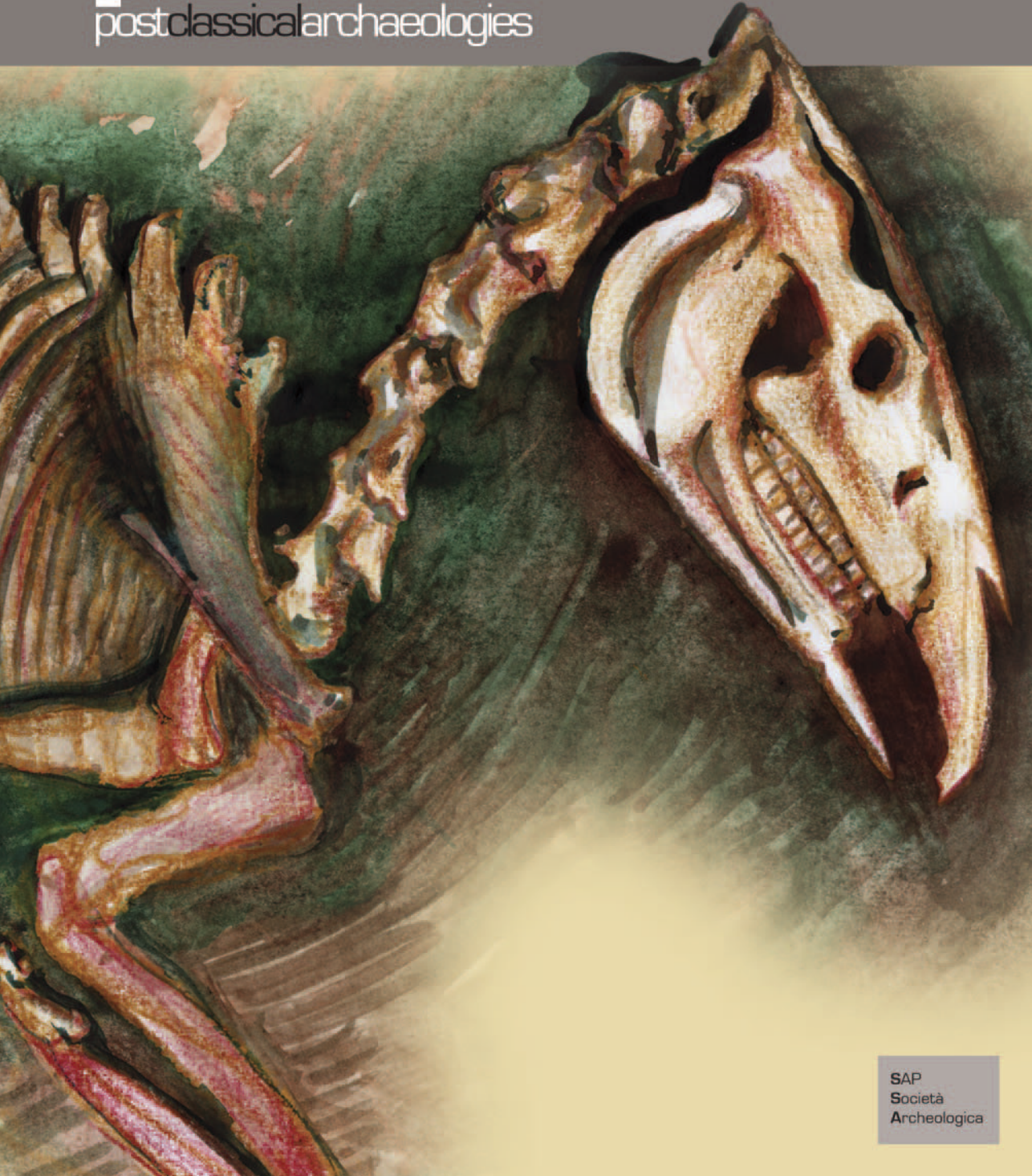


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Cristina Corsi\*

# The *suburbia* of Late Antiquity between spatiality and function. A discussion in the light of a few case studies from northern Italy<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

The *suburbia* of Roman towns, multifariously defined according to spatial, normative or socio-economic parameters, have attracted the interest of archaeologists and historians, who have approached the topic from different points of view. Archaeologists and art historians have concentrated their attention on the monumental display of funerary and religious monuments and villas lined along the main thoroughfares reaching the town; landscape archaeologists have investigated mainly the spatial aspects related to the road-network and land-use; environmental archaeologists have attempted the reconstruction of the ecological conditions and their evolution in the course of time; epigraphists have given voice to the many written testimonies of the deceased and devotees; historians have analysed the legal and normative regulation of the relationships between the urban and non-urban space; economic historians have reconstructed the bilateral relationship between production and consumption, trade and exchange<sup>2</sup>.

In other words, the town/country (or urban/rural as more frequently defined in the geographical literature) relationship can be analysed from the spatial or from the conceptual point of view, as towns (and *suburbia* as well) can be considered as places or as functions. Therefore, *suburbia*, like towns, cannot be studied sim-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been elaborated during a post-doc research stay fellowship at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in the framework of the Scientific Research Network of The Flanders Research Foundation (FWO) entitled "Structural Determinants of Economic Performance in the Roman World", coordinated by the Department of History of Ghent University. The residency at VUB was supervised by Paul Erdkamp, who kindly revisited this paper and gave precious suggestions for its final version.

<sup>2</sup> Although outdated for what concerns the archaeological data, the overview provided by WARD PERKINS 2001 on the topic of late antique production and exchange is an excellent analysis of the theoretical and historiological issues.

ply as artefacts but need to be considered as socio-economic and political systems<sup>3</sup>. Combining material and written evidence, we can list a series of functions that were expected to be located exclusively or for the most part in the *suburbium* of a given town. They extended from military structures to the residential functions (ranging from the seigneurial mansions to humble dwellings), from agricultural activity to artisanal and industrial production, from infrastructures for leisure, like baths, and spectacle buildings, to complexes devoted to worship, from the spaces devoted to market and exchange, including lodging for travellers, merchants and other 'transients', to the spaces devoted to the dead, from the infrastructures to serve the urban centres, like aqueducts and landfills, to those for land management and communications, like channels, dikes, ditches and roads.

The process implies stretching our analysis to other immaterial factors that, on the one hand, determined a different impact on economic, cultural, spatial and social aspects (e.g. nature and availability of manpower) and, on the other hand, heavily influenced the 'perception' of the difference – if any – between what was inside and outside the town proper. Although the focus has always been on urban centres and not on their periphery<sup>4</sup>, the analysis of the above-listed parameters resulted in different interpretative models, which alternatively favoured more modernist or more primitivist readings. The debate should, however, be considered overtaken thanks to a more multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach that enlarges the range of datasets used for the interpretation (e.g.: the palaeo-environmental and palaeo-biological data about diet and agricultural-pastoral activities, shedding light on transformations in land-use and aspects related to food production and market). Effectively, a large variety of stimuli has come from other disciplines, such as human geography, spatial analysis and urban planning, economic and ecological studies. Thanks to these precious contributions, we can sketch new visions and ask new questions.

As already highlighted (most recently, Corsi and Vermeulen 2021), with the relevant exception of Rome, the topic does not rely upon a long-standing tradition of studies. Specifically for Late Antiquity, at the end of the 1990s, the study of *suburbia* was addressed as a gap in the study of urban history (Pergola

<sup>3</sup> The mention of the milestone work of Horden and Purcell (2000) is unescapable. Regardless the disputed assertion that the city was an 'essential' category of settlement that could be used as a heuristic device, they highlighted that a 'city' and its surrounding countryside shared the same functions. Most importantly, they argued that the city cannot be understood without reference to its hinterland and its economic, social and cultural network of related urban and rural centres: HORDEN, PURCELL 2000, pp. 89-122.

<sup>4</sup> In the very extensive literature about the nature of urban transformation of post-classical centres that has been very central to the international debate of the last thirty years, *suburbia* feature astonishingly rarely, although often implicitly discussed: see, e.g. the review offered by WICKHAM 2005, esp. pp. 591-692.

1999, p. 268). Indeed, although since the seventies the idea had already spread among archaeologists that the study of suburban areas concurs with an understanding of the essence of ancient towns (Annibaletto 2010b, p. 17), it has only been since the end of the second millennium that archaeological studies explicitly devoted to *suburbia* have paralleled the debate about town and country. Scientific meetings and publications centred on large regional contexts (e.g. Gallia (*infra*) and Britannia: Esmonde Cleary 1987) have integrated the analysis of ancient sources of terms such as *pomerium* or *suburbanus*<sup>5</sup>. This process started in 1982 with the publication of Edward Champlin's paper on the *suburbium* of Rome, leading to the conclusion that, in the literary and epigraphic sources, "the suburb of Rome is not an area but a concept with a very narrow and private significance" (Champlin 1982, p. 97). Progressively, the notion that the urban dimension was not delimited by the emptiness of a non-urban space fostered the analysis of that segment of territory which was ideally perceived as inextricably linked to the town although marked by physical and socio-cultural peculiarities.

I shall thus provide an overview of the possible 'definitions' of the *suburbium* and of the theoretical approaches to its study, including some elaborated by scholars in contemporary urbanism. I will synthesise the issues related to the aspect and functioning of Roman *suburbia* in the later phases. I shall review some case studies from northern Italy and compare them to general trends highlighted in Gaul in an attempt to delineate the spatial and functional aspects of the late antique suburban areas, identifying the economic, social, cultural and religious trends that more heavily impacted the spatial connotation of the immediate towns' hinterlands.

## 2. Definitions and backgrounds

Evidently, the preliminary step is to define the object of this study. How do we delimitate the part of the settlement outside the town that we consider *suburbium* from the material (therefore, spatial) and immaterial (therefore socio-economic and cultural) points of view? Do we consider it a buffer zone, an interface between urban and rural space, or should it be considered a spatial entity in its own right? Can we make indiscriminate use of the words 'suburb' and

<sup>5</sup> Resorting to the original meaning, it has been argued that, while the concept of *pomerium* is linked to the idea of urban centre only following the performance of a founding act involving religious prescriptions and rites, the image of a town always included the existence of a *suburbium* (ANTICO GALLINA 2000b, pp. 131-132). The latter is likely to be encompassed in the division of the functioning of an urban centre in several sub-systems (ZACCARIA RUGGIU 1995, pp. 17, 26), and it was expected to connect *urbs* and *ager*. For additional references see CORSI, VERMEULEN 2021, note 1.



'periphery' to address the same concept?<sup>6</sup> If this second question is not likely to find a shared answer, we can agree that even when no distinction between spatial and social aspects is debated, *suburbia* are currently considered to be particular forms of settlements, with their specific architectural characteristics, spatial patterns, social connotation and economic functioning, regardless of the presence of demarcation elements, like city walls (Scagliarini 1991, p. 88). Indeed, the definition of "immediate hinterland as the area characterised by a particular set of activities" (Morley 1996, p. 83) appears too restrictive when detached from the aspects related to consumption and social and demographic profiling.

