

**COMPARATIVE ISSUES
IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF
THE ROMAN RURAL LANDSCAPE
SITE CLASSIFICATION BETWEEN
SURVEY, EXCAVATION AND
HISTORICAL CATEGORIES**

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Introduction

Peter Attema and Günther Schörner

This book treats theoretical and methodological implications of the classification of archaeological sites of the Roman period in regional survey archaeology, and the potential of classifications for making intra- and interregional comparisons and interpretations. The definition of a site is difficult, not in the least since everyone *believes* they know what it means, yet many definitions exist. S. Plog, F. Plog and W. Wait, for instance, define 'sites' as discrete and potentially interpretable loci of cultural materials.¹ For the geographer W. Wagstaff, a site is "fundamentally a place or location where something is found. Each site is in some sense recognisable and discrete ... Site implies a fixed, formal entity".² How can we classify such formal entities in order to read meaningful patterns in the landscape?

The book opens with an insightful paper by R. E. Witcher discussing the problematic nature of the current practice of site classification by survey archaeologists. He reflects on how archaeologists have classified sites from regional surveys, the ends to which such classifications are deployed, and the unintended consequences. He notes a lack of rigour in the selection of underlying criteria and concludes that "surveys demonstrate a rather unsystematic approach to classification". Emphasizing that classification schemes should be formulated in response to specific research questions, he explores a number of possibilities: they include the development of more sophisticated analyses to understand data variability and the identification of new variables and parameters such as longevity of occupation, patterns of consumption (rather than production), and the incorporation of landscape contexts. Such approaches may lead to classification schemes quite different to those currently employed. Moreover, these possibilities should not be seen as mutually exclusive; archaeologists should actively explore the use of multiple classifications. Finally, he points out that the self-contained character of the debate about Roman site classification in the Mediterranean hampers any meaningful contribution to global settlement archaeology (e.g., comparisons with Mesoamerica and China).

Many of the issues raised by Witcher are revisited and elaborated in the case studies that follow, including the important question of whether or not we can, and should, accommodate surveyed and excavated sites within a single site classification scheme. It is a truism that the surface record does not always correlate with sub-surface reality. Geophysical prospection can help to address this issue, but it does not show whether surface finds mirror subsoil material chronologically; thus surface survey interpretation is often burdened with a sense of anxiety about the precise relationship between surface and sub-surface archaeology.

In his contribution on the relationship of surface material to buried deposits at the Roman site of Il Monte in Tuscany, G. Schörner offers an analysis of the genesis of functionally different assemblages as observed at its surface, bringing home the fact that the relationship of surface materials to buried deposits has to be studied, not presupposed. As such, the paper corroborates Witcher's reservations about the assumption that surface scatters and excavated sites should always be categorized in the same classificatory framework. Studies like Schörner's enlarge the interpretative potential of intra-site surface assemblage studies, allowing complex classification of single surface scatters. Surface survey has often been used to identify sites suitable for excavation — in other words, it has served as a preparatory technique for 'more important' sub-surface investigation. It is now time to reverse this approach: excavation needs to be used in order to better understand the sites identified by large-scale intensive surveys, as has recently been done by the Sangro Valley Project.³

1 S. Plog, F. Plog and W. Wait, "Decision making in modern surveys," in M. B. Schiffer (ed.), *Advances in archaeological method and theory* 1 (New York 1978) 389.

2 W. Wagstaff, "The archaeological 'site' from a geographical perspective," in A. J. Schofield (ed.), *Interpreting artefact scatters: contributions to ploughzone archaeology* (Oxford 1991) 9.

3 E. Bispham, K. Swift and N. Wolff, "'What lies beneath': ploughsoil assemblages, the dynamics of

Ever since the inception of theoretical and methodological approaches to the regional archaeological record, mainly within the framework of the New Archaeology in the 1960s and 70s, the concept of site has played a central rôle. The debate centred on matters of definition, such as what might be considered as a site in the regional archaeological record, and why. On the interpretative level, what does a site actually mean in terms of human activity in the landscape, and how does a site, once classified as such, relate to historically known categories?

F. Vermeulen, drawing on the data of his Potenza Valley Survey project in N Picenum, advocates the merits of the integration of non-invasive survey with aerial photography and remote sensing as one of the best ways to achieve diachronic site characterisation and to establish typologies of Roman settlements without the need for large-scale and expensive excavation. The methodology adopted allows him to draw up a site classification of 6 types of rural settlement, some of which may be correlated with historically-known site categories such as *villa* and *vicus*; the categories are also thought to be relevant to Picenum more generally.

