

ISTRIA, CROATIA: ANCIENT SETTLEMENTS IN LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

The Istrian peninsula has been inhabited since the Paleolithic, but only Bronze / Iron Age hilltop settlements have had a significant impact on the landscape. More than 400 sites have been identified, and it is not difficult to establish a relationship between the geomorphology of the land and the anthropized / anthropic landscape.

A radical change occurred in the landscape with the roman conquest and romanization: hilltops were abandoned and new settlements appeared. Urban settlements were organized for the first time, while the countryside was dotted with farms (villae rusticae). The number of sites remained roughly the same, but their distribution is quite different. The Roman Age villas were positioned mainly along the western coast and within a few kilometers from it, and almost all on flat land suitable for mediterranean agriculture.

During the transition to the Middle Ages some open sites were gradually abandoned, others were nucleized with the formation of villages, some hilltops were resettled and fortified. These processes had an important impact on the formation of the modern istrian landscape.

Keywords

Istria, Prehistory, Antiquity, settlements, landscape

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean setting of Istria, a Karstic region in the Northern Adriatic has deeply influenced the settlement of the territory. The peninsula has been inhabited since the Paleolithic, but Bronze and Iron Age hilltop settlements have had a great impact on the landscape. More than 400 such sites have been identified, and it is not difficult to recognize a relationship between the geomorphology of the land and the anthropized/anthropic landscape. A complex network of hilltop settlements, based on the natural features of the relief, is clearly identifiable, especially in some areas. Due to natural erosion, many possible conclusions are outside our reach, but the surviving elements are enough to establish an interpretative principle.

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A radical change occurred in the landscape with the roman conquest and romanization: hilltops were abandoned and new settlements appeared. Urban settlements were organized for the first time, while the countryside was dotted with farms (*villae rusticae*) as the economy changed from prehistoric pastoral subsistence to intensive production for a wider market. The number of sites remained roughly the same (around 450 are known), but their distribution and position is quite different. The Roman Age villas were positioned mainly along the western coast (and within a few kilometers from it), and almost all on flat land suitable for mediterranean agriculture. The agricultural economy based on exports depended on good traffic connections for transport, and the sea routes were extensively exploited.

During the transition to the Middle Ages, interesting processes occurred: the gradual abandonment of some of the open sites, a nucleization of others with the formation of villages, the resettlement of hilltops as fortified settlements. These trends had an important impact on the formation of the modern istrian landscape.

2. PREHISTORY



Figure 1 The three hillforts of Picugi near Poreč (photo RM)

After the older prehistoric periods, in which the first groups of humans lived in natural caves in the limestone geological environment (Paleolithic) and later in the open (Mesolithic, Neolithic, Eneolithic), with the arrival of new populations at the beginning of the Bronze Age

new settlements were built on hilltops (ital. *castellieri*, croat. *gradine*). The geomorphology of the land is well suited for this purpose, because Istria has plenty of hilly areas, with rounded prominences 20-40 m above the 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 (Marchesetti 1903; Buršić-Matijašić 2007). Their main feature is that they are easily defended, and that is why they were chosen for permanent settlements in the Bronze Age (2000 – 1000 B. C.) and Iron Age (1000 – 100 B. C.).

The abundance of limestone favoured the choice of the material at hand for building the ramparts, as well as at least the foundations and lower parts of huts. The fortifications survive as heaps of stone, as the prehistoric inhabitants did not use mortar, but the drywall technique. Their remains appear in various sizes and forms, which depend not only of the number of people it was destined to contain, but also of the natural shape of the hill. They had at least three complementary functions: defense, housing and shelter for animals. The layers of rock were normally extracted from the top of the hill to obtain the building material for walls. In the same time, with this procedure the surface within the walls was flattened and rendered more suitable for building houses / huts.

A lot of attention was given to the planning and construction of the entrances into the hillfort. It was very important to defend them effectively in case of need, so they were conceived as corridors dominated from above, from where the defenders could control the passage. Several examples have been excavated. One of the most important istrian hillfort is Monkodonja near Rovinj, excavated 1997-2008 by an international team (Archaeological Museum of Istria, Rovinj Town Museum and Freie Universität Berlin; Hänsel, Mihovilić, Teržan 2015). 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 (Buršić-Matijašić and Matijašić 2015, 294). The grouping of hillforts reflects the social organization, but the lack of other data makes it impossible to be more specific. Their spatial organization was also planned as a defense system of the surrounding territory. Such an example are the hillforts along the mountain range of Čićarija (Monti della Vena), which defended not only the passage through the mountains, but a huge territory of northern Istria. It was the only land passage from the north into the peninsula.

