

Artistic paintings and drawings as a source for the ancient urban reconstruction of living towns: the cases of Panormus and Regium Lepidi.

The reconstruction of the ancient aspect of living cities is a particularly complicated but also very stimulating research field. The ancient city lies hidden beneath the countless transformations that form its current state and it is hard to understand precisely how its urban planning could have been in the past.

When an abandoned town, an “archaeological site”, is studied, after years of excavations and geophysical prospection, the aspect of the ancient city will definitely become clear, but these kinds of research, at least in an extensive way, are impossible to carry out in a living city.

Knowing the city's history perfectly, one must find reconstructive clues using certainly archaeological data and geophysics but is also important to capitalise all the information that could come from toponymical sources, satellite and aerial photos, ancient and recent cadastres, and archival data; the most multidisciplinary approach is required. Anyway these are not the only resources a scholar could use. Particularly important data for ancient town reconstruction, too often not taken into consideration, can be found in drawings, views and engravings concerning monuments or entire cities. They are often used to evaluate just the progress of degradation in a monument or to understand when certain changes had been done to a structure¹. These pictures frequently reveal themselves to be very reliable² and could be much more useful than that: they can help us understand peculiar characteristics of a city's urban planning or even indicate the unexpected presence of ancient buildings that have seemingly vanished.

In fact, the most important changes in our cities occurred during the great urban interventions of the nineteenth century and then in the twentieth century, due to the devastation of World War II. The consequent reconstruction was frequently carried out with the use of reinforced concrete as a building material, a walling technique that allows builders to ignore the shape of the foundation of the previous building. Before that time, there could have been a much stronger persistence of the ancient and medieval city in the modern one. So it is clear that the artists visiting Italy for the “Grand tour” or even the local ones, proud of their city's beauty, in the past could see many things that we can no longer appreciate and, conscious or not of what they were drawing, they recorded precious data for our reconstruction. Obviously perfect metrical precision or accuracy cannot be expected from these paintings; this was not the artist's goal, but these sources can be a gold mine of information anyway.

Case study I: Palermo

The urban layout of ancient Panormus still has some obscure aspects but its general shape is now known because of the studies of O. Belvedere³. He noticed that the distance between today's streets in the area corresponding to ancient Punic and Roman Panormus constantly refers to a

¹ For example, Cecere, Renda 2012, 92-100.

² See the accuracy of Pirro Ligorio's drawings of Tivoli remarked upon by Ten 2012.

³ Belvedere 1987; Belvedere 1998.

Punic measurement unit: the great cubitus of 52.18 cm⁴. One of the greatest problems that still must be solved about the topographical reconstruction of this town is that a 2nd century a.D. epigraph⁵ explicitly mentions the presence in Palermo of a theatre and hints at the presence of another entertainment building that is thought to be the amphitheatre, because of the great diffusion of this typology of structure in the Roman Empire and due to the mention of gladiators and gladiator spectacles in this very inscription and in another epigraph⁶ found in town. Neither of these two buildings has been found yet. I noticed in an aerial photograph, taken in 2008 for the production of the orthophotomap of the city by the cartographic office of the region of Sicily, a peculiar direction of the streets and roofs around the area of Piazza San Domenico. The buildings delineate a semicircular area that, for reasons explained in a previous paper⁷, may be interpreted as part of the amphitheatre of the city; but there was no clue as to where the theatre could be. Nothing else anomalous could be perceived in aerial photos and there is no archaeological evidence of it. Traditionally, the theatre was thought to be in the western part of ancient Palermo. The chronicles⁸ tell us that there was an impressive building in the area where the Palermo Royal Palace is now, in particular where the so-called “Sala verde” was built. This ancient building was full of marble and so wide that it was used for public spectacles and for the town assembly. It was dismantled and its stones used for the construction of the city walls. The historian V. Di Giovanni in 1890⁹ thought the identification of this building as the ancient theatre to be impossible: on the basis of his research, it was square and a square-shaped building cannot be a theatre. In addition, he found that in a purchase agreement from the fifteenth century (1435 a.D.) the building sold was called “theatrum”. This document referred to the area of the nowadays “Via Montevergini”, in the northern part of ancient Palermo, and he thought that this area was the most likely theatre location. This position is definitely a good one for a theatre: near to the city-centre and to the Papireto river. The Romans could have used the gradient of the river bank to build the structure more easily and cheaply, as often happened for the edification of these majestic structures for public spectacles¹⁰, and in a position of good visibility – not far to the area where an important Roman street entered the city, the via Valeria¹¹.

