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VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES. AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

VIOLÈNCIA I CONFLICTE EN ÈPOCA TARDOANTIGA
I MEDIEVAL. UNA PERSPECTIVA ARQUEOLÒGICA

MARC BOUZAS, LLUÍS PALAHÍ (EDS.)

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DISPUTED MOUNTAINS. DEFINING LANDSCAPES OF CONFLICT IN THE MONTI AURUNCI (ITALY - SOUTHERN LATIUM)

Edoardo Vanni,¹ Francesca De Pieri,² Simone Zocco,² Alessandra Cammisola³

LANDSCAPES OF VIOLENCE: HOW TO DEFINE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPACE AND CONFLICT

Edoardo Vanni

The theme of violence and conflict is increasingly considered in its relational connections, the devices of power, and its multiple forms of expression, recognising how violence is primarily a structural factor, mediated and integrated within a broader socio-economic system (Bini, Capocéfalo & Rinauro, 2024; Dempsey, 2024). According to this approach, violence is understood as a process that evolves rather than as a singular ‘act’ or ‘result’ (Springer, 2012; Tyner, 2012; Springer & Le Billon, 2016). Above all, this perspective frames violence not as something inherent to human beings but as the outcome of social and cultural relationships, as well as socio-economic strategies and structures (Galtung, 1969).

Structural and cultural violence, as highlighted in the studies of Galtung (1969, 1990) and the analysis of Hannah Arendt (1970), is linked to dynamics of power, gender, politics, and economics. The state, through the monopolisation of violence (Hobbes, 1651; Weber, 1918; Agamben, 2008) and colonial and imperialist practices (Gregory, 2004), plays a fundamental role in shaping and controlling spaces. While considerable research has been undertaken —particularly in anthropology and urban planning, as well as in archaeology— on the manifestations of violence through materiality, places, and urban spaces, the relationship between landscape production and conflict dynamics remains relatively unexplored.

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Violence, therefore, possesses its own concrete materiality, expressed not only in individual acts but also in the production and organisation of spaces that generate tensions and conflicts, wherein space itself becomes a producer of violence. In this sense, every study of violence is intimately connected to space and, consequently, to landscapes, understood as accumulations of significant places. The spatial and material dimensions of violence (Gregory & Pred, 2006; Springer, 2011) reveal various processes of landscape production and transformation through the perpetuation of structural violence. This includes forms of imperialism and colonialism that utilise political, economic, and physical violence to maintain control over space (Blomley, 2003); the disruption of places following armed conflict (Flint, 2004); and the effects of climate change and the environmental pressures imposed by the capitalist economic system, which constitute forms of violence against specific social groups (Harvey, 2006; Parenti, 2012; Springer 2014; 2015). Other examples include violent extractivism and political ecology (Le Billon, 2012); forced migration and border violence (Walia, 2013); the gendered dimensions of violence (Fluri, 2009); and the racialisation of spaces and landscapes, as well as the identity politics that underpin exclusionary practices (Chatterjee, 2012). Each of these themes is linked to the ways in which violence shapes space—understood in its broad political and procedural sense—and how space, in turn, constitutes violence.

It has often been emphasised from various perspectives that in these places—ranging from monuments and sanctuaries to border zones and natural environments—complex processes intertwine memory, oblivion, and counter-memories (Foucault, 1971, p. 151; Nora, 1986; Bender, 1993; Bender & Winer, 2001; Tilley, 2006, p. 8; Schramm, 2011, pp. 5-6; Assmann, 2012), with time playing a fundamental regulatory role. An interdisciplinary approach is essential not only to capture the multiple manifestations of violence within these spaces, but also to understand their temporal and material dimensions. This has positioned archaeology—and particularly landscape archaeology (David & Thomas, 2008, p. 213)—as a privileged discipline for studying past phenomena and for analysing the contemporary vestiges of historical violence (Ralph, 2012). The study of violence thus aims to reveal its transformative power in shaping social relations, cultural practices, and the production of space—not as a merely episodic phenomenon but as an ongoing process embedded within historical trajectories.

This low-intensity violence, often neglected in historical and archaeological studies, foregrounds time as an active agent and highlights the traces it leaves in the landscape. It compels us to consider ancient landscapes themselves as structured in ways that generate and sustain conflict. In this regard, the historical transformation of landscapes produces characteristics that may be described as exaptive (Gould & Vra, 1982), situated at the intersection of ecological, cultural, and economic structuring. This lays the groundwork for the violent occupation of places or sites, even over the long term. We see this process particularly in the creation of violent or exceptional landscapes such as refugee camps, as well as in the racial and colonial discrimination that produces spaces of marginalisation and perpetuates exclusionary dynamics for decades, if not centuries. Such violence is inscribed onto both places and bodies (Gregory, 2004; de Leeuw, 2016), often culminating in the total erasure of landscapes and people. This perspective is evident in the contemporary governance of the earth, where resource determinism, pollution, anthropogenic climate change, and political inaction exemplify the temporal dimensions of slow environmental violence (Nixon, 2011; O’Lear, 2016).

The creation of these exceptional spaces is primarily driven, as mentioned above, by the state system, which administers and controls a given territory through the monopolisation of violence. More significantly, it exercises this violence within a defined and structured space. Thus, state sovereignty can be understood as a specific form of violence exerted on human bodies and landscapes through population policies, production strategies, norms, and protocols that enact ‘securitisation’ and exclusion —whether by restricting access to resources or by controlling the right to use them, such as through the granting of full citizenship. These mechanisms of violence are often most visible in border zones and frontier landscapes, where the regulation of mobility and the friction between different historical subjects manifest in direct and highly recognisable ways (Jones, 2016; Mountz et al., 2012). The spatialisation of violence is frequently enacted through expulsion and/or containment (Hyndman, 2019).

While extensive research has examined how violence functions to regulate and maintain social control —both through normative ordering and coercive dynamics— less attention has been paid to the production of space as a site of exclusion and as a generator of violent social practices. This involves the systematisation of marginality and border spaces, the coercive power of state structures, and the spatial dimensions of violence itself. Certain historical landscapes, produced through rigid and highly regulated control structures designed to enforce separation and exclusion, fall within this category. The structuring of these landscapes of violence and conflict —through specific population strategies that regulate access to resources— not only leaves traces in the landscape but actively shapes space, often irreversibly. The historical reactivation of violent spaces occurs whenever exclusionary and oppressive desires resurface at particular moments in history.

