

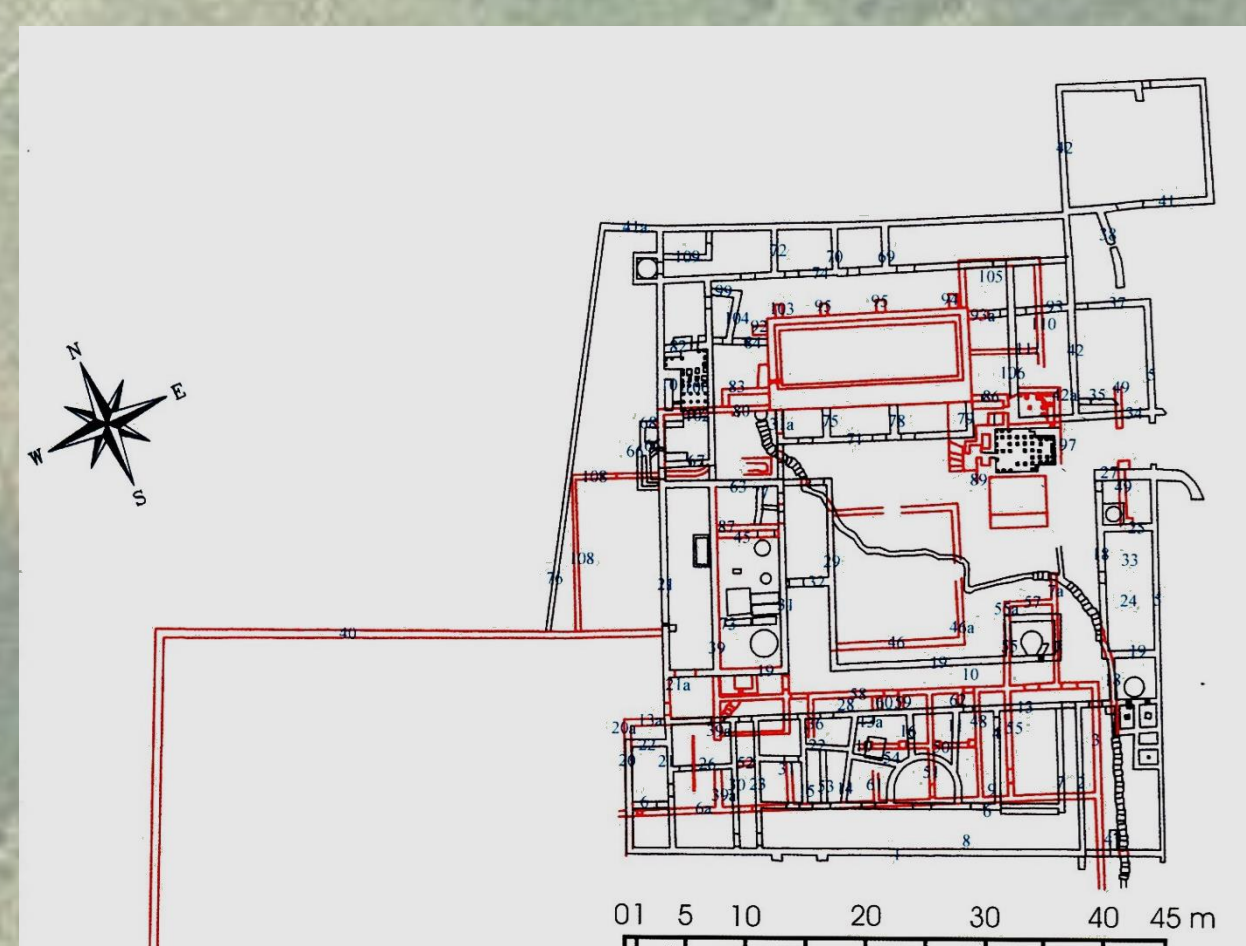
Rural Landscapes in Istrian Late Antiquity

1. INTRODUCTION The Istrian peninsula, part of the augustean *Regio Decima* reached its economic apex in the 1st – 2nd cent. AD. After the foundation of the colonies of *Pola* and *Parentium*, the land was divided into lots (*centuriation*), and the villa system was introduced. Hundreds of sites with oil presses, as well as at least two known big pottery kilns for the production of amphorae (Loron and Fažana), testify to the production and export of olive oil in the first two centuries AD. The main route of the istrian oil was through Aquileia to the Danubian limes. The transformation of the oil production took place from the 2nd century. The reason is unknown (the appearance of cheaper olive oil from Betica, and North Africa? natural events that destroyed the olive trees such as cold or disease?). The istrian producers lost their monopoly, and from the 3rd century the villas had to adapt to the new situation. The big oil factories were reduced to a fraction of their former capacity, but generally the villas do not seem to have been abandoned.

