Monte Barro: An Ostrogothic Fortified Site in the Alps

by A. Javier Martínez Jiménez

This paper is a reassessment of the original publications of the fortified site of Monte Barro, near Lake Como in Italy, excavated by G.P. Brogiolo and L. Castelletti, which studies its role within the Ostrogothic frontier system. The site is located on a mountain, overlooking the Po plain, but it is close enough to the Alpine passes to control the access into Italy. Built and fortified during the Ostrogothic period, the site was destroyed during the period of the Gothic Wars in the mid sixth century. Because of its location, its views and fortifications, it would be possible to think that it was a fort, especially as it fits perfectly into the Ostrogothic Alpine fortifications, but neither its finds, nor the presence of the main building fully support this statement. Above all, the presence of a bronze hanging crown seems to indicate that some sort of Gothic noble or official lived at the site, which may give Monte Barro not necessarily the category of villa or palace, but certainly an important role within the Gothic administration, probably linked to the Alpine fortifications.

Key words: Ostrogoths, fortification system, Monte Barro, Alps, hanging crown.

Introduction

Monte Barro is an isolated mountain in the pre-Alpine zone, opposite to Lecco and near Lake Como (fig. 1; 45º49'55"N 9º22'00"E). Its main terrace, known as Piani di Barra (650 metres above sea level), was excavated during the 1980s and 1990s under Gian Pietro Brogiolo and Lanfredo Castelletti, both well known archaeologists specialising in the late antique period of north Italy. Since its first publication in 1991 (and then its second volume in 2001), it has become a very important element of scholarly discussion regarding fortifications and Gothic settlement during the late fifth and sixth centuries. Nevertheless, very little has been said about this site and this problem in English. This paper will be, as far as I am aware, the only thorough study of the site in English.

The site was built during a period of relative calm, in the early sixth century, but it seems to have been integrated into a general system of fortifications, a militarised landscape created by the Goths but still heir to the Roman works. Its life was short, and the site was destroyed violently during the course of the Gothic Wars in the mid sixth century. Monte Barro is presented as a fortified *castrum*. However, the site does not really seem to be a real fort, as there are several things present at the site that do not seem to belong in a fort, and there are other things that should be in a fort but are not present at Monte Barro.

This paper will try to explain and analyse what the site's function might have been and how this fits in its territorial context, both by analysing its location and surrounding territory (comparing it to similar sites), and the nature of the site's own internal structure and its finds. This will be done by means of explaining and reasoning its different possible functions (fort, administrative centre, aristocratic residence and fortified refuge) after analysing the site's buildings and finds. Of key importance will be its bronze hanging crown.
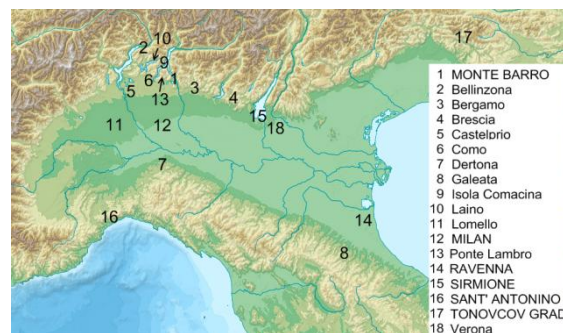

Figure 1 Map of northern Italy locating sites mentioned in the text, highlighting those discussed at length, based on a map by Eric Gaba (under CC-SA licence).

The Site

The Buildings and Fortifications

The site of Monte Barro (fig. 2) consists of a series of buildings surrounded by a fortification only known to have existed intermittently. The buildings that can be identified, and which have been excavated, are divided into three main sectors (B, C and F) and then numbered. The buildings are

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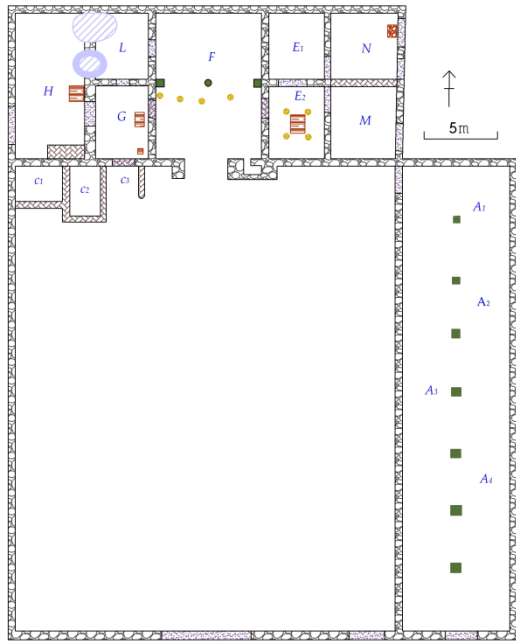distributed over several terraces of the Piani di Barra.

Figure 2 Plan of the main building at Monte Barro. Pillars in green, post-holes in orange, and hearths in red (original drawing based on Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 31).

Sector B is the main terrace, situated above the other ones, and it is where the main building (fig. 3) is built. The main building is so-called not only because of its size and layout (a courtyard surrounded by three two-storey buildings), but also because of the finds which include glass (cups, glasses and windows), coloured stuccoed walls, roof tiles, fine ceramic wares, a cloisonné ring, a pair of riding spurs, and most notably the hanging crown (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 48-9, 92-3, 247-9; 2001: 63-4). Of the three wings, only the north and east ones have been preserved, the former divided into several rooms, including a reception hall on the second floor, and the latter being a long single structure, used as a presumed barracks (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 37-43, 32, 35-6).

