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## Recent insights into the development of town and country in the Pontine Region (Lazio, Central Italy) between AD 300 and 700

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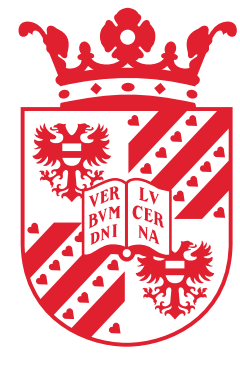
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# RECENT INSIGHTS INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOWN AND COUNTRY IN THE PONTINE REGION (LAZIO, CENTRAL ITALY) BETWEEN AD 300 AND 700.

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## Background

From the 1980's onwards the Groningen Institute of Archaeology (GIA) has carried out field surveys throughout the Pontine Region (Lazio, Central Italy), within the framework of the Pontine Region Project (fig. 1). These surveys have yielded ample evidence for the long-term development of the region from the protohistoric up to the Mid-Imperial period. At the same time a common trait of these surveys was the difficulty to provide data regarding subsequent Late Roman and Early Medieval occupation (roughly AD 300 to 700).

Both material and spatial factors appeared to contribute to the poor understanding of settlements dating to these periods. On a material level we had only limited insight in the repertoire of pottery wares and shapes in vogue (especially after the demise of the large-scale importation of African fine wares and amphorae after the 3rd century), whereas both periods are characterized by an apparent low level of consumed pottery. Moreover, sites of this date are often 'hidden' among high densities of Republican and Imperial period ceramics and appear to occupy only restricted areas, rendering their identification with commonly used survey methods, which use only partial spatial coverage, difficult.

To address this shortcoming in recent years a programme of small-scale excavations, dedicated pottery studies and field surveys adopting more intensive survey and sampling strategies has been employed within the project with considerable success. This specific methodology is in line with for example the Tiber Valley Project (e.g. Patterson et al., 2004), which proved successful in uncovering local contexts for the Late Roman and Early Medieval periods (and beyond). This poster enumerates and compares recent insights obtained by this integrated research program for two distinct parts of the Pontine Region: (1) the coastal area around the Roman colony of *Antium* and 2) the area between the Roman road stations of *Ad Medias* and *Forum Appii*, situated in the Pontine plain along the *Via Appia*.