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, Kuncil/Castellier near Dusmani, Valaron and Gradina above the Lim Bay. The social character of these hillforts can today be recognized only by indirect elements, such as the position and size of the settlement. Those that occupy an area of more than 2 or 3 ha were certainly permanent settlements, while minor ones could have been used as refuges in case of need, as observation points, shelter or seasonal settlements during the yearly transhumant migrations. Due to various changes, some could even have changed their main function, and not all were inhabited during the whole Bronze and Iron Age. Some could also have increased the usable space by building more concentric defence walls, other could have shrinked to a smaller area within the walls.

3. THE TRANSITION FROM PREHISTORY TO THE ROMAN PERIOD

The Istrian peninsula was conquered by the Romans in 177 B. C., but the romanization proper started after 50 B. C. (Matijašić 1991; Buršić-Matijašić and Matijašić 2015, 297), 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.

In the light of the fact that massive roman colonization occurred only after 50 B. C., we might expect that the descendants of the Histri subdued in 177 B. C. continued to live on their hilltops, but their access to the sea was limited, they were forbidden to build and use vessels capable of attacking the passing marine traffic, and they could not wear weapons. But they were still there, and living as usual on their prevailing Iron Age economy.

4. THE ROMAN PERIOD

The establishment of the colonies changed everything. The arrival of probably several thousands Roman citizens was preceded by the organization of the territories of the new towns, *Pola* and *Parentium* (centuriation, Marchiori 2013). Large portions of the best land along the western coast, and at least about 15 km inland, were requisitioned, the histrian occupants probably forcibly removed further inland, so that almost all hillforts were abandoned.

The new settlers received a land lot per family unit within the centuriation grid, while the more distant areas, although also divided by the centuriation, were probably for communal use. In those areas some local inhabitants may have been given permission to remain, because a number of epigraphic monuments from within the colonial territories bear autochthonous names and names of pre-Roman divinities (Matijašić 2015, Fig. 4). That was the start of the romanization of the pre-Roman population in Istria. Those in closer contact with the colonies and their agri were quicker to adapt, while those in the more remote and isolated interior preserved their traditions for a longer time, but by the end of the 2nd century all traces of the indigenous culture disappear from our epigraphical and archaeological sources.

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. The main product of the land in Istria was olive oil (and wine), produced and exported in great quantities, particularly to the Danubian limes in the provinces of *Noricum* and *Pannonia*.

The protection offered by the hillforts was no longer needed, and they were gradually abandoned also in the areas of the peninsula outside the colonial agri. In a few documented instances at our disposal the life of local communities was transferred from the top of the hill to the valley beneath it. It is the case of *Flanona* (Buršić 2011) and *Alvona*, on the eastern coast. It was more practical to live near the sea, or in the valley through which the roads passed. Instead of expanding the settlement further on the hill, a new unfortified settlement gradually grew at the foot of the hill. Romanization led to the displacement of settlements in places less protected, but more comfortable.

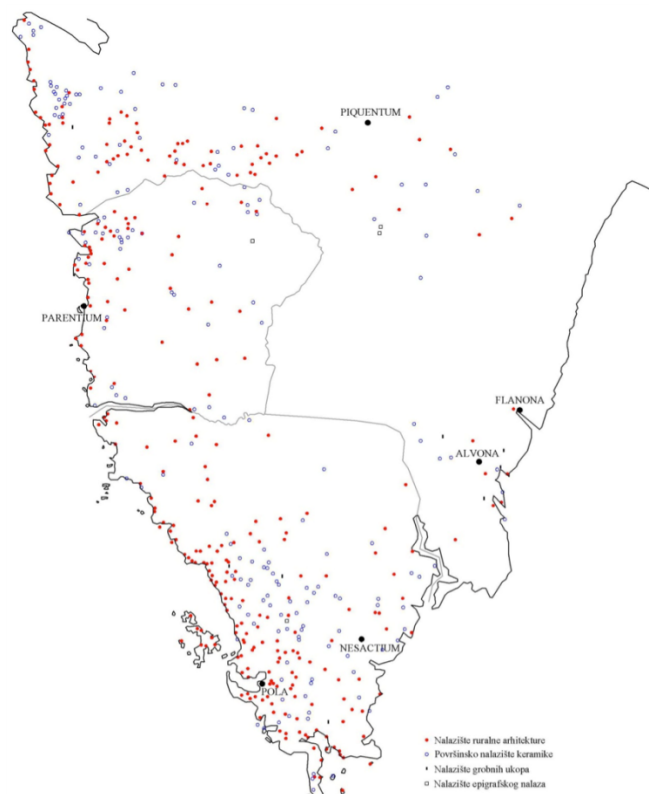


Figure 3 Map of distribution of roman rural architecture (from Bulić 2014)

The case of *Flanona* (today Plomin) is emblematic as the life there seems to have continued on the hilltop as well at its foot. Of course, they would have their reasons which we today do not see. The site has yielded many votive inscriptions, almost all to local deities, and it may have had a religious importance for the wider community of Liburnians who inhabited the eastern istrian coast.