Sector C (fig. 3) lies south of sector B, and it is composed of several buildings, of which only buildings II, III, IV and V have been excavated in full. Buildings II, III and IV are built around a *cortile* (courtyard), while building V lies between the main building and these other three structures (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 24-61). Sector F lies west of the main building, on the far edge of the terrace, and of the buildings there, only building VII was fully excavated. Located on this lower terrace is the

only known water source surviving today (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 66-75). It is assumed that these structures were dwellings, according to the presence of several hearths (almost one per room) and the finds (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 138-9, 142, 154, 175-9), which include common and fine ceramic wares, combs, loom-weights, glass cups and other everyday metal objects (knives, rings, etc.). Furthermore, the similar layout of buildings II, III, IV, V, and VIII (three parallel rooms with a communal porch) has been linked with multi-family dwellings (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 84). However, most of the buildings in sectors C and F were multi-functional, as elements of storage (amphorae) and metal working (forge and bellows) have been identified in some of these (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 46-9).

The fortifications of Monte Barro (see fig. 3, in green) have been surveyed around the terrace on which the main buildings are located and two areas have been excavated; the walls beyond the terrace towards the East (known as the *muraioo*) and the defences up on the top of the mountain (known as the *Eremo*). Little is known of the walls around the terrace apart from their location.
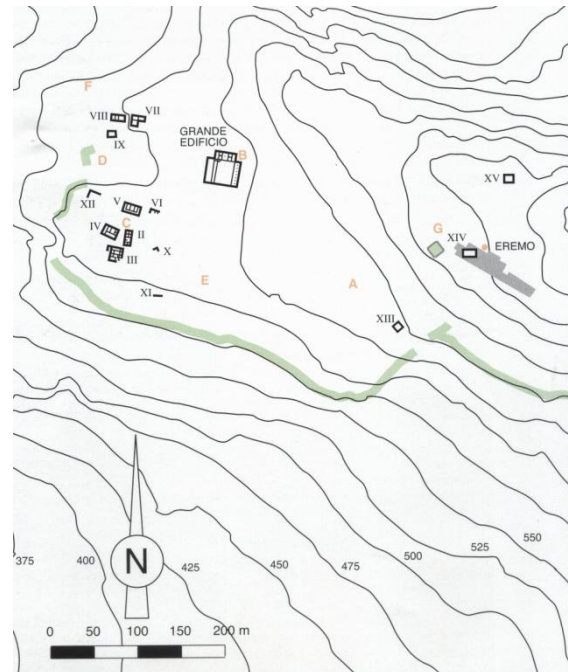

Figure 3 Plan of the site of Monte Barro with its fortifications (in green), from Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 14 (with permission of the authors and the Monte Barro museum).

The walls of the *muraioo* (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 51) were built in mortared rubble with small stones extracted from the

exposed bedrock, they are around a metre thick, and were placed in an area of a *very* steep slope, so much so that it needed buttressing piers in some points. This causes us to wonder whether it was really intended to defend access to the site, considering how difficult access to this slope already is, or whether it was just a way of linking the three towers that were built in this area by means of a defended and stable walkway (see Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 51). These walls were built at a constant level of 650-700 metres above sea level.

Of the three identified towers (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 51-3) built on this wall only two were excavated. The towers were built in mortared rubble, just as the wall, and both those excavated (2 and 3) had tiled roofs. Tower 2 (fig. 4) was smaller (3.85x3.40m) than tower 3 (6.20x4.40m), and it was built with buttressing spurs, whereas tower 3 was built with deep foundation trenches. Tower 2 had an internal staircase on its west wall, of which three steps survive, which went around the north wall (passing above the door) clockwise (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 52).
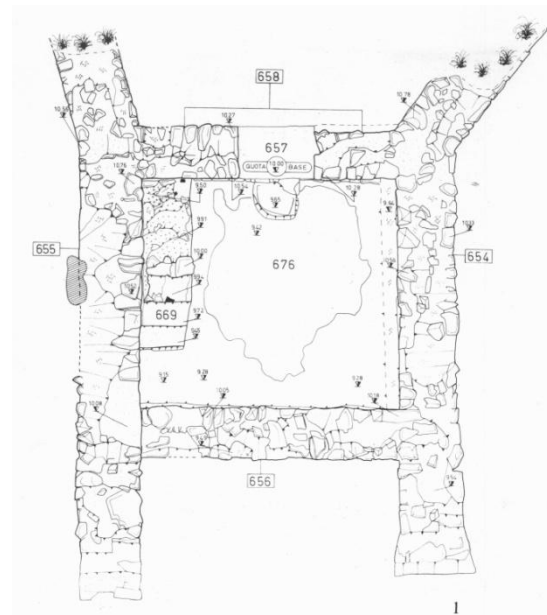

Figure 4 Plan of tower 2 in Monte Barro, from Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991, t. XIV.1 (with permission of the authors and the Monte Barro museum).

The fortifications of the *Eremo* (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 54-5) that have been surveyed and excavated, consisted of a wall and a tower (south tower). The *Eremo* is the rocky spur on the top of the mountain, and the walls there have not provided any dating evidence, which becomes a frustrating detail when we look closer at this structure. At the *Eremo*, a building that may have been a church could have been identified, but it has not been excavated (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 77). Unlike the other towers, the *Eremo* tower is built using bricks together with mortared rubble, which the excavators relate to a previous structure, on top of which the south tower was built. The issue of the bricks is very interesting, because it may be that an early tiled structure collapsed (maybe another tower) and then its tiles and rubble were used to build the new tower.