This study aims to analyse, from a long-term perspective, the production of such landscapes of violence in a marginal mountain region: the Aurunci Mountains, geographically situated in southern Lazio, Italy (fig. 1). Here, at the intersection

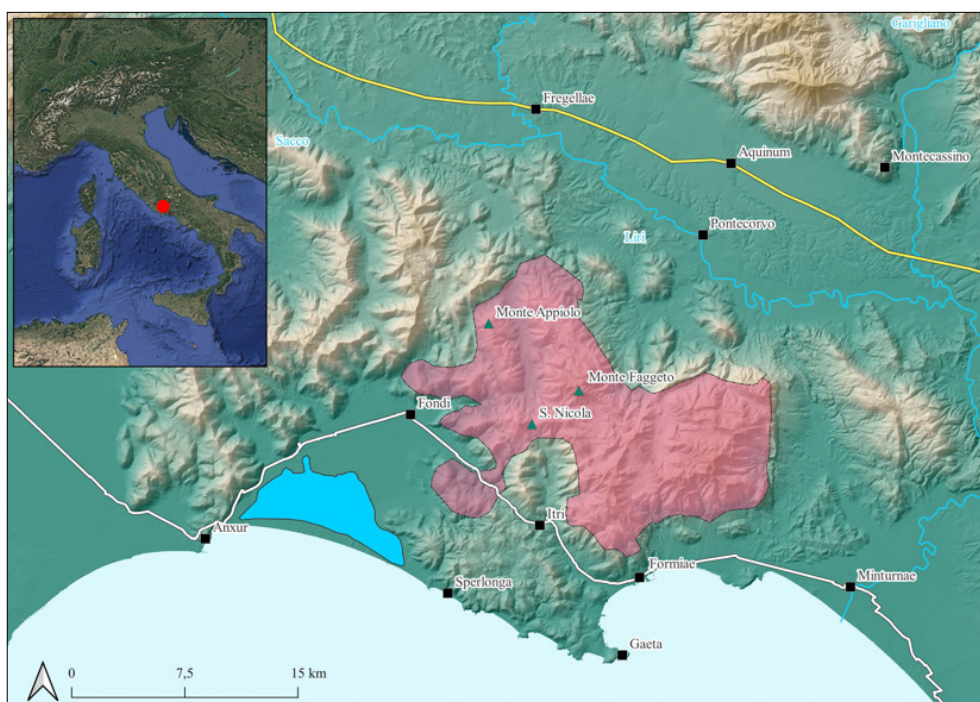


Figure 1. The Aurunci Mountains with some of the most important sites and the main road network (author's processing from DTM by Tarquini *et al.* (2007) using QGIS 3.28; elaboration by E. Vanni).

of ecological marginality, peripheral human communities, and major political and military events, these mountains have historically been contested spaces, shaped by shifting socio-environmental dynamics (Van der Leeuw & Aschan-Leygonie, 2005). Their ecological marginality, combined with their rugged and inhospitable terrain, has been transformed into an instrument of social and political violence by supraterritorial and state entities seeking to exert control through division and exclusion —leaving a lasting imprint on the historical trajectory of these landscapes.

TOOLS FOR CONTAINING PRE-ROMAN AND ROMAN CONFLICTS IN THE AURUNCI MOUNTAINS

Francesca De Pieri

The Aurunci Mountains occupy a marginal yet strategic position at the convergence of the Liri Valley, the Minturno Plain, the Appian Way, and several secondary roads. This location has historically facilitated control over tensions and conflicts arising at the frontier between distinct political and economic entities. However, the region's peripheral status has led to its marginalisation in archaeological research. The Monti Aurunci Project (MAP) aims to address this gap, demonstrating that the current paucity of documentation is not indicative of an absence of historical significance. Despite this, for the pre-Roman and Roman periods, archaeological evidence and historical sources remain scarce.

Between the 7th and 4th centuries BC —culminating in the Aurunci Mountains' integration into the Roman sphere— there is evidence suggesting a network of settlements linked to the mountain roads. At Le Festole (Itri - LT), circular stone clusters associated with ceramic fragments indicate a potential necropolis, possibly connected to an as-yet unidentified settlement (Saccoccio, 2024, pp. 121-122). The site of Pianara (Fondi - LT) also appears to have a pre-Roman phase, with structures suggesting a village linked to internal road axes (Di Fazio, 2020, pp. 81,131). Another potential site at 'Le Mura' in Campello (LT) has yielded acorn projectiles and lead weights, suggesting a phase predating the medieval occupation.

The 4th century BC was transformative for this region, coinciding with the incorporation of Southern Lazio into the Roman orbit. This period saw the foundation of numerous colonial settlements, likely a response to growing tensions with Italic groups such as the Samnites and Sidicini (Sirano, 2015, pp. 199-200). The creation of a 'buffer territory' suggests a Roman strategy to mitigate conflict in this border zone.

During this process, Rome experimented with various administrative structures, including the *civitas sine suffragio*, *civitas optimo iure*, *municipia*, and *pagi*. The *pagus*, a key instrument of territorial organisation, was primarily an extra-urban settlement with legal, economic, and territorial autonomy (Capogrossi Colognesi, 2002; Tarpin, 2002; Letta, 2004, pp. 231-232, 238-239; Stek, 2009, pp. 6-7, 66-77, 111-112, 120-121; Sisani, 2011, pp. 555, 600-608). It had its own magistrates (*magistri pagi*), financial independence, and distinct territorial boundaries ritually reaffirmed through *lustratio pagi* and the *Paganalia* (Sisani, 2011, pp. 604-606; Stek, 2009, pp. 109, 144, 171-185, 219). Literary sources describe the *pagus* as comprising dispersed rural dwellings, *villae*, and sanctuaries (Letta, 2004, pp. 232, 238-239).

The Aurunci Mountains were likely reorganised in the 4th century BC as a *pagus* centred around present-day Itri (LT), with the San Cristoforo sanctuary as a focal point (De Spagnolis, 2019). This sanctuary functioned as a communal and religious centre, reinforcing regional identity and control over communication routes. Numismatic evidence suggests it was active from the late 4th century BC, coinciding with the construction of the Appian Way, indicating a clear correlation between religious and infrastructural developments.

San Cristoforo, which will undergo further survey and documentation by MAP in 2022, is currently the only known site from this period in the Aurunci Mountains. Preliminary findings suggest it was a terraced sanctuary, later monumentalised with a stairway in the 2nd century BC. Epigraphic evidence attests to substantial renovations between the 2nd and 1st centuries BC (De Spagnolis, 2019; Molle, 2022). An inscription dedicated to Fortuna from the late 3rd century BC is significant (Molle, 2022, pp. 244-245), as Fortuna was often associated with Roman expansionism and the reorganisation of pre-existing cults (Miano, 2021). This suggests a process of religious Romanisation, reinforcing Roman control over a potentially volatile border area (Stek, 2009, pp. 17-34 and pp. 213-214).

