

The Urban Dimensions of Mountain Society in Late-First Millennium BC Italy: Monte Vairano in Samnium

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The mountain communities of late-first millennium BC Italy have been regarded as non-urban societies that reverted to city life mainly owing to Roman intervention. A growing body of archaeological evidence is uncovering the diversity of settlement forms and dynamics in the region's pre-Roman past, which included sites encompassing a range of functions and social agents. This article presents an in-depth, microscale analysis of one such site, Monte Vairano in Samnium, drawing on perspectives from comparative urbanism. Monte Vairano developed urban characteristics such as a complex socioeconomic profile and political cohesion, as well as potentially more unique features such as an apparently balanced distribution of wealth. These results can shed further light on the diversity of ancient urbanization and its sociopolitical implications in late-first millennium BC Italy and the Mediterranean.

Keywords: urbanization, microscale, Italy, Samnium, first millennium BC, settlements

INTRODUCTION

Among the major developments of first-millennium BC Italy, emphasis is given to urbanization, generally understood as the process by which people concentrated in larger and denser clusters that combined different socioeconomic and political functions. Urbanization has been associated with state formation, a clearer distinction between private and public spheres, the extension of political participation, and the development of citizenship (e.g. Fulminante, 2014; Perego & Scopacasa, 2016; Terrenato, 2019: 76–77). Scholars have also explored the sophistication of the peninsula's less or non-urbanized societies (e.g. Bradley, 2000; Isayev, 2007; Stek, 2018). The region of Samnium in the mountains of central Apennine Italy

(Figure 1) is a case in point: its inhabitants stand out for their struggles against the Roman conquest of the late fourth century BC, while being portrayed as backward by Greco-Roman writers (Dench, 1995; Scopacasa, 2015). Reasons for the region's apparent lack of urbanization have been sought in its mountainous and agriculturally challenging terrain, which would not have supported large enough population concentrations (e.g. Lomas, 2018: 6). According to this view, urbanization was introduced in Samnium after the region's incorporation into the Roman citizen body c. 50 BC (Bispham, 2007).

A growing body of studies have emphasized the formation of larger, fortified settlement centres in pre-Roman Samnium, which combined a range of different functions and have therefore been described as

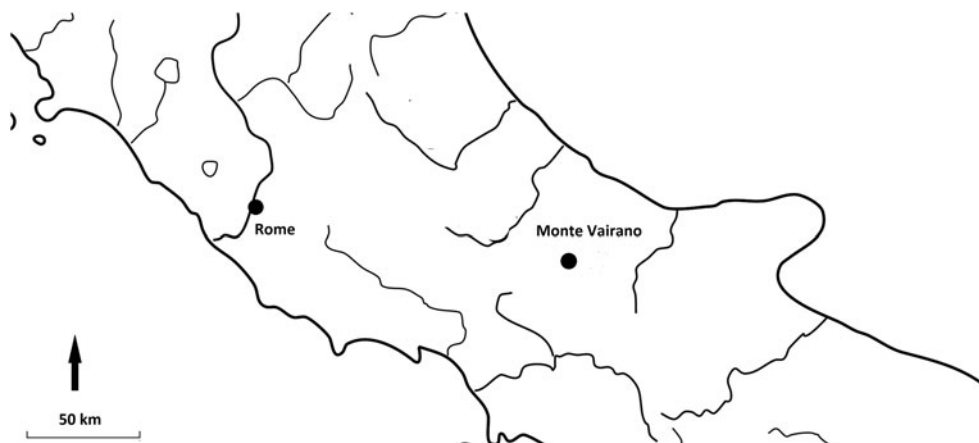


Figure 1. Map of central Italy showing Monte Vairano.

nucleated or even urban (Lloyd, 1995; Faustoferri & Riccitelli, 2005; De Benedittis, 2017, 2018–2019; Lee, 2022). Given the volume and complexity of the data accumulated from decades of systematic excavation, this article aims to provide a detailed analysis focusing on one of these nucleated centres, through the lens of comparative urbanism. This can aid further study of the degree to which the mountain societies of late-first millennium BC Italy developed urban features, and how they compare with urban societies elsewhere in the peninsula and the ancient Mediterranean.

BACKGROUND

Archaeological fieldwork has identified a settlement pattern in Samnium that seems to originate in the early first millennium BC. Regarding the Iron Age (*c.* 1000–400 BC), this is normally described as a system of small and dispersed rural sites, classed as farmsteads, villages, and hamlets (Barker & Suano, 1995; Lloyd et al., 1997). The largest settlements reached up to *c.* 2.5 ha, but their socioeconomic profiles are compatible with the smaller

villages: a combination of agricultural and (limited) craft production, essentially coarse pottery (*impasto*) and textiles. The dispersed rural sites, therefore, appear to have been largely self-sufficient, with most of the population living close to natural and agricultural resources. From *c.* 600 BC, differences in wealth among tombs indicate increasing social stratification, pointing to the formation of local aristocracies whose wealth and power was probably based on the control of agricultural surplus (Bispham, 2007: 185).

From *c.* 350 BC, rapid growth in the number of small rural sites (Lloyd, 1995; Lloyd et al., 1997) echoes a Mediterranean-wide trend (Terrenato, 2019: 99–100). In addition, sanctuaries of varying sizes and hillforts begin to appear (Barker & Suano, 1995). A long-held theory proposes that these classes of site formed territorial districts where political, economic, and social activities were spread out rather than concentrated in a city or *polis*. While this organization would have placed Samnium at the margins of Mediterranean urbanism, it would also have supported a unique, non-urban political system that relied on territorial rather than civic integration (e.g. La Regina, 1981; *contra* Letta, 1994).

The late fourth century BC also saw the development of larger, more complex fortified sites that concentrated a broader range of activities (protection, crafts, trade, cult, inhabitation) and displayed urban features, such as fortifications, cisterns, paved streets, intramural temples, and residential areas (De Benedittis, 1980, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 2017; Matteini Chiari, 1982, 2004; Lloyd, 1995; Lloyd & Faustoferri, 1998; Faustoferri & Riccitelli, 2005; Kane, 2011; De Benedittis et al., 2013). Scholars have differed as to how permanently these settlements were occupied and to what degree they can be considered urban; they have been seen as (proto-)urban centres (e.g. De Benedittis, 2018–2019; Lee, 2022), larger fortified ‘villages’ (*vici*: La Regina, 1981), or ‘major hillforts’ that were not necessarily permanently or fully inhabited (e.g. Bispham, 2007: 198–200).