The Date of the Site

We shall focus now on the date of the site, which is a major issue in this discussion. The site of Monte Barro, contrary to the dating proposed by some modern scholars (Heather 1996: 238-9; Christie 2006: 456), does not seem to date to the late Roman period, but to the early sixth century (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 55). This means that the site is fully Ostrogothic rather than late Roman.

From the start it must be said that there has been no pottery found that dates before the first half of the fifth century (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: figs. 151, 153, 156-8). Thus, categorically, this site was built *ex novo* during Late Antiquity. The stratigraphy of the settlement has revealed that the earliest levels seem to consist of a series of post-built structures, which have been found under the main building and other structures in sector C. In the main building, the levels on top of the sterile soil that contain these post-holes (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: tables V and VII; US [*unità stratigrafica*, stratigraphic unit] 440 and 383) covered an area that disregards the later room divisions (rooms *H*, *L* and *G* all share US 440). This suggests that these layers and post-holes had no relation with the later building. However, as no conclusive dating elements have been found in these contexts, there is no clear evidence for a late Roman (pre-476) occupation, unless the previously described tower of the *Eremo* has an earlier Roman date which has not been positively identified.

Without any solid evidence for a permanent pre-476 settlement, we must focus now on the buildings of Monte Barro in order to date them. The construction of the site can be archaeologically dated with the evidence outlined below.

In the main building, a single potsherd of Hayes 97 was found in US 524 together with a coin of Marcian (450-7). This type of pottery is dated by Hayes to AD 490-550 (Hayes 1972: 150-1). US 524 is the foundation level of room *N*, on top of the sterile soil and underneath the levelled mortar floor of US 521 (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: table XXI.2). This floor most probably had these elements, both coin and potsherd, crushed underneath the mortar floor when it was levelled as a foundation for the floor, therefore giving us a *post quem* construction date of 490 (see table 1 in Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991).

The fortifications have not produced any good dating evidence beyond a fifth- to sixth-century bronze fibula (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 51). This just confirms that the buildings and fortifications are contemporary, although it does not help in deciding whether the fortifications were built earlier or at the same time as the rest of the site.

When Theoderic took over Italy (AD 493), he distributed Odoacer's lands (mainly in the Po valley) amongst his men, creating a 'Gothic core land' (*Variae* 6.22, cf. Wolfram 1988: 295), and in the Alpine region he established a series of forts that would substitute the old late Roman border troops, known as *limitanei* (Wolfram 1988: 299; Christie 2006*:* 341; Heather 1996: 237), although their existence in Italy is disputed. Assuming that Monte Barro was a fort (and we shall discuss this later), we could link its construction to these historically attested fortification efforts.

The north wing of the main building (fig. 2; and table 1 in Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991) has several dating elements in its levels of use. These are clearly linked to the use of the building, because each stratigraphic unit corresponds to a room: i.e., the walls limit the stratigraphic contexts. Amongst the dating elements there are coins of Honorius (410-23), Valentinian III (425-55), and Marcian (450-7), elements that could suggest a Roman phase. However, a coin of Hilderic, king of the Vandals (523-30), found in US 504 gives a later date for this same level. In US 209 a Roman coin re-struck (*terminus ante quem* AD 534) by the Vandals was found (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 48-9). These two Vandal coins together give us a post-523 date. The east wing presents one level of use (US 59), where coins of Athalaric (526-34) and Witigis (536-40) were found. This suggests overall use in the period 520-540. No coins or pottery dating from after the Byzantine conquest of this area (540-550) have been found.

In sector C, key dating elements comprise several coins, amongst which the most important are that of Leo (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 41) and several *Felix Ravenna* coins (B. II and cortile - Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 56). The issue of the *Felix Ravenna* coins (showing the monogram of Ravenna and the legend FELIXR · ΛVENNΛ) seems to have been first minted in Ravenna when Rome was lost to Belisarius, and hence the lack of S·C in the Ravenna coins (Grierson 1986: 33). The Ravenna coins therefore were substitutes for coins minted in Rome and were minted until Ravenna was taken over by Belisarius in 540 (Grierson 1986: 33 and 38; plate 9 in p. 435). Amongst the datable fine-wares we have four shards of Hayes 104 c. 530-80 (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 41, 61, 56, 74; Hayes 1972*:* 160 and 166), one of Hayes 103 c. 520-80 (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 50; Hayes 1972: 157, 159-60) and one early to mid-sixth century Hayes 95 (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 50; Hayes 1972: 149), all of which seem to correlate the finds from the main building, in a rough use date of 520-560.

The stratigraphy of both the towers in the *muraioo* and the *Eremo* shows two occupation phases. The *muraioo* towers had a thin initial occupation layer (perhaps denoting a short occupation), followed by abandonment strata, then a much richer and thicker stratum implying perhaps a longer occupation, and a final destruction-by-fire phase which is reminiscent of the burning phases of the other buildings (see below). The *Eremo* shows also two occupation moments, each linked to one of the towers built on the same spot (see above, Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 54-5). The lack of dating evidence prevents anything beyond educated guesses about its nature.

In the *muraioo* towers, the thin first level of use is maybe related to the construction of the site, when there was the need to protect it while it was being built, and the thicker second level of use can be related to military activity in the area perhaps caused by the Byzantine invasion of Italy (AD 535), when there was a greater need for vigilance. Alternatively, the thin first layer could be related to the early timber structures identified under the main building, but without any dating evidence, we cannot say for sure.