By the 2nd century BC, Rome had fully consolidated its control over the region, as evidenced by two additional potential sacred sites. One, at Piana del Campo (Campello - Itri), is suggested by ceramic and clay remains, including a probable votive object shaped like a uterus. The second, at Monte Appiolo (Lenola), has yielded Roman-period ceramics and structural remnants (Saccoccio, 2024, p. 123). A votive deposit found in Valle Funnana (Campodimele) in the late 1990s contained anatomical offerings and statuettes characteristic of the so-called Etruscan-Latium-Campanian traditions, dated to between the 4th and 2nd centuries BC (Cassieri, 2015). These findings highlight the role of religious sites in maintaining social cohesion and managing local tensions.

The imperial period brought profound changes to the Aurunci Mountains. The sanctuary of San Cristoforo, active throughout the Republican era, saw a marked decline. New settlement and economic patterns emerged, with scattered finds suggesting rural or industrial activities at Piana del Campo (Campello - Itri), Pozzo Bifulco (Lenola), and Taverna (Lenola), where ceramic and iron slag remains indicate possible production sites (Saccoccio, 2024, pp. 117-121). This period saw the establishment of imperial estates, a process initiated under Augustus and expanded under Tiberius, culminating in extensive landholdings in Sperlonga, Formia, and Minturno (Di Fazio, 2006; De Meo, 2018). A 166 AD inscription from Itri mentioning an imperial freedman, *Graphicus*, supports the presence of such estates (De Spagnolis, 1988; *AE* 1988, 00227). The most significant transformation occurred under the Flavians, with the establishment of the *saltus* system, cementing imperial control and stabilising tensions arising from the region's liminal position (De Nardis, 2009, pp. 178-182).

The Aurunci Mountains, though historically marginalised in archaeological discourse, played a crucial role in regional dynamics from the pre-Roman to the imperial period. The evidence of settlement networks, sanctuaries, and administrative structures underscores their importance in Rome's broader strategies of expansion, integration, and control. Continued research by the MAP is essential for further clarifying these historical developments.

THE CONTESTED MOUNTAINS BETWEEN THE GOTHS, BYZANTINES AND LOMBARDS

Edoardo Vanni

If the military control of this mountain territory proved decisive for Rome's expansion strategies in the south of the peninsula, its progressive administrative and productive structuring was fundamental for the exploitation of resources (woods, clay quarries, pastures, water) and for the establishment of a diversified economy, the Aurunci Mountains were subsequently at the centre of new conflicts and disputes that arose following the disintegration of the Empire and the occupation of the peninsula by ethnic groups from continental Europe.

During the period of the Greek-Gothic War (535-553), when the Ostrogothic Kingdom and the Byzantine Empire were fighting to bring the western part of the empire back under the control of Constantinople, these mountains were once again at the centre of violent clashes. Even if for this period information regarding this territory is scarce (Savino, 2005, pp. 103-122), we do have information regarding the passage of armies, at least in the first phases of the conflict, like the one commanded by the Byzantine general Belisarius at the end of 536, who led his troops towards Rome along the Via Latina after landing in Sicily and taking Naples (Proc., *De bello gothico*, I, 14). Procopius also reports the transfer, along the Appian Way, of the citizens not in arms, of the women and children following the Goth siege of Rome in March 537 (Proc., *De bello gothico*, I, 25), while other militias, sent as reinforcements, also seem to have used the Via Latina and the Sannio (Proc., *De bello gothico*, II, 5).

From an archaeological point of view, the high percentage of Ostrogothic coins among those contained in a small treasure trove found near *Interamna Lirenas* could be a sign of these transits and perhaps even of a period of greater involvement of the local populations. In this sense, the presence of 20 coins attributable to the kingdom of Baduela among the 21 pieces ascribable to this chronological phase, which is also the last one represented, could mean the intensification of military and strategic activities of the Goths in the area (Wightman, 1994, p. 50; Nicosia, 1982, pp. 79-80). Recent archaeological investigations conducted at the site of Colle San Pancrazio in Campoli Appennino, overlooking and controlling the Sorana Basin, the Latina Valley and the Roveto Valley, have also revealed a large number of coins chronologically attributable to the period of the Greek-Gothic conflict; these, together with traces of frequentation of the site (which also contained several burials), to a preliminary interpretation of the context as a more or less stable strategic garrison, with phases attributable to the chronological period considered (Del Ferro, 2020, p. 63).

The victory of the Byzantine army brought with it a new organisation of the conquered territories, consistent with the highly centralised structure of the proto-Byzantine empire (Guillou, 1976, pp. 70-73; Zanini, 1998, pp. 53-63). The prominent features that characterise the area in question from a social point of view, as with most of the territories of the peninsula at this stage, are those linked to the growing militarisation, a long-term phenomenon already well established during the Greek-Gothic war, the repercussions and different territorial variations of which have been investigated, especially from a documentary point of view (Brown, 1984); in particular on the

progressive replacement of the landed aristocracy of late antique tradition with a new class of predominantly military origin, very evident in the case of Ravenna (Brown, 1986). A militarisation that brought about profound transformations both from a strictly social point of view, for example with the appearance in the Byzantine territories of the role of citizen-soldier who, until the formation of the regional militias of the various duchies, seems to have performed the functions that in other neighbouring territories were the responsibility of the permanent troops of the *limitanei* (Zanini, 1998, pp. 56-59), a phenomenon that has been well studied in other regions such as Abruzzo (Staffa & Pellegrini, 1993), where there is archaeological evidence of a group of Egyptian soldiers in the Ortona region, or research on the *castra* and the Lombard presence in the Byzantine-Lombard border area in Maremma (Kurze & Citter, 1995).

Currently, therefore, it is once again the movement along the main roads, to the west the Via Latina and to the east along the coast the Via Appia, which constitutes the element of electrification of the conflicts, which seem to marginally touch and not directly involve the mountainous area of the Aurunci. As we have repeatedly emphasised elsewhere, however (Vanni & Saccoccio, 2024) any longitudinal movement that would connect the Liri valley with the ports on the coast (Gaeta, Sperlonga, Terracina) or the Via Latina with the Via Appia had to cross the valleys and narrow passes of the Aurunci Mountains to ensure a fast connection, which presupposes that their direct control was strategically decisive for the movement of armed troops.

The strategic importance of the Via Appia is demonstrated by what we know from written and epigraphic sources about the restoration work on the canal and the Decennovio road section, commissioned by Theodoric to the *magnificus atque patricius Caecilius Decius*, who in exchange received the transfer in emphyteutic title without fiscal encumbrance of the reclaimed land (Cass., *Var.*, 2, 32 and Cass., *Var.*, 2, 33 of 507-511; *CIL*, X, 6850; *CIL*, X, 6851; *ILS*, 827). The reasons for this intervention during the reign of the Gothic king had more to do with the central government's need to re-establish the communication network between Terracina and Rome than to reclaim fertile public land (Traina, 1990, pp. 40-43). During the Greek-Gothic conflict, the Via Appia remained fully functional, as attested by Procopius, from which it seems we can also deduce the continuation of the reclamation of the area undertaken a few decades earlier: this is the case of the passage relating to the year 536 in which the historian describes the Goths coming from Rome settling in the countryside near Terracina, where they found green pastures for their horses (Proc. *De bello goth.*, II, 2, 3).

