



Central Places in un-central Landscapes. The Tuscany of “weak-Towns” between Lombards and Carolingians (AD 600-900)

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Summary

Recent researches have pointed out two different paths of early medieval landscape shaping in Tuscany related to the role and the status of towns. Southern Tuscany is commonly called a land of weak-towns, just because most of former roman towns disappeared or reduced their power and wealth, although still maintaining central place functions. This influenced much the shaping of landscape and the structure of rural communities. Many of the former foci (villas and villages) were replaced by new ones, the plain was partially replaced by the hilltop. But this is not all but the truth. Some old rural central places played a role in the centuries between the Lombard invasion of that area (ca. 570) and the Carolingians. Some other changed their position in the hierarchy. Some new were settled but in the planes (like Grosseto that got the full heritage of the roman town of Roselle only in the 12th century). Not all of them were successful. Sites that would have apparently the same chances in - say - the 9th century, had different paths in the 12th. New aristocracies replaced the old ones. This produced new approaches both in landowning and showing social status. So this paper aims to focus all these themes, presenting brand new and partially unpublished data and a new reading of old ones focusing on the special feature of the weak role of towns.

Recent literature about early medieval southern Tuscany (AD 600 - 900)

Southern Tuscany corresponding to the former bishopsites of Populonia, Roselle, Sovana, Siena and Chiusi fits rather with modern provinces of Siena and Grosseto and the southern part of Livorno and Pisa. This is one of the most intensively studied region of medieval Europe both with long lasting landscape's archaeology programmes and excavations of sites (see VALENTI 2004 for previous and detailed references). That's why since the '90ies scholars produced a model of settlement patterns, sometimes called “modello toscano” (BROGIOLO, CHAVARRIA ARNAU 2005: 112-118), though it seems to fit with central Italy - at least - and parts of northern and southern Italy (FRANCOVICH, HODGES 2003).

At first we need to sketch a very brief summary of recent, abundant, literature about towns and countryside in southern Tuscany, just to prevent any further quotation below: each paper contains a detailed literature within, so there's no need to do it here. It will be clear what we owe to who and we shall concentrate on discussion. All scholars have pointed out the strong connection between towns and countryside in this region so that we can easily read both stories in synopsis. And that's why we shall not separate them here on.

Field surveys started in the '70ies of 20th century, even if most of them are not yet available in a full, detailed form like the Archaeological Map of Siena's Province under the direction of Riccardo Francovich and Marco Valenti (see for example VALENTI 1996; CAMBI 1996; NARDINI 2001). Most of them are published in a shorter, but usable, form (CARANDINI, CAMBI edd. 2002) or as a report (CITTER ed.1996; GUIDERI 2000; VACCARO 2005; CITTER 2007b), with many informations for the period ca. 400-800.

Excavations of rural sites are available in quite a huge amount for such a small region. It's worth to mention at least Montarrenti (CANTINI 2003), Poggio Imperiale near Poggibonsi (VALENTI 1996; FRANCOVICH, VALENTI edd. 2007), Miranduolo (VALENTI 2006) in the inland and Rocca San Silvestro (FRANCOVICH ed. 1991), Donoratico (BIANCHI 2003; 2004b; 2005), Campiglia Marittima (Bianchi ed. 2004a) Castel di Pietra (CITTER ed. 2002) and Scarlino (FRANCOVICH ed. 1985) near the coastline.

General views and detailed accounts of medieval southern Tuscany are in FRANCOVICH, GINATEMPO edd. 2000, VALENTI 2004, FRANCOVICH, VALENTI 2005, WICKHAM 2005.

Among rural sites important monasteries like S. Salvatore at Monte Amiata (DALLAI 2003) and S. Pietro at Monteverdi (FRANCOVICH, BIANCHI 2006) are the focus of scholars' attention.

