

10. Via Catina - Thermae: new data and research perspectives arising from preventive archaeology

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Catina-Thermae road is the subject of this contribution (Fig. 1), more precisely the stretch that crosses the Madonie mountain between the municipalities of Caltavuturo and Sclafani Bagni. The road, passing through large expanses cultivated mainly with wheat, was the *route* of commercial transit to the port city of Thermae.

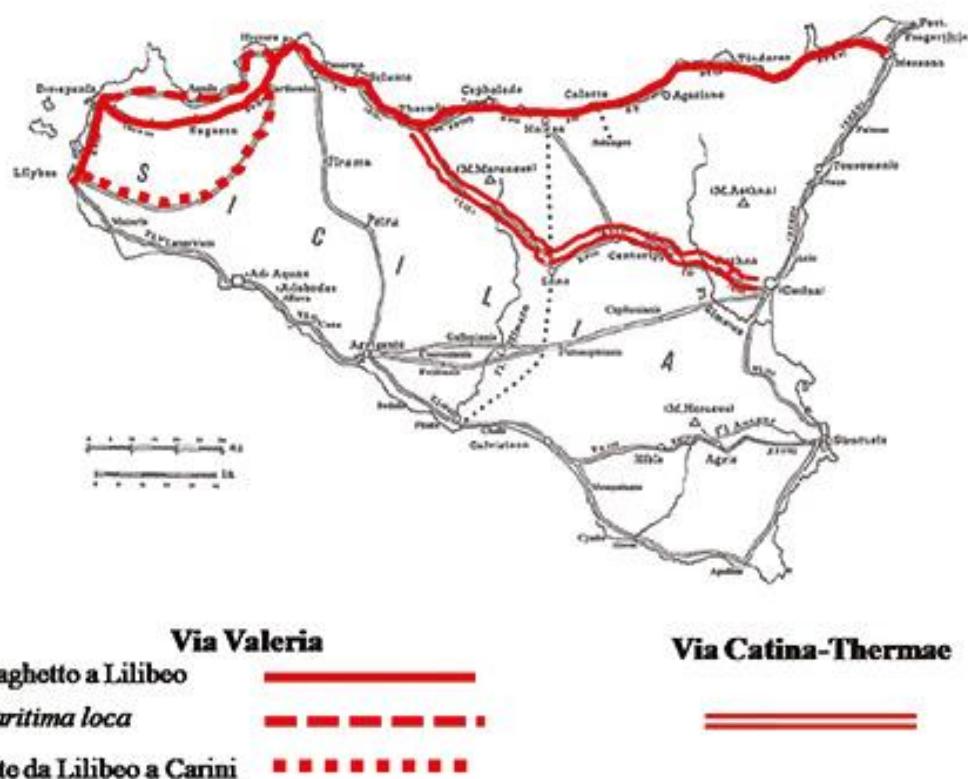


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the Roman road system in Sicily by G. Uggeri (Graphic elaboration by R.M. Cucco).

In recent years, thanks to new studies of ancient topography and to rescue archaeological excavations of Soprintendenza of Palermo, it has been possible to acquire data that gave new light to the building techniques of a stretch of Via Catina-Thermae and to some of the settlements served by the road. Also important was a review of the infrastructure attributable to the road route: new information was acquired not only from direct observation of the remains of some bridges but also thanks to archival and bibliographic sources. See the

“Ponte Grande Diruto” on the road to Thermae Himeraeae and “Ponte Mere-trice” by the river Torto, located near or at the junction between Via Catina-Thermae and Via Valeria.¹

The Soprintendenza of Palermo requested the realization of archaeological samples to be carried out before the assessment of the project for the SNAM Rete Gas methane pipeline called ‘Gagliano-Termini Imerese’, in contrada Gangitani/Stripparia in the Caltavuturo territory.² Official papers documented, in fact, an interference between the new methane pipeline and an area of fictile fragments dating back to Roman times.