With the arrival of the Lombard populations in southern Lazio and the shortly following constitution of the Roman Duchy, during the last quarter of the 6th century AD, the territories in question began to delineate themselves as a true border strip between the Byzantine Roman Duchy and the Lombard Duchy of Benevento (Delogu, 1979, p. 18; Zanini, 1998, pp. 270-271; Rotili, 2010, pp. 32-49), intensifying the militarisation process that had begun in the immediately preceding phase, marked by the tumultuous events related to the end of the Western Roman Empire and then by the Greco-Gothic wars, roughly between the middle of the 5th and the middle of the 6th century, and which left recognisable marks on the territory, sometimes full of developments in the following phases (Wightman, 1994, pp. 48-51; fig. 3).

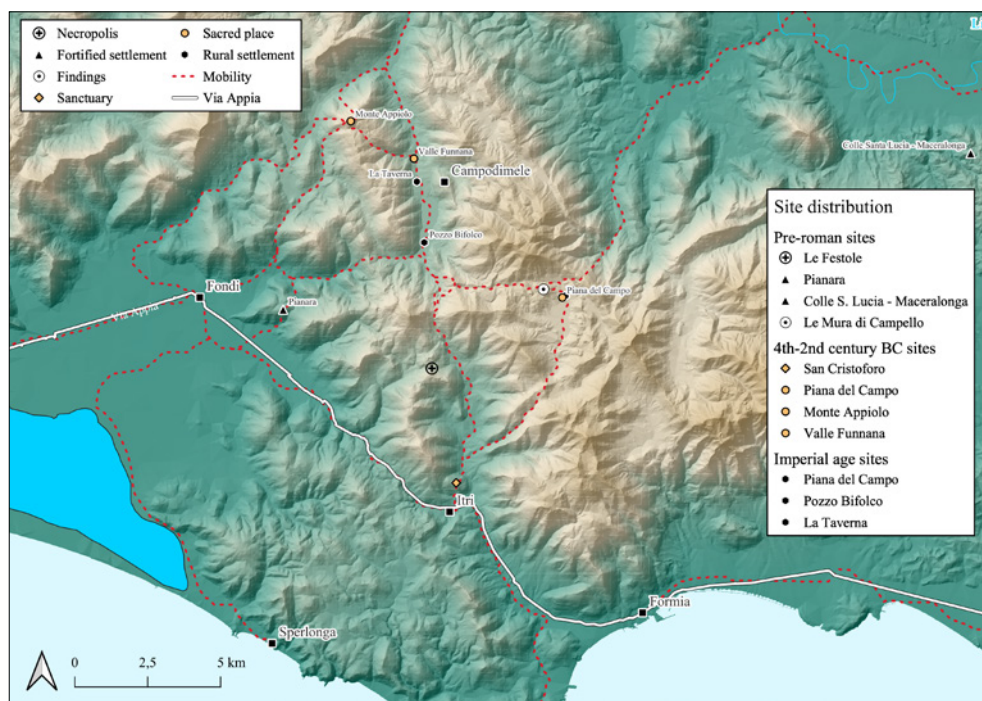


Figure 2. Distribution of the pre- and Roman sites mentioned in the text (author's elaboration from DTM by Tarquini *et al.* (2007) using QGIS 3.28; elaboration by F. De Pieri).

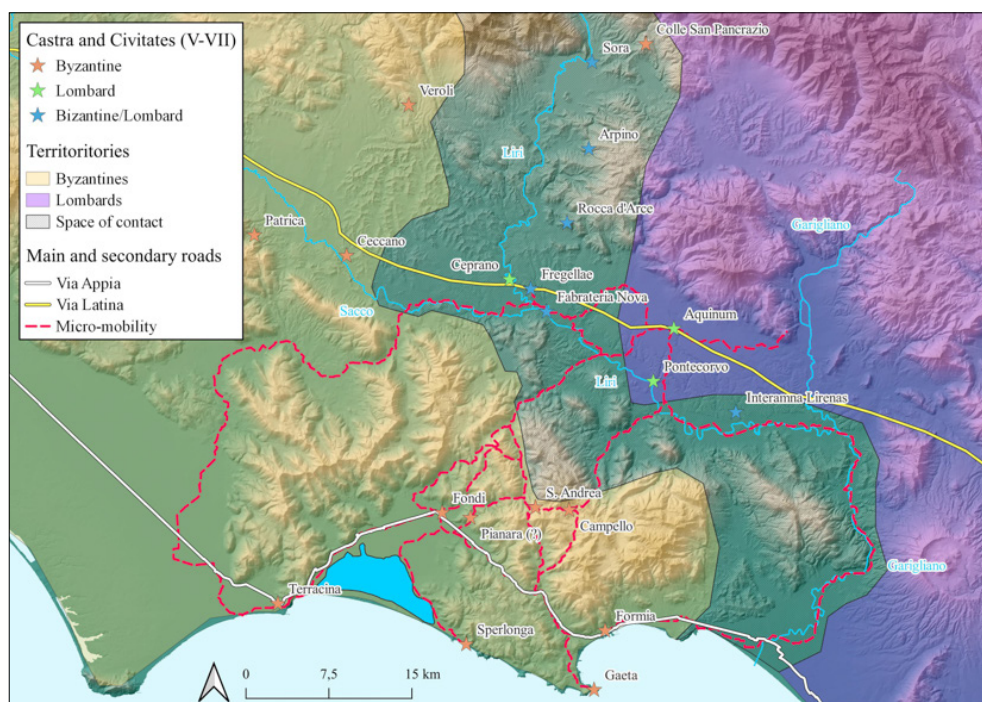


Figure 3. The Aurunci Mountains between the 5th and 7th centuries AD (author's processing from DTM by Tarquini *et al.* (2007) using QGIS 3.28; elaboration by E. Vanni).

In this context, the strategic reoccupation of the pre-Roman and then Roman settlements on the peninsula's border areas became decisive. After the mid-6th century, these settlements appear to have flanked and in some cases replaced the *territoria civitatis* as 'centres organising their own districts' and 'cells of articulation of political power at the local level' (Santos Salazar, 2006, pp. 3-4), through a translation and interpretation of the term *castrum* used in the context of Byzantine historiographical and documentary-administrative production of the 6th century as a 'cell of supra-local order', with a meaning substantially equivalent to the term *civitas* (Del Ferro, 2020, p. 285).