Perspectives from comparative urbanism can help us understand the nature of these large, fortified centres. Arjan Zuiderhoek (2017) has argued that the urban (or non-urban) profile of ancient settlements should be assessed not only in terms of size and population density, but also with respect to mortality rates, degree of economic specialization, and extent of occupational diversity. Similarly, Michael E. Smith (2020) notes that being urban is not an intrinsic attribute of a site, but an interpretation of its features. He proposes that the basic unit of analysis should be the settlement rather than ‘the city’, and that archaeologists should consider ‘urban dimensions’, which may be present in different degrees. He identifies these as ‘primary’: size (area and population), function (goods and services provided to outlying areas), and daily life and social organization (socioeconomic complexity, wealth inequality, occupational diversity, formal and informal power relations); and ‘secondary’: form (built structures), growth

(in a spatial, demographic, and economic sense), and ‘urban meaning’ (cosmologies and symbolic systems).

I will draw on the perspectives of Zuiderhoek and Smith in an in-depth, microscale analysis of Monte Vairano, a Samnite fortified centre. I will focus on Smith’s primary urban dimensions and on two of the secondary dimensions (built environment and growth); ‘urban meaning’ is difficult to access from the material evidence available and will therefore not be considered.

URBAN DIMENSIONS AT MONTE VAIRANO

Among the excavated Samnite fortified centres, the site of Monte Vairano in the upper Biferno valley stands out in terms of the volume, detail, and comprehensiveness of the published data (De Benedittis, 1980, 1988, 1990, 1991b, 2017, 2018–2019; De Benedittis & Bevilacqua, 1980; De Benedittis et al., 2013). The site consists of a 3 km-long wall circuit enclosing a 50 ha area that included paved intersecting roads, artificial terraces, and built structures for habitation, storage, food and craft production, and water collection (Figure 2).

Although there are isolated signs of frequentation dated to the later Iron Age (c. 600–400 BC), nearly all the recorded archaeological remains pertain to the last four centuries BC (De Benedittis, 1980: 326–27, 340). The earliest consistent evidence for stable occupation belongs to the late fourth century BC, which corresponds to the wall foundation of the fortification, or Stratum C: this stratum includes a small amount of black gloss pottery datable to c. 325–300 BC (Table 1). Stratum B (third–early first centuries BC) includes most of the excavated structures and finds, with diagnostic pottery concentrating around 220–100/50 BC. Stratum A, formed by landslides, contains some late second-/early

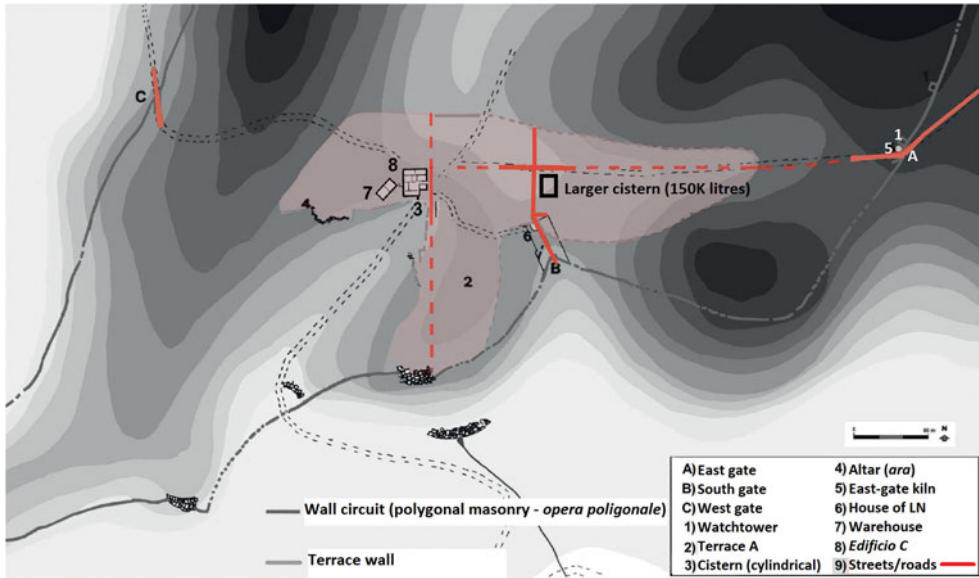


Figure 2. Plan of Monte Vairano (after De Benedittis, 2017). Reproduced by permission of Prof. Gianfranco de Benedittis.

first-century BC material mixed with medieval pottery, as the site was partially reoccupied in the thirteenth century AD (De Benedittis, 1980: 326–27). Traces of conflagration and the filling of a cistern with discarded material place the site's decline and abandonment in the mid-first century BC (De Benedittis, 2017).

Built structures

According to Smith (2020: 17–18), knowledge about ancient urban centres usually involves their built environment or 'form'. Material attributes that he considers indicative of 'urban form' include 'architecture, planning, layout, and housing', and more specifically connective infrastructure, intermediate-order temples, elite residences, formal public space, and a planned 'epicentre'.

The most conspicuous built structure at Monte Vairano is the 3 km-long fortified circuit. Its construction seems to have

been guided by practical concerns: the excavators report that the walls and watchtowers were made of locally-sourced river pebbles and sandstone blocks that are ubiquitous in the area (De Benedittis, 1980). The building techniques consist of the two main types of polygonal masonry (*opera polygonale*) identified in pre-Roman central Italy (Fontana & Bernard, 2023): the first type comprises inner and outer faces of stone blocks and a rubble-earth fill; the second is an outer stone facing backed by a rubble-earth fill (De Benedittis, 2017: 14–16). The extant height (2–3 m) is consistent with other Samnite fortifications and can be explained by the sloping hill-sides, which reduced the need for very high walls (Fontana & Bernard, 2023). The width of the gateways (6 m at the east and west gate, *c.* 3 m at the south) would have allowed relatively quick access by large numbers of people seeking protection.

Inside the walled area, connective infrastructure takes the form of paved,

Table 1. Assemblages from Monte Vairano. * includes the loom-weights forming the complete vertical loom in the House of LN; ** includes the total number of millstone/grindstone fragments recorded; *** *crolla*: rubble layer over Stratum B in the House of LN; **** excepting the curse tablet, which is Stratum B.