I found an engraving published by the French Journal “Le Magasin Pittoresque” in 1874 (Fig. 1) that illustrates a building in Palermo characterized by an extraordinary similarity to an ancient theatre. In it a semicircular structure with arches can be seen, on the left what seems like the typical half-ring shaped corridor, and in the middle, a structure-free area that could correspond to the stage. The similarity of what is depicted in Palermo with several ancient theatre engravings is undeniable. The image caption says that the building was in the laundrywomen district. This name is unknown in Palermo but we must consider that via Montevergini leads to a neighborhood named “Panneria”, the place where clothes were produced and maybe also washed. So it seems

⁴ Belvedere 1987, 296.

⁵ CIL X, 7295.

⁶ CIL X, 7297.

⁷ Storchi 2013.

⁸ Fazello 1628.

⁹ Di Giovanni 1890, 380-382.

¹⁰ Sommella 1988, 155-6.

¹¹ Uggeri 2004.

to be a strict semantic connection with this area and the heading of the image published by the French magazine.

So a 19th century drawing likely represents the only image we have of the ancient theatre of Panormus.

Case study II: Reggio Emilia

Years of excavations in the city centre of Reggio Emilia, the ancient Regium Lepidi, revealed a number of archaeological sites but most of them are constituted only by the finding of mosaics that can be traced back to private houses (*domus*). The number of these floorings is extraordinary and has sparked research into the possibility of widespread wealth in this ancient Municipium¹². Despite this, there are still numerous problems concerning the reconstruction of the ancient urban layout of this town. In the whole city, only one public building has been found (interpreted as the basilica or the *macellum*¹³), and another structure, probably a temple, was close to it: that area and the opposite Piazza San Prospero would probably have been the forum of the city. We still do not know the precise extent of the city, where the republican and imperial city walls were, and we know nothing about other temples, thermal baths, or entertainment buildings; we know of just one of the city-necropolis. Furthermore, the Crostolo river flowed in the city and may have had a defensive role at least for the southern and western side of Regium Lepidi.

Waiting for new archaeological excavations, geophysical surveys and geological coring, I think that certain drawings could be very helpful in reconstructing this city.

The first known map of Reggio Emilia was drawn by Francesco Valegio in 1590, approximately¹⁴. In the northern part of Reggio Emilia we can see the fortress built in 1339 by the Gonzaga family to protect themselves in case of enemy attacks or even internal insurrections. The drawing of this fortress, called “Citadel”, shows a semi-elliptical anomaly in the western side, and it appears in many of the subsequent reproductions of the city (Fig. 2). This anomaly does not appear in the 1591 map called “Veduta Camuncoli¹⁵” but the actual presence of a peculiar-shaped area here is plausible if we consider that this urban district in 1315¹⁶, before the construction of the fortress, was called “Contrada Cuclaratae” a name that seems to indicate a round shaped area where, documents¹⁷ tell us that 41 families lived. It is just a supposition but it is possible that this anomaly corresponds to what remained of the amphitheatre of Regium Lepidi. The integration of these structures into the city walls is not uncommon¹⁸, especially in moments of crisis, when the walls had to be built in a hurry: famous examples are the Aurelian walls of Rome for which the “Anfiteatro castrense” was used or the amphitheatre of Rimini, included in the city walls in the same period. In this case we cannot assume there was a particular rush in building walls but it is

¹² Scagliarini, Venturi 1999, 20.

¹³ Malnati, Burani, Cassone, Marchi 1996, 88-107.

¹⁴ All the maps can be viewed in Davoli 1980.

¹⁵ Badini 1995.

¹⁶ See Storchi 2009, 133.

¹⁷ Nironi 1971, 81.

¹⁸ Capoferro Cencetti 1978.

possible that when the military architects found the remains of the amphitheatre, they found it more useful to integrate them than to destroy this structure; but some years later they may have thought it was better to regularize the wall, maybe for strategic reasons. This is just a suggestive hypothesis but it is plausible in light of what we know about ancient Reggio Emilia and Roman urbanism in general. The anomaly is about 250 m from the northernmost mosaics found in town and many amphitheatres were built this far from the city, because of reasons related to public order; for the same reason (to make it easier for spectators to reach the amphitheatre and exit it) and for visibility they were often erected near important streets, in this case the road to Brixellum, a *Municipium* as well as one of the most important ports on the Po river. Finally, often the curved shape of quarters where amphitheatres were leaves its mark in the toponyms: in Milan, for example, in the amphitheatre a church named Santa Maria ad circulum was built and, as previously noted, this quarter in Reggio was called “Contrada Cuclaratae”, before the construction of the Citadel. These reproductions do not allow us to be sure that there was an amphitheatre in Regium Lepidi but they are important nevertheless for new research perspectives and for the protection of any remains.