Returning to the centuriated colonial agri, the number of known sites of roman villas is similar to that of the prehistoric hilltop settlements (around 450; Buršić-Matijašić 2007, 582; Bulić 2014, 319-369), but their distribution is different, particularly in the coastal area, as the produce of the land were exported by sea. The density is greatest within a narrow strip along the coast. All villas had to have an exit to the market, and if they were inland, they relied on roads that led to the sea. Almost every bay has traces of traffic in the roman period. Some of them, where a few roads or tracks from the interior converged, were organized as small ports with breakwaters and piers, and it was there that the inhabitants of the interior came in contact with the outside world. The colonies were medium-sized hubs that collected the goods from the land and relayed them to Aquileia, the main port of the Northern Adriatic, from where the main state roads to *Noricum* and *Pannonia* started.

The roman villas were a powerful means of romanization, because they represented the new way of life that became the model for the subdued population to emulate. The luxury in some coastal villas (*villae maritimae*) was proverbial. The Romans chose the best spots along the coast for their buildings with parks and gardens, some of them even had *vivaria*, basins in the sea for keeping live fish.

The case of Brijuni (Brioni) Islands is again emblematic, because the archipelago was property of a very highly placed senatorial family, probably the *Laecanii*, and later passed to the imperial *fiscus*, thus becoming property of the crown. The *Laecanii* had an important pottery manufacture in Fažana, on the mainland opposite Brijuni, which produced large quantities of amphorae, containers for transporting oil and wine (Bezeczky 1998, 3-6; Bulić and Koncani Uhač 2010). Another senatorial family, the *Sissennae*, had a similar, if not bigger, factory in Loron near Poreč (Carre et al. 2011), which later in the 1st century AD became property of an influential women entrepreneur, *Calvia Crispinilla*, and both workshops became imperial property before the end of the 1st century AD.

5. THE TRANSITION FROM THE ROMAN PERIOD TO THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The economic boom of the istrian agriculture lasted for a little more than a century. Already in the 2nd century the quantity of olive oil produced along the western coast diminished sensibly, and the producers could not meet the demands of the danubian market. It is as yet unresolved whether it was the impact of a cheaper hispanic oil or a natural catastrophe (such as drought or cold, both of which can fatally damage the olive trees) that brought an end to the istrian export-oriented economy. The villas, some of which previously had sets of three, four, six and even ten oil presses within the same building, were gradually transformed: some retained only one or two presses, others changed the production completely.

In Late Antiquity, i. e. after the 4th century AD, the oil was clearly produced for local use only, as was wine and other agricultural produce, that, unlike oil, were never exported in great

quantities. This did not result in dramatic changes in the economic and natural landscape. Some land was clearly abandoned, but the villa system persisted in the following centuries, although in different circumstances.

A villa excavated recently at Dragonera near Peroj shows clearly two phases (Starac 2010): built in the second half of the 1st century AD as a luxurious villa with mosaics in the residential quarter facing the sea, but also with an agricultural section, it was destroyed by fire in the 4th century and reconstructed in the 5th century, again with new mosaics and again with an oil press and a smithy (but also all other ancillary facilities, such as kitchen, magazines etc). The building was remodelled slightly during the 6th century, and again at the turn of the next century. It was obviously modified for housing an increasing number of people, until it was burned down again in the 7th century (the exact date could not have been established). After that, all inhabitants left the site, and there are no traces of life after that.

A comparable example from another coastal site, Vrsar, shows a similar situation of a luxurious villa abandoned after the 6th – 7th century AD, which has been established by the first explorer (Mirabella Roberti 1944) who found a hearth on the Late Roman mosaic floor in what appears to have been one of the representative rooms of the villa, here also facing the sea (Tassaux 2003). This degradation of a luxurious space is a clear sign of radical changes between the 6th, 7th and 8th century. While the refugees from Pannonia in the previous centuries brought the same “roman” way of life, but on a lower economic level, new immigrants after that represented a radical change, but were soon acculturated.

Historical sources mention the first slavic incursions into Istria at the very end of the 6th century, while a slow immigration of small groups started probably soon after in the 7th century. The Slavs settled in the interior, in areas that were abandoned by the Roman inhabitants. The latter retreated into new fortifications that were hastily organized on hilltops once again. Buzet (*Piquentum*), Roč (*Rotium*), Labin (*Alvona*) and Plomin (*Flanona*) were probably the earliest examples. Those living in villas and villages near the coast retreated to *Pola* and *Parentium*, but also to the new fortified towns of *Ruginium* (Rovinj), *Ursaria* (Vrsar), *Civitas Nova* (Novigrad) and *Humagum* (Umag). It is significant that some prehistoric hilltop sites were inhabited again in this period, and almost all medieval – modern settlements on a prominent hill in Istria have prehistoric roots, most of them with a hiatus during the roman period.