Although the issues related to the buffer zone between urban and non-urban space have been conceptualised in contemporary geographical, 'urbanistic' and sociological disciplines within the framework of the 'rural-urban fringe' (RUF) studies<sup>7</sup> and notwithstanding the fact that these spaces are now rightly considered 'places in their own right', no technical definition has been elaborated in modern terms to describe what is prosaically called "the space where countryside meets town" (Scott *et al.* 2013, p. 8). The seminal paper by Pryor (1968, p. 206) provides both an informative and comprehensive definition of this space of transition: "The rural-urban fringe is the zone of transition in land use, social and demographic characteristics, lying between (a) the continuously built-up urban and sub-urban areas of the central city, and (b) the rural hinterland". We will try to question whether RUF is a good match for the concept of *suburbia* here, and we will attempt to discuss the matter in the light of concrete examples.

Equally interesting stimuli related to the debate about theoretical approaches come from disciplines such as spatial planning, and are mainly linked to the relevance of the tenet of connectivity (Scott *et al.* 2013, p. 39). Rooted in ecological

<sup>6</sup> Although the term *suburbium* is manifestly rare in Latin sources and is preferably linked to the *Urbs* par excellence, and although it is not alien to the sense of 'subdue, subjected', here it has been chosen in preference to modern terminology, which is not free of sociological and 'emotional' implications linked to contemporary situations. In addition to the references quoted at notes 19 and 20 of CORSI, VERMEULEN 2021, see: AGUSTA-BOULAROT 1998; GRILLI 2000, p. 46; REDDÉ 2012, p. 650. Penelope Goodman chooses 'urban periphery' to circumvent these instinctive connections with contemporary suburbs: "The idea of the suburb as a lower-class overspill zone is an anachronism for the Roman world: and has arguably given rise to misinterpretations of its economic activity": GOODMAN 2007, p. 3. However, more recent contributions undermine this terminological choice, arguing that "the part of a city located on its outer edge", i.e. what Latin sources address as *continentia aedificia*, is better labelled as a suburb rather than a periphery: EMMERSON 2020, p. 9. The rarity of the lemmas related to the adjective *suburbanus* is explained by the difficulty of distinguishing the *suburbium* as an entity in its own right. The areas surrounding the town would have been rather considered as extension of the urban centres, a sort of land of possibility, accrediting a vision of *suburbia* as potentiality that is probably too modern.

<sup>7</sup> The elaboration of the theoretical paradigm of RUF is thought to have been developed in the inter-war literature in the fields of sociology, geography and planning. See, e.g., WEHRWEIN 1942.

theory, which aims at understanding the relationships between populations of different species and scale that inhabit the same ecosystem, the idea that interconnections played an essential role in the shaping of places and that interrelations had to be taken into account in the space management generated a holistic vision for the analysis of place-making common to the environmental approach and spatial planning (e.g. Albrechts 2004).

A stimulating epistemological reversal can be performed, inverting the perspective from an urban/rural to a rural/urban focus. Indeed, challenging the dominant urban-centric vision, which describes the fringe as a buffer zone charged with the absorption of the urban overspill in terms of housing, retail development, recreation and transport infrastructure, we can portray it as the osmotic space for the expansion of the rural world, for instance with new agricultural land or the growth of woodlands (Scott *et al.* 2013, pp. 9-10).

The other contemporary theoretical approach to the urban periphery lacks exactly this duplicity of perspective. The concept of Peri-Urban Interface (PUI), in modern urban studies, portrays the areas at the edge of a city simply as “a transitional zone that combines urban and rural functions”, but it is grounded in the earlier concept of the “urban fringe belt”, with a clear emphasis on the urban component (Emmerson 2020, p. 8 with ample bibliography).

Current approaches attempt to consider the zone where town and country overlap not only from the functional point of view, with the mix of activities characteristic of both poles, but also from a more ‘emotional’ perspective, with the urban periphery perceived as a ‘borderscape’ (Emmerson 2020, pp. 2-3; Stevens 2021, p. 268 on the concept of ‘borderscape’). The perception of borders undoubtedly played a central role in the development of a specific Roman cultural, religious, political and even military conception (Carlà-Uhink 2015; Stevens 2021 with a focus on the borderscapes of Roman Italy and the interaction between the urban fringe belt and the civic centre).

Dealing with the approach that merged economic and spatial factors first theorised by Von Thünen in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>, based on the idea that

<sup>8</sup> VON THÜNEN 1826. This model implies that the spatial distribution of economic activities gravitating on that market (the town in its entirety) is patterned by the costs of production and transport. It responds to Ricardo’s theory that the location was mainly a function of the differences in fertility. An increase in demand from the consumer centre triggers an expansion of the areas where those production activities take place since the expected rise in the prices compensates for the higher cost of transportation from zones further away. The reverse process of market contraction is paralleled by a shrinkage of the productive areas outside the centre, giving way to an adaptive system. The visual simplification of this model in concentric circles around the town helps to correlate other factors to the distance from the centre: the labour force, manuring, tools and know-how also come mainly from urban centres. Additionally, the vicinity of the market to the peri-urban sectors ensures access to less specialised supplies, like staples, allowing the people engaged in agricultural production to concentrate their efforts on intensive market-oriented productions (for example: perishable goods like vegetables, fruit and dairy): MORLEY 1996, pp. 59-60.

agricultural activities developed around a given market followed well-defined rules, we should test the proposed model of responses to changes<sup>9</sup>.

With regard to the work of Henry Lefebvre, who stressed how the interrelationship between town and country has a changeable nature and how difficult it is to determine a linear process for social integration in centres of different dimensions and connotations given that certain behavioural attitudes, such as *urbanitas*, were not exclusive to towns<sup>10</sup>, we shall analyse if different behavioural attitudes (e.g. religious patterns) modified this relationship.

Regarding the matter of the extension of the *suburbium*, it is evident that no general rule can be established since it is not only proportional to the dimension of the urban centre itself but the different level of connectivity, via roads and waterways, also heavily influenced what can be defined as the 'site catchment area', as seen from socio-economic and cultural points of view. Rome is probably the most prominent example since its economic hinterland stretched far beyond the natural halo of the city. In particular, thanks to its position in the Tiber valley, the 'pull of the Roman market' is considered to have reached areas as far as 30-35 miles away (Patterson 2006, p. 63).

The needs and factors that triggered the development of inhabited areas outside the perimeter of towns were approximately similar in the whole Roman world. The effectiveness of these factors with respect to the development of suburban areas started to be perceivable only from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, and it became increasingly manifest in the course of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, unrelatedly to the local stage of urban tradition<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, a general explanation for these developments can be sought regardless of the local variations and peculiarities. For what is concerned here, the individuation of the processes that shaped these halos of urban centres can proceed in parallel with the analysis of how these halos evolved after the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, if there was a change in the way they were perceived and if the relationship between centre and periphery had to find a new balance.

<sup>9</sup> However, we shall leave aside the economic approach that has placed the debate about the consumer/producer city at the centre and that, having assumed a strict competition between city and territory, has underestimated the relevance of the suburbs (FLOHR, WILSON 2017). In general, Roman suburbia present themselves as an ideal ground for deploying a multidisciplinary approach and for widening the nature and number of datasets that can be taken into account for an economic assessment.

<sup>10</sup> LEFEBVRE 1996, p. 119. See ADAMS 2012, pp. 9-10. The matters related to social interaction have also been dealt with by Ray Laurence (1994, p. 19) and have been central for the elaboration of the accessibility theory by Hillier and Hanson (1984, pp. 96-140, 148-175). See also CLARKE 1977, pp. 28-41; BROWN 1990, pp. 100-101.

<sup>11</sup> Exceptions are those republican towns whose delimited surface was so small that a sprawl outside the walls was unavoidable already in the early times (e.g. *Minturnae* at the border between *Latium* and *Campania*).

As anticipated, the analysis of classical *suburbia* has investigated the factors explaining the initial growth, assessing the spontaneity or the 'artificiality' of the suburban development, asserting whether, regardless the common acknowledgement that suburban areas lacked general planning, common trends in their development could be envisaged. Or that, given that some sectors of the same suburban area could have been 'specialised' in different function (productive, funerary, mainly linked to communications, etc.), some sectors were subjected to regulation and others sprawled inorganically. For our topic, then, it will be interesting to understand if factors like the demographic growth, the increasing wealth, the improved security and the expanding markets (Emmerson 2020, p. 14), in addition to a tighter connectivity, continued to explain change later on. Altogether, we should be able to explain whether such a new 'vision' of the city, probably a stronger feeling of how the town was expected to serve its hinterland and how tight and open at the same time this relationship was, was still effective.

Given the limits imposed on this sort of contribution, we shall analyse here the suburban areas of only a few towns of northern Italy, in particular their aspect and functioning, starting from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, generally considered a *discrimen* between the last urban and suburban growth and the transformation of settlement patterns (Marazzi 1988, pp. 260-264 for the impact of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century change on the Roman *suburbium*). These case studies have been selected as they provide piecemeal information about relevant aspects of the discussion. Their suburban areas have been the target of specific studies, especially *Iulia Concordia* and *Mediolanum*. The sample is also meant to embrace a broad castrum, from small-size towns to rapidly expanding cities with a new relevant political (the new capital Milan) or religious (e.g. Aquileia) role, from centres that progressively lost their connectivity to towns that were upgraded to a strategic position (e.g. Aosta), from settlements that were located in environmentally stable areas to centres that faced challenging ecological transformations like *Iulia Concordia*.

### **3. Late Antiquity and the *suburbium***

Most attempts to delineate the evolution of spatial phenomena and economic trends in suburbs have been undertaken for the Republican and Early Imperial phases. However, economic, social and cultural transformations and evolution starting from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century meant towns and suburbs changed. Most interestingly, the reversed balance between urban and 'non-urban' activities that affected the post-classical towns (starting with the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE), with the epochal fading of the taboo of the separation of the spaces for the living and those for the dead (from the 5<sup>th</sup> century) and the breaking in of cultivation areas in town, paralleled with phenomena such as spoliation, reuse and encroachment, triggered a

revolution in the spatial organisation of urban centres and their peripheral areas in both practice and perception. Yet, while these processes are well documented and studied for post-classical town centres<sup>12</sup>, much less attention is paid to the suburban areas, with the sole exception of contributions devoted to studying the process of Christianisation and the rise of new poles in the suburban areas that affected burial zones, road systems and any associated settlements.

