

estratto

GIOCHI E SPETTACOLI NEL MONDO ANTICO

problematiche e nuove scoperte

Atti del Convegno Internazionale, 24 Marzo 2018

Chiesa di San Filippo Neri, Fondazione FAR Studium Regiense, Reggio Emilia (RE)

a cura di

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nei 100 anni di
SCIENZE E LETTERE
ROMA 2019

Il volume e la giornata di studi sono stati realizzati grazie al contributo di
FAR Studium Regiense, Società Reggiana di Archeologia
e la vincita di Paolo Storchi al Programma l'Eredità

In copertina: Anonima veduta di Reggio Emilia del 1751 edita in Z. Davoli, *Vedute e piante di Reggio dei secoli XVI-XVII-XVIII*, Reggio Emilia, 1980; Tav. LIII.

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e-mail: info@scienzelettere.com
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ISBN 978-88-6687-160-6

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New studies on the amphitheatres of the Roman towns in the Reggio Emilia area¹

Paolo Storchì, Paul Blockely, Gianluca Mete

Preface

In recent years we are witness to a flowering of studies about the Reggio Emilia area, especially concerning its Roman past², a wealthy period when the region was densely populated. Specifically, in the area that we are examining there were four towns: *Regium Lepidi*, *Tannetum*, *Brixellum* and *Luceria*.

The best-known city of the district is undoubtedly *Regium Lepidi* that was founded during the first half of the 2nd century BC as a small village; it then grew to become a *municipium*, a real town, during the following century, and it is the only one of these towns that has been continuously occupied without interruption until today. We have fewer information about the other centres; to our knowledge, *Regium Lepidi* and *Brixellum* seem to be the only large towns, *Luceria* is generally considered to have been just a small village, a *vicus*; and we can say very little about *Tannetum*, since it disappeared in late antiquity and is now lost, except the fact it was formally and juridically a real town.

The research presented in this paper focuses on the possibility that the Roman towns in this area were equipped with buildings for public shows and what we aim to propose is that research on amphitheatres can be intended not only as a simple architectural study, but has deeper implications and can also be considered as a tool for the discovery of ancient lost towns, or to understand the importance of a centre in the administrative structure of the Roman Empire³.

Regium Lepidi

Once famous only for the exceptional amount of elegant geometric mosaics discovered there (mainly unearthed during excavations for public utility works)⁴, new geoarchaeological and topographical studies have given us a lot of information about this town, such as the ancient morphology of the area⁵, the changes in river courses and the evolution of urban planning⁶.

We know now that it was a huge town for the *Regio VIII* parameters (about 40 ha).

Even if today we have a much better knowledge of the city than just a decade ago, since it is a “living town” further investigations are difficult to pursue. We have a good knowledge of just one public building: the *Basilica*⁷ and, during the same survey, another complex, probably a temple⁸, close to it was discovered; then we can count only on some 18th and 19th century data, often not entirely clear or easy to understand, that let us perceive just a glimpse of a rich town which had marble paved squares, colonnaded porticos, imposing temples and perhaps also an honorary arch⁹. This picture is indirectly confirmed by the plethora of rich Republican and Imperial-age mosaics discovered in the town, mentioned above. These pieces of art cannot tell us much about the town organization, since they

¹ The text, having been elaborated collectively, has been written by P. Storchì, the corrections to the English version were done by P. Blockely and the paragraphs on the geophysical survey were written by P. Blockely and G. Mete of RA.GA Srl.

² Considering only the monographs edited in these years: Forte 2017; Cantoni, Capurso 2018; Storchì 2018, Losi, Podini forthcoming.

³ See also Capoferro Cencetti 1983.

⁴ Scagliarini, Venturi 1999.

⁵ Cremaschi 2000; Cremaschi, Storchì, Perego 2017.

⁶ Cremaschi 2015; Storchì 2015; Id. 2018.

⁷ Malnati 1996, Id. 2017.

⁸ This interpretation was proposed by E. Lippolis in Lippolis 2000; L. Malnati feels that those remains are part of the late Roman walls, Malnati 2017.

⁹ Curina 2014.

could be traced back only to private houses (*domus*) and their precise position and orientation is often uncertain, but they attest the widespread wealth of the population that lasts until late antiquity, as evidenced by the large mosaic found in the recent excavations at the cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption¹⁰ and a few *opus sectile* floors discovered some decades ago¹¹.

A prosperous city, rich in monuments which, moreover, assumed the honorary title of “*colonia*” during the Imperial age, perhaps under the reign of the emperor *Claudius*, who was, as attested by inscriptions, its *patronus*, the defender of *Regium* and its inhabitants¹².

During the era of the Roman Empire, as we will discuss in the following paragraphs, every town of a certain importance in Italy, every *municipium* or *colonia*, had at least one building for public shows. *Regium* seems to have been, as we saw, a rich, wealthy city, but there is no clear archaeological evidence of such a structure in this town and reliefs or inscriptions referring to gladiatorial games or beast hunts (*venationes*) have not been found.

Should we think that *Regium Lepidi* was an exception?