The burnt levels in *all* the buildings and towers suggest a violent end to the settlement. In the main building, stratigraphic levels of debris such as US 400*,* 304 and 204 covering *the entire* north wing (table 1, Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991), regardless of the room

distribution, are an indicator of collapse of the building.

Building II has the only dating element found in the destruction levels (US 2092): a *siliqua* of Athalaric (c. 527-534 - Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 28); which just provides us a *terminus post quem* of 527.

However, in building VII a carbonised chestnut was found in a destruction level (US 3040). The radiocarbon date given by it was the following:

> 1460±40 BP [2 sig (95.4%) : 530-670 AD] : 550±20 AD.

The radiocarbon date may not be precise, but it supports our dating of c. 560 AD for the destruction of the site (Brogiolo and Castelletti 2001: 281-3).

These destruction levels are dated to the period of the Byzantine conquest of Italy, the Gothic War. This war began in 535 when Belisarius took Sicily and Illyricum, and from the south, he marched north with his troops towards Ravenna. While Ravenna was being besieged, Milan and the north (where most of the Goths were settled) surrendered in 538 (Heather 1996: 266, cf. *Bellum Gothicum* 6.11-12). With Ravenna captured, the war seemed to be over, but the newly proclaimed king Totila began a large rebellion against the Byzantines in 540 (Heather 1996: 267), which extended the war another twenty years until the final Byzantine conquest in 558-60 (Heather 1996: 271). It would be difficult to link the destruction of Monte Barro with a single event in the war, but it is reasonable to assume that the site was destroyed in the period of the wars (540-560) when the Po plain was in a state of continual war.

The Hanging Crown

There is little else to say on the finds of the site, as the material culture retrieved from Monte Barro is not exceptional in any way, and has been outlined above. Amongst the finds of Monte Barro, there is one object which is set apart from the rest and which deserves especial attention in terms of its craftsmanship, nature and meaning: the bronze hanging crown.

The crown (fig. 5) was found in the remains relating to the collapsed upper floor of the north wing of the main building. The crown was found in five twisted fragments with three

segments of chain. It is made out of a single thin (0.1cm) sheet of bronze and is 20cm in diameter (reconstructed). The decoration of the top and bottom edges comprises alternating curves and angles. This decoration corresponds to that of the sheet: the curves consist of cut-out semi-circles on the top and bottom bands, whereas the central band alternates triangles with their base up or down. Semi-circles and triangles are decorated in their perimeter with punched (repoussé) dots. From the bottom angles, elements of bronze, green and orange glass paste hang (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 106). It was located in the main room of the north wing, apparently *in situ*, indicating that it was probably the administrative centre of the fort.

Figure 5 Drawing of the reconstructed hanging crown, from Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: t. LIX (with permission of the authors and the Monte Barro museum).

The same room had three hanging crosses and some sheets of mica. The crosses show a Germanic influence because of their trapezoidal ends (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 113). These crosses are found elsewhere in relationship with lamps, which seems to be confirmed in this case because of the mica found and its refractive nature (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 110, 114). Hanging crowns are sometimes found in association with other types of hanging lamps (Weitzmann 1979: 594).

The crown as an object cannot be precisely dated; it is dated within the chronology of the site: AD 500-560.

Hanging crowns may have their origin in the Roman *oscilla* (Israeli and Merovali 2000: 105-9) and they appear in many sources, both written and archaeological, despite the fact that none of these *oscilla* survived (Weitzmann 1979: 594). They probably also derive from Roman military crowns, and thus had a triumphal meaning for emperors, consuls or generals.

Although crowns have been linked to kingship, in the late antique period they seem to have maintained a symbolism of honour and victory, rather than kingship (which was represented by a diadem). As Isidore says in his early seventh-century *Etymologiae*: '[the] crown [is] a symbol of victory, or a sign of royal honour' (19.30.1). This could be linked to the hanging crown present in the diptych of consul Magnus, displayed as part of his official regalia (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 110; Weitzmann 1979: 50; cf. Delbrueck 1929: 135, items 20-24). Similar crowns appear in Christian contexts, as we know that there were over a hundred of them in Saint Sophia (Cortés 2001: 371), there is one in the Pola casket, and they are mentioned as presents in the *Liber Pontificalis* (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 108-9).

The only surviving hanging crowns come from the Visigothic kingdom of Iberia. The Visigoths used these crowns as symbols of their own power, although the ones we have are of a votive nature. Each king seems to have donated a crown in the palace to commemorate their reign, and this was later registered in post-conquest chronicles, both Christian and Muslim (cf. Hernández Juberías 1996: 194-8; Ibn Habib, n. 44; Velázquez 2001: 325-6). These crowns were later found in the church of Guarrazar, 13 kilometres away from Toledo (Perea 2001: 67-78) because they were taken there from the 'hall of crowns' during the Umayyad invasion of 711 (Perea 2001: 354). Of these crowns, the most impressive are those of kings Recceswinth (653-672) and Swinthila (621-631), made with two sheets of gold, cloisonné decoration and many jewels and pearls (Museo Arqueológico Nacional 71.203; cf. Perea 2001: 35; cf. García Serrano 2006: 387, 8). Reccared seems to have also donated a crown, but this time at a saint's tomb, as was registered during Wamba's reign in the late seventh century (*Historia Wambae Regis* 26, lines 675-83). Crowns were in this context signs of royal honour, but not of kingship, as the Goths were anointed (Julian of Toledo *Epistula Pauli:* 'Paulus *unctus* rex orientalis'), not crowned, as Isidore says: 'reges *quidam gentium* aureas coronas utuntur'- 'kings of *some [other] nations* use golden crowns' (*Etymol.* 19.30.3).

