. Olive oil and wine were produced and exported in great quantities, particularly to the Danubian limes. The villas were a powerful means of Romanization, they represented the new way of life that became the model for the subdued population to emulate. The protection offered by the hillforts was no longer needed, and they were gradually abandoned. The life was transferred from the top of the hill to the valley beneath it (*Alvona*, *Flanona*, *Piquentium*...). Romanization led to the relocation of settlements in places less protected, but more comfortable.

The number of known sites of Roman villas is similar to that of the prehistoric hilltop settlements, but their distribution is different, particularly in the coastal area, as the produce of the land were exported by sea.



Val Madonna on the Island of Brijuni

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