The transformation processes were not evenly distributed through the peninsula: the descendants of roman citizens continued to live in towns and along the western coast, while the Slavs settled in the interior on the lands abandoned by their previous owners who migrated to the towns or nucleated settlements. The territory of *Pola* in the southern part of the peninsula was less affected by these processes, and here the villas were transformed into villages, whose inhabitants continued to cultivate the surrounding land. Very interesting is the case of the so-called “Castrum” on the island of Brijuni (Begović and Schrunk 2007, 95-112). In fact, it is not a military fort, as the name would imply, but a civilian settlement that developed spontaneously on the western coast of the island, looking away from the mainland, on the remains of a classical villa. In the 5th – 6th century it became a fortified agglomeration

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populated by refugees from the danubian provinces, but was abandoned shortly after the 7th century.

Another element that must be taken into account at this point is the christianization of the population, which by the 6th century was almost complete. Parishes became a form of territorial organization parallel to the secular authorities, so churches and chapels sprang up in every agglomeration, even the smallest. The archaeological remains of early medieval churches and chapels generally are 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. Some churches remain and are even today rather well preserved.



Archeological research in the Guran microregion, near Vodnjan, has lead, among other things, to the discovery and exploration of an Early Medieval church of St. Cecilia (8th century) which was built on a 1st century AD roman villa (Jurković et al. 2011). The research is still under way, but the continuity of life on the site during all these centuries must be taken as an established fact. The villa was extensively remodelled in Late Antiquity, which is logical in view

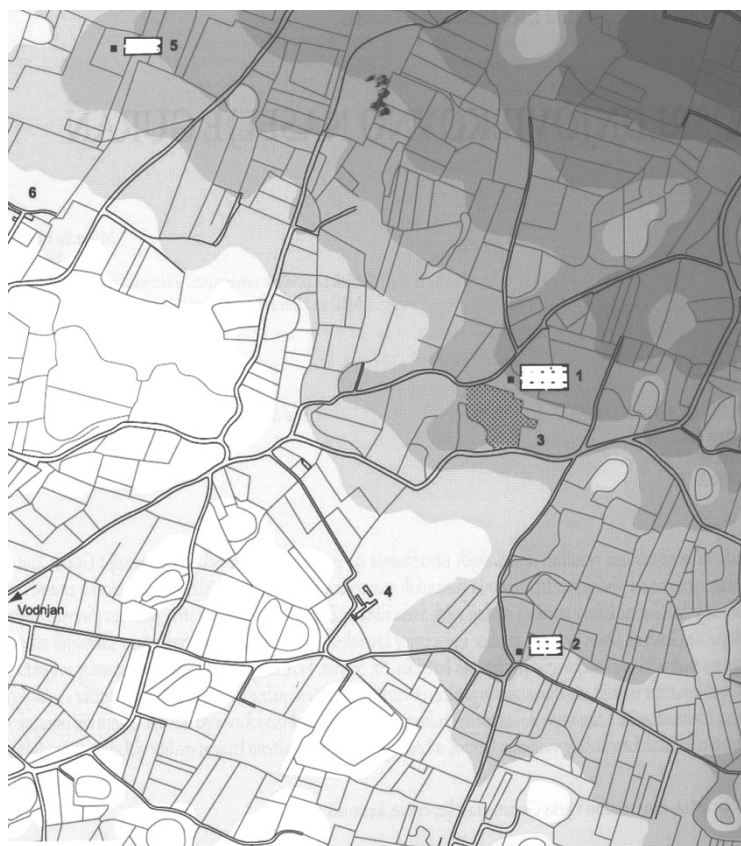


Figure 5 Map of the Guran area (from Jurković et al. 2011)

of the economic and demographic changes in Istria in those centuries. It was not a luxurious villa, as all such signs are absent, but it was one of the many production units, of which we know many examples. In some cases, such as this, the villa was transformed in an early medieval village, of which today only the chapel remains.

6. CONCLUSIONS

During the long period from the end of prehistory to the beginning of the Middle Ages (2nd century B. C. – 8th century AD), the anthropic landscape of Istria was transformed several times. Although the data at our disposal could be defined as 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;
- during the roman period, at least for some time, some hillforts were continued to be occupied, it is not yet clear whether by romans or the descendants of the Histri;
- the period of greatest economic prosperity was between the 1st and 3rd century, and is characterized by the villas and their export economy;
- between the 4th and 6th century the villa system has been maintained, at least along the western coast;
- 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 grow into semi-urban and urban settlements;
- almost all villas in the interior have been abandoned after the 7th century, but some were transformed into villages, already christianized,
- some churches and chapels that survived during the Middle Ages are even today signs of the existence of early medieval villages that sprang up on villa sites. (1)

NOTES

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