There are three smaller non-royal crowns found in Spain (Museo Arqueológico Nacional 71.204-5 and Palacio Real de Madrid 10012363; cf. Perea 2001: 36-7, 49; García Serrano 2006: 389-90), but these are smaller. They are decorated with geometric patterns in repoussé and chasing. All three also have glass-paste hanging elements and are made out of a single sheet with geometric decoration. They are similar in size, thus far more similar to that of Monte Barro than those donated by kings. Even if Visigothic crowns were golden, we should remember that the crown from Monte Barro is made out of bronze and in its earlier days must also have been golden in colour. One of the crowns (that in the royal palace) has an inscription saying 'Offeret munusculum s[an]c[t]o Stephano Theodosius abba' – 'Theodosius the abbot offers this small present to saint Stephen', which implies that in the Gothic kingdom these items were also used as dedications, maybe thanksgiving? These minor crowns, like the Monte Barro one, may well have belonged neither to the highest aristocracy nor royalty, but certainly to people with rank and wealth. Either way we have to link crowns with single individuals as donors or receivers of honour.

The Roman hanging crowns were symbols of victory and honour, not necessarily of *power* despite the fact that victory, honour and power are closely linked concepts. When the Goths created their kingdoms, they took over these Roman symbols of honour and used them as their own, making them with their traditional techniques (cloisonné in the case of the Visigothic crowns). The earliest known Visigothic crown is that of Reccared (r. 587-602) mentioned in the *History of King Wamba* thus over forty years after the end of Monte Barro. Can we assume then that the crown is Gothic? We know that the site was an Ostrogothic-period fort, and a Roman symbol of power in a Gothic context may well point towards Theoderic's policy of Roman continuity.

But, what does the crown mean in the context of Monte Barro? It could be a symbol of honour and victory, two concepts that would fit in a military context, but for whom? We could assume that the Goths already used the hanging crown as a symbol of honour, and the

geometric decoration could point towards Germanic manufacture, so the crown would point towards a Gothic officer residing in the main building. But who would it belong to? A royal officer or commander? A local governor?

It would be tempting to see the crown in Monte Barro as a sign of royal foundation, but the crown and the foundation of the site cannot be matched on an archaeological basis. Nevertheless, the presence of this crown clearly points towards a direct link between central Gothic administration and the site, or at least, to a member of the Gothic elite.

Monte Barro and the North Italian Military Administration

It is difficult to classify Monte Barro within a category of site, as it has elements which are common to fortifications and elite dwellings. For the excavators, Monte Barro was definitely a Gothic military settlement (*insediamento militare*), which did not survive the destruction of the main building (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 55). The other buildings, as already mentioned, were dwelling structures, which could be linked to families living in the site. But was Monte Barro really a fort? How similar is it to other contemporary fortifications of the region?

Following the excavators' suggestion, we will now try to fit Monte Barro within the late Roman and Ostrogothic north Italian context by examining other similar sites. I would be inclined to consider the crown as an important find, indicating a close relationship between the inhabitants of the site and the central administration, so Monte Barro may also be framed within the Ostrogothic (military?) administration of the Alpine and Padane region.

Monte Barro, a Fort?

Considering that the site was fortified with walls and towers, and that it seems to have been violently destroyed during the Gothic War, it is within reason to assume that Monte Barro was a fort (Brogiolo and Gelichi 1995: 239-40).

Its location on a hilltop is also typical of late antique fortifications: Monte Barro is placed on a site that oversees a wide territory and it is easily defended using the natural slopes of the mountain. Its location is, furthermore, related to the series of forts built by Theoderic

(Wolfram 1988: 299; Christie 2006: 341; Heather 1996: 237) on the Alps, which continued the late Roman strategy (Brogiolo and Gelichi 1996: 9-10), as will be explained below.

Monte Barro shares several characteristics with other known forts of the period and region. Even though several others are known and excavated (Lomello, Castel S. Pietro, Bellinzona, Isola Comacina, Laino, Ponte Lambro, Monte Castelo di Giano, etc.; Brogiolo 1999), for the sake of brevity we will just mention Sant'Antonino, which has been thoroughly published.
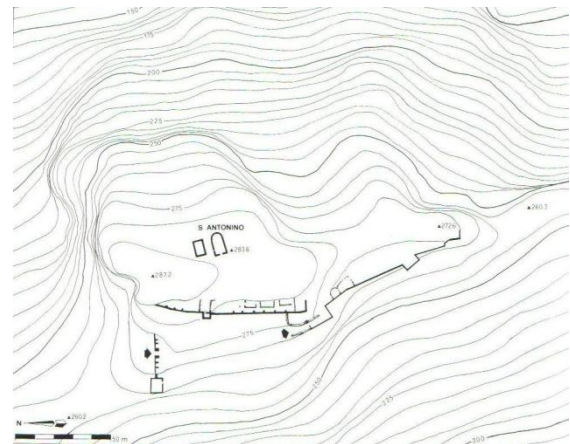

Figure 6 Fort of Sant'Antonino, from Mannoni and Murialdo 2001: 92, fig. 8.1 (with permission of the authors).