ARTEFACT	STRATUM	CONTEXT				TOTAL
		<i>Quartiere</i>	House of LN	Cistern	Warehouse	
Amphorae	A, B	32	3	5	0	40
Rhodian	A, B	29	2	0	0	31
Dressel (1, 28)	A, B	2	1	5	0	8
Bosphorus	B	1	0	0	0	1
Storage/ cookware	A, B	2	15	71	7	95
Tableware	B, C	6	35	105	12	158
Toiletry vessel	B	0	4	6	1	11
<i>Stamnos</i>	B	0	1	0	0	1
Washbasin (<i>louterion</i>)	B	0	1	10	0	11
Lamp	B	0	3	5	1	9
Tools/implements	A, B, C	14	40*	48**	4	106**
Loom-weight	A, B, C	4	39 (1 loom)	0	4	47
Scissors/shears (iron)	A	1	0	0	0	1
Needle (bronze)	B	1	0	0	0	1
Pincers (bronze)	C	1	0	0	0	1
Stylus (bone)	B	3	0	0	0	3
Fishhook (bronze)	B	1	0	0	0	1
Sculpture mould (terracotta)	A	1	0	0	0	1
Hoe (iron)	n/a	0	0	1	0	1
Spade (iron)	n/a	0	0	1	0	1
Scythe	n/a	1	0	2	0	3
Millstones/grindstones	n/a	0	0	44**	2	46**
Knife (iron)	<i>crolla</i> ***	0	1	0	0	1
Jewellery	A, B	0	9	0	0	9
Key (iron)	<i>crolla</i> ***	0	1	3	0	4
Antefix (terracotta)	B	0	1	2	0	3
Nails (iron)	B	0	13	c. 100	2	c. 115
Coins	A, B	39	3	1	0	43
Cult-related objects (curse tablet, female/Heracles figurines, terracotta head, incense burner)	n/a****	6	0	0	0	6
TOTAL		99	129*	c. 356**	29	c. 611

interconnected roads; their articulation with the fortifications suggests an integrated building programme (De Benedittis, 2018–2019: 45). Four large artificial terraces were identified, one of which (Terrace A) was

excavated: it included a rectangular building interpreted as a warehouse (*horreum*) (De Benedittis, 2017: 37–41); this hypothesis is consistent with the presence of storage jars or *dolia* found inside the structure (Table 2).

Table 2. Pottery assemblages from Monte Vairano, excepting Dressel1/imported amphorae.

	Quartiere	House of LN	Cistern	Warehouse	TOTAL
Tableware – common ware	0	13	35	4	52
Jug (<i>brocca/olpe</i>)	0	4	19	2	25
Cup/bowl (<i>tazza/coppa/scodella</i>)	0	1	6	1	8
Cup (<i>bicchiere</i>)	0	0	5	0	5
Plate (<i>patera/tegame</i>)	0	8	2	1	11
Basin (<i>bacino</i>)	0	0	3	0	3
Tableware – black gloss	6	22	70	8	106
Jug (<i>brocca/olpe</i>)	0	2	2	0	4
Cup/ bowl (<i>tazza/coppa/scodella</i>)	5	4	40	4	53
Cup (<i>bicchiere</i>)	0	0	0	0	0
Plate (<i>patera</i>)	1	16	28	4	49
Basin (<i>bacino</i>)	0	0	0	0	0
Storage/cookware – common ware	2	15	71	7	95
Amphora	0	1	1	0	2
<i>Dolia</i>	1	2	35	5	43
<i>Secchio</i> (bucket)	0	0	2	0	2
<i>Fornello</i>	0	0	5	0	5
<i>Bollitore</i>	0	0	1	0	1
Cooking pot (<i>olla/pentola</i>)	0	11	27	2	40
Mortar	1	1	0	0	2
Toiletry vessels – common ware	0	0	0	1	1
<i>Unguentario</i>	0	0	0	1	1
Pyxis	0	0	0	0	0
Toiletry vessels – black gloss	0	4	6	0	10
<i>Unguentario</i>	0	0	6	0	6
Pyxis	0	4	0	0	4

Immediately adjacent were a multi-roomed building of uncertain date and nature (*Edificio C*) and a cylindrical cistern with a tile-mortar lining and a 12,000 l capacity (De Benedittis, 2017: 43–45) (Figure 2, no. 3). Another cistern, with a 150,000 l capacity and fed by a drainage ditch coming from one of the roads (Street B), was identified some 60 m from the cylindrical cistern (De Benedittis, 2018–2019: 44–45).

Further evidence of planned layout, public spaces, and housing is found in the so-called *Quartiere* (neighbourhood), a c. 800 m² area excavated between Terrace A and the south gate (Figure 3). It is crossed

by one of the main roads (Street B), next to which was a small structure abutting the walls of Terrace A and interpreted as a house. The relationships between the terrace walls, the house, the road, and the gate suggest an articulated use of space. The presence of an additional structure is inferred from a concentration of finds between the house and the gate, mostly coins and amphora fragments, which seem consistent with a streetside establishment such as a wine shop or stall.

Little evidence has been adduced for temples or elite residences. A possible votive deposit, including a Heracles figurine, was