If we consider the ancient *Regio VIII Aemilia*, we should reflect on one thing: we can count several cases in which ancient sources and inscriptions make it a certainty that there was an amphitheatre in the town, but its position is still unknown or uncertain (*Placentia*, *Mutina*, *Bononia*, *Ravenna*); and in towns where the amphitheatre was discovered by accident, with absolutely no clues that it was there (*Forum Cornelii*; *Veleia*), but we can say the same about the theatre of *Claterna* or, in present-day Emilia Romagna, but ancient *Regio VI*, *Mevaniola*. Taking into account a wider area, as noted by G. L. Gregori¹³, only about 20 inscriptions concerning amphitheatres were discovered in the entire “Cisalpina” (north Italy) and the majority come from the *Regio X*, but many more structures have been discovered and similar considerations would apply to other regions or *provinciae*¹⁴.

So, thinking that *Regium Lepidi* was a likely candidate for having hosted that kind of structure, we tried to understand where it may have been erected¹⁵.

The first and most important step in this kind of research is try to understand how the town was organized: just knowing that, you can hypothesize where a Roman architect would have built such a structure.

When an ancient town-planning scholar has to study a long-living town, he tries to work as the GIS software does: he must imagine the present town as a stratification of different cities; he has to remove the most recent layers to reach the Roman town (in this case).

This job is simple in Reggio Emilia: quite often archaeological excavations have shown that underneath the modern road source the medieval one is found and, a little deeper and, in certain cases, slightly side-shifted, the Roman road.

So, in the historic centre of Reggio Emilia it is easy to recognise perpendicular streets forming blocks of Roman measures. There are just two significant anomalies in this pattern, one, in the north-west sector of the town, is connected with hydraulic problems¹⁶ and the other refers just to a small area inside a regular Roman block in the western part of the town: we hypothetically attributed it to the presence of an ancient theatre or an odeon¹⁷.

There are no other irregularities that can be interpreted as anomalies connected to the presence of any kind of leisure buildings. Anyway it must be taken into account that there are certain parts of the town that were destroyed and remodelled in particular circumstances. One of these is the northern part of Reggio: here in 1336-1339 AD a large fortress was built by the Gonzaga family to protect themselves in case of enemy attacks or even from internal insurrections, as argued by D. Iacobone: “una autonoma

¹⁰ Curina 2014.

¹¹ Baldini Lippolis 2008.

¹² *CIL* XI, 983; Cassone 2017.

¹³ Gregori 1994.

¹⁴ For example, in *Britannia* were discovered only three inscriptions mentioning gladiatorial games, but there are 13 amphitheatres, Vismara, Caldelli 2000, p. 169; see also Wilmott 2008.

¹⁵ Storchi 2009, Id. 2017.

¹⁶ Lippolis 2000a; Cremaschi, Storchi, Perego 2017.

¹⁷ Storchi 2009.

difesa contro la città¹⁸). This fortress, named “cittadella”, was then abated at the end of the XIX century and there is now a park in its place (Parco del Popolo).

So, the only chance we had to analyse this area was to use ancient documents; drawings, views and engravings (fig. 1) depicting this vanished district¹⁹.

The first known map of Reggio Emilia was drawn by Francesco Valegio in 1590 (fig. 1, a). In this representation the “Citadel”, is characterised by a bizarre semi-elliptical draft in the western side, a detail underrated in its implications by scholars, that appears in many of the subsequent graphic reproductions of the city (fig. 1, b, c). This anomaly is not drawn in the 1591 map called “Veduta Camuncoli” (fig. 1, d), but the actual presence of a peculiar-shaped area here is plausible if we consider that the urban district that was here before the construction of the fortress was called “*Contrada Cuclaratae*” a name that seems to indicate a round shaped area (maybe deriving its root from the late Latin *cyclus/circulus* according to Du Cange glossary). Here archive documents tell us that 41 families lived.

Is it possible that this peculiar anomaly corresponds to what remained of the amphitheatre of *Regium Lepidi*?

Often the curved shape of quarters where amphitheatres were leaves its mark in the toponyms of the area: in Milan, for example, inside the amphitheatre was built a church named “*Santa Maria ad circulum*”; Moreover in other documents there are indications of the presence of underground structures in the Citadel, one of which is told to be in a place named “*Palatium Vetus*” which is one of the most frequent toponyms that you can find in correspondence of amphitheatres²⁰ and in these structures underground rooms were frequent, for example for hosting the wild beasts; they are often known as “cryptis” in the medieval documents²¹.

Secondly the architectural integration of these structures into the city walls is not uncommon, as demonstrated by A. M. Capoferro Cencetti and D. Iacobone²²; especially in case of imminent danger, when defences had to be built in a hurry: we can think of the “Anfiteatro castrense” in Rome, utilized as a sort of avant corp in the Aurelian walls, or the amphitheatre of *Ariminum* (Rimini), included in the city walls of the town in the same period²³. In the case of *Regium Lepidi* perhaps there was not a particular rush, but we may suppose that, under the assumption that it was an amphitheatre, when the military architects in 1199-1229 discovered the remains of the structure, they found it more useful to integrate its walls into the fortifications, than to destroy the massive structure. Anyway, some years later they may have thought that it was better to regularize the castle-wall, as demonstrated by the “Veduta Camuncoli, maybe for strategic reasons.