Sant'Antonino in Liguria (fig. 6) is a mid-to-late sixth-century Byzantine fortified hilltop enclave, roughly contemporary with Monte Barro (Mannoni and Murialdo 2001 vol. 1). However, in Sant'Antonino there is clear evidence for a fortified entrance which was only accessible once a previous set of towers had been surpassed and even then, the gate was designed in an s-shape. At Monte Barro no gate has been found, but we must suppose there was one. The walls were also built in mortared rubble, and featured buttressing spurs to make them more solid, just as at Monte Barro. However, Sant'Antonino seems to have been far better fortified than Monte Barro, as it had a smaller and more manageable double-walled enclosure, and its fortifications were more robust (Mannoni and Murialdo 2001 vol. 1: 91-100, 120-31). Finally, as at Monte Barro, the ceramic and bone finds seem to indicate that the fort was supplied foodstuffs from the outside (allegedly in this case, by the Byzantine *annona*), and the necklaces, beads and gems found show that whole families may have lived in the fortified enclosure (Mannoni and Murialdo 2001 vol.

2). It is surprising that border forts of the period held permanent garrisons of troops with their families (Christie 2006: 353, cf. *Variae* 2.5), but this seems to have been the case.

Are these enough coincidences to see Monte Barro as a fort? A slightly later written source gives us a detailed account on how to build a late Roman border fort: Maurice's *Strategikon* (c. 582-602). We can assume that, as both Ostrogoths and Byzantines inherited Rome's military organisation, most probably the Byzantine description could be accurate. The *Strategikon* states that border forts should be built on hill-tops, from where signals could be sent, and should be built in a solid way with bricks, stones and mortar. Maurice also recommended that the site be able to store provisions for three or four months and water in big cisterns if there was not a stream close enough (Maurice, *Strategikon*, 10.4). The walls of Monte Barro were built in the recommended manner, and the storage room F in the main building (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 41), together with the presence of readily chopped animal bones across the site can certainly relate to provisions.

But there are several elements that prevent us from labelling Monte Barro as a fort. Going back to the finds, it is very telling that no martial gear whatsoever has been found at the site, excepting a pair of riding spurs (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 116-7, found in US 201, room e1 of the north wing, in the main building), and these are expected finds at forts, such as Sant'Antonino. There are no granaries or any other large storage areas (excepting for the storage room F in the main building - cf. fig. 2). Its size also places Monte Barro apart from other fortified hilltops: according to Mannoni and Murialdo's classification (2001 vol. 1: 101-12), Monte Barro would fit their type IV which corresponds to great *castra* with further functions, other than purely military, just like Castelseprio, a fifth- to sixth-century fortified site which as Monte Barro, also had a church (Mannoni and Murialdo 2001 vol. 1: 112; Brogiolo 1999: 14; Christie 1991: 426). This would fit what we had already said about the hanging crown. The presence of such an object must be related to a powerful individual, probably linked to the central administration. But would that mean that Monte Barro was part of the Ostrogothic territorial administration?

The Late Roman Alpine Defence Systems

Ever since the northern borders were crossed by invading barbarians in the course of the third century AD, the Roman Empire had an increasing awareness of the need for defending Italy, which had only before been invaded in Hannibal's time (218 BC). The earlier Roman tactic of a single fortified border had been proved to fail in a critical moment (Luttwak 1976: 130) and the Empire reacted by creating a 'defence in depth' which through time included the fortification of Italy and its mountain passes (Christie 2006: 298-9).

This 'defence in depth' was based on key fortified sites with an increasingly militarised hinterland that would turn the invaded territory into a hostile terrain for any invader force (Luttwak 1976: 140-1, fig. 3.2). This defence was structured into a network of hierarchically organised nodes (fortified cities, forts, garrisons) allowing the local troops to skirmish the enemies until mobile troops arrived on the spot (Luttwak 1976: 130-7).

The Roman Empire applied this system to its northern frontier in Italy (i.e. the Alps) from the fourth century AD onwards (Christie 2006: 304). The first of these systems was called the *Clausura Alpium* which failed in its mission of closing the eastern approaches (Johnson 1983: 215; Christie 2006: 325; Brogiolo and Gelichi 1996: 14), and was consequently extended to the whole of the Alpine range, in what is called in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (of roughly AD 420) the *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* (Christie 2006: 326; Brogiolo and Gelichi 1996: 14).

The *Clausura Alpium* was established to protect in particular the Julian Alps, the eastern and lowest part of the mountains, to prevent invasions into Italy in the fourth century AD (probably under Constantine). It consisted of a series of fortification lines (up to three) protecting the roads and passes from modern Ljubljana to Aquileia. However, this system was not effective in times of need, as it became a central focus in the civil wars during the fourth century, and so was basically destroyed by the Romans by the early fifth century, meaning that Alaric and his Visigoths could go through these formerly fortified lines without encountering any trouble (Christie 1991: 471; 2006: 325). Despite its failure, it was expanded to the rest of the Alpine range.

The *Tractus Italiae* was the extension of the *Clausura* across the Alps, which we know from the *Notitia Dignitatum* (*Not. Dig*. XXVIII: *Sub dispositione viri spectabilis comitis Italiae;*

Tractus circa Alpes: 423), similar to other comparable *tractus* mentioned for other frontiers (*Not. Dig.* XXIX, XXXVII: 425-7, 463-4). It is not known for how long it was in existence. Fortification efforts later in the fifth century seem to indicate that the system did not work (Christie 1991: 420-1). We do not know how many forts or soldiers were deployed in this system, although they were all under the command of the *comes* (count), and we can only trust the illustrations of the codex to get an idea of this fortification system. However, if compared with the archaeological evidence, we can conclude that, in a perfect example of 'defence in depth', the defence was organised from (re)fortified cities such as Milan, Turin and Verona, which controlled a series of forts, watch towers and outposts controlling the Alpine passes (Christie 2006: 326-7,334-9; Brogiolo 1999: 13-4; Brogiolo and Gelichi 1996: 11-4).