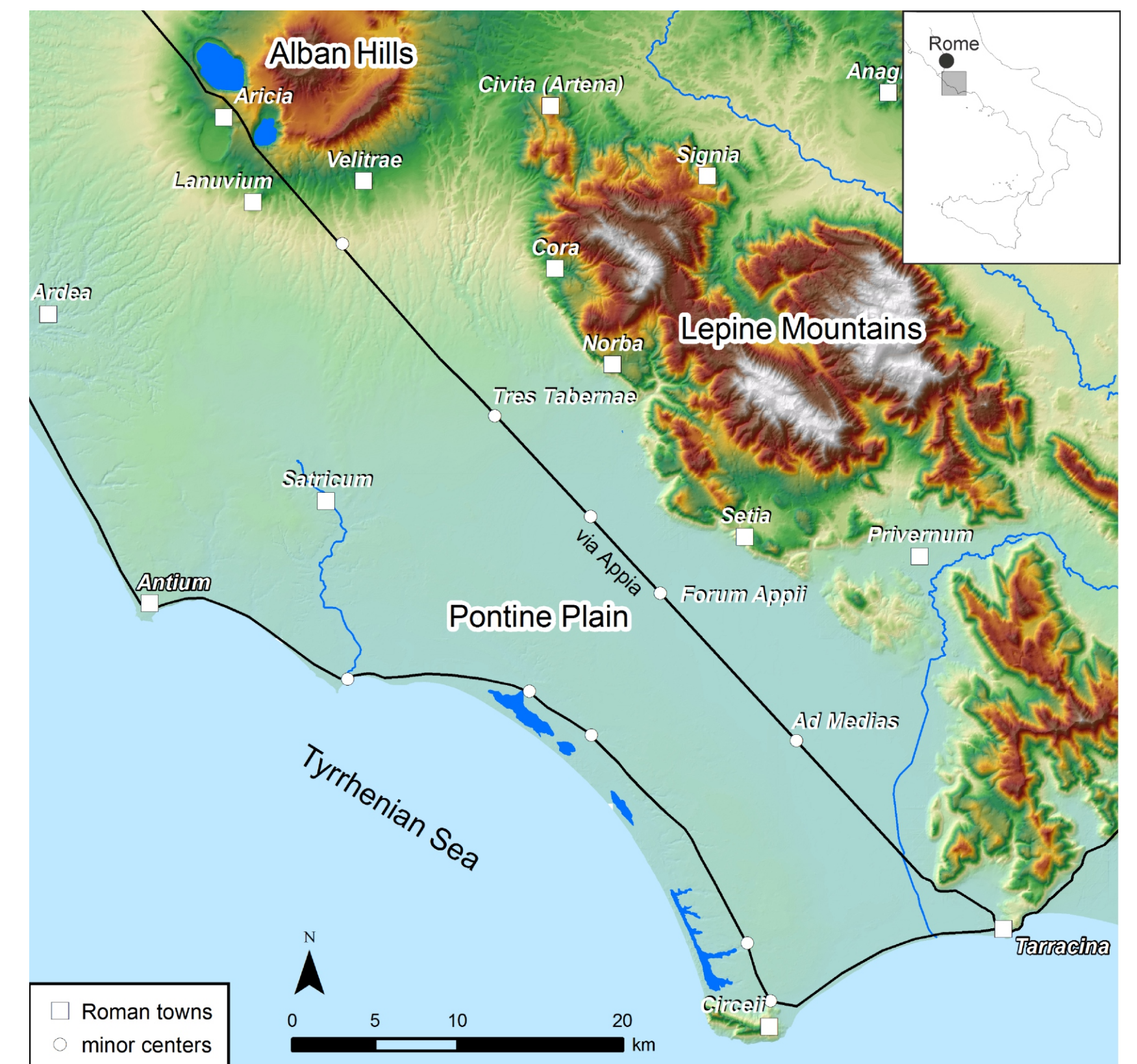


Figure 1 – Map of the Pontine Region with location of the main settlements



Figure 2 – Overview of the studied section at Astura

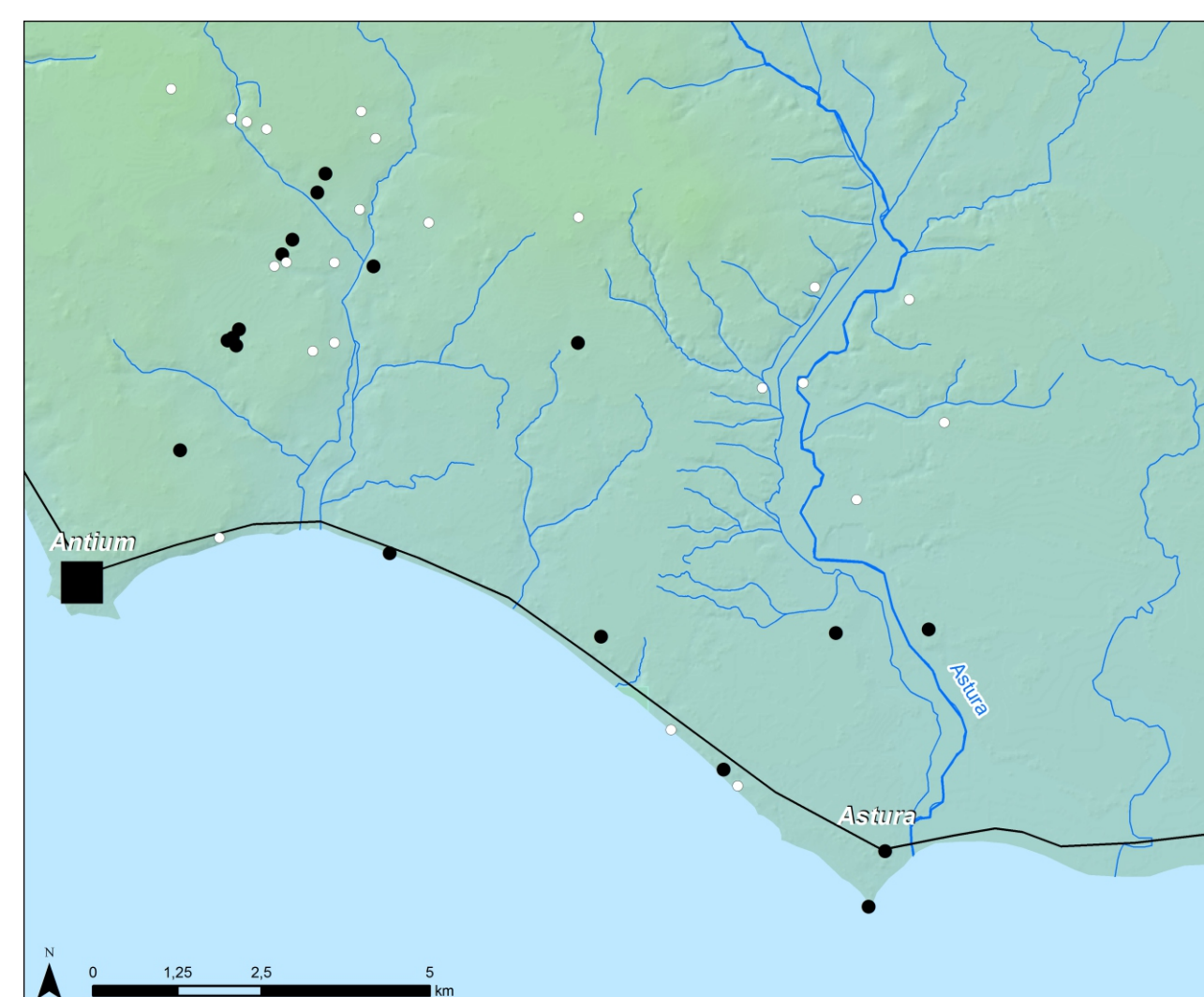


Figure 4 – Late Roman and Early Medieval sites in the coastal area

## Case study 1: The coastal area

Acknowledging the need to study a reference site to obtain data on the array of wares and shapes circulating in the Pontine area in the relevant periods, we welcomed the opportunity to study a large section (ca. 100 metres), brought to light by marine erosion, in the summers of 2007 and 2008 (fig. 2: Tol, 2012; Tol and Attema, 2014). This section exposed only a fraction of a large site, located in the eastern part of the Nettuno municipality at close distance of the famous villa of Torre Astura and the mouth of the Astura river. Based on the finds collected this settlement was dated in the Late Roman and Early Medieval period (4th-7th century AD) with a subsequent phase of occupation in the High Middle Ages (11th/12th century). The many ceramic-, glass- and metal fragments (including over 150 coins) indicate that between the Late Roman and Early Medieval period the site formed part of long-distance trade networks, probably using the nearby harbour at Torre Astura. The site exhibits large similarities with contemporaneous settlements along the Tyrrhenian sea-coast, such as *Portus* and *Ostia* (fig. 3). The size of the settlement, combined with its date and location provides sufficient evidence for its identification as the ancient road station *Astura*, depicted on the 4th century Peutinger map. It is probable that this settlement, with the continuous decline of *Antium*, became the main economic (and demographic) focus of the area. The development of *Astura* may fit into the general development on the Italian peninsula in which villages became the new focal points of settlement systems ("focus of aggregation") from the 3rd and 4th century onwards (Francovich and Hodges, 2003).

A subsequent re-assessment of the dataset compiled for the Carta Archeologica di Nettuno, which entailed extensive surveys in the hinterland of Antium and along the lower streambed of the Astura (Attema et al., 2008 and 2010), led to the identification of a number of additional sites with Late Roman and Early Medieval phases (fig. 4). These sites were mainly situated close to the coast and to the northeast of *Antium*, in correspondence to the main roads of the area. The documented sites probably represent habitation in different forms and on different scales, including re-occupation of long since abandoned settlements and continuity of occupation – although often on a smaller-scale - on villa sites and in villages up till the late 5th or early 6th century AD.