The impact of the socio-economic evolution was stronger in the Italian Peninsula. The Diocletianic reforms had downgraded Italy from being the core of the empire to a provincial domain; the creation of the *provinciae suburbicariae*<sup>13</sup> clearly demonstrated that large territories of central Italy were considered ancillary to the need of the former capital<sup>14</sup>. This implied many changes mainly in the functional rather than the spatial features of the late Roman *suburbia*, especially in central Italy. The increased control of central authorities was counterbalanced by the shrinking of the individual administrative units. As a consequence, the *praefectura urbana*, based in Rome, extended its control over a territory included within a radius of 100 miles from Rome (for instance, Symmachus refers to *Spoletium* as a 'suburban' entity)<sup>15</sup>. This administrative act is paralleled by a terminological evolution witnessed in several sources. The spread of the use of the substantivate adjective *suburbanus*, *-a*, *-um* replaced the term '*suburbium*'. *Suburbanus* is often contrasted with the substantive *civitas* to encompass the whole range of possibilities for the definition of inhabited space (Annibaletto 2010a, p. 146). From the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the use of the adjective '*suburbanum*' as a noun is paralleled by the recovery of the ancient terms of *suburbium* and *suburbanitas*. The latter, which appears only in the letters of Sidonius and Symmachus, seems to have been used in literary contexts, while the term *suburbium* was also used in juridical texts<sup>16</sup>. It was most popular in the Middle Ages (see Chiodi 2000) when it was paired with the form *sub-urbs* while still keeping a certain flexibility in its meaning.

If Isidore of Seville's entry in his *Etymologiae* (beginning 7<sup>th</sup> century) does not add much to the concept of *continentia aedificia*, so popular in classical times<sup>17</sup>, the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus (second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century) delivers

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., the review of ESMONDE CLEARY 2013, pp. 101-103.

<sup>13</sup> Both these adjectives continued to be used in medieval Latin, the form '*suburbanus*' to address the inhabitants of the *suburbium* (Odilo *transl.rel.S.Seb.S.Greg.* 42 = PL CXXXIII, 614B), the adjective *suburbicarius* almost exclusively referred to the possessions of the Church: ANNIBALETTO 2010a, p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> The same role of 'site catchment area' of the *Urbs* is attributed in the written sources to the Mediterranean basin: *Schol. Iuv.*, 5, 95, 1d. The *provinciae suburbicariae* are also defined as '*suburbanae*' in Symm., *Epist.* 1, 90, 2; 2, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Symm. *Epist.* 3, 13, 2. See ANNIBALETTO 2010a, pp. 145-169.

<sup>16</sup> *Novell.* 131. Also Ven.Fort. *vita Loeb.* 27.88; a will of the 7<sup>th</sup> century in PL LXXXVII, 1137C-1138B; Bed. *in Pent.Comm.* XXXV (PL XCI, 378D). See ANNIBALETTO 2010a, p. 151.

<sup>17</sup> Isid. *etym.* 15, 2, 12; 22. See TODISCO 2016.

a much more stratified concept, since the spatial dimension and the idea of the proximity of the architectonic sprawls outside the urban limits is strictly linked to a sense of interconnections between the two entities, and the interaction between city and *suburbium* appears in several towns from west to east (*Parisii*, Aquileia, *Sirmio*, Tarsus and Samosata: Amm. 21.10.1; see Annibaletto 2010a, p. 148). This is confirmed in the 5<sup>th</sup>-century writings of Pope Leo the Great, where the *suburbia* still featured as a relevant category of settlement, after towns and before *pagi*<sup>18</sup>. The recurrence of the expression “*in suburbio*” confirms that the two spheres remained distinguishable between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, even if post-classical *suburbia* came to include areas originally considered part of the town but later excluded by the often reduced Late Roman defensive circuits (Goodman 2007, p. 230). Those new town walls played an essential role in the development of the concept of *urbs*, at least in the definition by Isidore, that is to say that the actual town correspond to the walls delimiting it (“*urbs ipsa moenia sunt*”: Isid. *etym.* 15.2.1). However, this statement is obviously to be contextualised in the early medieval milieu when security was a priority and the architectural fabric of most towns was so dilapidated that it was necessary to resort to a symbolic (although ‘material’) structure like city walls to materially and conceptually delineate the urban environment<sup>19</sup>. The analysis of the imperial (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE) and late Roman (3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries) urban defences in the western provinces (especially, northern and central Gaul) shows that most of these major constructions were connected to “questions of civic status and urban monumental display rather than strictly military or defensive considerations, making the point that the ideological context of urban defences was status and display” (Esmonde Cleary 2013, p. 122)<sup>20</sup>.

Until the Middle Ages, the suburbs would remain an essential feature of the urban systems, regardless of the fact that the concept of town is frequently captioned in ancient texts with the icon of a walled settlement, basically pointing at an entity spatially concluded in itself (Annibaletto 2010a, p. 152). Yet, sources of a different nature, like the mosaic carpets of Madaba portraying Jerusalem and Jericho (fig. 1), show how the representation of a contemporary town could not

<sup>18</sup> Leo Mag. *De Manich. eres.* 60.2 = PL LV, 844A-D. See ANNIBALETTO 2010a, p. 169.

<sup>19</sup> Most recently INTAGLIATA, BARKER, COURAULT 2020a and INTAGLIATA, BARKER, COURAULT 2020b, pp. 1-2, with an overview of regional and chronological variations with updated references. See also CHRISTIE 2006, pp. 281-399, updated by SARANTIS, CHRISTIE 2013, especially section “Fortifications in the West: a bibliographical review”, pp. 255-296.

<sup>20</sup> Esmonde Cleary stresses that the overwhelming presence of civilian officers in the region north of the Loire confirms that those towns were provided with defensive infrastructure mainly to ensure protection to the communication network providing logistics to the Rhenish *limes*: ESMONDE CLEARY 2020, p. 32. Conversely, in southern Gaul, late Roman defences are rarer, suggesting that a political strategy might have governed these choices: ESMONDE CLEARY 2020, p. 41.



Fig. 1. Madaba, Jordan. Mosaic floor in the early Byzantine church of Saint George depicting the Holy Land (6<sup>th</sup> century AD). A: Jerusalem and its suburb; B: Jericho and its hinterland. © Creative Commons.

be considered ‘complete’ without the characteristic sprawl of settlement outside the walled area. After the official transfer of the role of capital of the Western Empire to Milan first and then Ravenna, starting from 402 CE, the references to suburban areas of cities other than Rome increased, proving that the model elaborated around the *urbs* was seminal<sup>21</sup>.

The *suburbia* of late antique towns were heavily transformed by the epochal process known as ‘Christianisation’. It has in fact been argued that the gospel and the narrative of the passion of Jesus Christ might have played a crucial role in the increasing popularity and ‘visibility’ of the *suburbia*, at least among the lower classes, since most of the events narrated there took place in the outskirts of Jerusalem<sup>22</sup>. But it was primarily the rising devotion to the tombs and bodies of the martyrs that triggered a real revolution. To begin with, before the religious aspects, we have to analyse the social change that led burials to be considered not as an individual or familiar or – at most – a professional representation of identity but rather as the materialisation of a feeling of belonging to a larger community, where individuals renounce their personal identity in favour of an act of testimony, of the delivery of a message to posterity. Indeed, the structure, distribution and conception of the funerary spaces are among those aspects of ancient culture that changed most in Late Antiquity. One of the clearest factors

<sup>21</sup> E.g. in Ammianus only 3 entries of the term *suburbanus* out of a total of 23 are related to Rome: ANNIBALETTO 2010a, p. 147, note 16.

<sup>22</sup> ANNIBALETTO 2010a, pp. 156-161. Of course, in addition to the many writings in which the suburban villas feature as a status symbol of the elites, several other sources reported about the activities connected to mobility that were in large part located outside the gates: CORSI 2021, pp. 271-272.

is the constitution of large collective cemeteries with a Christian connotation<sup>23</sup> and the opening up to the possibility of expansion for future generations, usually neglected in the Roman funerary monuments of republican and imperial times<sup>24</sup>.

The progressive fading of the division according to social classes made way for another sort of privileged burial. The competition was no longer focused on the erection of impressive funerary monuments but rather on ensuring the proximity of the tomb to the bodies or tombs of martyrs and other persons considered champions of the faith. The venerated tombs became real attractors for both the living and the dead. The expanding clustering of burials around these generated in turn the development of shrines, altars, chapels and other types of installations for worship and commemoration. In the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, many cemetery areas came to be equipped with structures for the worship of the martyrs, abolishing the distinction between religious and funerary spaces. These installations patterned the development of the cemeteries themselves, and at the same time generated new poles in the peri-urban areas. The growing popularity of these funerary and cultic spaces led to the creation of the *itineraria ad sanctos*, (preferred) routeways to these holy foci. The Christianisation of the elites and of the imperial family facilitated the financial support for often imposing constructions. Soon, these suburban Christian monuments rivalled the existing and even new pagan constructions, progressively replacing them as urban poles<sup>25</sup>.

#### 4. The material evidence

Moving to the archaeological evidence, we shall briefly discuss here a series of case studies from northern Italy offering sufficient archaeological documentation for the late antique phase. This will provide an overview of their varied rank and locations, in that they will demonstrate a range of different situations.

<sup>23</sup> The difference was neatly perceived and highlighted in ancient sources. For instance. Caesarius of Arles (*Epis. Arelatenses genuinae*, 35 (= *MGH Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini aevi*, I, p. 54) stressed how much the *cymeteria Christianorum* were different from the *solitaria loca* of ancient burials. See FIOCCHI NICOLAI 2003, pp. 922-923.

<sup>24</sup> FIOCCHI NICOLAI 2003, pp. 921-924. The structuration of these cemeteries cannot be earlier than the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, in parallel with a better developed financial and organisational capacity of the Christian community. The most relevant changes in the general aspect and in the very conception of the Christian cemeteries started in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when the first churches were built in the burial grounds, providing a functional space for celebration, assembly, pray, commemoration: FIOCCHI NICOLAI 2003, pp. 923-926.

<sup>25</sup> ANNIBALETTO 2010a, p. 159. Predictably, best known and documented is Rome, where Pope Damasus I (366-384) expanded the process of monumentalisation of the cemeteries and of the venerated burials started by Pope Sylvester I (314-335); a monumentalisation that ranged from the simple adding of inscriptions to the erection of a basilica: see, e.g. FIOCCHI NICOLAI 2018.



Although they may not represent the perfect cross-section of examples, they constitute the basis for starting a discussion using relatively recent, well-documented archaeological examples. Rome is definitely the clearest example of how the richness of written and archaeological sources does not automatically lead to a full understanding. Notwithstanding the extraordinary amount of data available for the imperial and late antique periods of ample sectors of the *suburbium*, we still have to assess the impact of the erection of the Aurelian walls in the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. They undoubtedly fractured an urban fabric that is expected to have been quite homogeneous<sup>26</sup>. However, there is no total comprehension of how the 'star-shaped' sprawls along the main thoroughfares coexisted with the inclusion of minor centres and smaller towns that were located up to a striking distance from the *Urbs* (Quilici 1991, pp. 98-99) and how the process of 'urbanisation' of the periphery progressed to the detriment of the rural environment<sup>27</sup>.