Fig. 2. Via Catina-Thermae (via glareata) downstream of the SS 120 near Caltavuturo (picture in Archivio Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Palermo).

¹ R.M. Cucco, *La viabilità antica nel palermitano. Nuove acquisizioni e prospettive di ricerca*, in Atti VIII Congresso di Topografia Antica, in memoria di Giovanni Uggeri, Ferrara 14-16 giugno 2023, in print.

² The archaeological investigations financed by SNAM were carried out by Filippo Iannì.

Preliminary samples brought to light a section of a *via glareata* to be associated with Via Catina-Thermae, datable between the second and the third century AD (Fig. 2). This road was laid out on an older (late 1st century BC – 2nd century AD) paved route, to which the remains of a building, that can probably be interpreted as a resting place, are connected. The *glareata* evidently runs downstream from the SS 120 'dell'Etna e delle Madonie' road and parallel to it,

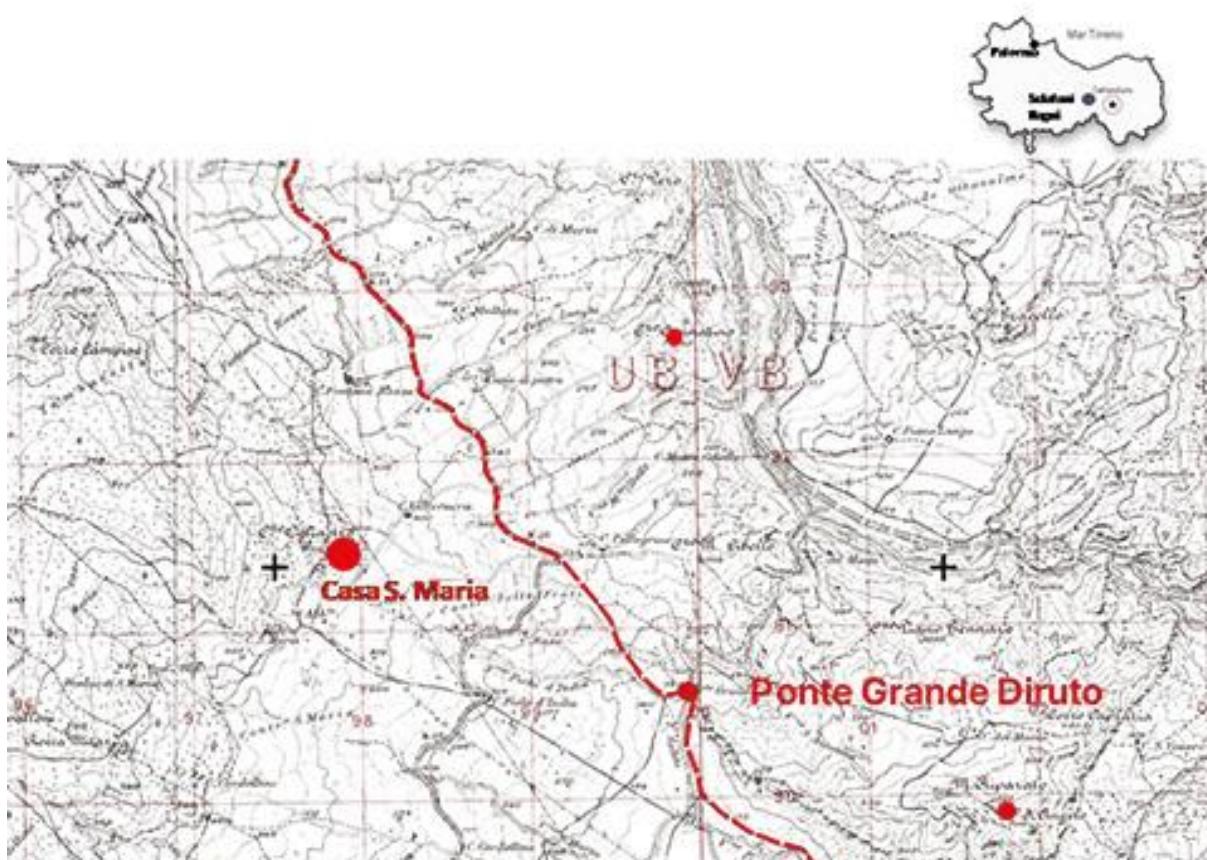


Fig. 3. Sclafani Bagni – Cozzo Ogliastro – Casa Santa Maria. Project for the construction of the methane pipeline Gagliano – Termini Imerese DN 300 (12") (Graphic elaboration based on IGM 1:25.000 by R.M. Cucco).

corroborating the hypothesis, repeatedly put forward in scientific publications, of a mere coincidence, even if limited to certain portions, between the two road routes. The stretch of the road excavated in Caltavuturo is about 23 metres long and 2.70 metres wide, a measure that corresponds to the seven feet Attic-Roman system, and allowing the transit of only one cart at a time³.

³ The end of the excavation, the Soprintendenza protected the archaeological area with a restriction provision: DDS n. 384 del 02.03.2021.

As hypothesised by Giovanni Uggeri regarding Via Catina-Thermae, the lack of an intermediate pit-stop on the itineraries between Enna and Termini Imerese suggested that only the *mansiones* of the mail courier (*cursus velox*) were indicated. The *cursus velox* was able to travel longer distances per day than ordinary travellers, who probably needed to stop in places in the middle of the countryside, such as the one where the road, just described, passed through.⁴ Proceeding along this hypothesised route of Via Catina-Thermae, from Via Glareata to NW, the road runs downstream Cozzo Oigliastro, in the territory of Sclafani Bagni (Fig. 3).