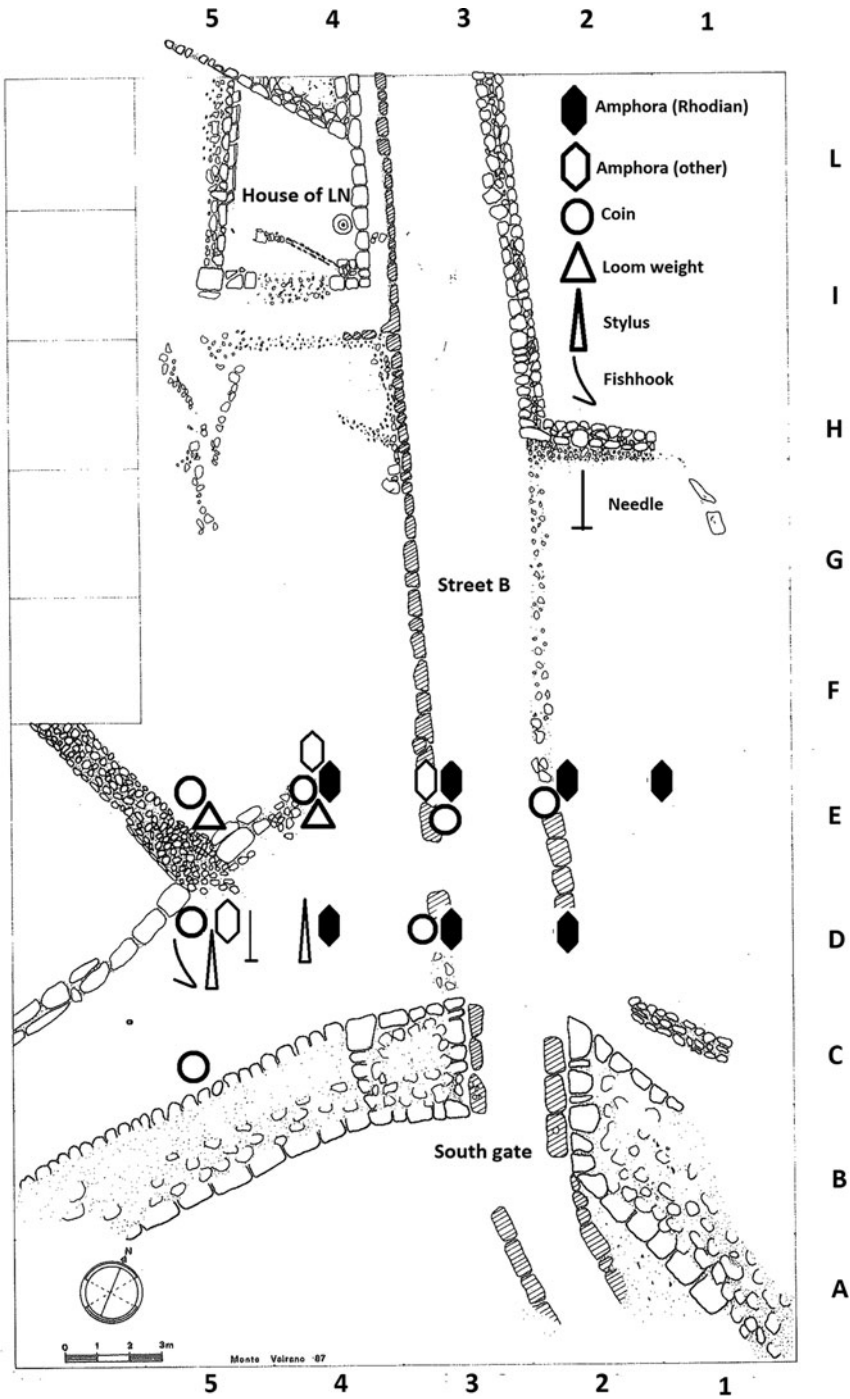


Figure 3. The Quartiere at Monte Vairano, with location of finds from Stratum B in the streetside area (after De Benedittis, 1990). Reproduced by permission of Prof. Gianfranco de Benedittis.

found in a crevice in the wall by the south gate (Table 1; De Benedittis, 1980: 326).

Size and estimated population

With its 50 ha walled area, Monte Vairano ranks among the larger of the known fortified centres in central Apennine Italy (De Benedittis, 2017). While not on the same level as the major Tyrrhenian cities of the time (c. 150–180 ha: Stoddart, 2015: 60–61), it is ahead of the 20–25 ha Archaic settlements in Latium generally classed as cities by ancient and modern authors (Fulminante, 2014: 116), and not far behind western Greek *poleis* such as Rhegium in the fourth century BC (70 ha; Fischer-Hansen et al., 2004: 292).

Assessing population size and density is, however, challenging, as most of the intramural area remains unexcavated. A relatively dense occupation is indicated in the excavated sectors (De Benedittis et al., 2013: 104, fn. 14). In Terrace A, the warehouse, *Edificio C*, and cylindrical cistern were only a few metres apart, and similar seeming crowding is suggested in the *Quartiere*. In the second century BC, a pottery kiln abutted the fortification wall by the eastern gate (De Benedittis, 1990: 29–35) (Figure 2, no. 5). The walled area, however, will not have been entirely taken up by buildings. Some of the more irregular terrain may have been used for keeping livestock, an important element of the economy. The rearing of sheep for wool would account for the emphasis on textile manufacture detected at the settlement. Intramural gardens and orchards are also likely.

Given the scarcity of data for estimating population size and density, an alternative is to consider the workforce requirements for the construction of the 3 km-long fortified circuit. Fontana and Bernard (2023) provide the best basis: they estimate

construction costs of 121/168 hours per person per metre for 3 m-high walls employing the building techniques identified at Monte Vairano. Without knowing the completion time, it is challenging to extrapolate a workforce from these values. Nevertheless, assuming a 100-strong team working an eight-hour daily shift (Fontana & Bernard, 2023: 10), construction would have taken about one-and-a-half years (453 days) at least. If, however, we accept the excavators' assessment that the walls' crude aspect indicates hurried construction during a military operation (De Benedittis, 2017: 16–17), and postulate a shorter construction period of up to six months (180 days, still assuming an 8-hour working day), the workforce necessarily increases to 252–350 people, depending on building technique. The resulting range of 100–350 people can be seen as a hypothetical minimum workforce; the real number was probably higher, owing to replacements, relays, wall stretches over 3 m high (e.g. watchtowers), and/or possible completion under six months. Assuming the workers were primarily local, able-bodied adults, and that not all would have been available for construction work at any given time, the estimates above would, at the very least, suggest a local population larger than 100–350 people; how much larger remains to be determined. At any rate, these projections support two preliminary observations on the size of the local population that are worth highlighting: a) it probably exceeded that of 'several' Greek *poleis* which 'can have had no more than 100 inhabitants' (Hansen & Nielsen, 2004: 139); and b) in the best-case scenario, it may have approximated the 1000-people minimum that Hansen and Nielsen (2004: 35) consider applicable to most Greek *poleis*. These estimates assume that the bulk of the workforce did not come from afar, but, assuming it did, the foregoing estimates could still indicate the settlement's capacity

to affect outlying populations by harnessing their workforce.

Socioeconomic profile

Zuiderhoek (2017) and Smith (2020) emphasize the importance of socio-economic complexity and occupational diversity in the study of pre-modern urbanism. This domain includes socio-economic organization beyond the household level, and diversity in wealth levels and occupational activities within the community. Monte Vairano hosted a rather broad range of socioeconomic practices and occupations, from unspecialized agricultural labour to more sophisticated forms of craft production, writing, and international trade. Consumption involved a range of goods and services, from locally made pottery to imported Greek wine and olive oil (Tables 1–3; Figures 3–4). Such variation is suggestive of a socioeconomically diverse community, from low-income peasants and independent craftspeople with different degrees of specialization, to

potentially wealthy and well-connected merchants and/or shopkeepers.

The presence of agricultural workers at Monte Vairano is suggested by agricultural tools found mainly in the cylindrical cistern, among pottery discarded in the cistern around the mid-first century BC. Whether these were people who cultivated surrounding lands and lived inside the settlement or were primarily based in farms around Monte Vairano remains to be determined (see Fulminante, 2014 on Middle Tyrrhenian Italy; Bispham, 2007: 196 on Monte Vairano as an ‘agro-settlement’). The cistern and nearby warehouse also yielded millstones and grindstones of different shapes and sizes, from individual, hand-held querns to parts of larger and complex grinding mechanisms capable of food production/processing on a larger scale (De Benedittis et al., 2013: 65–68). These finds imply that Monte Vairano functioned as a place where produce was stored, processed, consumed, and possibly also sold or redistributed to outlying areas.