The other Late Roman capital, *Mediolanum* (fig. 2), shows common traits between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, with the differentiation between town and country, originally marked by administrative boundaries, now signalled by the peri-urban belt of 'Holy Bodies'<sup>28</sup>. The Christian topography of the city developed in the wake of the major urban transformations made by Maximian. The tetrarch is, in fact, credited with the construction of large monumental complexes, including the palace and the circus, and the expansion of the walls encompassing them (Sannazaro 2014, pp. 79-81). It is, however, Constantius II who promoted the Christian developments, and the transformation of the suburbium started with the erection of the basilicas *Portiana* and *Faustae*, the shrine of SS Nabore and Felice, and the fast expansion of the cemetery area *Ad Martyres* (Sannazaro 1996). Other cemeteries show signs of Christian presence (Sannazaro 2014, pp. 82-83). After all, the *suburbium Mediolanensis* was already dense with Christian presence in the age of the Constantinian dynasty. This process would be amplified with the work of Ambrose and the '*inventio*' of other relics and with the basilica *Apostolorum* would have brought to the 'Christianisation' of a large area not far from the palace and the circus, in addition to the basilica Ambrosiana and probably the complex of S. Simpliciano (Sannazaro 1996, pp. 93-97). The com-

<sup>26</sup> This aspect has been studied for regional contexts such as Abruzzo: CAMPANELLI 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Obviously, it is not possible here to summarise the extraordinary amount of recent and less recent research centred on the *Urbs*, nor is reasonable to extend the proposed interpretations to other towns. However, some methodological and general considerations set out for Rome are inspiring for understanding other less documented contexts. In addition to what quoted above, see, e.g., MARAZZI 1988, 2001. Mandich explores the possibility to adapt the Ekistics model to Rome (MANDICH 2015). Thus, while Marazzi investigates the phase of urban contraction, Mandich focuses on the growth.

<sup>28</sup> ANTICO GALLINA 2000b, p. 133. "I Corpi Santi di Milano" is the name given to a former *comune*, established in 1782 and annexed to Milan in 1873. It comprised the rural territory around the city walls of Milan. The name refers to the presence of the shrines hosting the venerated relics.



Fig. 2. *Mediolanum* (Milan, Italy). Schematic map of the post-classical suburbium, with location of the excavation of the Catholic University of Milan (in red). Elaboration author after: ROSSIGNANI, SANNAZARO, LUSUARDI SIENA 2009, p. 4, fig. 3.

parison with the distribution of the basilicas of Rome, almost invariably built in connection with venerated burials, shows that in Milan the new Christian topography of the suburbium was more exceptionally driven by the initiative of Ambrose and of his successors (Pani Ermini 1999, pp. 273-274). In the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the road exiting *Porta Romana* was monumentalised with a portico and a triumphal arch. Probably in the same period, the construction of the imperial mausoleum in the courtyard of the Museo della Scienza e della Tecnica, in the south-eastern suburban area of S. Vittore al Corpo. These interventions show how civil and ecclesiastical powers had started to undertake initiatives meant to underline the role of capital, concurring and/or competing to

charge the *suburbium* with 'ideological' meanings (McLynn 1994, p. 232; San-nazaro 2014, pp. 85-86)<sup>29</sup>.

The excavations carried out in suburban areas so far (e.g., in the area of the courtyard of the Catholic University of Milan, a sector included in the intramural area only by the expanded defensive walls of the 12<sup>th</sup> century) show developments that we can label as 'conventional' (Lusuardi Siena, Rossignani, San-nazaro 2011, p. XIII). Occupied by a necropolis until the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century (San-nazaro 2011, p. 73), this small plot of the *suburbium* of *Mediolanum* was exploited as agricultural land until the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century when the construction of a monastery dedicated to St Ambrose changed the land-use (Rossignani, San-nazaro, Lusuardi Siena 2009, pp. 19-24). However, the most remarkable archaeological evidence is represented by the dark earth, the deep archaeological layers whose peculiar colouring is due to the high component of organic and other anthropic materials in the soil (e.g. charcoal, fragments of pottery, tiles, animal bones, building debris). This confirms that, although some areas were partly covered by constructions, large sectors were left unbuilt, but included courtyards, gardens and open-air areas (Lusuardi Siena 2011, pp. 149-153).

Remaining in Lombardy, the excavations in the suburban area of via Benzi-viale Varese at *Comum Novum* confirm how the different functions attested in the *suburbium* for early imperial times (a hostel-brothel and another building identified with an infrastructure for travellers hypothetically linked with the *cursus publicus*) were progressively abandoned, starting from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, in favour of an almost exclusive funerary use (figs. 3-4). Also the eastern and western sectors of the Convalle, including the villa of Via Zezio, the bath complex of via Lecco, and the buildings of via Benzi, were gradually abandoned (Luraschi 2013, p. 42). This reversal interrupted the process of expansion of the first two centuries of our era, characterised by the erection of public monuments and residential complexes especially in the proximity of the hills of Brumate and Rondineto (Sacchi 2013, pp. 149-151).

This process of transformation of the *suburbium* appears to be fostered by the bishops, who promoted the erection of the most important funerary basilicas (S. Abbondio (fig. 3, n. 20), S. Simpliciano, SS. Cosma and Damiano (fig. 3, n. 21), and S. Lorenzo and S. Giuliano on the opposite side) along the main roads<sup>30</sup>. Among them, the so-called via Regina, running at the slopes of Monte Croce, and connecting Milan to the Alpine passes, shows some Late Imperial restoration (miliarium from the area of the early-Christian church of S. Carpoforo: Uboldi 1993, p. 115, n. 108).

<sup>29</sup> An interesting comparative case study are the *porticus* connected to the suburban churches of S. Pietro and S. Paolo in Rome, where the structures are hypothetically linked to the imperial ceremonial processions: SPERA 2019, p. 458.

<sup>30</sup> DAVID 2006, pp. 126-129. On the process of Christianisation in *Comum* see: SANNAZARO 1993.

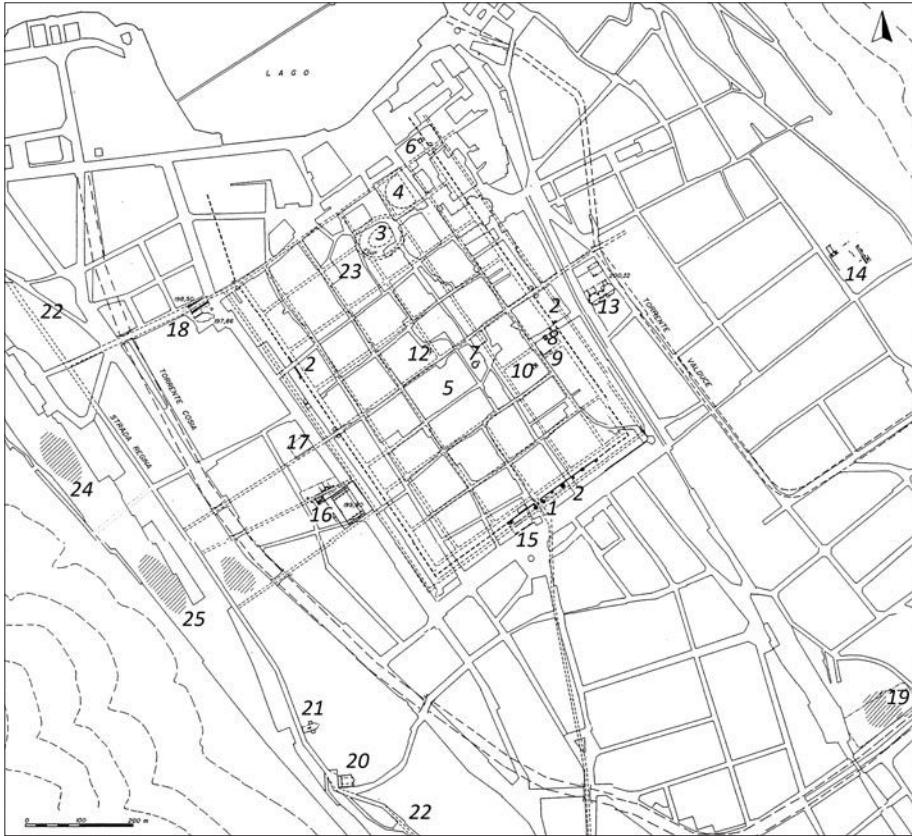


Fig. 3. *Comum Novum* (Como, Italy). Schematic map of the location of the archaeological areas and findings inside and outside the city walls of the Roman town. 1: *Porta romana* (via C. Cantù); 2: city-walls and towers; 3: Amphitheatre (via Vitani); 4: theatre (according to Caniggia); 5: forum area; 6: late-Roman shrine close to the bishop palace (piazza Rimoldi); 7: Baptistery of S. Giovanni in atrio (piazza S. Fedele); 8: *domus* (via Perti); 9: paved road (via Perti); 10: *domus* (via Vittorio Emanuele 107); 13: baths (viale Lecco); 14: villa (via Zezio); 15: extra-mural tower and *glareata* road (via Parini 1); 16: western suburban sector of via Benzi-via Varese; 17: extra urban buildings (viale Varese); 18: harbour area (piazza Cacciatori delle Alpi); 19: necropolis (via Carloni); 20: church of S. Abbondio; church of SS Cosma e Damiano; 22: *via Regina*; 23: harbour area? (piazza Mazzini); 24: necropolis (S. Giovanni Pedemonte convent); 24: necropolis (church of S. Marta). After BLOCKLEY, NICCOLI 2004: Tav. 1, p. 20.

In Roman Aosta, the most evident trend was a progressive desertion of the traditional funerary sectors outside the walls, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE clustered outside the southern walls and the main gates (Mollo Mezzena 1992, pp. 275-276), only partially compensated for by the construction of funerary basilicas along the western and eastern roads and along the road leading to the *Alpis Poenina* (Mollo Mezzena 2000, pp. 171-173) starting from the second half of the

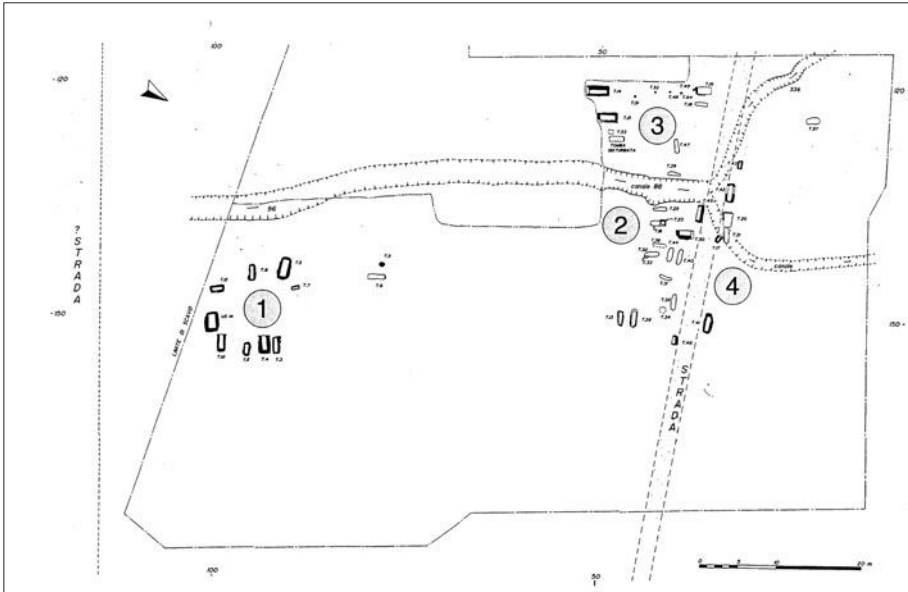


Fig. 4. *Comum Novum* (Como, Italy). Late Roman burials (end 3<sup>rd</sup>- beginning 5<sup>th</sup> century) in the excavated area of via Benzi: 1: burials among the ruins of building B; 2: burials in the open area between building A and B and along the ancient road; 3: burials among the ruins of building A; 4: burials from the area of the road.