In southern Italy, traces of frequentation of offshore sites with important evidence of pre-Roman defensive structures, as in the case of Castiglione di Paludi/*Thurii*, in Calabria, with coin finds between the 6th and 9th centuries (Pagano, 1986), which will also involve ecclesiastical structures such as monasteries (Roma, 1998) or even the organisation of the Byzantine defensive system in Apulia (Favia & Giuliani, 2022), find similar logic in the paradigm of settlement continuity that goes beyond the regional dimension. In a particular logic of strategic re-evaluation of a public nature carried out between the middle of the 5th and 7th centuries, eminently through the rich *possessores* (delegated and appointed by the central authority to defend the territories - and their assets - starting from Valentinian III's *Novella* 911 of 440), rather than, as in the cases of Emilia, attributable with a good margin of certainty in part to the initiative of local communities (for the *castra* located at the foothills of the Apennines), and in part to the Byzantine exarchal authority (for the *castra* in the plains (Noyé, 2012, pp. 405-416 ; Noyé, 2015, pp. 130-13) accelerating a return to pre-Roman territorial logic by local communities favoured by the crisis of central power (Santos Salazar, 2006, p. 5). In short, boundaries and borders are confused, but also the categories of population and their functions in an oscillation that is not only terminological but which reveals a hybrid reality that is difficult to define.

This could be the case, for example, of the territorial district of Campello, located in the heart of the Aurunci Mountains and right on the border between the territory controlled by the Byzantines and that occupied by the Lombards (Vanni, Saccoccio & Zocco, 2023; Vanni & Saccoccio 2024, 2025), structured with dynamics not dissimilar to the organisation of rural administrative structures during the Roman period and where the spheres of relevance and the settlement categories merge. Compared to the Roman period, in fact, the administrative and military character now interpenetrate and integrate in completely peculiar settlement typologies. This is the case, for example, of the fortified site of Sant'Andrea di Campello, located to control an important mountain pass (S. Nicola), which, in addition to early and late medieval phases, has yielded late antique coins and Byzantine nummi (5th-6th century), and could represent one of those military garrisons with a strongly defensive character, planted along the internal passageways between the Via Latina and the Via Appia (see *infra*). Not far away and also positioned along this frontier, the *castrum* of 'Le Mura' in Campello, which from the 11th century onwards would constitute the territorial hierarchical centre of reference for the Aurunci Mountains, has instead yielded material from the 7th century, therefore perhaps activated as a garrison at a later stage. The characteristic of these settlements seem to be that they had a functional continuity and were reoccupied in the pre-Roman and Roman periods, but there are also solid phases from the 8th and 11th centuries, as in the case of the stratigraphic excavations at S. Andrea. This would make sense also regarding the methods of settlement, which would see the Byzantines no longer establishing a rigid borderline (as the Romans did), but a more fluid and pragmatic strategy of controlling the key crossing and travel points, especially if they could be better defended on hills with intervisibility. From this point of view, the Greco-Gothic wars represent a watershed between a linear border defence and a porous war tactic centred on rapid movements on protected routes (Noyé, 2015, pp. 141-142; Del Ferro, 2020, p. 238), such as the valleys and passes of the Aurunci Mountains.

Similar situations are found in other sites of the same period and comparable in terms of position and function, such as Rocca d'Arce where pre-Roman and Roman phases are accompanied by Byzantine and early medieval occupations, as evidenced by the

discovery of a heavy glass case fragment from the end of the 8th-9th century (Paroli, 1985, pp. 314-356 and n. 303 p. 329; Mazzucato, 1995, pp. 8-9), an inkwell lamp in a display case scattered A from the 10th-11th century (for the shape, see Luttazzi, 1995, pp. 233-234, fig. 14; for the coating, the mixture and the dating of the piece, Paroli, 1985, pp. 314-356, Paganelli, 1995, pp. 24-27, Romei, 1998, pp. 128-133) and *forum ware* and display cases from the Campania region (Paroli, 1992, pp. 33-61). The collection of material findings and written sources therefore provides valid support for the hypothesis that the castrum of Rocca d'Arce was perhaps a permanent defensive outpost in the early medieval period (Stasolla, Del Ferro & Zottis, 2010).

At the beginning of the 6th century and until the Byzantines took control, this meant a series of fortified *castra*, mostly positioned along the upper and middle course of the Liri (Arpino, Colle San Pancrazio, *Interamna Lirenas*, Rocca d'Arce, Sora) and along the Sacco river (Ceccano, Patrica, Veroli) and a series of fortified *civitates* along the coast, such as *Formiae*, Terracina and Fondi, whose urban structure was however greatly reduced (Cracco Ruggini, 1989, pp. 216-217; Fiocchi Nicolai, 2002, p. 169, n. 17). The city of Terracina in particular, which was the only urban centre in the area mentioned by Procopius, remained a fundamental strategic hub for the Byzantines' maritime connections throughout the war, and even after the reconquest, thanks to its port and its defensibility guaranteed by the city walls (Savino, 2005, p. 181). Many of the Byzantine fortified centres and cities along the upper and middle Liri valley fell definitively into Lombard hands after the expedition of Gisulf, Duke of Benevento, in 702, as did many of the important cities along the Via Latina, such as Aquino and *Fregellae* (Ceprano).

Having stabilised at the end of the 6th century, after a number of incursions near Terracina, Formia and Minturno (Del Ferro, 2022), the Lombard occupation withdrew into the mountainous hinterland, leaving free the coastal strip between the final course of the Garigliano river, the sea and the Aurunci mountains, which corresponded to the diocesan territory of *Formiae* and *Minturnae*. At the beginning of the 9th century, the period to which the first available written documents belong, the area appears to be divided into different jurisdictions: a large part of it still belonged to the great landed patrimony of the Church of Rome from the Constantinian and Damascian age, divided into *massae* and governed by a *rector*, administrator on behalf of the papacy (Del Ferro, 2020, p. 78).