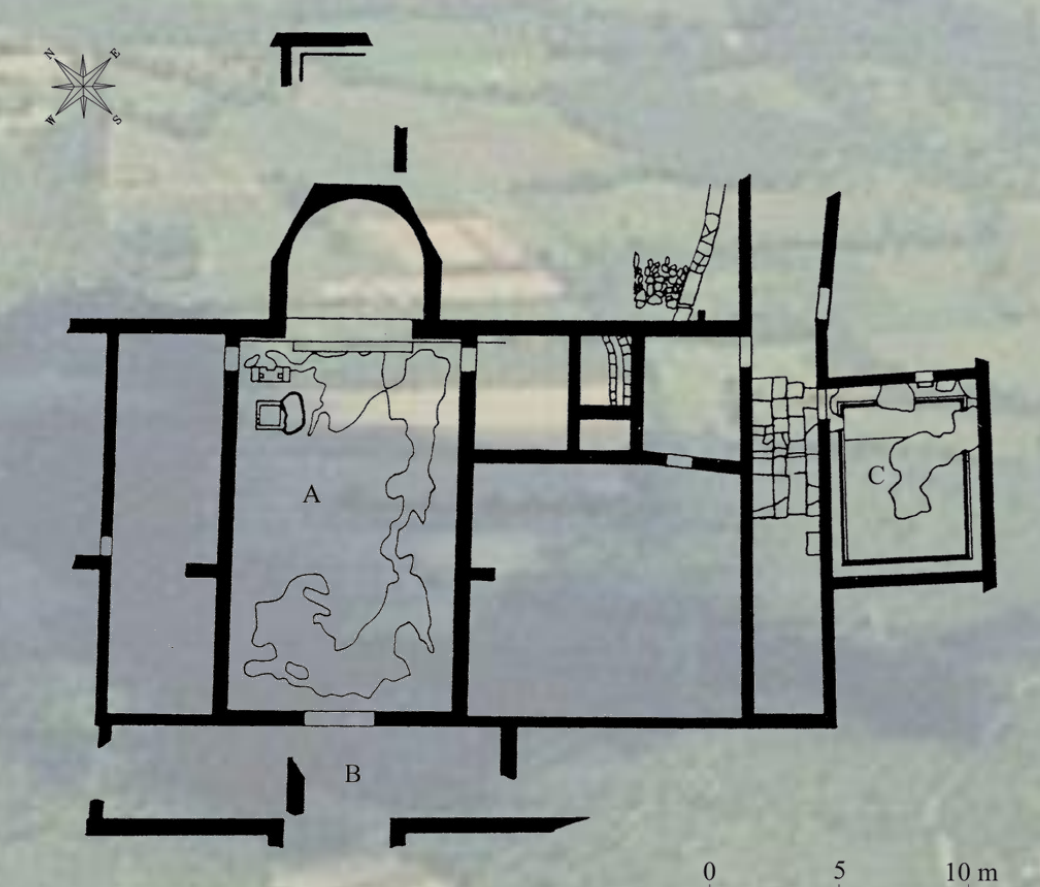
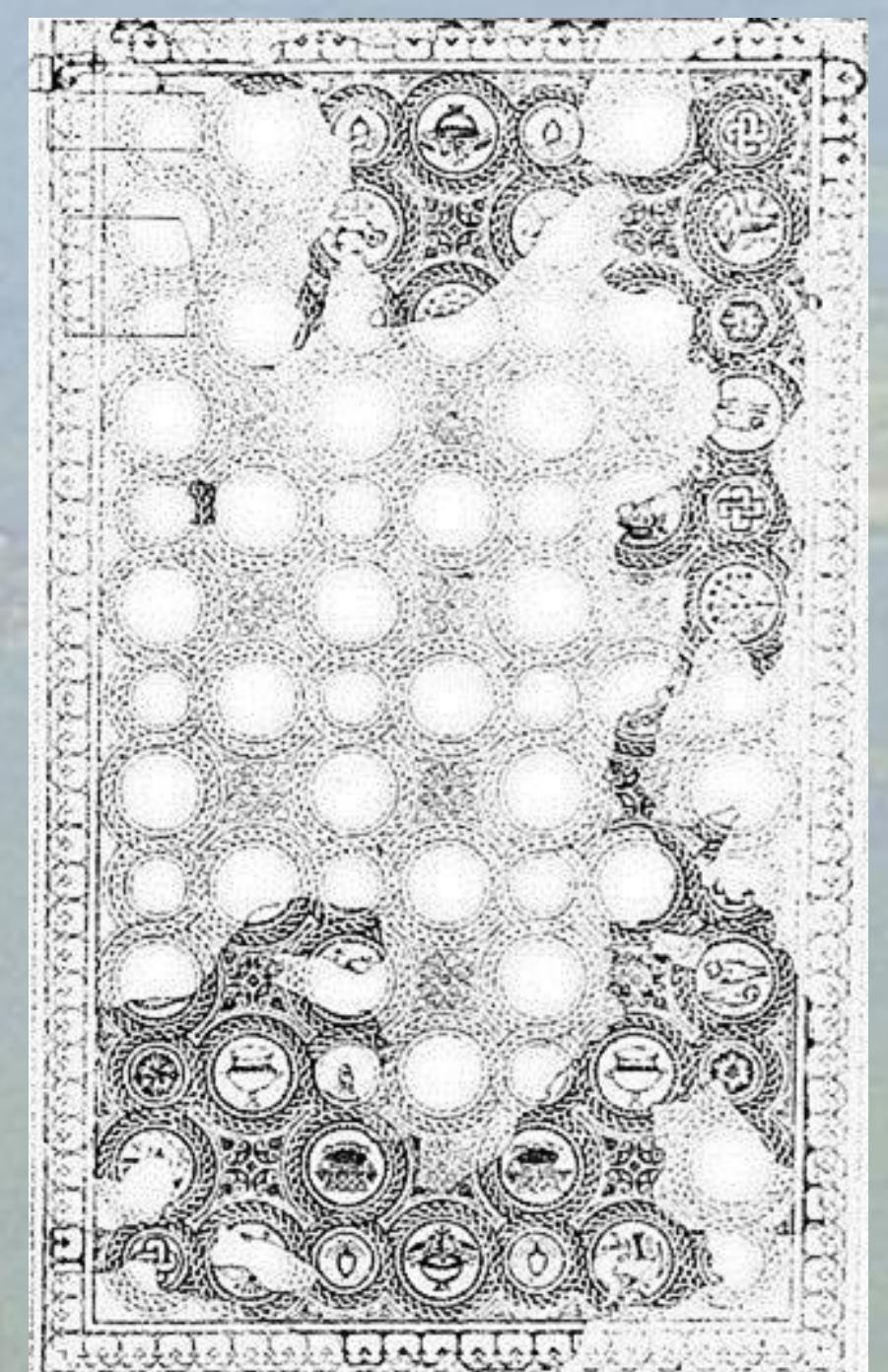