Researches in towns span from regional views (ABELA and others 1999; CITTER, VACCARO 2003) to spot analyses. We have a parachutist point of view for Sovana (CITTER 1995), a truffle hunter's one for Grosseto (CITTER ed 2007) and Cosa (FENTRESS 2003). Siena (CANTINI 2005a), Roselle (NICOSIA, POGGESI edd. 1998) and Chiusi (MARTINI ed. 1997) lay in between though at different levels. Populonia has detailed reports (see for instance CAMBI, MANACORDA edd. 2002; MASCIONE, PATERA edd. 2003; GUALANDI, MASCIONE 2004).

Recent literature went far beyond the description of general trends, asking how and when new aristocracies played an archaeologically visible role on settlement patterns both in towns and countryside (VALENTI 2007; CITTER forthcoming). This is related to the ever increasing role of the Church in daily life of early medieval communities (both urban and rural). As yet we have a scant evidence of christianization of the countryside in late antiquity for a part of the so called “weak-Towns Tuscany” (CITTER 2007a), but this seems a general trend of the whole region (see also FRANCOVICH and others 2003).

In the following I will refer to southern Tuscany as a region, because it shows sharp differences with northern part. Anyway in modern juridical terms it is not a Region.

Weak towns and countryside (AD 400 - 900): questions, data, models of interpretation

We know that a landscape persistent on the plains shifted to the hilltops. We thought that it occurred ca. AD 600, but now we have data that enhance our model. Probably the shift started at the beginning of the end of antiquity (ca. AD 450-500) and went on till AD 1000 when the greatest part of villages were on top, although AD 600 still remains a suitable turning point for most of situations.

Once we have a model - that is a tool - for the general trend, we need to focus on its internal hierarchy. This means at first to find what can be seen as a central place here from ca. AD 600 to AD 900. It is worthwhile to ask whether there was a simple hierarchy, that is central places vs all the rest, or there was a more complex one. Let's start with towns, whatever they were in AD 600.

In our region we cannot doubt that roman towns like Roselle and Chiusi were central places between AD 600 and 900, although the latter was a powerful duchy and the former only a modest gastaldus-site. Siena was a gastaldus-site too, but at a very different level compared to Roselle. In AD 900 Chiusi had lost much of its power, Roselle eclipsed and Siena had grown up at a regional scale.

Most towns were abandoned like Heba and Saturnia or reduced to a small village like Cortona, Cosa, Vetulonia and Populonia (at the foot of the hill, close to the harbour). Sovana was formally a bishopsite, but it looked like a great village.

No new towns were established, but this is very common in early medieval Italy. Anyway we should pay attention to a village on the plain, Grosseto, that in AD 800 used to have at least 2 churches. This is a new central place born by the end of antiquity around AD 600. Northward we don't have data about another new central place - Massa Marittima - that had become so crucial to receive the bishop of Populonia before AD 1062. Its foundation and development must be in the period we focus on here.

Attempts have been made to look if between ex-roman towns and rural sites we could put a category of new sites, commonly called "early medieval castles". These military outposts sometimes became central places extracting power and functions from former, declining towns. This is very clear in northern Italy, while in our region there is no evidence at all.

Also where towns began to grow up since AD 700 the archaeological picture is very different from that of historians: still much more wood, mud, rubbish, gardens and ruins than expected.

So a very rapid sketch of towns suggests to us that there was a complex hierarchy, although around AD 900 none of them could be regarded as a regional (that is tuscan) central-place apart from Siena.

The countryside is a more complicated picture to draw. In fact we have to pay attention to very different features: plains and hilltops, ancient roman sites and new ones, the network of roads built between 240 BC and AD 120 and, along the coastline, the harbour-system.

Around AD 600 all roman villas were abandoned. Some of them were replaced by new settlements, very different in type from a late republican estate, but probably very similar to those of late antiquity, some were not. This is a process of shifting that deserves some attention. The villa of Sterpeto-S. Martino was replaced by the village of Grosseto, some 2 Km. eastward along the Ombrone river: both sites are in the plain. The villa of La Pieve was replaced by the village of Scarlino, which is on a hilltop. Other villas like Torre Tagliata and Settefinestre near Orbetello were no more than seasonal settlements or recovery for shepherds. All of the mentioned sites lay in the SW part of Tuscany. But things go in the same direction in the inland, now in Siena's province, where villas like La Befa and Pieve a Bozzone behave in the same way.