4<sup>th</sup> century CE (fig. 5). Aside the widespread phenomena of abandonment of the suburban villas is the process of fluvial-climatic deterioration that affected the Aosta basin in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries. The hydro-geological instability following the disruption in the maintenance of the drainage networks led to the silting of the artificial canal outside the walls (Mollo Mezzena 2000, p. 174). The *villae* from the lower slopes show the conventional signs of 'conversion' to different productive activities and the presence of burials in the sectors originally devoted to residential functions (Mollo Mezzena 1992, pp. 277-278). The study of materials confirms a decrease in the imports from the late 4<sup>th</sup>-early 5<sup>th</sup> century, and a diminished monetary circulation (Mollo Mezzena 1992, pp. 280-285). This concatenation of reduced economic activities leading to population decline implied a lack of investments in the maintenance of territorial infrastructure, despite an increased political relevance due mainly to the position of road-junction.

*Iulia Concordia* is the focus of one of the few thorough and comprehensive studies of the *suburbium* and is therefore a reference for any scholar tackling the topic. The work of Matteo Annibaletto integrates pluri-disciplinary approaches, specifically for the palaeo-morphological survey, and relies on former studies that have already delivered the idea that town and country were two inseparable

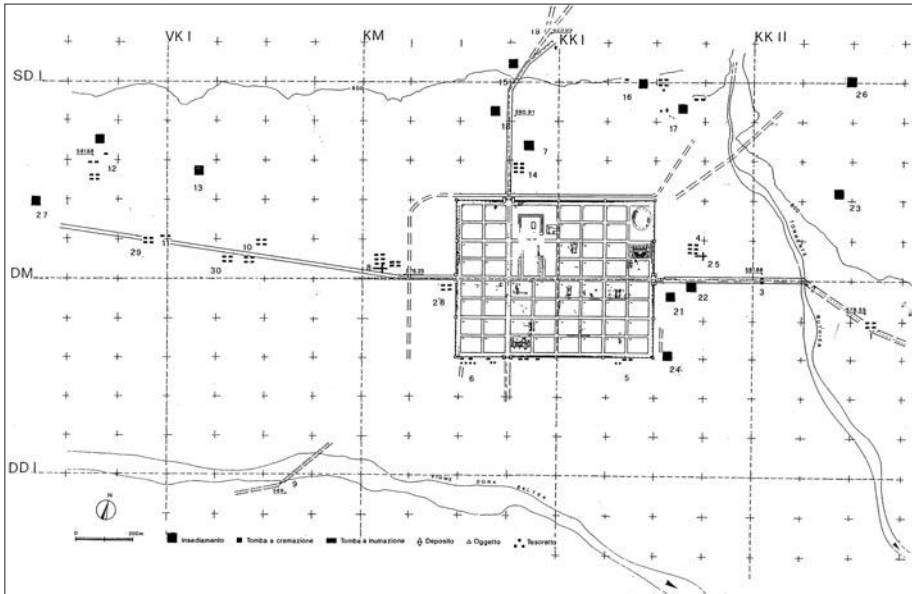


Fig. 5. *Augusta Praetoria* (Aosta, Italy). Schematic map of late-antique findings. 1: eastern necropolis of S. Rocco; 2: bridge on river Buthier; 3: honorary arch; 4: funerary basilica of S. Lorenzo; 5: burials cluster around the south-eastern side of the city-walls; 6: burials cluster around the south-western side of the city-walls; 7: structural remains attributed to a taberna (via Martinet); 8: small basilica and funerary area from the former Hotel du Mont Blanc area; 9: bridge on the Dora Baltea river (Clerod) and segment of a paved road (Gressan-Aymavilles); 10-11: late-Roman burials of the eastern necropolis (Corso Battaglione); 12: burials cluster (Saint-Martin-de-Corléans, Corso Europa); 13: structural remains of houses (Regione Pallin – municipal sport hall); 14: cemeterial ground north of the *Porta Principalis Sinistra*; 15: rural-artisanal workshop (Regione Saillon); 16: suburban villa and scattered burials (Regione Consolata); 17: rural settlements and clusters of burials (Regione Consolata); 18: rural villas (Regione Collignon-Bibian); 19: cleansing pools and aqueduct (Regione Bibian); 20: tombs and coin hoard (Corso Ivrea); 21: Roman structures south of *Porta Praetoria*; 22: Roman structures south-east of via S. Anselmo; 23: rural settlement (Roppoz); large complex (via Vevey); 25: structural remains (Roppoz-Porossan). After MOLLO MEZZENA 2000, fig. 18, p. 198.

entities (Annibaletto 2010b, pp. 18-19). The low density of modern occupation makes Concordia an ideal location for this type of research, allowing even a separate analysis of the closest *suburbium* (only up to 1 mile from the town centre: fig. 6) and of the suburban area included in a radius of 2 to 4 miles (fig. 7).

Since the town was founded only in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, the expansion of the settlement outside the walled circuit started almost synchronically. The *continentia aedificia* of the central-eastern sector, however, were soon abandoned because of the inconvenience of the environmental conditions (Annibaletto 2010b, p. 200), although funerary use intensified from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The same process of paludification seems to have affected the south-

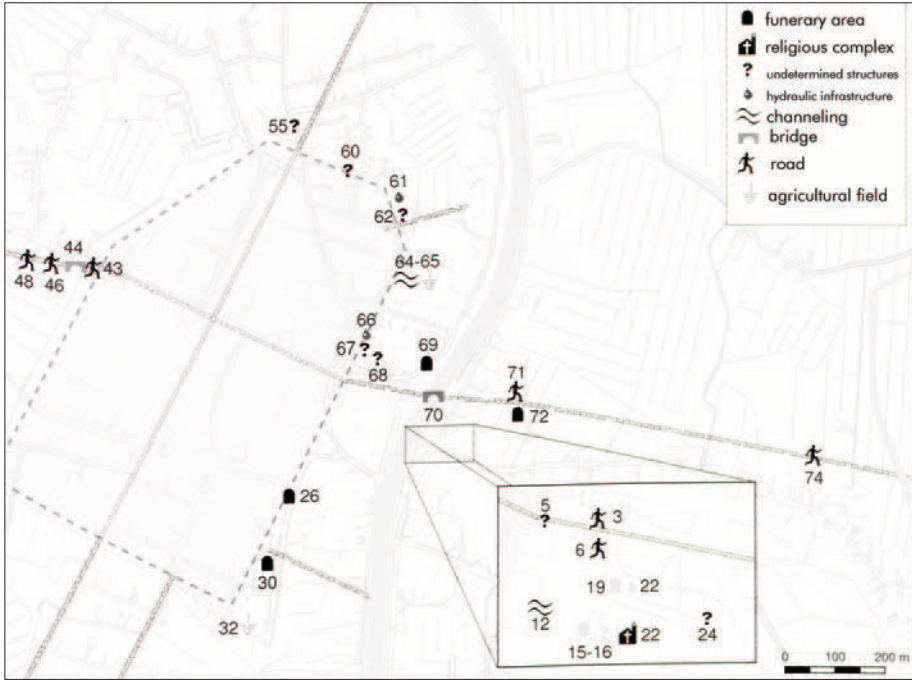


Fig. 6. *Iulia Concordia* (Concordia Sagittaria, Italy). Schematic distribution of archaeological evidence (4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century AD) in the radius of 1 mile from the walls. Elaboration Author after ANNIBALETTO 2010b, fig. 134, p. 217.

western zones, notwithstanding interventions to reclaim the area by means of wooden piles and the creation of draining levels of amphorae.

It has been argued that, surprisingly and contrary to what happened elsewhere, regardless of the frequent attacks levied in the region and the generalised insecurity due to the facility with which enemies penetrated the defensive system of the eastern Alps, the city-walls of *Iulia Concordia* were progressively dismantled. However, doubts have been casted on this reconstruction and an alternative version of the stratigraphic sequence has been advocated. In that case, the thermal complex at the hedge of the urban area would have been cut by the walls; the dismantling of the walls itself would be thus imputable to later spoliation activities (Annibaletto 2010b, pp. 233-234). Moreover, some of the gates were transformed in isolated public monuments (Annibaletto 2010b, p. 232). Baths seem to have been very relevant in urban life since at least three complexes were active in the course of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. By then, the funerary landscape was still very similar to the one reconstructed for early imperial times,

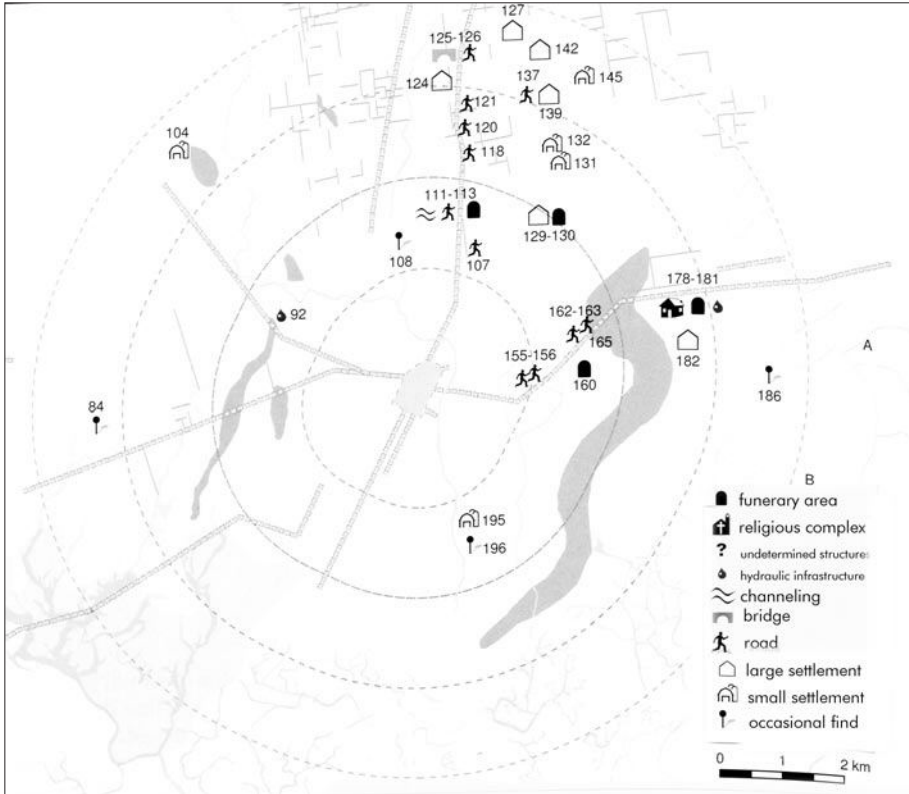


Fig. 7. *Julia Concordia* (Concordia Sagittaria, Italy). Schematic distribution of archaeological evidence (3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) in the radius of II to IV mile from the walls. Elaboration Author after ANNIBALETTO 2010b, fig. 141, p. 226.

but spoliation activities were already occasionally carried out (Annibaletto 2010b, pp. 197-204). The most relevant event was, however, the construction of a large basilica along the road to Aquileia dated to ca. AD 400. Its orientation followed the layout of the urban centre, but the erection of the suburban basilica reversed the relationship with the city centre. Notwithstanding its funerary function, the basilica attracted the late antique settlement, favoured on account of its topographical position along the *via Annia*. The degradation of the environmental conditions led to some adjustment in the project and finally led to the obliteration of a segment of the *via Annia*, but it was a fire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century that caused the definitive abandonment of this so-called *basilica maior* (Annibaletto 2010b, pp. 209-216).