But while in Vermeulen's classification the smallest site measures a mere 200 m², this is not the smallest artifact scatter that can be meaningfully interpreted, as T. de Haas argues in his paper on the interpretation of small sites and off-site distributions. A now common definition of the archaeological site states that sites are areas characterized by discrete scatters of artefacts in higher concentrations than the overall pattern of artifact distribution, given equal visibility. The latter definition is closely linked to today's practice of intensive survey, which aims at high coverage investigation of contiguous blocks of land. As scatters vary between them (e.g., from very small [a few tens of square meters] to very large [several hectares]) or show functional differences (e.g., having a range of pottery shapes, or dominated by storage pottery), the smallest of sites need to be classified in order for us to be able to interpret them. Besides evidence for human dwelling, artefact surveys may reveal a range of other activities too, some of which will have ended up in the archaeological record as ephemeral scatters or off-site distributions that can only be detected in high-resolution artefact surveys. The increasing intensity of survey thus necessitates a rethinking of the relationship between site and off-site.

The term 'off-site' was introduced by R. Foley nearly 30 years ago as a substitute for the term 'non-site'.⁴ 'Off-site' can be defined as archaeological material spread in low density, sometimes across a large area, around sites. Off-site sherds may originate with the dumping of domestic refuse, often plausibly interpreted as part of manuring practices to fertilize the land. S. Menchelli has recently proposed a typology of off-site or low-density scatters.⁵ Detailed recording and classification of this 'background noise' is valuable both as a source of information on land-use and as a tool for the delineation of sites as discrete scatters of artefacts in higher concentrations than the overall pattern of artefact distribution over the landscape. However, it remains difficult to interpret the archaeological significance of minor or less dense scatters of artefacts, especially when the effects of post-depositional factors are borne in mind. As L. Wandsnider and E. L. Camilli state, the survey record is characterized by its 'sitedness' because dense clusters of artefacts are more visible than single specimens. The common perception that the archaeological record consists of discrete sites is a direct consequence of this.⁶ However, now that the density threshold for off-site has decreased, and even very small sites can be defined thanks to the increased precision with

taphonomy and the interpretation of field survey data," in G. Lock and A. Faustoferri (edd.), *Archaeology and landscape in central Italy. Papers in memory of John A. Lloyd* (Oxford 2008) 53-76.

4 R. Foley, "Off-site archaeology: an alternative approach to the short-sited," in I. Hodder (ed.), *Pattern of the past. Studies in honour of David Clarke* (Cambridge 1981) 157-83.

5 S. Menchelli, "Surface material, sites and landscapes in South Picenum (Marche, Italy)," in H. Vanhaverbeke, J. Poblome, M. Waelkens, F. Vermeulen and R. Brulet (edd.), *Thinking about space: the potential of surface survey and contextual archaeology in the definition of space in Roman times* (SEMA 8; Turnhout 2008) 34.

6 L. Wandsnider and E. L. Camilli, "The character of surface archaeological deposits and its influence on survey accuracy," *JFA* 19 (1992) 169-88.

which the surface record can be mapped, we are gradually arriving at a point where we can maximise what we get out of the surface record. T. de Haas shows convincingly in his case studies how attention to off-site and ephemeral scatters enriches our understanding of the functioning of the Roman rural landscape in the Pontine region south of Rome, emphasizing that any interpretation of small sites and off-site data will depend on landscape archaeological contextualization.

A common problem in regional archaeological studies is the prevalence of one set of data over another. In his paper on funerary assemblages and the classification of Republican sites in Etruria, R. E. Roth signals the imbalance between the abundance of funerary data and the scarcity of data on nucleated settlement as problematic for site classification. Funerary data do not necessarily reflect the full chronology, social composition and possibly changing economic status of related settlement sites, and cannot impart information on their character (e.g., as nucleated or dispersed). He illustrates this situation with a case study of the site of Castiglione (coastal N Etruria). Roth pleads for a more profound study of nucleated urban or sub-urban settlements of the secondary or tertiary orders to increase our knowledge of Roman Republican settlement organization so as to refine (or rather correct) existing site classifications. Stratigraphic excavation of a sample of such settlements has priority, according to him, as it is our limited knowledge of pottery from settlement contexts which still hampers progress in the field of site classification.

By implementing more detailed recording methods using various collection techniques, survey projects could advance the analysis of surface scatters in terms of crucial factors such as function, chronology and evolution. Small-scale excavation of a sample of sites found in a surveyed area could offer important information, for instance, on coarse-ware typologies or the distribution and consumption of fine wares. We still know too little about the nature of rural nucleated settlement. The excavations of such sites would help to clarify their nature and occupation, and allow the collection of ecological data to reconstruct subsistence strategies and environment.