Figure 5 – The typical landscape of the Pontine plain around Ad Medias



Figure 6 – Ploughed up artefacts at Forum Appii

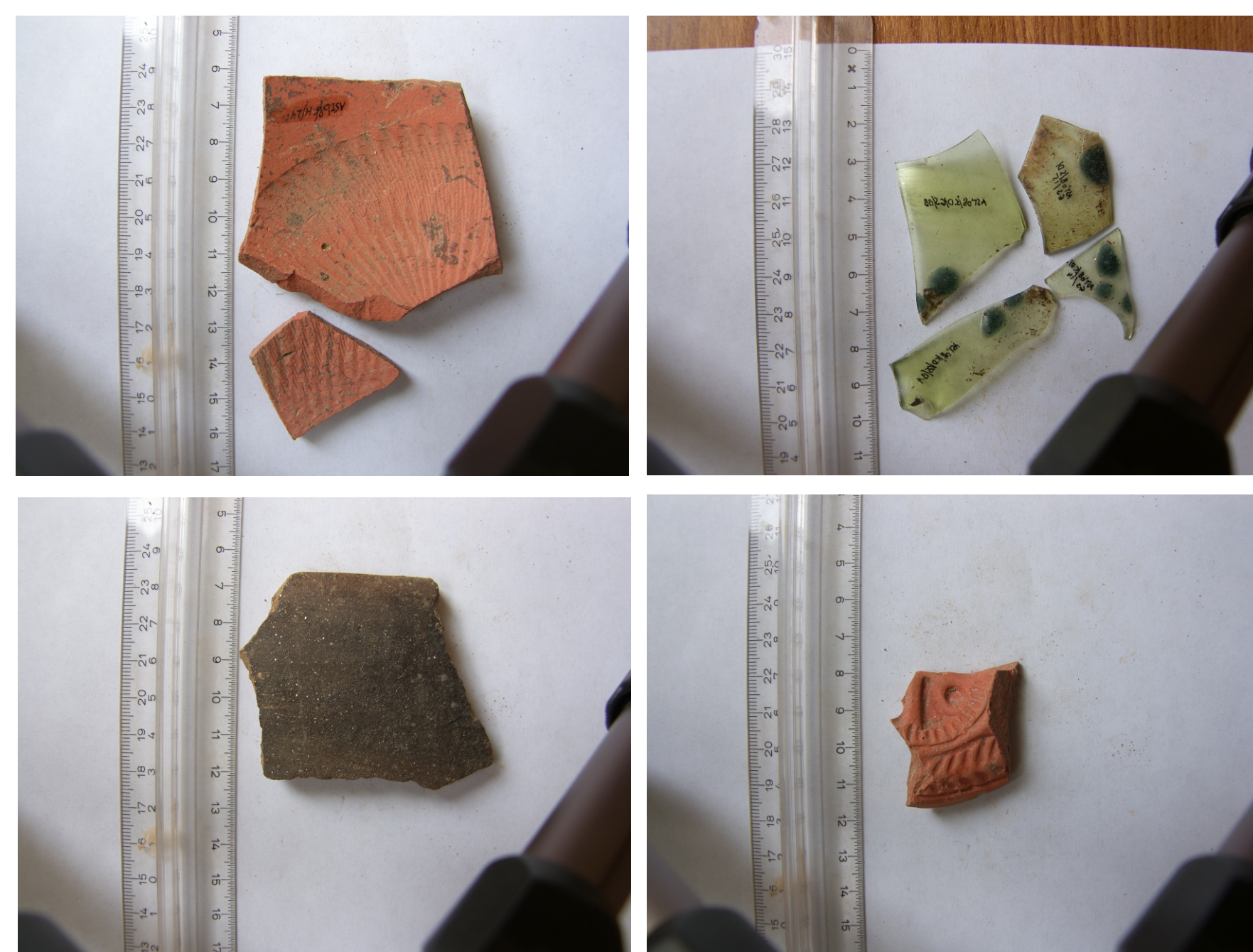


Figure 3 – Artefacts from the Astura excavations: body fragments of ARS form 91 (above left); Nuppenglass (above right); Micaceous Ware (below left) and African oillamp with chi-rho sign.