At this time, Gaeta had to establish, for the whole of the 8th century and probably still in the first decades of the 9th, a fortified settlement with a port, without jurisdictional role over the hinterland and included with nearby Sperlonga (Sagui, 1986) in the network of coastal *castra* in contact by sea that constituted the main Byzantine defensive system for the area connecting with the Neapolitan territory, which had escaped the Lombard conquest (Delogu, 1988, p. 191). So if the situation of the respective influences is clear for the coastal strip (Byzantines) and for the middle course of the Liri (Longobards), that of the Aurunci Mountains still seems to be undefined. And after all, we should perhaps imagine a composite situation both territorially and chronologically, in which certain areas or sites could have passed from one control to another within a few decades. From this point of view, any attempt at territorial attribution could be misleading or even epistemologically incorrect. In this sense, we believe we can rightly include this mountain area in the category of a 'floating frontier' (Martin, 1992), porous, percolating and mobile, where it remains difficult to clearly define the sphere to which it belongs. This is demonstrated, for example, by some place names in the Campello area on the maps

of the Military Geographic Institute, some of Lombard origin such as ‘Campolancia’, near ‘Le Mura’ of Campello, regarding a possible necropolis, and Volta del Corno between Monte Faggeto and the Piana del Campo, or of clear Byzantine origin such as Valle Catascone (κατά and σκότος) right near S. Andrea, the latter referring to an area of thick vegetation (fig. 4). Then, starting from the 9th century, the secular subject represented by the Duchy of Gaeta, of Byzantine military origin, would for a long period constitute the most important territorial actor, including most of the areas of conflict of previous eras that would then fall under its administration. At this point, Gaeta seems to have acquired an important regional role between the 10th and 11th centuries, through the complex power system constituted by the ducal family of Gaeta, who had long since consolidated their dominion over the Duchy of Fondi and Traetto, expanding their territories towards the mountainous interior of the Aurunci Mountains harming the county of Aquino (and the interests of the Abbey of Montecassino): an expansion sanctioned on 15 October 999 by a diploma of Emperor Otto III (*Ottonis II et III Diplomata*, n. 333 p. 761).

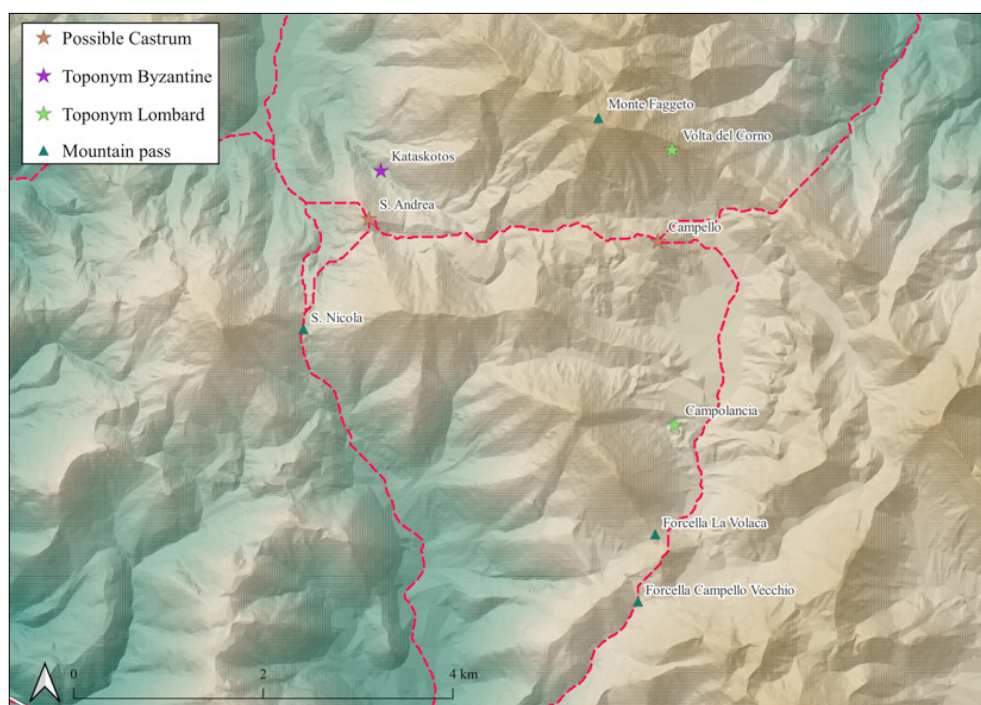


Figure 4. The Campello district with the sites investigated by the Monti Aurunci Project and the significant place names (author's processing from DTM by Tarquini *et al.* (2007) using QGIS 3.28; elaboration by E. Vanni).

THE MILITARY GARRISONS OF THE OTTONIAN PERIOD (10TH-11TH CENTURY)

Simone Zocco

The topographical research of the MAP, carried out through targeted inspections and field surveys, has focused particularly on the historic district of Campello, which appears to offer numerous insights into the historical phenomena that affected the Aurunci Mountains in the early Middle Ages and the role that the mountainous area played in the power struggles between local groups, especially between the 10th and 11th centuries. The territorial investigations were immediately supported by the substantial amount of data provided by the fortified site of Sant'Andrea,

whose stratigraphic succession is helping to identify and better contextualise other contemporary settlements, which, as we shall see, exhibit very similar characteristics.

The site of Sant'Andrea is the only one in the area that has so far undergone stratigraphic excavation (Vanni, Saccoccio & Zocco, 2023). It is located on the hill of the same name near the San Nicola Pass, along the road connecting the Via Appia and the Via Latina, between the coast and the Liri Valley. The presence of a curtain wall, together with its location—close to a mountain pass fundamental for controlling mobility—makes it a site with explicit strategic significance. Research, which is still in progress, has shown that the settlement was heavily restructured during the 13th-14th century, when a small chapel with a single nave and an apse was built on top of the hill. The construction of this building appears to have taken place at a time when the settlement had already lost its defensive function: in all the late medieval layers excavated so far, the fortifications have been found either partially stripped of their stone elements or collapsed. In fact, the perimeter wall, due to the technique used in its construction and the materials employed, could date back to a period between the 9th/10th and the 12th century. Archaeological data effectively show a high level of activity at the site during this period, with ceramic objects certainly dating from the 8th/9th century onwards, alongside several examples of *folles* issued by the Dukes of Gaeta and some *ottolini* (imperial coins of Pavia issue) (Rovelli, 1995). Given the quantity of these finds, it is thought that the site had a strategic function already at the end of the early Middle Ages.

Similar numismatic finds have been discovered at the castle of Campello (Crova, 2018, p. 70), known locally as 'Le Mura', a site located in the heart of the district and directly connected to Sant'Andrea. The drone-based LiDAR surveys conducted by MAP have provided new and unprecedented information about this settlement, which had never been thoroughly investigated until now. The plan of the castle shows the presence of various phases that can be dated with certainty—also according to historical documentation—from the 11th or 12th century up to the 15th century. However, the discovery on this site of numerous *ottolini* and more ancient material (6th and 7th century) undoubtedly testifies to the existence of a centre with significant early medieval phases.

In visual connection with Le Mura is Castellone, another site entirely unknown in the bibliography and also located in the Campello area. The settlement has strong similarities with Sant'Andrea: it is in an elevated position, it has curtain walls built using the same construction techniques, it controls mountain passes, and it is connected to Le Mura by road. The hypothesis is that Castellone was another territorial garrison and that it was perhaps devoid of a settlement—indeed, there are no clear traces of residential structures within the circuit. An inspection of the site has revealed the presence of ceramic fragments with morphological and compositional characteristics similar to those of Sant'Andrea, and therefore likely to date from the 9th-11th century.