This is just a suggestive hypothesis, but it is plausible in the light of what we know about ancient Reggio Emilia and Roman urbanism in general. In fact, the anomaly is about 200 m north of the northernmost mosaics found in the town²⁴ and many amphitheatres were built about this far from the city: these are huge structures that were either programmed since the city’s foundation and so they could be inserted into the town planning (in any case always in a marginal position, often near the walls), otherwise they were to be built outside of town, because simply there was no more space where to build it. One other reason for building these structures in a marginal position was to make it easier for spectators to reach the amphitheatre and exit it; Moreover, for publicity to the financier of its construction they were often erected near important roads, in this case, between the road to *Brixellum*, one of the most important ports on the Po river, and the one that led to *Mantua*.

When these buildings were built it was the time of the *pax romana*, but a huge building so close to a town, in moments of crisis, could easily be used as a fortress by those who would have attacked the

¹⁸ Iacobone 2008a, p. 16.

¹⁹ Storchi 2016.

²⁰ Iacobone 2008b, p. 27.

²¹ E.G. the church of S. Nicolò de cryptis at Todi, see Iacobone 2008b, pp. 27-30.

²² See Capoferro Cencetti 1978; Id. 1999; Iacobone 2008b, in particular pp. 17-24.

²³ For further examples the reader can see Iacobone 2008b and this Author’s paper in this volume.

²⁴ Podini Losi in press.

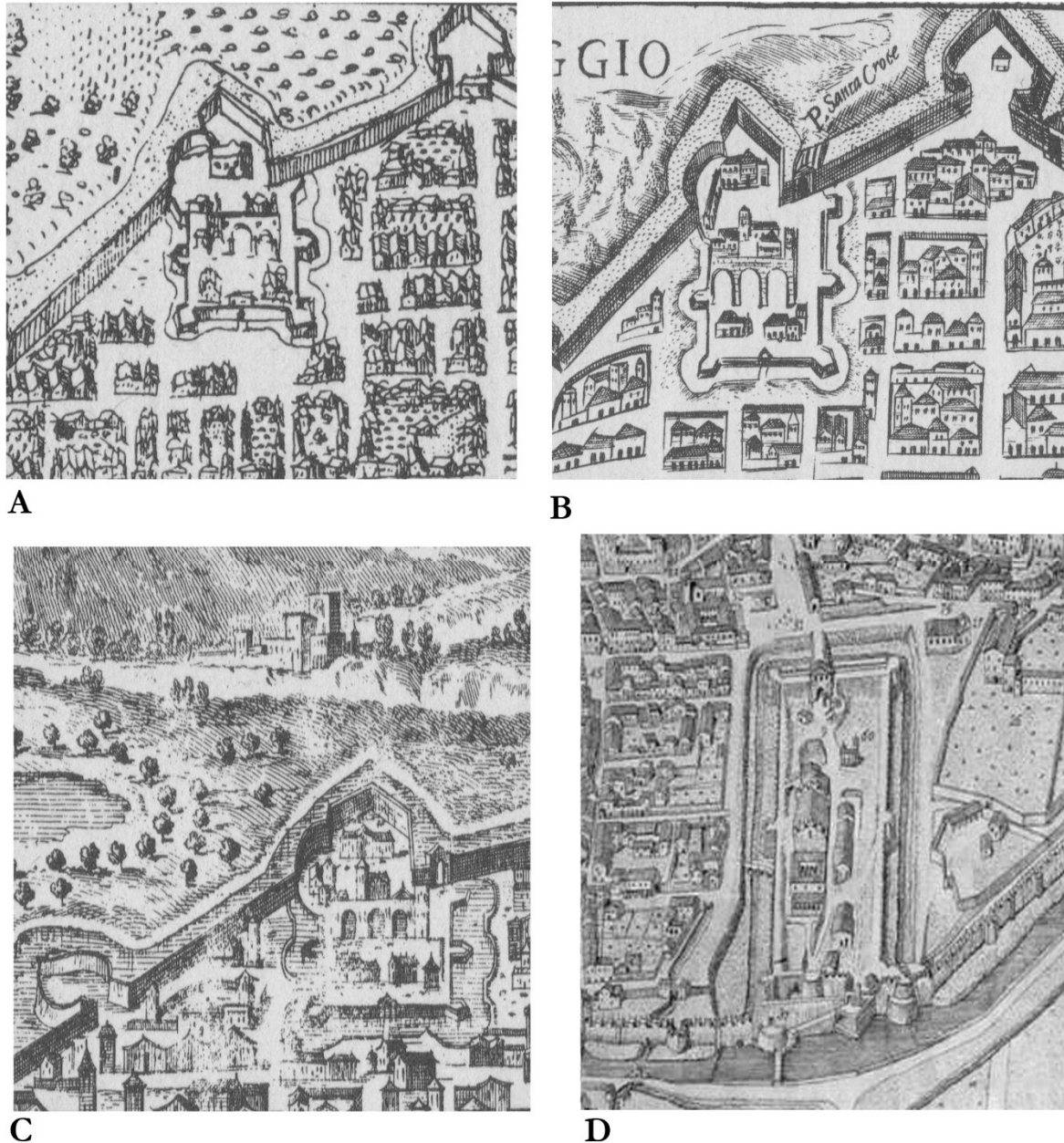


Fig. 1. Regium Lepidi: four images of the Citadel; note the semi-elliptical anomaly in the western side of it. In clockwise order: Francesco Valegio 1590; Anonymous 1599; Anonymous 1751 and the “Veduta Camuncoli” 1591.

centre²⁵: this is the reason why many of them were dismantled in Late Antiquity, if it was not possible to insert them into the defences.