Evidence for craft production is ubiquitous. Diversification seems to be the

Table 3. *Coins from the Quartiere at Monte Vairano.*

Date BC	Legend	Denomination	Issuer
380–350	FISTLUI (Oscan)	Obol	Phistelia (Campania)
300–260	NEAPOLITON (Greek)	n/a	Naples
300–200	ARPANOU (Greek)	n/a	Arpi (Apulia)
270 or later	n/a	n/a	Naples (?)
270 or later	n/a	n/a	Naples (?)
270 or later	n/a	n/a	Naples (?)
268 or later	LARINOR (Oscan)	Quincuncia	Larinum (Samnium)
268 or later	PAEST (Latin)	Triens	Paestum
268 or later	PAIS (Latin)	Quadrans	Paestum
238–168	APEIROTAN (Greek)	n/a	Epirote league
225–200	(none/ Tanit and horse)	n/a	n/a (southern Italy)
214–150	(none/ Bes with mace head and serpent)	n/a	Ebusus/Ibiza
168–135	BALLAIUO (Greek)	n/a	Pharos
100 or later	APOLLONIA (Greek)	n/a	Apollonia (Illyria)

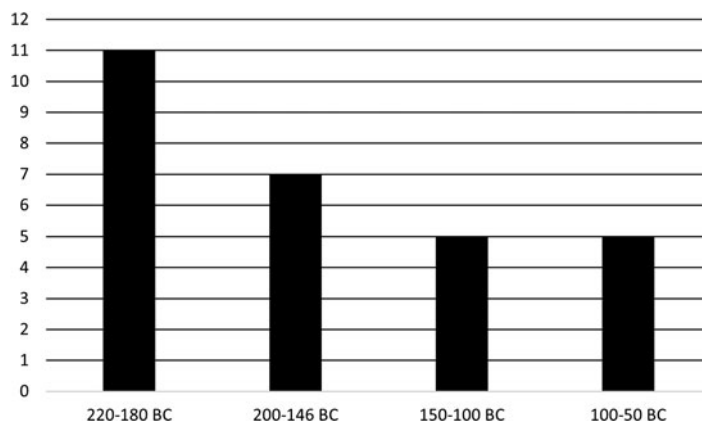


Figure 4. Numbers of attested Rhodian amphorae at Monte Vairano.

keyword regarding the *Quartiere*, where we have items pertaining to textile manufacture, fishing, the production of terracotta sculptures, and writing implements (Table 1; De Benedittis, 1980: 329–37). Less varied, but more robust, is the picture evoked by the pottery kiln at the east gate, which was active mainly during the second century BC. Well over 5000 pottery fragments were recovered in the kiln area, comprising at least forty-three different forms of black gloss tableware and toiletry vessels (De Benedittis, 1990: 38–57).

Trade is indicated on an international scale. Black gloss pottery identified as imports attests to links with other regions of Italy, while long-distance connectivity is confirmed by East Mediterranean amphorae concentrating in the *Quartiere* (see Figure 3). The fact that the amphorae were intimately associated with coins both spatially and stratigraphically, together with writing tools and drinking or dining paraphernalia, suggests the presence of an establishment such as a wine shop or stall (*osteria*: De Benedittis, 2017: 68) that had trade links ranging from southern Italy to the Hellenistic East: of the thirty-two amphora handles recorded, twenty-nine are from Rhodes, two probably from elsewhere in Italy (Dressel 1/A, 28), and one

from the Bosphorus. All are datable to *c.* 220–100/50 BC (see Figure 4). The amphorae may have arrived via Campania, Magna Graecia, or the Adriatic. The association of the amphorae with East Mediterranean coins (from Pharos, Apollonia, Epirus: Table 3) suggests that some were imported directly from the Hellenistic East. Monte Vairano appears, therefore, to have been home to, or frequented by, resourceful cosmopolitan merchants, who were tapping into trade opportunities in the wake of the Romano-Italian hegemony in the Greek East.

The marked imbalance between Italian and Rhodian amphorae would indicate specialization in imported wine and possibly also olive oil (De Benedittis et al., 2013: 97; De Benedittis, 2017: 68). Considering the low ratio of amphorae per decade (Figure 4), most of the imported products may have been stored in more perishable containers; alternatively, products such as (potentially very expensive) Rhodian wine may not have been the main fare, but rather an exceptional item in a more accessible list of goods. At any rate, if the *Quartiere* wine shop hypothesis is correct, its location immediately next to one of the main gates suggests that it attracted people from outlying areas.

Domestic contexts

Further insights into Monte Vairano's socioeconomic profile can be obtained from the small structure at the northern end of the *Quartiere* known as the House of LN (De Benedittis, 1988: 94–98) (Figure 5). While there are signs that some care went into the construction of this building, its very small size (c. 25 m²), irregular layout, and simple building techniques suggest modest levels of expenditure, leading the excavators to identify it as a 'low-income house' (*casa povera*: De Benedittis, 2017: 57). It abutted one of the walls of Terrace A, the additional walls being of wattle-and-daub (*torchis*: De Benedittis, 1988: 57). Yet, there were attempts at material comfort: tile-paved floors, hydraulic infrastructure (washbasin and drainage), a hearth, and a tiled roof complete with terracotta antefix depicting Heracles and the Nemean lion (De Benedittis, 1988: 57–59). Nails suggest the presence of wooden furniture, while the street-facing, wattle-and-daub walls were decorated with cinnabar-red painted stucco (De Benedittis, 1988: 55–58). Also

significant is the range of activities attested within the narrow confines of the building: storage (jars), cooking (sooted cooking pots), and weaving (Table 1). Other finds indicate some prosperity and cosmopolitanism, including a piece of silver jewellery, fragments of at least two Rhodian amphorae, and a coin potentially from Ebusus/Ibiza (De Benedittis, 1988: 91–92, 114–17). Tableware was present in both common ware and black gloss (De Benedittis, 1988: 65–89), presumably for daily use and for special occasions, respectively. A key and potential lock (De Benedittis, 1988: 118–19) suggest restricted access and privacy. Since the House of LN hardly qualifies as an elite residence, its existence would suggest that average- or low-income inhabitants at Monte Vairano enjoyed some degree of material comfort.