The mud-made farms still recordable from AD 400 to 550 on the smooth hills of Sienese's Chianti were abandoned before AD 650. So the network and hierarchy collapsed. Just to give a scale factor: of 427 roman villas recorded in southern Tuscany only 42 give us pottery of AD 400 to 500.

Some other settlements were almost abandoned around AD 600 like the street-inn near Torrita in the inland of Siena. This is another intriguing chapter of the story: long stripes of the roman road-system were still on site around AD 1823 when modern cartography recorded them. The situation in AD 600 would not be different. That does not mean that roman roads were at their best in the age of Charlemagne, with smooth, white plaster, shining milestones at the border and comfortable hotels in the neighbourhood. But we can be sure that large portions of the routes were practicable. Towns like Grosseto, monasteries like S. Maria Alborense, S. Bartolomeo di Sestinga, S. Salvatore al Monte Amiata can hardly be explained apart from a link to the roman roads. A new road system, mostly coming from a choice of former roman secondary routes, is going to be shaped already around AD 600, and the role of Siena is one of the best proves of it, but we have data to guess that only around AD 1100 the old major roads were no more a marker for settlement pattern. This is true for instance along the coast in Roselle's county, where the via Aurelia was quite irrelevant for castle-making. This is not the case of Arno Valley in the north of Tuscany, where morphology obliged roads to follow always the same paths.

Around AD 800 a new pattern had shaped the countryside. Definitely former villas or villages were no more foci for rural life. For some of them one can think of seasonal settlements.

We cannot doubt that settlements like Donoratico on the coast, Montarrenti, Miranduolo and Poggio Imperiale in the inland were new foci for new aristocracies, but, definitely, they never became towns. We must ask whether we can call them central places or not. In other words: do we have to imagine a landscape

full of central places? Or at the contrary do we rather privilege an empty landscape where only former towns and eventually new growing villages like Grosseto and Massa Marittima were really central?

These opponents are both too radical to be true. They can be useful to draw the skyline, but they cannot be assumed as a whole. Probably the very core of the question is not such a sharp alternative - say - white/black. Eventually we must focus a complex gray scale, such as inside the hierarchy of rural settlements, each of them being central at a certain scale, un-central at the others.

It is clear since AD 800 that things changed, both in towns and in countryside. Archaeology can track social distinction and economic growth with satisfaction, though southern Tuscany is far from the level of wealth of the northern part.

This means that we must be careful when using words like self-sufficiency to describe a period in which Tuscany saw the end of late roman villas - as it's commonly called now - and the shaping of the manorial system. It is a piece of the truth, just a piece. So the challenge is to investigate which relationships occurred among different levels of hierarchy, and in particular between towns and villages. We know, for instance, that the relevant monastery of S. Pietro in Monteverdi had close interactions with the hilltop village of Donoratico, but nearly no relationship with the towns of Volterra and Populonia. Was it the rule or the exception? Grosseto and Poggio Cavolo, facing themselves along the Ombrone river, could be at the same level in the hierarchy around AD 800, but not around AD 1000: the latter was abandoned some 50 years after the former received the bishop's site from Roselle (AD 1138). We can imagine a scale with Roselle at the top in AD 800 and both Grosseto and Poggio Cavolo nearly at the same level, at the bottom. Poggio Cavolo is in a very bad position in geographic terms, but Grosseto was surrounded by a fertile plain, salt-works, the river and the roman roads. Some seasonal settlements dating from AD 700 to AD 1000, partially overlapping former roman abandoned villas, could be the trace of a growing network which made Grosseto a central place at first for its surroundings, secondly for the whole county. It is obvious that Grosseto had replaced Roselle before literary sources recorded the fact.

It is for granted that aristocracies played no visible role in settlement pattern until AD 700, though they used to get money and/or foodstuffs from their estates.