This may have happened also in this case, at least in part; In fact, only the portion of ellipses facing the countryside seems, from the drawings, to be preserved and used in the walls, while that towards the city seems to have been demolished. An important fact that has never been stressed before: the preserved portion of ellipse was larger than the part needed for defence as is possible to see in an anonymous engraving of 1751 AD (fig. 1, c): this testifies that the elliptical structure was built before the citadel and was not just a peculiar part of this defence system.

An interesting clue comes also from the ancient monastery of “San Prospero Extra Moenia”, it was located just a few hundred metres north of the walls anomaly (see fig. 1, c in the background) and it

²⁵ Capoferro Cencetti 1999 passim.

was built with reused Roman materials, as shown by the excavations conducted there by E. Lippolis²⁶ and it was filled with marble statues and columns, as attested by ancient sources: we can hypothesize that these materials may come from the *Arena* closeby. Another interesting evidence, that in this suburb must have been a monumental structure is that some documents²⁷ testify that during the construction of the most important theatre of Reggio Emilia (Teatro Valli, 1852-1857), immediately east of the supposed ancient building, were discovered huge decorated marble slabs: one of those portrayed the emperor *Claudius*.

We also found other evidences convergent on the interpretation of the curved area as the ancient amphitheatre of *Regium Lepidi*²⁸, but the geophysical research conducted by M. Forte in 2017²⁹ led to the certainty of the existence there of an elliptical structure whose foundations are at a much lower level than those of the medieval citadel, exactly where indicated in our studies: an important, and perhaps definitive, confirmation that our hypothesis is correct.

Tannetum

Tannetum is first mentioned by Polybius and Livy with reference to the year 218 BC, during the Second Punic War, when the Gauls living in the Po Plain rose up against Rome and supported Hannibal who was about to arrive in Italy from the Alps³⁰. The *praetor Lucius Manlius* was moving west from the area of *Placentia* (Piacenza) with his army and he was repeatedly ambushed by the Gauls in the thick woods characterizing the Po plain in this period; seeking refuge, he arrived in *Tannetum*, a small village, where he gave his soldiers the order to build defences utilizing perishable materials available on spot. Entrenched there, he waited for *Gaius Atilius*, the other *praetor* in charge that year, to help him against a multitude of enemies that was growing by the day.

Then the town is mentioned by Pliny in the 1st century AD as a proper town, a *municipium*. *Tannetum* is then very rarely mentioned by ancient writers, but the fact that it was defined just as a *mutatio* about two hundred years later³¹ may be an important evidence of the decay that led to the complete disappearance of the city³².

The only clues that one has for the identification of the town are given by the ancient itineraries, the *Itinerarium Antonini*³³, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*³⁴ and the *Tabula Peutingeriana*³⁵. They inform us that the city was on the *Via Aemilia*, between *Regium Lepidi* (X/XI Roman miles west of this *municipium*) and *Parma* (about VII/VIII miles east of the *colonia*). At a fairly similar distance from Reggio and Parma, along the line of today's Via Emilia, there is the town of Sant'Ilario d'Enza³⁶; this is generally considered the ancient *Tannetum* in archaeological scholarship³⁷.

P.L. Dall'Aglia³⁸ noticed that about 1,5 km north of S. Ilario we can find the toponym 'Taneto', which seems to be closely related to the lost town and the Scholar underlined that its presence is very hard to explain if *Tannetum* was S. Ilario. Furthermore Dall'Aglia observed that in S. Ilario most of the Roman findings excavated were funerary³⁹; We agree with him that this seems incompatible with the hypothesis that this modern town coincides with *Tannetum*, since even the most ancient Roman laws, the so-called 'Twelve Tables', forbade burials in urban areas⁴⁰.

²⁶ Lippolis 1998.

²⁷ Corradi Cervi 1941, n. 23.

²⁸ Storch 2018.

²⁹ Forte 2017.

³⁰ Polyb., *Hist.* III, 40, 11-14; Liv., XXI, 25, 9-14; 26, 2; XXX, 19, 7.

³¹ *Itin. Burdig.*, 616, 11-12.

³² Storch 2014, p. 64.

³³ *Itin. Ant.*, 287, 8-9.

³⁴ *Itin. Burdig.*, 616, 11-12.

³⁵ *Tab. Peut.*, seg. IV.

³⁶ From now on, 'S. Ilario'.

³⁷ See bibliography in Storch 2014, p. 64, note 4.

³⁸ Most recently Dall'Aglia 2006, p. 124.

³⁹ See the map of archaeological finds produced for the municipality of S. Ilario in 2013 by Ar/s Archeosistemi: http://www.comune.santilariodenza.re.it/allegati/relazione%20archeologica%20e%20allegato%20schede_130801083218.pdf.