The zone between the second and fourth mile included the large eastern necropolis, also affected by hydrogeological instability from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.



Later, however, the ecological conditions stabilised, and until the 10<sup>th</sup> century no relevant ecological changes are recorded for the area, although the *via Annia* and the *via Postumia* seem not to have been affected by the expansion of the wetlands and of the lagoons (Annibaletto 2010b, pp. 221-222). Other roads, like the shortcut connecting the area of the harbour, were put out of use; some of the suburban rural establishments were replaced by ecclesiastical buildings<sup>31</sup> and the abbey of S. Maria in Sylvis, not far from Sesto, was inserted in the Roman land-division scheme, proving its continuity of use (Rosada 1999, p. 57). In general, the decay of the economic system of Late Antiquity seems attributable to the disruption of the ecological conditions, with the loss of arable land to water, a lack of drinkable water due to the salinity intrusions and the proliferation of malaria<sup>32</sup>. However, we have to highlight the resilience of the Concordian society who adopted strategies to mitigate the advance of the marshes, thus showing a certain vitality in the urban system until the Early Middle Ages. Many resources were invested in the efforts to keep the systems of channels and waterways active, but the alteration in the hydrological conditions of the region prevented the success of any interventions at the latest from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Annibaletto 2010b, pp. 231-237). The process of Christianisation is marked by the competition with Aquileia.

The greater size of early imperial Aquileia might recommend establishing the radius of the suburban area at least up to the fifth mile (Maggi, Oriolo 2009, p. 165). Here, the spatial patterning of the suburban area clearly shows that settlements were denser outside the walls and decreased in density along the star-shaped road network (fig. 8)<sup>33</sup>. The land use was characterised by a mixture of funerary, residential, productive and market functions (Maggi, Oriolo 2009, p. 169). The late antique layout of the *suburbium* is better known in terms of its chronological evolution than that of the town centre. As at Milan, several of the extra-urban cemeteries were encircled by the medieval walls. On the other hand, the walls of Aquileia, erected in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE as replacement of the Republican defences, were enlarged south- and west-wards during the Tetrarchy, reinforced between the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Bonetto 2004), and remodelled in the Gothic-Byzantine phase (fig. 9) (Christie 2006, pp. 291-295). The similarity with Milan is probably due to an intentional 'appropriation' of the subur-

<sup>31</sup> For example, the Benedictine abbey not far from the *via Annia* and the church of S. Martino, hypothetically replacing a shrine devoted to Jupiter Dolichenus: ANNIBALETTO 2010b, pp. 256-257.

<sup>32</sup> ANNIBALETTO 2010b, p. 229. The order of cause-effect here should be confirmed by the failure of the many attempts made to halt the environmental degradation (*infra*).

<sup>33</sup> Aquileia experienced the same landscape dynamics as *Julia Concordia*. The swamping and flooding processes, concentrated mainly in the north-eastern sector, are counteracted until the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Up to the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, drainage works were carried out on marshy areas, particularly in the area south of the city. Interventions to keep at least some stretches of the Natisone River navigable are also attested: MAGRINI 2004, pp. 652-654.

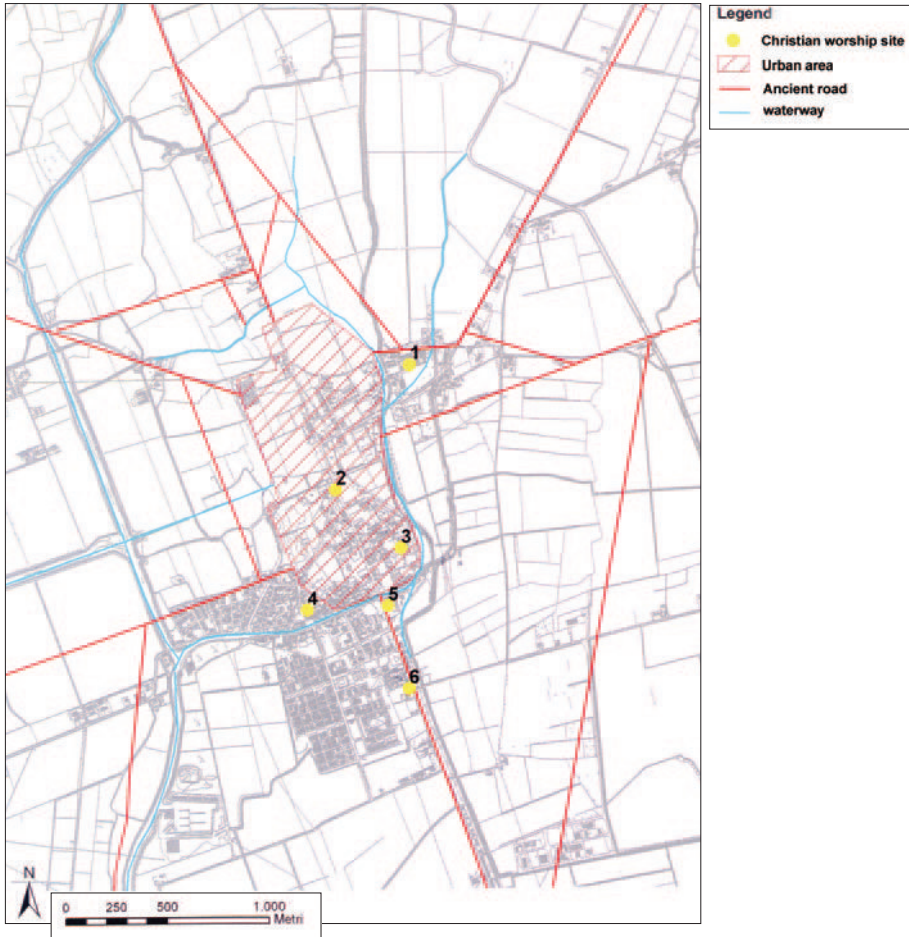


Fig. 8. Aquileia (Italy). Town and *suburbium* with indication of the Christian religious sites. 1: basilica of Monastero; 2: Martyrium (?) of S. Ilario; 3: episcopal centre; 4: basilica of S. Giovanni in foro; 5: basilica of S. Felice; 6: basilica of fondo Tullio at Beligna. Elaboration Author after Cuscito 2009, fig. 1, p. 134.

ban areas by Christian complexes, such as S. Giovanni in foro, S. Felice, the basilica of the Fondo Tullio in the area of Beligna along the road to Grado, the basilica of the area of Monastero (the last two, most probably built in the 5<sup>th</sup> century), named after a Benedictine female monastery attested only from the 10<sup>th</sup> century (see fig. 8, nn. 4-6) (Cuscito 2009, pp. 143-151). In general, these Christian poles favoured the areas closer to the city walls, and appear to have been strictly associated with the original funerary function. This quickly led to the loss of the functional specificities and to a reversed perception of the relationship between urban and suburban landscapes (Cuscito 2009, p. 151).

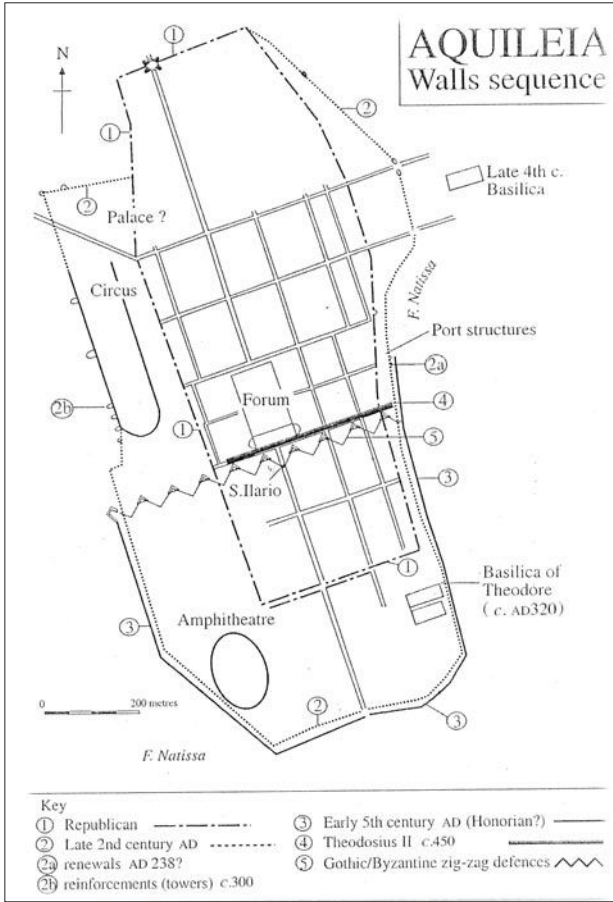


Fig. 9. Aquileia (Italy). Hypothetical sequence of defensive provisioning from Republican to Gothic times. After CHRISTIE 2006, n. 52, p. 293.