The above cited “veduta Camuncoli” could instead be important for the reconstruction of the urban course of the Crostolo river (Fig. 3). In 1229 it was taken out of the city. It is pretty certain¹⁹, through coring data²⁰ (and this course is partially still clearly visible in cartography or aerial photos) that during the Roman period, it flowed where “Corso Garibaldi” is now but we do not know where it flowed once north of the via Emilia. E. Lippolis²¹ supposed that north of this important street, the river turned with a right to the east and then went north where it surely flowed at least into late antiquity: in fact, a few kilometres north of Reggio Emilia, Crostolo formed, in that period, a large swampland that buried and erased the centuriation²², the ancient Roman land division. This hypothesis is based on the consideration that in the area known as “Isolato San Rocco” some very close Roman pavements were found at very different depths; furthermore in this area there were some Roman streets that had a strange oblique orientation, pointing to the north-west, while, at least in the Imperial age, the rest of the city streets were all orthogonal or parallel to the via Emilia. Moreover, in the nearby via Sessi²³, between the republican and imperial age structures, a sandy silt layer was found that could be interpreted as fluvial sedimentation. This latter area is far from the more widely accepted north of via Emilia Roman course of Crostolo. In fact, the river is thought to go a little bit to the west when it passes the Aemilia (in the same map a little stream can be seen that may be the dying course²⁴ of a more recent Crostolo) but close to the course hypothesized by Lippolis.

In the “Veduta Camuncoli”, the disposition of buildings and a sinuous street seem to trace this supposed riverbed. On the other hand, it must be noted that a recent study by M. Cremaschi

¹⁹ Cremaschi 2000, 319-341; Idem 2014 forthcoming; Bottazzi 2008, 392; this author thinks that Roman Crostolo flowed east of Reggio Emilia, out of the city.

²⁰ Cremaschi 2000, 322.

²¹ Lippolis 2000, 415.

²² Dall’Aglio 1981, 236-241.

²³ Lepidoregio 1996, 122; also Mario Degani in the ’70s found similar layers in the same area.

²⁴ Cremaschi 2014, forthcoming.

reveals how inconstant the Crostolo was over time; he supposes that during the long period that goes from the foundation of this town in the second quarter of the 2nd century b.C. to the middle ages, many Crostolo courses existed. This could be one of them, maybe in part modified by the Romans to defend their city even on the north-western side. In this case a drawing could give important clues to confirm the validity of a hypothesis created from anomalies in the archaeological data.

I think that these examples clearly demonstrate how the value of these drawings could go far beyond a mere documentation of the stated facts regarding monuments and cities in the past.

Captions



Fig.1: An engraving published by the French Journal “Le Magasin Pittoresque” in 1874. It illustrates a building in Palermo located in the unknown “Laundrywomen district”. Note the extraordinary similarity to an ancient theatre.