These land defences were complemented by the lake fortifications (at the lakes Garda, Como, Orta, d'Iseo) during the fifth century (already mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum*), perhaps employing troops from the Danube fleet once that frontier was abandoned. Lakes were not only equipped with fleets but also with watch towers and other fortifications and garrisons (Christie 2006: 314, 341; Brogiolo and Gelichi 1996: 22, Brogiolo 1999: 15, 35).

Yet these defences were capable of stopping neither the Visigoths of Alaric in the first decade of the fifth century, nor the Huns of Attila in 453 or the Ostrogoths of Theoderic once Odoacer had taken over Italy. This may be why Theoderic decided to rebuild the defences, following the same late Roman tactic of a 'defence in depth'.

Monte Barro and the Ostrogothic System

Unlike Roman emperors, Theoderic paid much more attention to the northern defences than the southern ones, and thus he ordered that many of the towns and forts had their walls rebuilt, as shown both by the archaeological record (Verona, Settia) and Cassiodorus' letters (Christie 2006: 357, 362), one of which even suggests the inhabitants moved to a more defensive position (*Variae* 3.48). The lake defences were also reinforced and increased, as in Sirmione, which was re-fortified by Theoderic with a wall that encircled the peninsula and especially the isthmus (*Variae* 5.17.6; 5.20.3; Brogiolo 1999: 14-5, 35-6; Christie 2006: 314). This reconstruction

sought to increase the security of northern Italy, but we cannot be certain that it was improving the pre-existing *Tractus* or setting up a new one (cf. Christie 2006: 367). Furthermore, it seems that the Ostrogoths expanded the frontier beyond the Alps, to the non-Italian side of the passes (Christie 2006: 357), so the old Roman *Tractus* seems not to have been kept in its original location. It is in this context that Monte Barro was built, overlooking the road that connects the cities at the foot of the main passes (fig. 1; from Milan to Como, and then to Bergamo, Brescia, Sirmione and Verona). The fact that Monte Barro is linked to this road from Milan could suggest a connection with the *Tractus* mentioned in the *Notitia*, but the dating of the site confirms a Gothic phase, and thus its construction has surely to be linked to Theoderic's (and his successors') scheme.

Monte Barro, as we have said, was built at the same time as this Ostrogothic fortification effort in order to keep possible northern invaders at bay (cf. Brogiolo and Gelichi 1996: 18). Plus, Monte Barro was not the only new Gothic fortified enclave of the region; other sites that are of similar characteristics in design and function, and placed in the same fortification line were Monte Castello di Giano, Laino, Sirmione and Lomello (Brogiolo 1999: 14), ranging in date from the very late Roman period well into the Gothic one. But the date of the site's construction is not the only evidence that may suggest that Monte Barro was part of this fortification system: its location also fits perfectly with what may have been Theoderic's intentions, and it is very close to Como, one of Theoderic's key fortifications (Christie 1991: 424; *Variae* 2.5.19, 3.48, 11.14).

The mountain of Monte Barro occupies a position overlooking the Po valley and the lake of Como (fig. 1), which makes it a strategic point in controlling the movement across the road that links the lake, its pass and its fleet with Milan and the other heads of mountain passes. Monte Barro's rough faces make it a mountain of difficult access and thus easily defendable, and its natural source of water, together with the ready availability of building material (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 13) make it an ideal location for a fortified enclave. As it is isolated from other mountains, it has clear views from its southern face (the north one is too rough to be easily accessible) towards Milan (some 40 kilometres away) and Po plain. It does not overlook the pass through lake Como, but other minor fortifications within 20 kilometres from Monte Barro do (e.g. Laino: DeAgostini 2001, or the Isola

Comacina). It may well be that Monte Barro was not a first-line defensive fortified site, but a central point for other minor and scattered forts. The main building may well then be the administrative centre not only of the site, but of a wider set of enclaves around Monte Barro, and the hanging crown would support this statement, as it could belong to a powerful individual who would have received it as part of his (governor's?) regalia.

Its location proved in the long term to be inconvenient because of its difficult access (it takes over an hour to walk from the foot of the hill at Galbiate up to the site). This might explain the short life of the site (c. AD 520-560) and the fact that at no other time has any sort of fortification been built in the spot, despite the importance of the mountain pass of Lake Como and its good visibility. The fact that Monte Barro only was inhabited in the Gothic period may also be used to explain it was part of the Roman Alpine system recycled by the Goths, and once they ceased to exercise their power, their system collapsed.

The location, the chronological framework, the surrounding fortified territory and the crown all link Monte Barro to the Ostrogothic military administration of northern Italy, but could it be something else?

Monte Barro as a Villa?

If Monte Barro was a seat of power for some officer or governor, could the main building qualify as a villa?

Monte Barro does not look like earlier Roman villas, as there are no signs of economic activity taking place on site. Furthermore, it seems that it was supplied from outer sources according to the amphora remains and the ready-butchered animal bones (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 77-8, 158-9; 2001: 142-4, 268). But late antique villas had been losing their economic function (*pars rustica*) throughout Late Antiquity in favour of *otium* (Sfameni 2006; Romizzi 2006: 38-9; Arce 1997: 19-31). Moreover, the main building's layout resembles that of late Roman Pannonian villas (Thomas 1964) and other later Visigothic elite residences (e.g. the seventh-century site of el Pla de Nadal; Juan and Pastor 1989). In addition, Monte Barro was located in a region famous in the Gothic period for its villas, despite this being a seemingly militarised area (*Variae,* 11.14). It is also true that most late antique villas were the successors of earlier Roman villas, as is the case of the royal villa of Theoderic in Galeata, for instance (De Maria 2003), whereas Monte Barro was built *ex novo*. It is possible that Monte Barro was built by private initiative, rather than commissioned by the state, but that does not imply that its function was not public.