The case study of Bologna allows us to highlight two more points. First of all, although a large part of the late imperial town was surrounded by defensive walls, it was the difference in the orientation of the main thoroughfares that made the clear demarcation between *urbs* and *suburbium* perceivable (fig. 10). Secondly, at *Bononia* the disruption of the suburban activity and the abandonment of most buildings were manifest already from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and in the 4<sup>th</sup> century few signs of activity besides spoliation were detectable in the excavated sectors (Emmerson 2020, pp. 51-52). The same thinning of the suburban fabric is documented at *Augusta Praetoria* (*supra*) and *Tridentum* from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards. In several Italian towns, by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries all detectable activity took place within the walls (Emmerson 2020, p. 52). Similarly to their urban centres, the crisis of the *suburbia* of the Italian Peninsula is attributable to a variety of factors and can be explained in different ways. The most relevant expla-

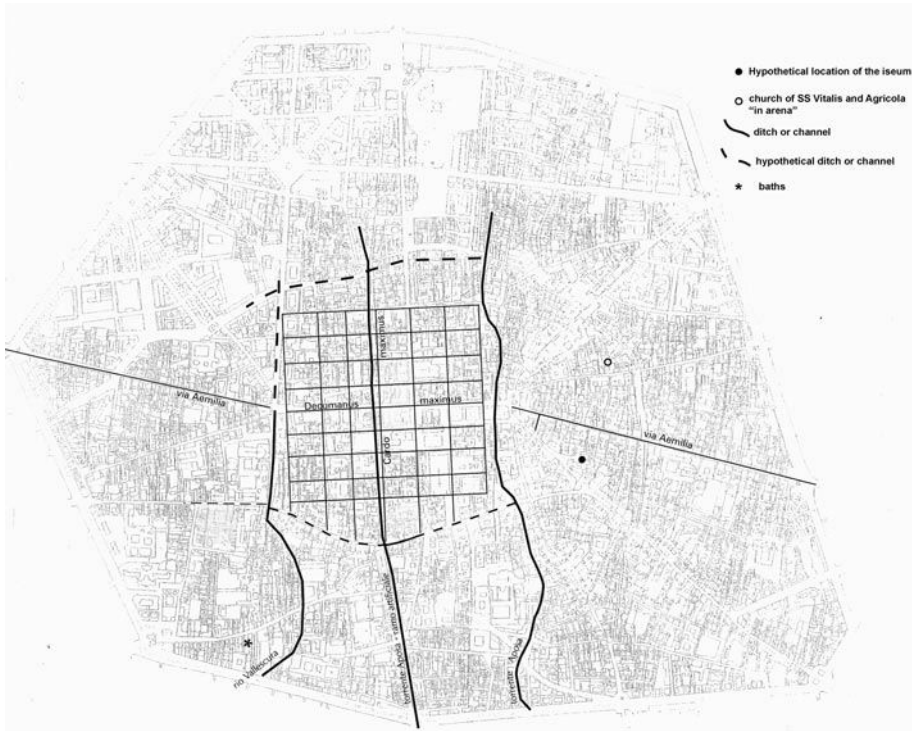


Fig. 10. *Bononia* (Bologna, Italy). Schematic map of the town and its *suburbium*, with indication of the main finds. Elaboration author after ORTALLI 1996, p. 41.

nation was probably the economic decline, but cases like *Mediolanum*, where the disappearance of the southwestern *suburbium* is paralleled by an intensification of building and economic activities elsewhere in town, warns against the use of relating factors like demography, prosperity, security and settlement patterns in a too simplistic way (Emmerson 2020, p. 52; see also Wickham 2005, pp. 547-550, 825-831; Delogo 2010).

One of the most relevant regional case studies that can support a widening perspective on the examination of late antique urban peripheries is that of Gaul, where the review of individual case studies edited by Robert Bedon has been used as a stepping stone by Penelope Goodman, who has also placed great emphasis on Late Antiquity (Goodman 2007). For Gaul, wide-ranging publications like the series of *Topographie Chrétienne des Cités de la Gaule* have devoted great attention to extramural settlements (Goodman 2007, p. 200). However, although the Christianisation of the suburban areas is also clearly marked here,

other phenomena characterise the post-classical developments of the relationship between intra- and extra-urban domains. The most evident is the erection of new defensive walls, starting from late 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century to compensate for the surprising scarcity of walled cities in Gaul. In most cases, these new circuits were built to delimit smaller intramural surfaces when compared to the already existing delimitations of the urban areas (Goodman 2007, p. 203). This 'shrinking' represents a radical inversion of the trend that had so far characterised the life of towns in Gaul and elsewhere, with an almost uninterrupted expansion and therefore an ever-changing ratio between urban and non-urban space (Goodman 2007, p. 204). The erection of such barriers impacted heavily on the urban fabric, cutting streets off, breaking sight lines, altering the circulation and giving way to the spoliation of public monuments and private buildings to supply materials for their construction. The most striking consequence was, however, the new condition of 'extra-urban' areas of those sectors of the town proper that were now omitted from the defensive infrastructure. Did this exclusion imply a change of administrative status or at least a modification in how these areas were perceived or inhabited? Was there a transformation in the land use that followed the shift to the extramural location? Undoubtedly, the fact that those areas were not considered a priority for defence meant that the vital functions for the survival of the town were transferred inside the walled areas. These included churches, cathedrals, monasteries and convents that already from the 4<sup>th</sup> century and increasingly from the 5<sup>th</sup> were built in town centres, quickly rising to become landmarks of Gallic townscapes (Goodman 2007, p. 209). The same fading of the neat difference between the landscape inside and outside the town borders characterised the appearance of burials in the city centre. Episodically in the 5<sup>th</sup> and more systematically from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the towns of Gaul also saw the funerary function relocated to within the urban space.

The increasing relevance of the cult of the relics had the dual effect of both promoting the construction of churches or special chapels to host relics eventually acquired elsewhere both in the intra- and extramural areas and reinforcing the relationship between the two by means of the establishment of rites and processions involving them both. The presence of important worshipping poles outside the centres still constituted a reference for the rural population. Churches and other Christian buildings, like monasteries, turned into the new foci for gatherings, entertainment and markets. Even cemeteries, having turned into places of worship and aggregation spaces, started to host celebrations and processions, even fairs and community happenings, with dancing, singing and promiscuity to the point that women were prohibited from frequenting the martyrial celebrations (Ficocchi Nicolai 2003, pp. 933-38). This meant that the late antique peripheries kept the role played in the High Empire but did not rise to the position of *espace privilégiée* as argued by Albert Février (1980, pp. 442-443).

When it comes to the ‘suburban villa culture’ we can stress how much the uniqueness and the desirability of this lifestyle was still very present among the ‘Gallic’ aristocratic and intellectual elites, regardless of the manifest thinning of the density of establishments in this period. Sidonius Apollinaris<sup>34</sup> and Symmachus, two authors quoted above as essential sources for understanding how the *suburbia* were perceived in Late Antiquity, are testimony to the vivid aspiration to be included in those elites, although the percentage of people who were able to afford such a lifestyle, involving sharing their time between town and country, was less and less (Goodman 2007, pp. 226-228). Furthermore, the decreased relevance of the political commitment of the largest part of the aristocracy<sup>35</sup> implied a preference for estates that were much more detached and distant from city life (*infra*).

## 5. Conclusion

If recent research tends to exclude generalised and durable phenomena of climate change that would have impacted late antique society (Erdkamp 2019), it is undeniable that the lack of efficient land-management interventions brought about many disruptions to the ecological conditions ideal for human settlement. In towns like Aosta and much more dramatically in centres close to the Adriatic shores, like *Lulia Concordia*, the focus is on the environmental factors that caused the abandonment of several sectors of the *suburbium* following the ineffective measures put in place. However, it was the community’s inability to contrast the natural phenomena that resulted in changes in the suburban asset.

Coming to ‘the human factor’, the comparison between the Italian and Gallic contexts shows that similar conclusions can be drawn about the urban defences. The primary function did not always explain their erection nor their absence. It is rather an ideological factor that often pushed the urban communities to equip their centre with such an infrastructure, probably more motivated by a will to state their grounds and highlight their unaffected sense of civic pride and dignity. In other words, it is essential to situate the presence of urban defences “within the changed ideological framework of towns and their self-representation in the late Roman world” (Esmonde Cleary 2013, p. 124). It is undeniable, however, that those new material demarcations of the borders between *urbs* and *suburbium* altered the relationship between the two spheres, with effects commensurate to

<sup>34</sup> For a picture of Sidonius as exponent of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, see WICKHAM 2005, pp. 160-161.

<sup>35</sup> WICKHAM 2005, pp. 155-258 depicts the economic, social, cultural and religious characteristics of the aristocracies of the Roman world from mid-imperial times to Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages; pp. 168-219 have a special focus on *Gallia* and Italy.

the dimension of the centre itself. Where the walls encircled large cities, leaving out those sectors that had already a less spatial and functional link to the centre, the extramural areas acquired a connotation not dissimilar to the idea of modern peripheries. Where instead the wall circuit cut off zones of the small towns that were originally part of the urban fabric and socio-economic tissue, these areas should be considered as a whole with the intramural space (Esmonde Cleary 1987, p. 75). The Aurelian Walls of Rome are an excellent example of this process and are likely the example that inspired many other towns of the empire to follow. Rightly considered to be the most dramatic alteration to “Rome’s urban space in the entirety of the city’s history” (Emmerson 2020, p. 88), the walls, although connecting many monuments that were already considered landmarks of the cityscape, cut the urban fabric like a scar, irreversibly dividing estates, urban blocks, built and open areas, thus requiring the clearance of a wide buffer zone. In Verona, a case study that we did not review, we can highlight how the erection of the late walls implied the creation of a buffer zone and the destruction of large housing sectors, thus breaking the continuum that had blurred the perception of what was ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (Brogiolo 2011, pp. 137-138).

From the spatial point of view, the more ‘polycentric’ than centripetal asset will influence the relationship between intra- and extra-mural space, but more than anything else it will be the redistribution of productive activities and diminishing demographic pressure that will push the transformation forward. The translation of funerary functions and cemeterial basilicas within the walls will do the rest (Brogiolo 2011, p. 126).

This imposing border impacted forever the distribution of burials and regulated the real estate market from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century until modern times. It is impossible to discuss here how the newcomers, mostly of Germanic origin, infiltrated in the burial activity outside the towns, but at least for the Gothic phase we have sporadic indications of continuity in the occupation of the existing cemeterial grounds. Such is the case of an infant burial of the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, most probably Gothic, from the cemetery of S. Stefano in Aquileia (in the northern suburb), and of a high rank woman buried in the Fondo Ritter (in the western suburb) of the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Magrini 2004, p. 660).

The epochal transformation that brought the dead into town, exceptionally attested in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, episodically practised in the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> and raised to a custom from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, might have only apparently affected the relationship between urban consecrated spaces and external areas. The strict division between the spaces for the living and those for the dead probably left room for some intermingling in earlier periods (Emmerson 2020, p. 229). However, it is undeniable that the presence of burials in towns, paralleled by the decreased social and economic relevance of the imperial *suburbia*, led in Late Antiquity to a certain detachment on the part of fewer and fewer citizens to-

wards some areas that were now perceived as alien to urban life. Conversely, some poles at the edge of towns became the driving forces behind new expansions, original not only in their spatial configuration but also in the typology of the buildings and monuments, with a series of chapels, burial grounds, monasteries and nunneries, hostels and inns, infrastructures for assistance to pilgrims, baths and other installations for hygiene and healing, open and roofed spaces for assembly, and a growing number of shops and workshops to serve the increasing clientele. It is enough to mention the sanctuaries of S. Pietro and S. Paolo at Rome.

The initial resistance to the acceptance of the Christian faith led the first communities to concentrate their investments in the extramural areas. The suburban area turned into the compounds where the first 'mass Christianisation' became visible. What has been labelled '*suburbanitas christiana*' (Helal Ouriachen 2012, p. 3) shaped the landscape also in its sacralisation. Increasingly during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, the establishment of churches, basilicas, monasteries, baptisteries, hospitals, hospices and private buildings moulded a new physiognomy characterised by a growing economic, administrative and enhanced functional autonomy (Helal Ouriachen 2012, p. 3). Although in Aquileia the so-called "Theodorian complex" is one of the earliest examples of Christian basilicas built within the walls, the Adriatic centre remains an exemplary case study to illustrate the magnificence of some of the extra-urban projects that shadowed the urban complexes. As we have already seen, the introduction of the cult of the bodies and relics of the martyrs triggered further developments that shaped the suburban landscapes earlier than the townscapes. With Rome predictably serving as a model, by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and increasingly in the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, most towns of the empire saw the erection of many worship buildings and monasteries, often in connection with the cemeteries and preferably along the major thoroughfares exiting the centre. Even when intra-urban basilicas, cathedrals and other Christian monuments were built, the practice of crowding the extramural areas with buildings that would have trumpeted the steadfastness of the faith, the abundance of relics and the generous investments of the local Christian community did not diminish.