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## Case study 2: The Pontine plain

Work in the Pontine plain has been undertaken by the GIA since 2006, and more extensively since 2011 (De Haas, 2011; Tol et al., 2014). This work comprises integrated non-invasive research (field surveys, geophysics and coring) on and around two road stations along the *Via Appia*, *Forum Appii* and *Ad Medias*, situated in the lowest-lying part of the Pontine plain (fig. 5). This area throughout history has required constant effort in order to maintain its potential for large-scale habitation and agricultural exploitation, and massive drainage works have been carried out in several periods, most famously in the late 4th-early 3rd century BC, under the reign of Trajan (early 2nd century AD) and under the reign of Theodorici (dated around AD 510). The latter drainage works centred on the site of *Forum Appii*, as is clear from a passage by Cassiodorus and an inscription (CIL, X, 6850), mentioning *Decennovium*, the canal that from Roman times onwards connected this site with the harbour town of Terracina.

Our field surveys at *Forum Appii* indeed yielded firm evidence for continuity of occupation until at least the first half of the 6th century AD, although covering a much more restricted area with respect to Republican and Early Imperial times (figs. 6 and 7). Simultaneously *Ad Medias*, appears to have been largely abandoned already in Early Imperial times, although dispersed finds of 4th and 5th century date are documented directly along the *Appia*. In rural areas between the two road stations a single small and probably short-lived site, located on the *Appia*, constitutes an *ex novo* foundation of the later 4th or early 5th century AD. The material assemblage comprises mainly building materials, but includes a dozen ARS D shapes, as well as imported amphorae (Keay 52), demonstrating access to imported commodities, that were possibly re-distributed through the presumed river harbour at *Forum Appii*. Until now no settlements have been identified that can be attributed to the reclamation works under Theodorici.

Geo-archaeological investigations show that sedimentation in the area increased from AD 400 onwards (Van Joolen, 2003). This may have resulted in the progressive decline of the *Via Appia* and the final abandonment of the road side settlements (not only *Forum Appii* and *Ad Medias*, but also *Tres Tabernae* to the north) and surrounding rural areas in the Pontine plain. Another possible reason for the abandonment of these sites may have been their vulnerability for attacks from troops roaming about, several of which occurred in southern Lazio after the early 5th century AD. Adding to the (seasonal) inundations and the broken off travel route, malaria too may have had its impact on the living conditions in the plain. These developments may (partly) explain the synchronous reoccupation of the malaria-free and well defensible plateau of *Norba* on the edges of the Lepine margins. Possibly parts of the *Via Appia* (and *Decennovium*) tract remained in use for local traffic in the centuries to come, but only in the 10th century new (written) evidence becomes available on activity in the plain, at *Ad Medias*.

## Conclusions and future directions

A dedicated programme of fieldwork and pottery studies has in recent years increased our knowledge on Late Roman and Early Medieval occupation in different parts of the Pontine Region. At the same time we acknowledge that the current state of knowledge is still fragmentary and that much work remains to be done. Promising avenues for further research in our view include: the continuation of restudying material collected during previous Pontine Region Project surveys; conducting additional research (intensive gridding, geophysics, excavation) on different types of sites with attested Late Roman and Early Medieval phases in order to understand the nature of this activity and a more comprehensive study (both typological and archaeometric) of Late Roman and Early Medieval coarse wares, and wall facing techniques (like *opus vittatum*). Incorporating the obtained data with already available toponymical, historical cartographic and documentary information (as presently performed by the second author; Satijn, forthcoming) we will hopefully arrive at a more complete reconstruction of town and country in the Pontine Region in the near future.