⁴⁰ *Hominem mortuum, inquit lex in XII, in urbe ne sepelito neque urito*, Cic., *De legibus*, II, 23.

One of the most important results of our work consisted in the discovery of a large field (about 2 ha) south west of Taneto filled with late iron age pottery, the decorated fragments revealed a celto-ligurian culture and also a Celtic bronze fibula was discovered, along with some rough brick structures⁴¹. Since this is the only zone in the area where such finds were discovered, this may be the Celtic village of *Tannetum*. We identified just a few fragments of Roman pottery and bricks, so we have to assume that the Roman town must be elsewhere.

Years of field surveys⁴² have revealed several areas where Roman pottery and bricks have been found, not only near Taneto, but also in the area between Taneto and S. Ilario, but they are not of sufficient extent to clearly identify the lost town. So, we may say that, until now, archaeology has failed to solve this historical enigma.

The only chance we had was to try to capitalise on all the information that could come from toponymical sources, satellite and aerial photos, ancient and recent cadastres, and archival data; the most multidisciplinary, the typical approach of Ancient Topography⁴³.

In an aerial photo of the area north-west of Taneto taken in 1996 by the Italian Environment Ministry⁴⁴, we identified a very peculiar profile in one of the fields, clearly visible, elliptical in shape, with two openings at the two apices. We think that this may be a crop mark generated by hidden structures of the amphitheatre of the lost town. In fact, the plan is of a typical amphitheatre shape: in particular, one of the two openings is square-shaped; this recalls, for example, the amphitheatre of London⁴⁵, but this is a recurring solution for those amphitheatres that had no underground facilities⁴⁶; in these buildings these chambers are supposed to be the enclosures where the wild beasts were kept before the show. Furthermore, this layout is so similar to the arena of the amphitheatre of Roselle (*Regio VII*, Tuscany, and exactly the same size: 26x40 m) that they can be easily overlapped (fig. 2).

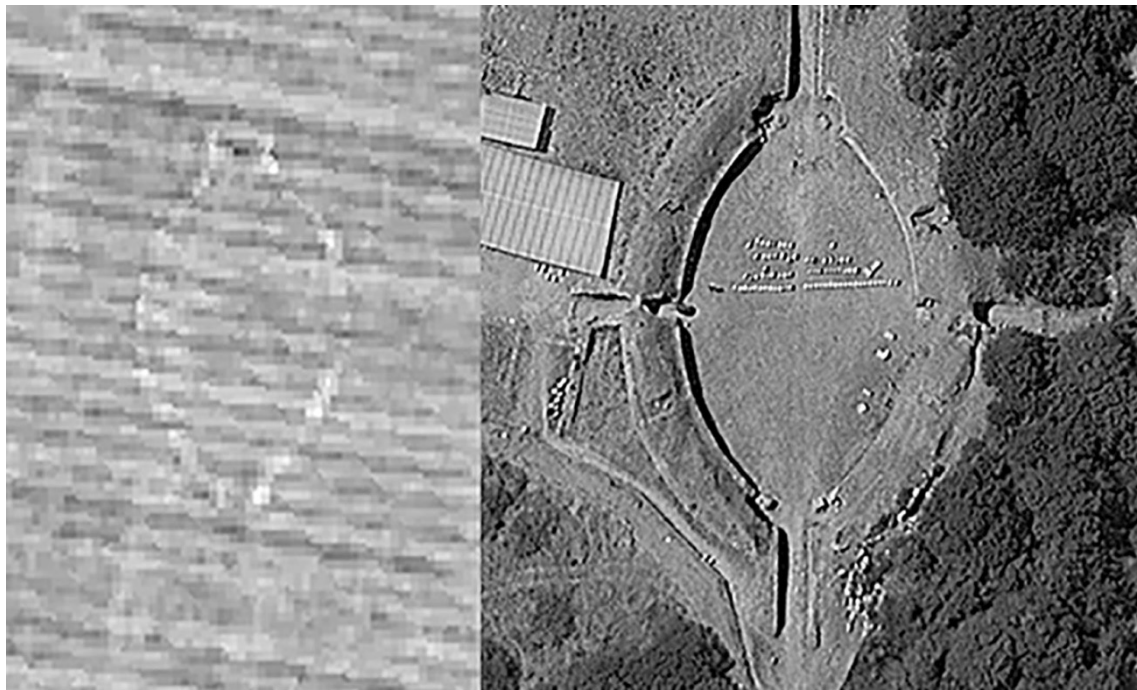


Fig. 2. Tannetum: comparison, at the same scale, between the trace that we discovered in Taneto (RE) and the amphitheatre of Roselle (GR).

⁴¹ Storchi 2018.

⁴² Bottazzi 1989; Pecchini 2015 and previous works of the same authors; Since 2016 we conducted surveys in the area and we can count on the data given us by the “Gruppo Stotico-Archeologico Val d’Enza” and “Associazione Culturale Tanntum”; we thank them for their constant support to the *Tannetum Archaeological Project*.

⁴³ Dall’Aglio 2000; Quilici, Quilici Gigli 2004.

⁴⁴ http://www.pcn.minambiente.it/viewer_old/.

⁴⁵ For this and the other English amphitheatres see Wilmott 2008, in particular pp. 92-97 and table 8.