The three sites described were all active in the same period; two of them are located at crossroads through the mountains and are distinguished by their military-defensive characteristics, while the third, Le Mura, appears to have fulfilled a more managerial role, in a certain sense directing and structuring the mountain landscape. Topographically, the three sites are situated along an imaginary line that overlaps with the borders of the territories belonging to the Duchy of Gaeta (Saccoccio, 2024, pp. 230-231), as recorded in a written source

from 1014 (CDC I, 130), and the limits of the diocese of Gaeta (Saccoccio, 2024, pp. 252-253), described in detail in a document dated 1152 (CDC II, 345). On this same border, also active —again at the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries— were the church of San Vennitto and the monastery of Fellino, founded by the Duke of Gaeta Giovanni III (CDC I, 165). These settlements could have been part of a single territorial system, which at a certain point was probably reorganised and reshaped when it became involved in some complex historical dynamics that affected the whole of southern Lazio (fig. 5).

Indeed, during the 10th century, various conflicting political entities coexisted



Figure 5. Distribution of the 10th-11th century sites mentioned in the text (author's elaboration from DTM by Tarquini et al. (2007) using QGIS 3.28; elaboration by F. De Pieri).

in this region, primarily the Duchy of Gaeta, the gastaldato (later County) of Aquino —initially dependent on the Principality of Capua— and the monastery of Montecassino.

The Duchy of Gaeta was formed as a result of a series of territorial appropriations and usurpations by the Byzantines at the expense of the Church (Marazzi, 1998, pp. 131-135; Wolf, 2014; Saccoccio & Zocco, 2023), which was forced to reach an agreement with the Gaetani, granting them the position of *rectores* of the papal lands (*patrimonia*), even though these were no longer in their *de facto* possession (Marazzi, 1998, pp. 134-135). The acquisitions of Gaeta, which took place under Docibile (Skinner, 1995), allowed this new state entity to engage with other political actors, such as the gastalds of Aquino: the Aquitanian Rodiperto built a solid alliance with Docibile, centred on their common hostility towards the monks of Montecassino (Indelli, 2017, p. 98). The domains of the latter —the *Terra Sancti Benedicti*— were repeatedly threatened by the expansionist policies of Aquino and Gaeta during the 10th century (Indelli, 2017, p. 98), to the extent that in 967 the monastery obtained the *ius munitionis* from the Prince of Capua to fortify its territories (Crova, 2018, p. 66). The Empire gradually had to assert its presence in this climate of friction between local groups: Emperor Otto I promised the Pope the recovery of

the *patrimonia* taken from Gaeta, but no real diplomatic or military manoeuvre was undertaken to restore the Papal prerogatives over the lands of southern Lazio (Houben, 1989, p. 56). Subsequently, Otto II granted privileges, immunity, and protection to Montecassino, using the monastery as a tool to expand his sphere of influence towards southern Italy (Galdi, 2017, p. 12). An entirely different political approach can be observed under Otto III: in 999, imperial authority aimed to settle disputes between political players, sometimes supporting Gaeta—for example, by donating the *castellum* of Pontecorvo (CDC I, 102)—and sometimes returning to Montecassino some land usurped by Marino II, *consul et dux* of Gaeta and Fondi (CDC I, 81).

The surviving documentation thus reveals a climate of bitter conflicts between emerging political forces and an increasing level of imperial interference in the political affairs of southern Lazio, particularly during the reign of Otto III. It is highly plausible that the discovery of the *ottolini* generally interpreted as evidence of the passage of the Ottonians and their armed entourage (Rovelli, 2010, p. 165), is directly linked to the presence of the emperor *in loco*—indeed, Otto III stayed in Gaeta himself (Houben, 1989, p. 61). The settlements analysed are probably situated in an area between Montecassino, Aquino, and Gaeta: Sant’Andrea, Castellone, and Le Mura could be interpreted as garrisons established to defend territorial boundaries. At a later date—around the last years of the 10th century to the very early 11th—they likely came under the influence of Otto III, whose presence in the territory reconfigured the local settlement system, adapting it to the demands of the complex political situation. During his diplomatic campaign in southern Lazio, the emperor, accompanied by his army, may have exercised his authority through the creation of a ‘buffer zone’, possibly corresponding in part to the historic district of Campello.

MONASTERIES AND CHURCHES AS MILITARY AND TERRITORIAL MARKERS IN THE AURUNCI MOUNTAINS

Alessandra Cammisola

This chapter analyses the role that certain religious foundations played in the management and control of the Western Aurunci Mountains area. In the previous chapter, we highlighted the marginal nature of the Monti Aurunci region, a point of contact for various political entities: the Duchy of Gaeta, the County of Aquino with the *Terra Sancti Benedicti* of the Abbey of Montecassino, and the Ottonian presence, which may have created an enclave in the Campello region (fig. 6).

The first monastery examined is San Giovanni di Fellino, located on the slopes of Monte Fusco (LT) and founded by Giovanni III between the 10th and 11th centuries. Of particular interest is a document from 1036 (CDC I, 165), which records the monastery as the beneficiary of a donation from members of the Docibian family. This source is useful for identifying areas of the Duchy of Gaeta located near the Campello region. The monastery of Fellino may have functioned to control and consolidate this sector of the Gaetan border. Similarly, other religious structures situated in the border areas of the Duchy of Gaeta appear to have served

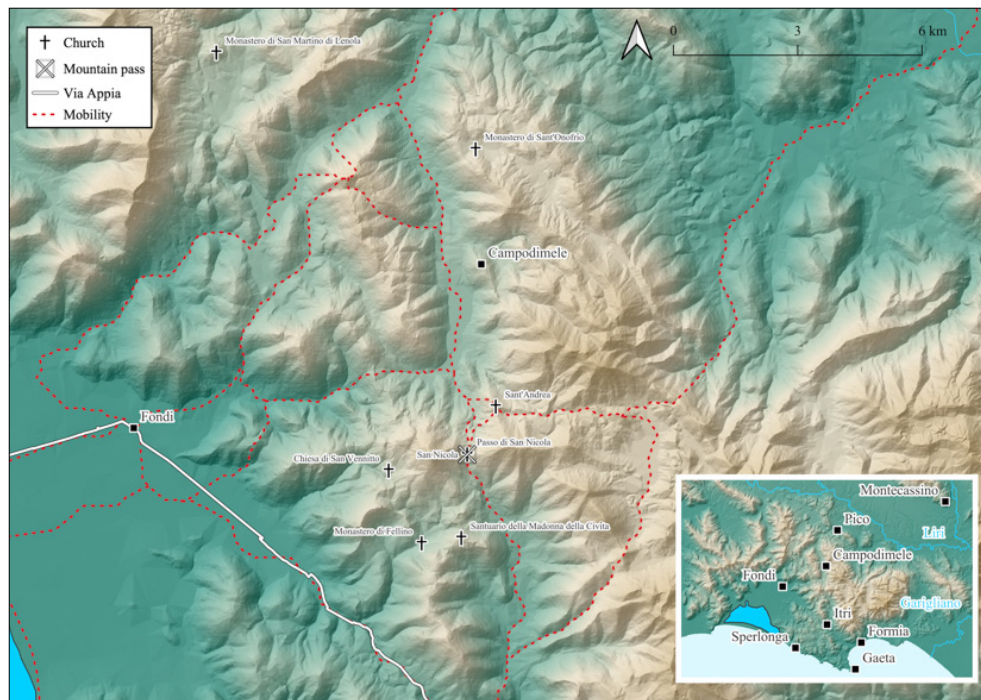


Figure 6. Distribution of the 10th-12th century churches and monasteries mentioned in the text (author's processing from DTM by Tarquini *et al.* (2007) using QGIS 3.28; elaboration by F. De Pieri).