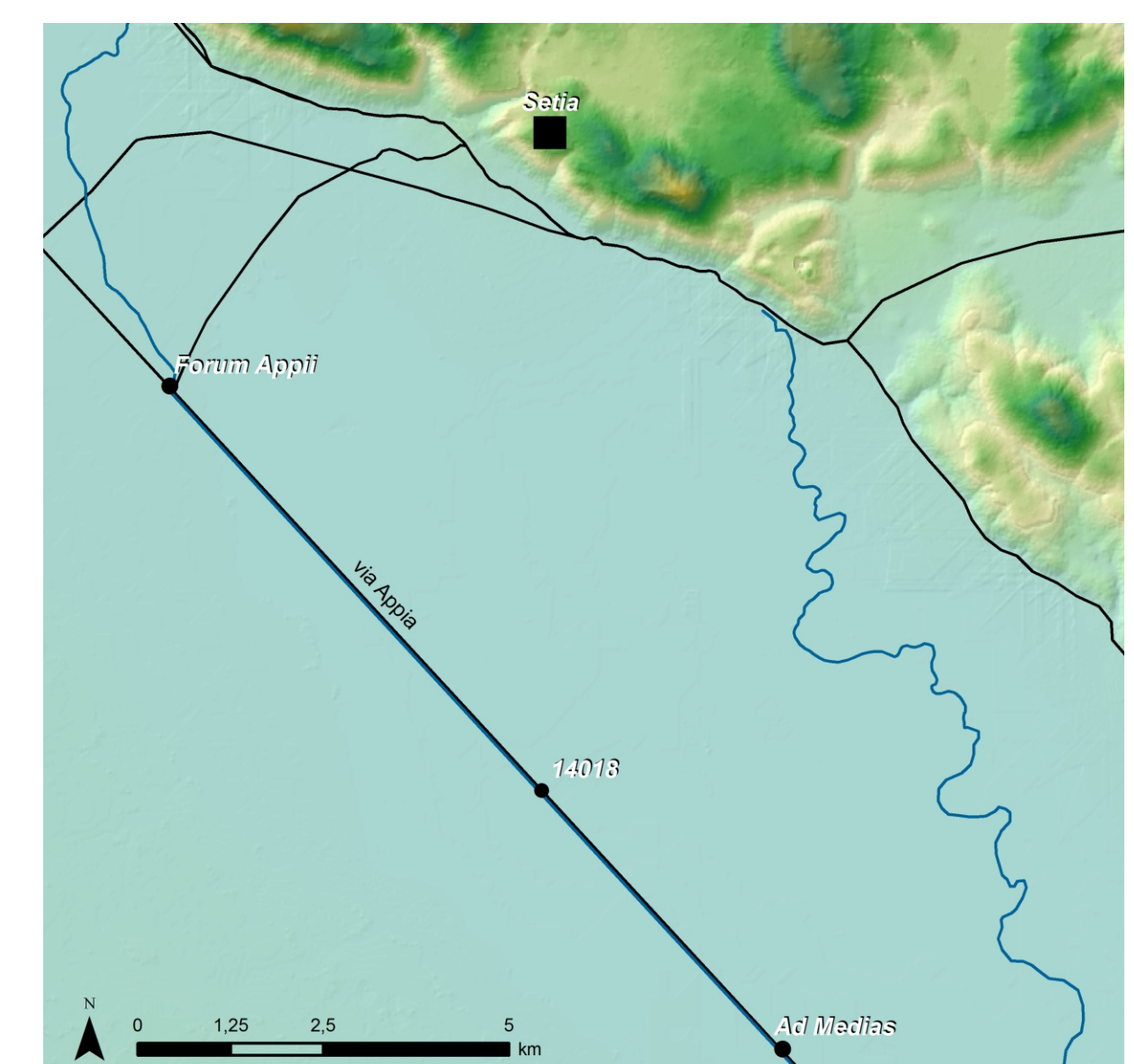


Figure 7 – Late Roman and Early Medieval sites in the Pontine Plain