Various parameters may be used as criteria for site classification and interpretation, such as quantity, quality and degree of concentration of the finds, dimensions of the surface scatter, and the distribution of functional classes within it. On the basis of these criteria, sites in a specific survey area may be classified in a hierarchical order. Such a hierarchy can be set up for entire regions by combining the results of several surveys, as proposed, for instance, by P. Arthur and F. Cambi for different regions in Italy.⁷ With today's increasingly precise recording of the surface record by many survey projects, a growing complexity and variety of ceramic surface assemblages can be observed, but this tendency in many cases is not matched by a greater variety in the site categories adopted, which too often is still restricted to a simplistic urban/rural dichotomy.

J. E. Francis' paper on the landscape of Roman Crete elaborates on the issue of the importance of detailed pottery knowledge raised by Roth. She emphasizes our dependence on pottery to identify and interpret the relative social status and prosperity of the hundreds of Roman rural and small urban sites found in the many surveys on the island, as well as its potential to gauge participation of sites in the island's intra and inter-island trade networks, given that few other types of material culture are often available. However, she points out the risks of relying on pottery typologies alone: incorporating other types of evidence, such as durable architecture, inscriptions and coins, may aid in classifying sites. In cases where such data are absent, fabric analysis may help to identify distribution trends between sites. This methodology can help to refine the definitions of what is urban and what is rural, since these, according to her, are far from being 'cut-and-dried' categories.

Thanks to the methodological debate and the increase in high-quality survey projects, the comparison of regional trends in settlement evolution and demography is now within reach, as shown

7 P. Arthur, *Romans in northern Campania. Settlement and land-use around the Massico and the Garigliano Basin* (Rome 1991); F. Cambi, "Pottery and territory: a tormented relationship," in R. Francovich, H. Patterson and G. Barker (edd.), *The archaeology of Mediterranean landscapes 5. Extracting meaning from ploughsoil assemblages* (Oxford 2000) 174-84.

by the volume *Side-by-side survey* edited by S. E. Alcock and J. F. Cherry.⁸ In the Italian context, diachronic projects such as the Tiber Valley Project of the British School at Rome and the Regional Pathways to Complexity Project of the University of Groningen and the Free University of Amsterdam have taken comparison of survey data sets as a methodological point of departure.⁹ The latter project is discussed in a contribution by Attema and Burgers, who compare settlement and land-use in three Roman Republican rural landscapes in central and S Italy (the Pontine region near Rome, the Salento Isthmus in Puglia, and the Sibaritide in N Calabria). They argue on the basis of the available settlement data (the greater part of which derives from their own surveys) that during the late 4th to mid-3rd c. B.C. similar processes of urbanization and rural infill occurred in the landscapes they studied, and that these processes can be identified in other coastal plains of central and S Italy too. Rather than isolating patterns within their regional socio-economic and political context, they advocate a broader view which, in the case of the Pontine region, makes it doubtful that we should attribute urban and rural growth solely to Roman colonization, for that would be a simplification of a complex overall trend of agricultural intensification and demographic growth occurring over vast stretches of the Italian peninsula.

The latter aspect, demographic growth, is the subject of the final paper by A. Launaro. Focussing on the potential of survey data for demographic reconstruction, he classifies site data from 27 survey projects scattered over mainland Italy to establish whether the free rural population of the Late Republic and Early Empire experienced growth, stability or decline. Applying a new methodology, the analysis leads him to conclude that the majority of regional landscapes shared patterns of overall growth, with only a few landscapes undergoing decline — and even in these cases it was never dramatic. On the aggregate level, Launaro uses his results to provide strong support for the ‘high count’ of population in Early Imperial Italy, while on the regional level he seems to find some correspondence with ancient authors who describe the flourishing or desolate demographic situations of particular central and S Italian landscapes.

Overall, the papers in this volume testify to the importance of surface survey as an autonomous form of archaeological investigation with well-developed methodologies and analytical frameworks able to generate data that, as ever more archaeologists recognise, are just as complex as those derived from excavation, and have a similarly wide interpretative potential. This status of surface artefact survey as a discipline in itself — and not solely as a preparatory stage for excavation or as a tool in heritage management — demands that survey archaeologists continue exploring methodological and interpretative issues in order to increase the value of surface survey for the reconstruction of socio-economic and demographic aspects of the Roman rural landscape.

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8 S. E. Alcock and J. F. Cherry (edd.), *Side-by-side survey. Comparative regional studies in the Mediterranean world* (Oxford 2004).

9 H. Patterson (ed.), *Bridging the Tiber: approaches to regional archaeology in the Middle Tiber Valley* (BSR Monog 13, 2004); H. Patterson and F. Coarelli (edd.), *Mercator placidissimus. The Tiber Valley in antiquity* (Rome 2008); P. Attema and M. van Leusen, “Intraregional and interregional comparison of occupation histories in three Italian regions,” in Alcock and Cherry (supra n.8) 86-100. See now also P. A. J. Attema, G.-J. Burgers and P. M. van Leusen, *Regional pathways to complexity* (Amsterdam 2010).