as territorial markers: San Nicola, placed on the namesake mountain pass, Santa Vergine in Agide, and San Vennitto, all located in elevated positions. The church of San Nicola is the last settlement referenced in documents pertaining to the Duchy of Gaeta; it is mentioned in 958 (CDC I, 58) and is positioned at a crucial crossing point towards the innermost areas of the Aurunci.

Limited information is available regarding the chapel of the Holy Virgin in Agide, likely identifiable as today's Sanctuary of the Madonna della Civita. However, the place name and the veneration of the Byzantine icon suggest an affiliation with the Duchy of Gaeta. Its location on Monte Fusco places it near Campello, the San Nicola Pass, and Fellino; moreover, its position ensures that the sanctuary is clearly visible from the Tyrrhenian coast. Likewise the monastery of San Vennitto, almost absent from historical literature (Pesiri, 2015, p. 245), was located at a crossing point between the Fondi sector of the Duchy and the interior of the Aurunci. San Giovanni di Fellino and San Vennitto appear to have been part of a system for managing the borders of this area of Southern Lazio, following a hypothetical boundary extending from the Itri valley to the fringes of the Aurunci Mountains.

Within the inner areas of the Aurunci Mountains, churches and monasteries were also utilised as territorial markers. One such example is the church of Sant'Andrea, situated in the Campello region near the aforementioned San Nicola Pass. Sant'Andrea appears to have been part of a connecting zone between the Duchy of Gaeta, the County of Aquino, and Montecassino. Only after its military function ceased, a late medieval church was built on the site (Vanni, Saccoccio & Zocco, 2023). This religious building may have served as a point of reference for inhabitants of the San Nicola Pass area while also demarcating the boundaries of the Gaetan diocese during the 13th and 14th centuries (*supra*, p. 233). Similarly, the church of San Michele Arcangelo, constructed within the castle of Campodimele (LT) (CDC II, 248; Pesiri 2016, pp. 179-180), may have played a comparable role in the Aurunci territory. Positioned within a fortified settlement, it likely controlled both the San Nicola Pass sites and the Itri-Arce road axis.

North of the Campodimele fortress lies the monastery of Sant'Onofrio, which provides insights into settlement and strategic choices within this sector of the Aurunci Mountains. Mentioned in 1072 (CDC II, 248; Pesiri, 2016, p. 180), the church was part of a donation made by the last Dukes of Fondi to Montecassino, aimed at forging a strong alliance against the Normans, who had been infiltrating the political dynamics of Campania and Southern Lazio since the early 11th century (Pesiri, 2016, pp. 180-181). Sant'Onofrio's transition from church to monastery occurred after 1125, when Montecassino secured control over the important castle of Pico (FR) (Lisetti & Scuderi, 1989, pp. 13-16). Abbot Desiderio commissioned Gerardo, prior of San Nicola di Pico, to relocate and expand the ancient church, transforming it into a monastery. Montecassino thus established a passage between the *Terra Sancti Benedicti* and the Tyrrhenian coast through the Aurunci Mountains, consolidating the territory via the monastic foundation of Sant'Onofrio (Chinappi, 2011, pp. 4-5; fig. 7). The monastery of San Martino di Lenola (LT) (CDC II, 247) served a similar function, creating a control point between the castle of Pico and the coastal areas of Fondi (LT) through the nearby Ausoni Mountains (Chinappi, 2011, pp. 12-13).

As with the religious settlements linked to the Duchy of Gaeta, the churches and monasteries in the Aurunci and Ausoni regions also appear interconnected, forming an imaginary boundary running north of the San Nicola Pass.



Figure 7. The monastery of Sant'Onofrio in the 1940s, archive photo (from Lisetti & Scuderi 1989).

CONCLUSIONS

Edoardo Vanni

As we have sought to argue, the Monti Aurunci are —though not exclusively— a space of friction and frontier, maintaining their distinctive morphology over both the long and very long term, according to specific landscape configurations. However complex and ambiguous the definition of 'liminal space' may be (Toubert, 1992, p. 13; Guglielmotti, 2006), we can confidently assert that this characteristic is largely shaped by the particular combination of ecological, geomorphological, and topographical factors with the historically produced dynamics of space (Torre, 2002, p. 447). It is in the specific interaction of these elements within certain chronotopes —that is, configurations of space and time— that these mountainous places crystallise moments of conflict and confrontation, becoming sites of violence and control. These dynamics manifest in the landscape through various settlement strategies, shaped by socio-ecological configurations, such as rural *pagi*, Byzantine *castra* (fortified settlements), or religious markers, all linked to processes of exclusion, selection, and the exercise of power. These innovative experiments in political, social, and economic management interact with the ecological characteristics of the territory (forests, water resources, erosion phenomena), producing the 'historical

landscape'. The existence of a frontier district marked by conflict and violence in the Aurunci Mountains allows us to examine the modes of production of these landscapes, which, as we have seen, can be both violent and contested.

As demonstrated, control of this mountainous area proves decisive in moments of conflict and violence between supra-territorial and regional entities of different compositions and objectives. The prolonged centrality of certain settlements and centres of power within the Aurunci Mountains appears to extend beyond specific historical circumstances. The continuity in patterns of habitation and resource exploitation complicates any attempt to interpret these landscapes as mere products of Roman expansionism and new administrative imperatives, or of the military opposition between the Lombards and Byzantines, the ambitions of the Saxon emperors, or the formation of the Duchy of Gaeta in competition with the Papacy. The persistence of particular ecological characteristics and their management by the human communities inhabiting these regions has resulted in a strong conservatism—not only in the settlement network but, more crucially, in mobility routes. These routes, not necessarily the primary road infrastructures, imposed obligatory passages and pathways, the control of which was both a catalyst for conflict and a defining feature of the landscape. This has, in turn, produced a form of 'violent' landscape, one that has shaped and constrained collective and individual choices over time.

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