⁴⁶ Golvin 1988, p. 100.

We also found that in that field in the XVIII century there was a house that was called “casa delle fiere”, that may be translated as “the house of the wild beasts”, maybe an ancient memory of the ancient arena games.

In 2016 and 2017 two archaeological excavations were held in correspondence to the elliptical pattern seen on the aerial photo.

What we found was quite surprising: instead of the imposing buried walls that usually generate traces of this kind and that one would expect in an amphitheatre, we discovered layers composed by gravel and rubble that we propose to interpret as the bases for sleeper beams of an amphitheatre made largely of wood and perhaps with an earthen bank. The rare pottery and amphorae fragments discovered between the stones can be dated at the 1st century AD and the hypothesis that it was a wooden structure can be confirmed by the large quantity of squared nails discovered during the excavation and the field surveys done before and after the excavation campaigns. Such kind of structures made with perishable materials are known from ancient writers and inscriptions⁴⁷, but none has ever been discovered in Italy; just some examples of structures that were built partially in wood and in part in masonry as the case of *Forum Novum/Vescovio*⁴⁸. In this latter case, the preparation for the wooden structures is very similar to what we discovered in Taneto; so, if further investigations will confirm that this is a wooden amphitheatre this discovery must be considered of great importance: these evanescent archaeological findings can justify why it is so difficult to find structure like this and may perhaps led to a re-evaluation of older discoveries.

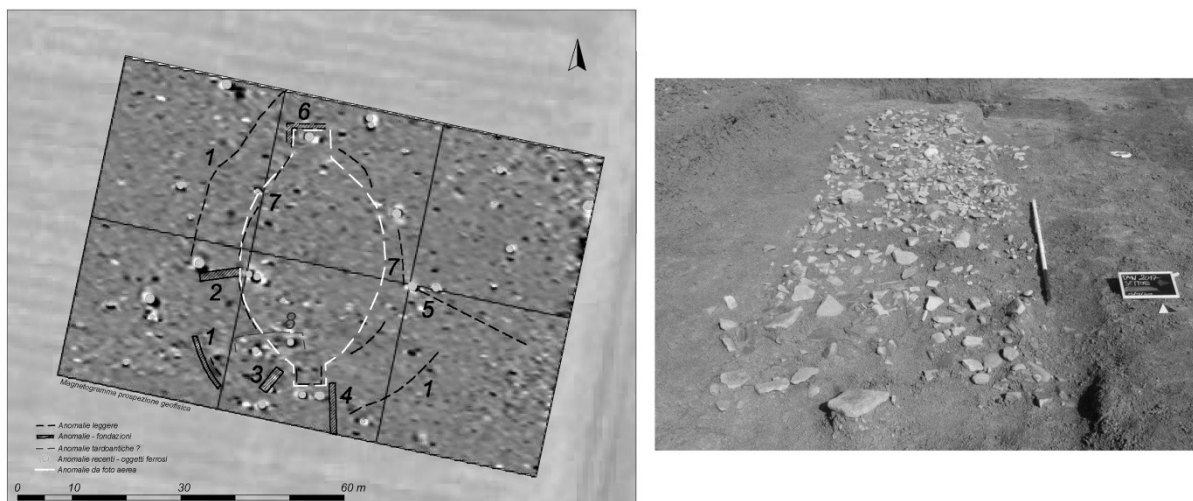


Fig. 3. On the left the results of the geophysical analysis (Elaboration by P. Blockely); on the right the excavation of the anomaly n. 3.

In 2017, a high-resolution geophysical survey⁴⁹ was conducted over an area of 5400 square metres, corresponding to the area where an aerial photograph of 1996 had revealed an oval-shaped anomaly, interpreted tentatively by P. Storchi as an amphitheatre: the same subjected to the excavations of 2016 and 2107, described above. The survey was conducted with a fluxgate magnetometer “Bartington Mag 601-2”⁵⁰. The processed data, presented in the form of a greyscale plot, indicate a few very slight anomalies, suggesting that little remains of the ancient structures (fig. 3). However, the slight traces have a form resembling the oval-shaped anomaly visible in the 1996 aerial photo, and would tentatively support the theory of an amphitheatre with slight foundations and wooden structure. The many micro-anomalies, present in the grey-scale plot of the data, are probably of iron nails of

⁴⁷ See Balbo, Storchi in this volume.

⁴⁸ Gaffney *et al.* 2003.

⁴⁹ Conducted on 2nd December 2017 by P. Blockley and G. Mete, RA.GA Srl.

⁵⁰ Developed and produced by Bartington Instruments Ltd, United Kingdom, specifically for archaeological use.

roman origin. The lack of clear anomalies would call for more targeted archaeological excavation, to locate the entrances and internal structures to further test the hypothesis of the presence of an amphitheatre.

If this is the amphitheatre of *Tannetum*, the lost town cannot be far from here and it can hardly be S. Ilario, which seems far too distant. Given the discovery in 2018 of a fine roman cobblestone road close to S. Ilario train station and the discovery in the last decades of a similar road close to it, it seems likely to me that this area at the S-W of Taneto may be a good candidate for the location of the ancient town; this hypothesis would perfectly account for the long-lasting preservation of the toponym here.