While the House of LN is the only structure at Monte Vairano thus far identified as a domestic unit, domestic material was found discarded in the cylindrical cistern, which was decommissioned by the mid-first century BC (De Benedittis, 2017). The excavators interpreted this material as

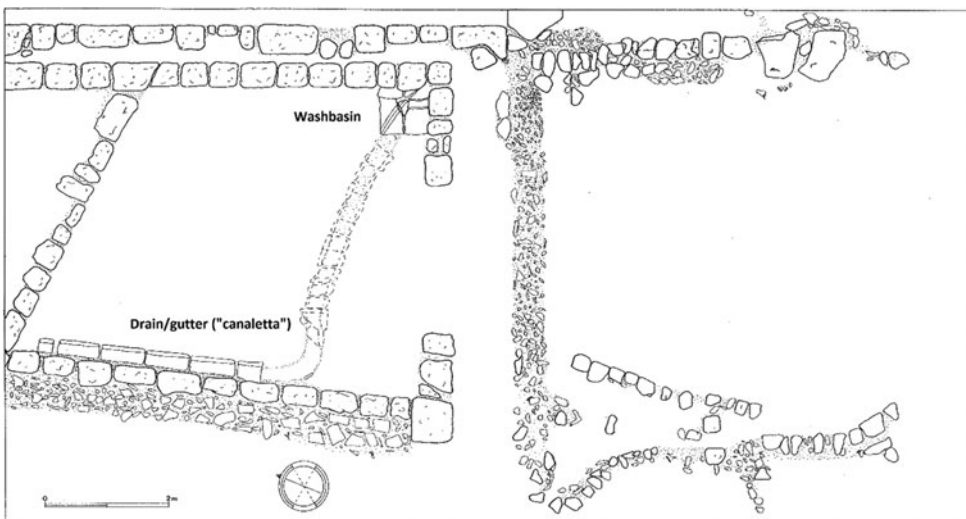


Figure 5. Plan of the House of LN (after De Benedittis, 1988). Reproduced by permission of Prof. Gianfranco de Benedittis.

pertaining to a single household (De Benedittis et al., 2013: 19), but the sheer quantities suggest more than one domestic unit: over thirty cooking pots, an equal number of storage jars or *dolia*, and over 100 items of tableware. A preliminary comparison with the pottery assemblage from the House of LN indicates a general compatibility in terms of forms and basic technologies (Table 2). Aside from a greater variety of cooking ware forms in the cistern, both assemblages are characterized by the presence of common pottery (*ceramica acroma*) and black gloss wares. Furthermore, both the cistern and the House of LN yielded black gloss vessels identified as non-locally made (e.g. pieces closely matching Morel type 2258: De Benedittis et al., 2013: 21–22), as well as vessels that match pieces from the eastern gate kiln and were almost certainly made on site (De Benedittis et al., 2013: 27, no. 13).

This preliminary evaluation suggests that, in terms of access to pottery technologies, Monte Vairano households varied to some degree, but not wildly. The same might be said for domestic conveniences: the cistern also yielded ceramic washbasins (*louteria*) and clay pipes that recall the hydraulic infrastructure at the House of LN.

Urban functions

The extent of a settlement's centrality in relation to surrounding areas is key to understanding its urban (or non-urban) character (Smith, 2020). The development of hierarchical relationships between first-, second-, and third-order sites is a crucial variable in studies of ancient urbanism (Hansen & Nielsen, 2004: 74). Centrality can be gauged in terms of a settlement's ability to provide goods and services to communities outside its own walls, and/or to control these communities politically:

these are referred to by Smith (2020: 17) as 'urban functions'.

In a study of such dynamics, Kevin Lee (2022) argues that a series of urban functions (territorial administration, markets, protection, cult) can be identified across a sample of settlement centres in the pre-Roman central Apennines, including Monte Vairano. A protective function is assigned to the site's fortifications, which Lee argues indicate Monte Vairano's function as a centre of territorial administration, if taken in conjunction with smaller and roughly contemporaneous hillforts within a 10 km radius: these may have constituted a territorial defence network centred on Monte Vairano (2022: 146). The pottery kiln at the east gate, paved roads, and imported amphorae suggest that Monte Vairano functioned as a market centre, while the cult-related objects (see Table 1) are interpreted as 'circumstantial evidence for a sanctuary' (Lee, 2022: 145–47).

The present assessment largely confirms Lee's evaluation: the structural features and timing of the fortification walls point to practical defensive purposes, at least originally. The fortifications could have provided much-needed security for potentially large numbers of people in the surrounding countryside, especially in view of the historical context of intensified warfare in the late fourth and third centuries BC. The walls may have lost some of their defensive purpose during the lull in warfare in Italy after the Second Punic War (218–201 BC), but this probably changed in the decades leading up to the Social War (91–87 BC): this conflict adversely affected Samnium and may relate to the abandonment of Monte Vairano. Monte Vairano's function as a market centre is suggested not only by its craft production, but also by the fact that evidence for imported Greek wine was right next to one of the centre's main gateways.

Growth and decline

Given these findings, it is possible to outline the following general phases of development at Monte Vairano: i) an initial expansion beginning in the late fourth century BC involving the construction of the fortifications and probably the road network, amidst intense warfare and instability in central Italy; ii) a phase of economic expansion in the late third and second centuries BC, with the east-gate kiln in full swing, international trade and consumption (amphorae and coins in the *Quartiere* area), agricultural production (millstones, storage jars), and thriving households (House of LN, cistern fill), all in a context of decreased warfare in Italy; iii) a final period around the early to mid-first century BC, which includes the decline of activity at the kiln and evidence for the destruction and/or abandonment of the structures in the *Quartiere* and Terrace A (the cistern was decommissioned), probably in connection with the Social War and its devastating aftermath.

DISCUSSION

To address the question of urbanism at Monte Vairano, I shall focus on two aspects, namely: i) the development of complex sociopolitical dynamics between different wealth groups, and ii) the provision of goods and services to outlying populations and its possible implications for Monte Vairano's development as a focus of community cohesion and identity.

Wealth distribution and access to material comfort

The picture of different socioeconomic groups at Monte Vairano is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the site

apparently became quite wealthy: by the late third century BC, agricultural and craft production were sufficient to generate revenue for high-profile trade and consumption, as indicated by the imported amphorae. On the other hand, whereas manual labourers such as agricultural and (especially) craft workers are well represented in the site's archaeological record, there seems to be comparatively little evidence of the display of private wealth by a privileged elite. Virtually all the contexts excavated so far seem closely connected with daily work activities; in over five decades of archaeological investigation, little or no traces of private ostentatious behaviour have been uncovered. This may, however, change with future study of the multi-roomed *Edificio C* and the traces of additional structures detected around the larger cistern (De Benedittis, 2018–2019: 45).

The consolidation of wealthy aristocratic elites is attested in Samnium since the early first millennium BC in the funerary record, and from the fourth century BC in the monumentalization and embellishment of major sanctuaries (Bispham, 2007: 185). Epigraphic evidence signals the formation of a state-level, republican-type political organization with formal magistracies around 300–100 BC; the recurrence of certain family names among the epigraphically attested magistrates points to a pool of elite families in the area (Bispham, 2007: 194).