Recent researches approach the role of the Church in building a new, or fairly new network, that partially overlaps former late roman settlement pattern, but that partially goes in other directions. It seems that the role of the Church was stronger where towns remained foci of people, craftsmen and exchanges, that is in the northern part of Tuscany. It was weaker where towns had lost most of their functions, preserving only juridical ones. This does not fight against the general model of crisis and discontinuity of roman towns in late antiquity and the early middle ages. But we must notice that some towns give us references in literary sources, epigraphic and architectonic exhibition of social status and other don't. That must mean something.

In the same direction goes the lack of churches in the countryside of most southern Tuscany from AD 400 to 600. Things do not change when we look at the hilltop villages. Rural churches, expression of the bishops who stayed in towns, are exceptional until AD 800 both in literary, and in archaeological record.

Discussing data: (few) answers and (new) questions

That's quite amazing. We were afraid to seat in an empty theatre - with no central places at all - and now it seems we are in a (crowdy) chorus line. We need a strategy. Generally speaking each settlement - from a single farmstead to a busy bishop's town - can be a central place: it depends on how far we move from it. Probably the best solution - as yet - is to define a hierarchy that allow us to put each spot in the correct position. At the top of the ideal pyramid we are still tempted to put towns. Not all the towns of - say - 100 AD, but many of them. Deprived of their very roman look, full of graveyards and vineyards, but still having juridical functions both in lay and religious sphere, these "weak towns" were not superseded. When it happened, but we must run up to year 1000 and after, they simply lost their role in favour of other settlements that became soon towns. It is the case of Grosseto vs Roselle and of Massa Marittima vs Populonia. Still for some needs people had to go to Roselle and Populonia in AD 800.

Did towns of this region had other functions? Did aristocracies live inside? Were they centre of craft activities? Up to year 700 most of italian towns give us a very scanty evidence of elites or at least we don't see them yet. We could have the wrong keys, but the discussion about the strategies of distinction would take us too far. Anyway the lack of epigraphies, quotations in written sources, buildings, luxury goods seems to be more than a casualty in Cosa, Roselle, Populonia, Sovana (not to mention the abandoned Heba and Saturnia), while Siena and Chiusi behave very differently. But in Roselle around the last decades of the 8th century the bishop's church was rebuilt and newly refurbished with a stone caved ornament made by a magister johannes who proudly signed it. In Sovana it happened the same. Things changes in Carolingian times, particularly in northern Tuscany and in Siena.

Pottery ceases to be a marker around AD 600. The distribution of good quality and importation finds does not fit with the geography of settlements: the abandoned town of Cosa has more glazed pottery from Rome around AD 800 than any other site in Tuscany and Grosseto has got no pieces at all.

Comparing roman and early medieval landscapes, we notice some new entries we must discuss somehow. We have seasonal settlements, farms, villas, villages and towns around AD 450. We have no material evidence of a consistent sparse settlement in AD 800. We sampled such a large portion of territory to think

that it could be a coincidence. We have some, very scanty indeed, evidence of seasonal settlements but irrelevant when discussing general trends. We have, on the contrary, strong evidence of nucleated settlements, both on planes and on the hilltops, that deserves major attention. Some of them (among the others Donoratico, Poggio Imperiale, Grosseto) have gone too far in AD 800 to be placed at the bottom of the pyramid, just above seasonal ones. They had circuit walls, churches, they appeared in written sources: they played a role of central place, although they had no juridical functions. So they must be put under the towns.

Every time we dig a medieval castle we find stratigraphies and/or pottery in secondary position of AD 600 up to AD 900. The contrary is really an exception like Rocca San Silvestro. Most of them were villages in etruscan times (from 300 to 100 BC) but this is another subject we cannot investigate here. One must relate to that in terms of a new pattern, and possibly also a network, at least in carolingian times. Data are not so clear for each site to allow a full understanding of its position in our pyramid. We know that Montarrenti had more functions in AD 800 than in AD 600, and the same for Miranduolo, but we don't know to which extent they were central places. Anyway they must be put below Donoratico, Poggio Imperiale and Grosseto.