But why would an elite residence be located in such a strange position on a hilltop? Why does this villa lack the luxuries and elements linked even to late antique villas (not only Theoderic's villa, but many others of lower rank), such as baths, mosaics or marbles (Romizzi 2006: 42-56)? The only evidence for any sort of luxury in the main building is the coloured stuccoed walls and the window glass (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 30, 92-3). It is true that a wide range of glass finds were retrieved from the site, but they are plentiful both in the main building and in the other sectors (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 85-92; 2001: 154), and recent research is showing convincingly that glass was not, during Late Antiquity, a luxurious commodity, and even the Goths produced it on a large scale (Castro and Gómez 2008; Maul 2002). There is of course the hanging crown. The crown shows that the main building was an aristocratic residence, as any official administrative building could have been in the period, but in my opinion, its location and its lack of infrastructure for *otium* (baths for instance) prevents us from labelling it as a villa.

Monte Barro as a Fortified Refuge?

There is finally the possibility that Monte Barro functioned as a fortified refuge for the local population, something that would pre-date the classical Italian *incastellamento* (which is linked to private initiative; Christie 2006: passim, esp. 399), and which is suggested by the excavators (Brogiolo and Castelletti 1991: 55-7).

Fortified refuges were used and built unofficially by the local population, who saw their possessions and lives to be in constant danger. This was a phenomenon that spread through the empire in this time. A known example worth mentioning is Venantius Fortunatus' poem to the bishop of Trier regarding his *castellum* over the Moselle, where the bishop retreated with his flock to a fortified position, in what we can imagine to be very similar to Monte Barro: a fortified hilltop with a probable aristocratic dwelling (Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmina* III.12;

Johnson 1983: 216-31; Luttwak 1976: 133; Christie 2006: 334-7). Some Italian examples we can mention are Osoppo, Ragogna and Udine in Friuli (Brogiolo 1999, 166). However, a better known case has been excavated in Slovenia.

Tonovcov Grad in Slovenia seems the most appropriate example for comparison, with all its non-permanently occupied buildings packed inside the fortified area, high up on a hill overlooking the valley of Kobarid (Ciglenečki 1994: 186, 188 and 206). Tonovcov Grad (fig. 7) was a refuge on a hilltop overlooking a valley (Ciglenečki 1994: 188-90, 195, 203 and 206), but it was similarly equipped with walls and towers, and also a fortified gate. It still relied, however, on the rocky slopes of the hill for further defence. Although the size of the site is hardly comparable to Monte Barro (the whole fortified area was just 150 by 90 metres, which is smaller than the area occupied by the Piani di Barra), the fortification effort was proportional to its size, and it was densely occupied with buildings (Ciglenečki 1994: 186) whereas Monte Barro was largely empty.
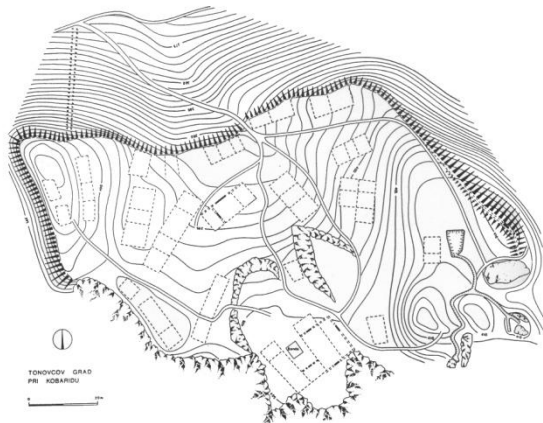

Figure 7 Plan of Tonovcov Grad, in Slovenia, from Ciglenečki 1994: 191 (with permission of the author).

If Monte Barro was a fortification related to the official defence system, it may have allowed in refugees temporarily, whereas Tonovcov Grad seems a deliberate permanent refuge (cf. *Variae* 1.17, where the inhabitants of Dertona are asked to look for their own defence, as the state cannot defend them). All evidence at Tonovcov Grad (walls, towers and the finds including swords) make Tonovcov Grad similar to a fort, but its habitation levels indicate only temporary occupation. Furthermore, its location far from the direct control of the Ostrogothic kingdom, in a region of a power vacuum linked to the failed Roman

Clausura Alpium may have led the locals to build a refuge, as opposed to Monte Barro which fits into a state-organised system heir to the *Tractus*. It is clear that Tonovcov Grad was designed to house more people on a regular basis, whereas the largely empty fortified enclosure of Monte Barro was not, and whereas it is possible that in times of crisis the locals may have been allowed into the fortified enclosure, this was not meant to be a new fortified settlement.

Conclusions

With all the functional possibilities considered (fort, fortification, villa, refuge), it is possible to claim that Monte Barro was a fortified enclave linked to the Ostrogothic Alpine territorial administration; maybe the residence of an officer with his bodyguard, maybe his office. It is clear, nevertheless, that the whole complex was built in this place because of its defensible location close to the Alpine fortifications, main communication routes and a lake famous for its summer villas. The dating of the site, only clearly inhabited during the Gothic period, and the finds (especially the hanging crown which can be linked to a Gothic officer), further support this statement. Overall, Monte Barro remains one of the key sites to study the way the Ostrogoths controlled their territory and how the new governing elite dwelled.

Acknowledgements

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