Only further archaeological investigations will finally lead to the full discovery of the lost town⁵¹ but we have undoubtedly taken a step forward: probably a topographical dilemma that had lasted for centuries is close to having been solved only due to an amphitheatre study.

Luceria

Luceria is an archaeological site in the Tusco-Emilian Appennines, south-west of *Regium Lepidi*.

As already indicated, in the archaeological literature it is considered as just a small *vicus*, a little village, or service centre, “an institution designed to offer specialised services to citizens and the inhabitants of the surrounding areas⁵²”. It is possible to visit a small archaeological area with a nice stone-paved road and some home-workshops along the sides: it is considered a sort of *vicus routier*, a single line of houses and shops built on this road that is one of the lines of communication that connected the Po plain with the Appennines and Tuscany.

If these were the only data we had, for reconstructing the past of ancient *Luceria*, we may agree with the common opinion that this was just a small village.

We must not forget that when the town was first excavated in XVIII century it was surveyed by the same family that, in those years, was excavating *Pompei*, *Herculaneum* and *Veleia*: it's evident that *Luceria* cannot compete with these extraordinary sites and the disappointment of the Parma's dukes condemned the site to a sort of oblivion for centuries.

Reading the ancient excavation reports, those of G. Chierici in the XIX century and some of the most recent ones, we can find some clues that this centre may have been something more important⁵³.

In fact, we calculated that the urbanised area was about 10/11 ha⁵⁴ and in this area, many roads have been discovered that were parallel or perpendicular to the one that is rightly considered the main route of the “*vicus*”, so one can speak of an urban planning.

Moreover, the old excavation reports testify that walls, marble slabs and Roman coins were discovered daily and also some bronze statues fragments and bronze inscriptions; new and old excavation reports give details of the discovery of thousands of *suspensurae* and *tesserae* from mosaics and public buildings. This is also proven by the excavation of E. Lippolis that led to the discovery of a large structure interpreted as a market for the selling of sheep⁵⁵, but also G. Chierici in the XIX century writes about the discovery of a temple and a fountain and the XVIII century excavators wrote about the presence of buildings with apsed rooms⁵⁶.

In addition, we must focus on the main street of the centre: now we can consider as almost sure⁵⁷ that it belonged not to just one of the many itineraries that connected *Aemilia* and *Etruria*, but to an important road mentioned by the *Itinerarium Antonini* as the Parma-Lucca. In *Luceria* it was excavated and described by G. Chierici and E. Lippolis⁵⁸, they agree on the fact that in the soft limestone rocks used to pave the street inside the centre there were no traces of the passage of carriage wheels.

⁵¹ The archaeological surveys will continue in future years by Sapienza University of Rome (Prof. L. Migliorati, dott. P. Storchi) and University of Southern Denmark (Prof. J. Carlsen) in collaboration with Soprintendenza Archeologia di Emilia Romagna (dott. M. Miarì).

⁵² Evangelidis 2014.

⁵³ See Patroncini 1994 and Storchi 2018.

⁵⁴ Storchi 2018, p. 237.

⁵⁵ Lippolis 2000b.

⁵⁶ See Storchi 2018, pp. 221-244.

⁵⁷ Dall'Aglio 1998.

⁵⁸ Lippolis 2000b.

This aspect, however, is characteristic of the main streets of urban centres, especially after the laws that limited the entry of vehicles into the city, as for a law passed by Emperor Claudius which recited: “*viatores ne per Italiae oppida nisi aut pedibus aut sella aut lettica transirent*”.

This rule would certainly not have been applied in a “*vicus routier*”, which, by definition, should be a centre that is born and lives in direct dependence of a highly frequented road.

One could actually think, as E. Lippolis suggested⁵⁹, of a deviation of vehicular traffic at a parallel road, a sort of tangential road. Such facilities are being discovered more and more frequently in Italy, but they were always built to avoid urban centres, proper towns, not *vici*⁶⁰.

Even the rather contained dimensions, as we have seen, of the settlement cannot unequivocally lead back to a non-independent centre. In particular if we consider the mountain towns, they had to function essentially for their entire existence as centres of services and host a small population: for Veleia D. Vera spoke about “urban dwarfism”⁶¹; similarly it can be affirmed for *Mevaniola*, also elevated to the rank of *municipium*, even though it only constituted of a group of public buildings (a bath, a square and a small odeon) along a road axis.

It seems, at the same time, not impossible, but certainly rather improbable, to believe that a simple minor centre, not even having administrative autonomy, may have been the object of the attention of Emperor Claudius which, as attested epigraphically there, worked to restore the “*nundinae*”, or became their *curator*⁶²: it was a periodic fair of a certain importance that required approval and authorization by the Roman State.

Above all it is difficult to think that an agglomeration of secondary importance, was inserted in the number of the cities (and we stress: cities) of the *Gallia Togata* by C. Tolomeus.

In fact, “*Nuceria*”, would be the only non-autonomous centre cited in the *Regio VIII* (the other cities are in fact: *Placentia, Fidentia, Brixellum, Parma, Regium, Tannetum, Mutina, Bononia, Claterna, Forum Cornelii, Caesena, Faventia, Forum Livi, Ariminum and Ravenna*; all *municipia* or *coloniae*), but one of the very few in the whole of Italy.