Castel di Pietra, Scarlino, Rocchette Pannocchieschi, Montemassi, Selvena give us data of very different consistence, but we lack a smoking gun. They are surely villages, but they could not be considered central places like the above mentioned. Questions arise whether it is useful in this region to build up such a rigid scale of central places ever decreasing in importance and site catchment or whether it is more appropriate to assemble a certain amount of sites between great central places and seasonal settlements and let the door open to new solutions, when more data will be available.

This sketch leaves out a category of settlements, whose relevance in our period - mostly between AD 800 and 900 - is clear: monasteries. S. Salvatore al Monte Amiata had such a great power that the town - and the bishop - of Chiusi could not affect their power on the Amiata mountain slopes. S. Pietro in Monteverdi with its interests in Donoratico was a great centre of power, whose connection with carolingian aristocracy is well known. They were both central places, and we can put them - though temporarily - between towns and Donoratico, Poggio Imperiale and Grosseto.

Behind all lays a question: how did new aristocracies (lay- and churchmen) of late lombard and carolingian period relate to this situation? A wise answer seems to assign to these new elites a role of riding a positive trend, that was already growing up. Their role seems to be a very low-profile one up to AD 700, both in towns and in countryside, and above all in the Tuscany of "weak-towns".

Grosseto, August 8th 2007

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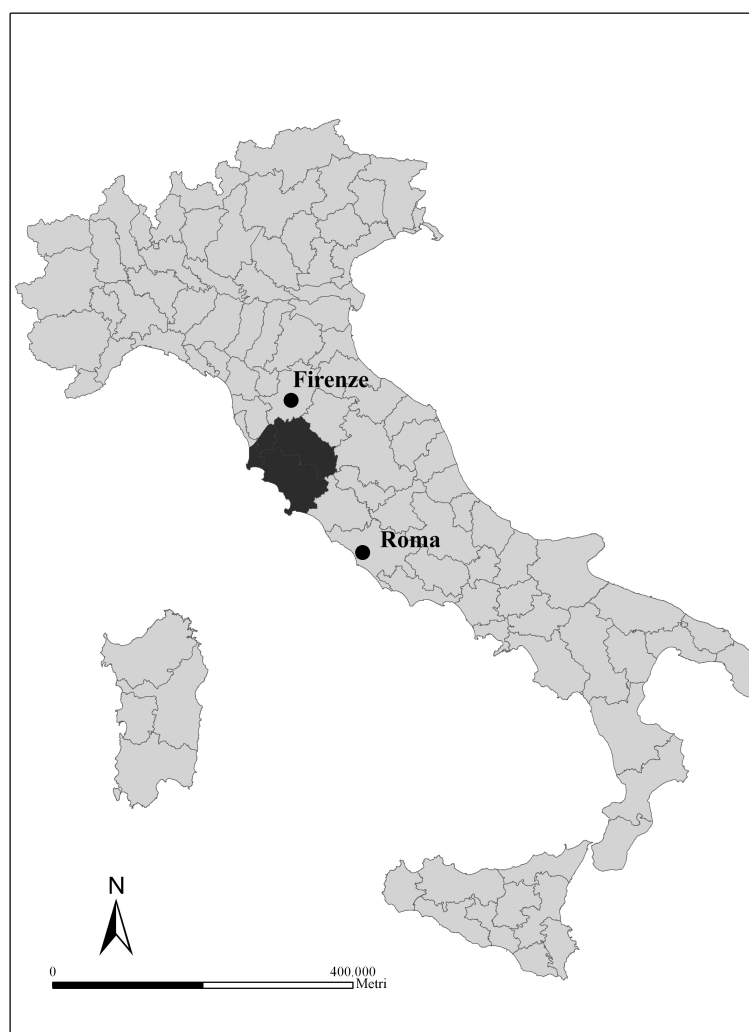


Plate 1 southern Tuscany



Plate 2 principle site cited within the text