2. VAL MADONNA ON BRIJUNI ISLAND. The villa, active in the first centuries of the Empire, had two sets of three presses each, and two or three big magazines for oil and wine. In the 3rd century it started to be modified with modest structures built within the courtyard. They included at least three single presses. They were clearly for local use only, as the quantities produced were not intended for sale. New modest buildings sprang up around the main body of the ex-villa, until sometime in the 5th century the whole settlement was provided with a thick wall and towers. It became a fortified civil settlement and received probably refugees from the pannonian provinces. It continued to grow in the 6th century, but was abandoned before 750.

3. DRAGONERA NEAR PEROJ. A classical residential villa of the Imperial period - *villa maritima*, built in the second half of the 1st century AD (Starac 2010). It had a quadrangular courtyard with the residential quarter facing the sea (with mosaic floors), a water reservoir, usual feature of istrian villas in the inland wing, while the lateral wings were damaged by later reconstructions. Traces of a thermal unit were identified. The building was destroyed by fire in the 4th century, and then reconstructed at the beginning of the 5th. The residential quarter with new but coarse mosaics was facing the sea, but the three wings now included some production units, at least an olive press and a smithy. The thermal section was reconstructed. The building was remodelled during the 6th century, and again at the turn of the next century. It was modified for housing an increasing number of people, until it was burned down and abandoned in the 7th century.



4. VRSAR. A set of rooms excavated in 1935 in the bay, the central one with a polygonal apse decorated with mosaics, was interpreted as a paleochristian site, but it has recently been demonstrated to be a Late Antique *villa maritima* (Tassaux 2003). It seems to have been destroyed in the 7th century, when an oil-press has been placed on the mosaic. In 2011 rescue excavations have confirmed the existence of other mosaics near-by, and recently new excavations have begun (Croatian Conservation Institute, funded by the Vrsar municipality) which will hopefully bring new data for the understanding of its history. The building activity was very active in the area through the passage from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. A structure that could have belonged to a huge late Antique magazine has been excavated in the 1920-ies on the southern shore of the bay, but it has since been destroyed.



5. CONCLUSIONS. The three examples are only a fraction of many more instances that illustrate the transformation of the anthropic landscape in Istria between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, when the istrian natural and historical landscape has clearly undergone significant changes. The main trends can be defined as follows::

- between the 4th and 6th century the villa system has been maintained, at least along the western coast;
- some villas, particularly in the interior, have been heavily downgraded in architectural quality and productive quantity;
- some villas on the coast have started a transformation into semi-urban and urban settlements;
- almost all villas in the interior have been abandoned after the 7th century, but of some, already christianized, the churches and chapels survived during the Middle Ages.

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