At the level of a simple working hypothesis, P.L. Dall’Aglio had already proposed that *Luceria* could correspond to one of the various towns that Pliny lists in *Regio VIII* that disappeared in Late Antiquity. In particular, the author suggested the possibility that it could correspond to *Forum Clodi*⁶³. In our Ph.D. studies we think that we found some more clues that support this hypothesis⁶⁴.

So as for *Regium Lepidi*, is it possible that *Luceria* had buildings for public performances?

In an aerial photo taken in 1954 by IGM, we recognized a semi-circular anomaly, with a diameter of 45 m, indicated either from the arrangement of the trees and from a clear halo: a typical trace linked to the presence of buried structures⁶⁵.

Since the site was completely abandoned in late antiquity to undergo a renewed urbanization only at the beginning of the ‘70s of the twentieth century, with a good margin of security we can say that probably the trace can be connected to the presence of an ancient structure.

The second outline presented here was observed in a low-altitude flight carried out in June 2015 and it was possible to see the trace again the following year (flights in May and August 2016, by P. Storch). It is difficult to describe, since we can see just a small part of it: the lines continue in an urbanized area today. It can be described as two concentric semi-circular traces with an internal diameter of about 7 m (fig. 4).

The traces are in a slightly peripheral position, but on the fluvial terrace where the town was built. This aspect and their particular shape could, with caution, make one think of the presence of buildings for shows which would lead to a further confirmation of the municipal status of *Luceria*, but nothing can be said with certainty before an archaeological investigation.

⁵⁹ Lippolis 2015.

⁶⁰ Quilici, Quilici Gigli 2010.

⁶¹ Vera 2009, p. 249.

⁶² Lippolis 2000b; Storch 2018.

⁶³ Dall’Aglio 1998, pp. 61-2.

⁶⁴ See Storch 2018.

⁶⁵ Storch 2018, p. 237.



Fig. 4. Luceria: a trace that we observed in a low-altitude flight carried out in June 2015.

Brixellum

Brixellum was an important centre in Roman times⁶⁶, born as a service centre, it developed as a *municipium* and received a contingent of veterans, becoming a colony in the 1st century BC. We can therefore imagine a rich and wealthy town that kept its importance into Late Antiquity, as one of the most important ports on the Po River, as testified by ancient writers⁶⁷.

Its great strategic position was the reason for its condemnation to disappear: the Byzantines escaping from the Lombards decided that their enemies should not hold such an important stronghold and they decided to destroy it completely before leaving.

Since then, without the maintenance of roman infrastructural works to regulate the water, the area was at the mercy of the great Po river which repeatedly flooded the entire area, to the extent that by around the year 1000, nobody knew where *Brixellum* was. The ancient documents tell us that there was just an area where trees didn't raise into a great forest that was known as "*Roncores Brexellanes*" in which we can identify clearly ancient *Brixellum*⁶⁸.

Considering the flooding and the fact that all the amphitheatres in the Reggio Emilia area seem to be less majestic than in central Italy, we can suppose, given the importance of the town, that such kind of buildings for public performances were in this centre, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to discover.

We identified just one amphitheatre-like anomaly, but, as we will see, the interpretation of the structure is uncertain and so its date (fig. 5).

The area is about 700 m north-west of Brescello, here in a photograph taken in 1988 by the Ministry of the Environment, one can see a trace generated by an anomalous disposition of the vegetation that defines two concentric, almost elliptical, traces; they are open on the northern side, maybe due to river erosion or because that was its original shape. It measures 50 m in its minor axis.

⁶⁶ Chiesi 2013.

⁶⁷ Sid. Ap. Ep. I, 5, 5.

⁶⁸ Storchi 2018, p. 198.



Fig. 5. Brixellum: elliptical anomaly north-west of the Roman town.

It is no longer possible to investigate the area, as it was the object of a gravel extraction in the 1990s.

In archival research, the only document in which the area is mentioned is in a drawing of the XVII century, in which the area is called “the old district of *palatia et portici*”, the “district of great buildings and porticoes”, a place name evocative of a glorious past, but extremely vague.

One hypothesis is that it corresponds to a harbour mentioned in 1266 at the mouth of the Enza river and defended by a castle built by the city of Parma.

Unfortunately, therefore, at the moment, there is no document that can help us understand the function and chronology of the structure, but this was probably not the ancient amphitheatre of *Brixellum* since it is quite far from the town and also the Roman port of *Brixellum* seems to have been in a southern part⁶⁹: just further archaeological and geomorphological investigations will bring new light on this peculiar trace.

Conclusion

To conclude, some kind of leisure activities should, in our opinion, certainly be considered as a necessary service to the life of settlers even in smaller towns.

Even if some kind of shows could take place in the squares and, in particular, at the *forum*, it is true that, in particular, the amphitheatre was very commonplace in northern Italy: a structure that, as is well known, was considered a symbol of living *more urbano*.

One aspect that should always be kept in mind (and it is often forgotten in Italy) is that an amphitheatre may not have been as monumental as in common opinion: not all amphitheatres were like the *Colosseum* or the famous “Arena” in Verona.

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⁶⁹ Storchi 2018, pp. 214-217.

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