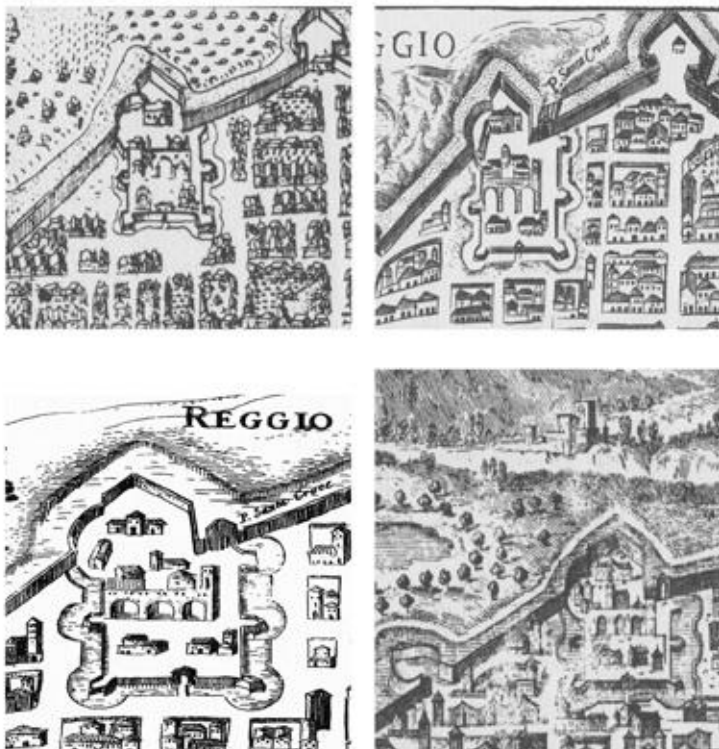


Fig. 2: Four images of the Citadel of Reggio Emilia; note the semi-elliptical anomaly in the western side of it. In clockwise order: Francesco Valegio 1590; Anonymous 1599; Anonymous 1627; Anonymous 1751.

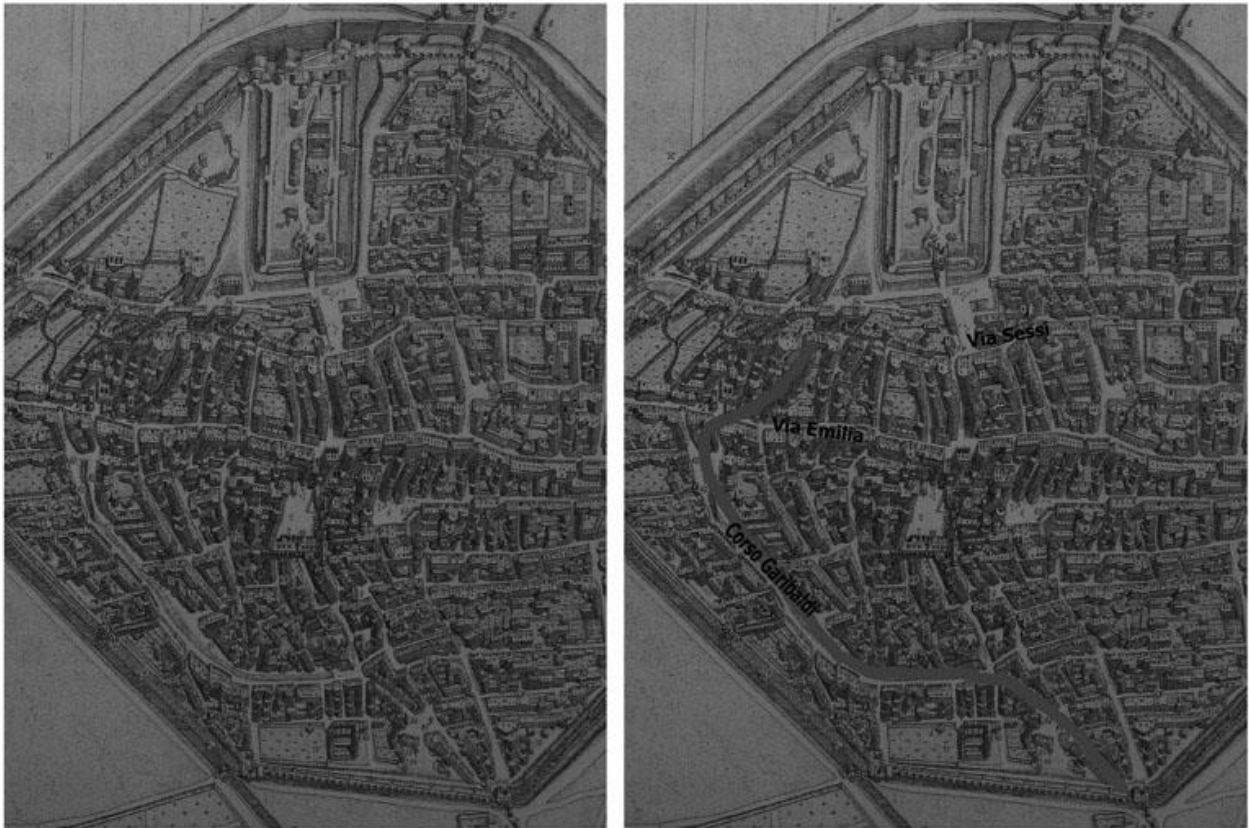


Fig. 3: The “Veduta Camuncoli”, notice how north of the Via Emilia the buildings and the street seem to continue along the riverbed, corresponding to the nowadays “Corso Garibaldi” south of the street.

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