If an affluent aristocracy was present at Monte Vairano, it was apparently far from monopolizing access to luxury and material comfort in the settlement. This can be inferred from the Rhodian amphorae, which are arguably the strongest indicators of conspicuous consumption and cosmopolitanism thus far detected at the site. In an Italian context, Monte Vairano stands out for its abundance of Rhodian amphorae: a 2008 study concluded that the site contained about thirty-five per cent of a sample of Rhodian and Knidian amphorae surveyed

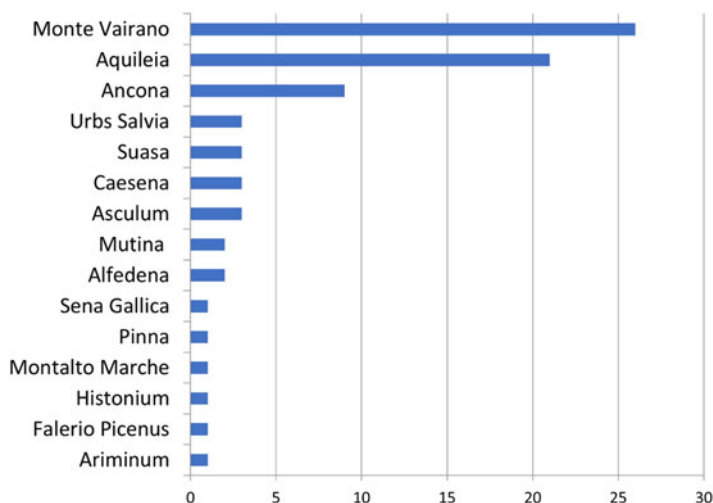


Figure 6. Numbers of Rhodian and Knidian amphorae in 'Adriatic' (non-Tyrrhenian) Italy, as compiled by Marengo & Paci (2008).

across Adriatic Italy (Marengo & Paci, 2008: 320–22) (Figure 6). This suggests both prosperity and conspicuous consumption, as the amphorae may have been made even more expensive owing to their potentially difficult transport from Italian ports to our upland settlement (on Monte Vairano's role as a centre of consumption, see Bispham, 2007: 200). Yet, the Monte Vairano amphorae are associated with contexts that do not otherwise show obvious signs of privilege or exclusivity, namely the open streetside area of the *Quartiere* crossed by a potentially busy thoroughfare (Street B), and a modest domestic space that was largely dedicated to manual labour (House of LN). They were furthermore associated with coins and work-related items suggestive of a public commercial establishment. We therefore have a scenario in which the choicest imported goods thus far recovered at Monte Vairano were found in an apparently public space frequented by potentially diverse people, and in the relatively humble House of LN.

The House of LN can itself be seen as an indication that people at Monte Vairano who were at the lower end of the

socioeconomic spectrum nevertheless had some access to material comfort as discussed above. Elsewhere in Samnium, such elements of domestic comfort are found in contexts that tend to be interpreted as indicative of higher socioeconomic status: among the better-known examples are the farmhouse at Gildone, 12 km from Monte Vairano, a 180 m² multi-roomed building of stone with a central courtyard and possible stables (di Niro, 1991) and the villa complex at Santa Maria Casalpiano, a high-end *domus* with mosaic pavements located further down the Biferno valley (Lloyd, 1995: 201).

A contextual assessment of the imported amphorae and the House of LN suggests, therefore, that complex negotiations involving the social distribution of communal wealth took place at Monte Vairano; this raises the question of whether we can regard this upland settlement as developing into a politically cohesive collective.

Towards a civic community

The people who inhabited and frequented Monte Vairano seem to have been

heterogeneous in occupation and status, but came together for sustained periods for shared needs and interests. Food and artisanal production were undertaken on a scale above household level, as evidenced by the pottery kiln and millstones; the cisterns were arguably large enough to function in communal-level water management. Such a scenario would theoretically have generated interpersonal tensions, whose solution would have called for coordinated action. Whether this means that Monte Vairano could have developed characteristics usually associated with ancient Mediterranean civic communities (citizen assemblies, magistracies, civic identity: Hansen & Nielsen, 2004: 138–43) is debatable.

Indications that Samnite settlements could be politically autonomous can be found in the written sources. Greco-Roman authors occasionally refer to Samnite *poleis* and *urbes* as units capable of independent action in the context of the Samnite wars of 343–290 BC. A good example involves an episode when the Samnites are said to offer a diplomatic solution to the war with Rome. In the version reported by Appian, the Samnite ambassadors are given unfavourable conditions; they respond that they could not decide on their own and would refer the matter to their *poleis* (Appian, *Samnite History* 4.1). Although it is not clear what is meant by *poleis* in this passage (Scopacasa, 2019: 58–59), when Greek writers mention Samnite *poleis* they normally mean settled communities (Lee, 2022). Appian's testimony can therefore be taken as an indication that, in the eyes of Greco-Roman historical writers, Samnite settlements could function as cohesive political communities in the context of war and diplomacy in the late fourth century BC.

Epigraphic sources from third- to first-century BC Samnium also suggest that settlements in the region were autonomous to some degree and developed republican

forms of political organization. Epigraphic evidence indicates the formation of a state-level organization in Samnium that included formal magistracies. The most frequently attested magistracy is the **meddiss**, which occurs widely in the epigraphy of Oscan-speaking Italy and was equivalent to the Latin *magistratus* (Festus, p. 110: Lindsay, 1913). The title **meddiss** is often followed by the adjective **túvtíks**, meaning 'of the **touto**', a political community attested in much of Oscan-speaking Italy which varied in geographical range. In Samnium, many of the known **meddiss túvtíks** inscriptions come from the fortified centre of Bovianum c. 8 km from Monte Vairano (De Benedittis, 2018–2019; Lee, 2022) and a nearby sanctuary (Crawford, 2011; 987–1033); they reveal that the terms of the **meddiss túvtíks** supported an eponymous system of time reckoning, like the Roman consuls or Athenian archons. Based on the Bovianum evidence, Letta (1994) proposed that, in Samnium, the **meddiss túvtíks** presided over a republican-type community that was coterminous with the individual settlement (*contra* La Regina, 1981). Letta's model is compatible with descriptions in literary sources of the heavy infantry of Samnite armies, which arguably relied on a large constituency of independent citizen farmers capable of equipping themselves with weaponry and armour, as in the cities of Tyrrhenian Italy (I owe this suggestion to an anonymous reviewer).

At Monte Vairano, no epigraphic evidence for political organization or autonomy has hitherto been identified. Whereas De Benedittis (1990: 16) has hypothesized a local political structure similar to Bovianum's, Bispham (2007: 203) sees the settlement as too small to have necessitated a complex administration. The apparent absence of an intramural sanctuary is certainly problematic, as we could

expect to find such a structure if a significant degree of sociopolitical integration had developed at the site. We know that cult places were a key venue for the negotiation of community membership in antiquity, and joint worship in sanctuaries was frequently used to promote civic integration and identity in *poleis* (Hansen & Nielsen, 2004). While Monte Vairano's political status cannot be inferred from written or epigraphic sources or by the presence of a sanctuary, the building of stone fortifications is arguably indicative of significant communal cohesion at the site.