Already from the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and increasingly in the course of the 5<sup>th</sup>, the hypogea and underground cemeteries also tended to disappear from the suburbs of Rome (and Aosta, among the towns briefly analysed here) where they had spread extensively (Annibaletto 2010a, p. 160). However, it is the general funerary landscape that changed, with a shift in attention from the sides of the roads leading to the town to the religious buildings just outside the urban centre (Spera 2003, pp. 32-35; David 2006, p. 115). The suburban landscape underwent a further renovation in the course of the 7<sup>th</sup> century once the translation of the venerated spoils to the safer crypts of the intramural churches was finalised.



Of course, the transformation of the suburban landscape also involved other forms of land use, starting from the residential ones. Once the season of the large imperial *praedia* on the urban fringes waned, the revival of lavish mansions in the countryside and the concurrent availability of high-market real estate properties in town polarised the aristocratic dwelling far from the *suburbia*, as well exemplified in *Bononia*. However, another factor was to play the most relevant role in the configuration of a new residential and social suburban landscape: the rise of the ecclesiastical property. The acquisition of domains and estates via different channels (donations or incorporation of properties of Church leaders or co-religionists) was initially aimed only at ensuring revenues to supply the growing staff of the Church, to carry out new constructions and to maintain the existing ones and, most of all, to support the needy (Annibaletto 2010a, pp. 166-167). Although this new patterning was initially more easily perceived in the zones further away from the city centre, it is undeniable that the post-classical *suburbia* were the at the forefront of the birth of new ideological public poles and of a revolution in settlement patterns. The model of the rural and suburban villas was nonetheless destined for a radical transformation that would finally lead to the disappearance of the aristocratic lifestyle characterised by the extension of the concept of *urbanitas* to the countryside<sup>36</sup>.

The outbreak of the processes of 'ruralisation' in the urban environment implied an even more radical conversion to almost-exclusive rural exploitation of the suburban areas (in general, see Goodson 2021). Somehow the concept of periphery was stripped of its topographical-spatial connotation to be circumscribed to its functional aspect, namely an agricultural productive function that was now largely absorbed by the city itself, a phenomenon that was paralleled by the repossession of vast public spaces and buildings by craft and manufacturing activities (Volpe 2018, p. 9).

It is this process of loss of multifunctionality that seems to be common to cities like *Comum*, Arles, Rome, and Milan. This phenomenon of the 'polarisation' of functions between centre and periphery would characterise the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and led to the transformation of life-styles in towns. At the same time, regardless of the fact that the Church elaborated diversified forms of governance for the towns and *suburbia*, the tension between the two spheres faded, leaving room for a new spatial organisation, focused on novel political, religious, commercial and social poles (David 2006, pp. 130-131). The patchy spread of burials all over

<sup>36</sup> The process of social change that saw the municipal élites coming under pressure in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries and being challenged by the rise of new groups of landowners, until their almost complete replacement in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, is described for the eastern Mediterranean countryside by BANAJI 2007, pp. 101-103. This process would have brought about the emergence of a new eastern Mediterranean aristocracy: BANAJI 2007, pp. 134-170.

the urban space in parallel with a much more blurred zoning progressively erased the distinction between *urbs* and *suburbium* and generated a new concept of periphery, which was now not necessarily outside the town borders.

When we attempt the adaptation of the definition of RUF to the Roman and post-classical world, we have to stress that, on the one hand, the ancient sub-urban spaces were also characterised by the intrusion of urban utility services. They were equally less patterned by urban planning when compared to many as centre, and they were less dense from material and demographic points of view. Past and present 'urban fringes' are both subjected to zoning and sectorial patterning and undergo frequent transformations and reshaping. In other words, the lack of planning, the elasticity of the delimitations and the permeability of borders can be addressed as the main features impacting the changes occurring on a variety of spatial and temporal scales (Scott *et al.* 2013, p. 2) on both late-antique and contemporary "rural-urban fringes", proving the efficiency of this theoretical approach, also in the light of our case studies. On the other hand, they differed with respect to the presence of farm dwellings, so well attested in Roman *suburbia*.

The brief review proposed here helps us in the assessment of the intensity of the 'pressure' exerted on such liminal zones, where the three parameters of time, connections and values are at work. The zones where a city or town meets the countryside are characterised by a dynamic interaction. Adaptation and response to change will be again the features to monitor in post-classical developments. As far as a few definitions can be applied to ancient *suburbia* ("landscapes at the edge; places of transition; heterogeneous mosaics; landscapes of disorder; chaotic landscapes; new geography of urban sprawl; the last frontier; ephemeral landscapes; edgelands; and forgotten landscapes": Scott *et al.* 2013, p. 9), the ones that probably do not fit are those stressing the disorder. In fact, although for the development of these extra-urban areas no spatial planning comparable to what was put in force at least for the new foundations can be assumed, it is evident that their sprawl pursued integration with the urban entity, both in terms of topographical coherence and functional combination.

Indeed, unlike newly founded towns and colonised territories, *suburbia* are not planned, but in most cases they develop spontaneously following the needs and the fluctuating expansion or contraction of the urban centre (Scagliarini 2005, p. 535). While towns tend to progressively 'consume' their planning, *suburbia* acquire their specificity with time, fulfilling the rising exigencies and absorbing the local peculiarities of the centres and the countryside that they serve. Although we do consider *suburbia* to be a subject of study in their own right, we cannot deny that they are spaces where tensions between town and country are discharged. The rupture of the equilibrium that guaranteed "the maintenance of

the urban limits due to the reciprocal relationship between the city and its territory, which tended to confine urban growth, particularly in areas with an agricultural economy” (Scagliarini 1991, p. 88) could indeed be considered one of the most relevant topics in a discussion of the post-classical phases of Roman towns. To answer some of the questions raised in the opening, we could say that our review confirms that the reversal of factors like demographic growth, increasing wealth, efficient landscape management, improved security and expanding markets explains change later on in both urban and suburban contexts.

By reviewing case studies and one regional synthesis, we have been confronted with contrasting views. On the one side, the novelty and vitality of post-classical *suburbia* have been highlighted by the reconstruction of the dense land use specifically connected with the diffusion of the Christian faith and the rise of attractors, via churches and monasteries. The intense frequentation to the cemeteries and martyrial shrines and churches that arose around and inside them attracted not only devotees from the town and the hinterland but more and more pilgrims from far away. The exponentially growing phenomenon of pilgrimage, in turn, also triggered the construction of hostels, pilgrim houses, episcopal residencies and clergy residencies around these sanctuaries. The intense frequentation led to the development of new poles and to the constitution of new ‘urban agglomerations’, causing the town to shift outside the town (Fiocchi Nicolai 2003, pp. 942-943). The availability of large areas and domains made of the suburbia the perfect stage for a showdown by the Late Roman emperors and the rising ecclesiastical hierarchies: from Rome to *Mediolanum*, imposing projects altered the ‘rural’ aspect of some sectors just outside the walls. The ‘liminal’ connotation of the extramural locations continued to attract the infrastructure for hosting travellers and other sorts of ‘transients’; the funerary churches themselves were often chosen for holding meetings, councils, synods and other diplomatic meetings (Fiocchi Nicolai 2003, pp. 938-39). In this vision, the convergence of secular and religious ideologies prompted unprecedented developments in those sectors which, being less constrained by centralised planning, were open to experimentation with novel models of land use (Helal Ouriachen 2012, p. 2). Especially between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, the settlement patterns in the peri-urban area evolved into the construction of new suburban sacred landscapes. The differentiation in the spatial configuration and the functional zoning would have then maintained very vividly the general difference between intra- and extra-urban spaces. If this is the case, we can argue that late antique urban peripheries made a more relevant contribution to urban life than their earlier predecessors at least with respect to culturally related aspects.

Conversely, it is undeniable that in some of the case studies reviewed here, a decline was perceivable already from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and especially from the 4<sup>th</sup> cen-

ture (Emmerson 2020, pp. 20-21) when the extramural areas' socio-economic contribution to urban life decreased. Often paralleled but not necessarily synchronic with the 'consumption' of the urban fabric, this decline was emphasised by the erection of the defensive walls that irremediably broke the spatial, visual and mental connection between the two entities. Regardless of the more or less optimistic point of view about the persistence of the urban fabric, it is undeniable that the materiality of late antique borders changed the perception of the interrelation of what laid on either side.

The destiny of these afresh shaped *suburbia* was to meet a slow or accelerated fading or instead to become revitalised by the new functions that came along with the process of Christianisation or simply to continue to thrive along with the residential and production activities, as happened in the suburb outside Porta Marina at Ostia (Emmerson 2020, pp. 52-55).

Finally, we can conclude this brief review by stressing that Late Roman *suburbia* were shaped by the phenomenon of Christianisation and the modified perception of the relationship between the dead and the living. In different ways and with changed implications, *suburbia* remained "less a topographical entity and more of a state of mind" (Purcell 1987, p. 26, referring to Champlin 1982, pp. 97-117).

## Abstract

A review of a few case studies concerning Roman towns in Italy offers sufficient data to attempt an analysis of the archaeological and socio-economic patterns of their suburbium, starting from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, aimed at distinguishing common trends. A comparison with the well-studied regional context of Gallia provides the opportunity to sketch trends (rather than designing 'models'), seeking the integration of different datasets and approaches. The analysis is framed by an overview of the theoretical and methodological issues of archaeo-historical research on the suburbia of the Roman towns in the Western Empire and also integrates methodologies of contemporary urban planning.

**Keywords:** Roman *suburbia*, Late-Antique Italy, urban planning, theoretical approaches to Roman towns spatial analysis, centre/periphery vs town/country relationship.

*Una rilettura di alcuni casi studio riguardo le città romane in Italia ha offerto dati sufficienti per un tentativo di analisi dei pattern archeologici e socio-economici dei loro suburbi, a partire dal III secolo, per trovare punti comuni. Una comparazione con il contesto regionale della Gallia, ben studiato, permette di tracciare trend (più che definire 'modelli'), cercando di integrare differenti dataset e approcci. L'analisi è inserita in una panoramica riguardante le questioni teoretiche e metodologiche della ricerca arqueo-storia sui suburbi delle città romane nell'impero d'Occidente e integra metodologie tratte dall'attuale progettazione urbana.*

**Parole chiave:** suburbia romani, Italia tardoantica, pianificazione urbana, approcci teorici all'analisi spaziale delle città urbane, relazione centro/periferia vs città/campagna.

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