In a study of *polis* formation in the Aegean, Anthony Snodgrass noted that fortifications can be indicative of different types of communal integration, depending on whether they encircle an entire inhabited area or only the hilltop with the chieftain's hall, or constitute isolated fortresses away from settled areas (Snodgrass, 1991: 7–8). The wall circuit at Monte Vairano would appear to be at the more inclusive and communal end of Snodgrass's spectrum, enclosing a 50 ha area. These walls were extensive enough to hold considerable numbers of people and animals, almost certainly more than a select group of households or families. The gateways, furthermore, would have been wide enough to allow the passage of several people and animals at a time, which would have been essential in the event of a military emergency.

It is worth recalling that the development of Monte Vairano as a fortified centre took place in a late-fourth century BC context marked by the start of two broadly interlocking processes: escalating warfare in connection with the Roman conquest of Italy, which seems to have hit Samnium particularly hard during the so-called Samnite wars of 343–290 BC (Terrenato, 2019); and the multiplication of small rural sites in central Italy,

including the countryside around Monte Vairano in the upper Biferno valley, where archaeological surveys identified an increase of at least fifty per cent in the number of 'definite and probable sites' from c. 350 BC (Lloyd 1995: 187). As Lloyd (1995: 187–88) observed, these sites are 'by far the most numerous of any period of comparable length in the valley's pre-modern history'. These small rural sites, e.g. the farmhouse at Gildone (di Niro, 1991; see also Rainini, 1996), do not seem to have had their own permanent defensive structures. Such an overall context probably generated a strong demand for the large-scale, long-term security that Monte Vairano offered. This would have continued throughout the third century BC, when intermittent bouts of warfare affected the central Italian uplands, both directly and indirectly. By the end of the Second Punic War (201 BC), decades-long use of Monte Vairano as a shared stronghold probably supported the site's development as a focus of communal identity at the local level, which would help explain the ensuing signs of communal investment and economic growth at the settlement in the second century BC.

There may have been a final moment in Monte Vairano's lifespan when the fortifications regained some of their function as collective protection, in the build-up to the Social War of 91–87 BC, which had catastrophic results for Samnium. We know that nearby Bovianum was sacked and destroyed in 89 BC. This seems a very likely context for the traces of destruction and decline detected at Monte Vairano, namely the conflagration in the *Quartiere* which seems to have involved the House of LN and led to its abandonment, and the infilling of the cylindrical cistern in Terrace A (De Benedittis, 1980: 327, 1988: 54; De Benedittis et al., 2013: 103, 108).

CONCLUSION

The growing quantity and quality of contextualized archaeological evidence, along with comparative approaches to pre-modern urbanism, encourages us to revise ideas about the non-urban nature of some Italian mountain societies of the late-first millennium BC. Before we can produce syntheses of what was probably a multifaceted scenario, microscale analyses of individual settlements will contribute to a better understanding of their demographic and socioeconomic profiles, their degree of occupational diversity, their sociopolitical dynamics, their ranges of connectivity, and their level of integration as political communities.

Monte Vairano appears to have been a large and prosperous centre, where significant amounts of energy and resources were generated and invested, and where people from different rungs of society converged over centuries. Conditions were probably in place for all of this to coalesce into a cohesive civic collective. There is still much to discover about the institutions, values, and identities that somewhat muted communities such as this may have developed, or how unique they were in the context of the late-first millennium BC Mediterranean.

How Monte Vairano's complex socio-economic profile can be understood in a broader comparative perspective also warrants further investigation. In other contexts of first-millennium BC Italy, processes of accelerated social change involving settlement nucleation and urbanization have been seen to correlate with increased social marginalization (see e.g. Perego & Scopacasa, 2016). This study, by contrast, suggests that the development of Monte Vairano as a nucleated settlement with urban characteristics resulted in a situation where material comfort and luxuries may have been more equally

negotiated in society: people living in modest dwellings had access to standards of domestic comfort found elsewhere in well-provisioned farmhouses and high-end *villae*; and the fruits of communally generated wealth, such as imported fine wines from the Greek East, circulated in busy public areas where work-related activities took place. It could therefore be that access to wealth was relatively egalitarian in this mountain settlement; it remains to be determined whether a similar profile is detectable in other similar centres. Overall, further discussion of these issues can shed light on the extent to which the mountain societies of late-first millennium BC Italy developed urban characteristics and how they compare with urban societies elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean.

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Les dimensions urbaines d'une société montagnarde : Monte Vairano à la fin du premier millénaire av. J.-C (Samnium, Italie)

Les communautés des Monts Samnites en Italie centrale sont considérées comme non-urbaines, bien qu'ayant atteint des objectifs impressionnants, y compris une vive résistance à l'essor de l'impérialisme romain à la fin du premier millénaire av. J.-C. Un nombre croissant d'études a souligné que les centres samnites combinaient une série de fonctions et qu'on pourrait les décrire comme des agglomérations, voire des centres urbains. L'auteur de cet article présente une analyse détaillée du site de Monte Vairano, dans une perspective urbaine comparative. Le site acquit un profil socioéconomique complexe et aurait pu remplir une fonction cohésive dans l'articulation politique de la société, ce qui le rapproche de

certaines notions d'urbanisme. Cette étude concernant le degré d'urbanisation d'une communauté montagnarde italienne de la fin du premier millénaire av. J.-C. est offerte comme contribution aux recherches sur les sociétés urbaines du monde méditerranéen pendant l'Antiquité. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Mots clés: Italie, Samnium, urbanisme, agglomération, échelle détaillée, habitats

Städtische Dimensionen in einer Berggesellschaft des späten ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. in Italien: Monte Vairano in Samnium

Die Gemeinschaften der zentralitalienischen Berglandschaft werden als nicht städtisch angesehen, obschon sie beachtliche Ziele erreichten, besonders im Widerstand gegen den wachsenden römischen Imperialismus des späten ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. Mehrere neuere Untersuchungen haben aber betont, dass Samnitische Siedlungszentren verschiedene Funktionen erfüllten und dass man sie als Sammelsiedlungen oder sogar städtische Siedlungen beschreiben kann. In diesem Artikel wird eine Feinanalyse einer dieser Siedlungen, Monte Vairano, aus der Sichtweise einer vergleichenden urbanistischen Untersuchung vorgelegt. Monte Vairano war sozioökonomisch komplex und konnte potenziell eine einheitliche politische Gemeinschaft bilden, was mit bestimmten Aspekten des Urbanismus übereinstimmt. Der Verfasser hofft, dass die vorliegende Studie des Urbanisierungsniveaus der Berggemeinschaften des späten ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. in Italien als Beitrag zur vergleichenden Erforschung von anderen städtischen Gesellschaften im antiken Mittelmeerraum dienen kann. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Stichworte: Italien, Samnium, Urbanismus, Sammelsiedlung, Feinanalyse, Siedlungen