The archaeological value of the land nearby SS 120, in the stretch between Contrada Settefrati and Contrada Baiata, on the outskirts of the town of Cerda, the area of Cozzo Oigliastro, was pointed out by the surveys by the Institut of Topography directed by Oscar Belvedere of the University of Palermo. As in the previous case, archaeological samples were carried out here before the construction of the Gagliano – Termini Imerese methane pipeline, which had to pass near Casa S. Maria, on the eastern slopes of the Cardellino Woods and close to the southern edge of Cozzo Oigliastro. The planned methane pipeline



Fig. 4. Late roman and Byzantine Tiles, African Red Slip and Islamic pottery from tests carried out downstream of Casa S. Maria (pictures: Archivio Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Palermo).

⁴ For a complete study of the via Glareata of Caltavuturo: R.M. Cucco – F. Iannì, La via Catina-Thermae: recente scoperta nell'agro di Caltavuturo (Pa), in: Atlante Tematico di Topografia Antica 32, Rivista di Studi di Topografia Antica (Roma – Bristol 2022) 115-124.

here also interfered with an area of archaeological interest, indicated by the presence, on the ground, of late Roman and early medieval fragments. The exploration of Cozzo Ogliastro had already revealed how this high ground had been inhabited between the imperial age and the Middle Ages, probably in connection with activities related to the exploitation of the forest.⁵ Preliminary archaeological samples carried out downstream of Casa S. Maria, which was on a hillock, testified that a settlement was founded here between the imperial and Islamic periods (2nd century A.D. – 10th century A.D.) (Fig. 4), probably where the modern house is.⁶ In addition to surface fragments (including a mosaic) and finds from the stratigraphic samples, there is a curvilinear wall structure, probably pertaining to an apse. On the basis of the finds, unlikely we can probably affirm that in the Roman period on the hillock, where Casa S. Maria stands, there was a *villa*, served by the Via Catina – Thermae. The favourable position of the site also determined its occupation in the later Islamic period.⁷ Also interesting from a topographical point of view is the visual relation among Casa S. Maria, Cozzo Ogliastro and Cozzo Cannatino (Fig. 3). The last one dominated the road from the east; on its northern and northwestern slopes there was a farm whose floruit coincided with the early and middle imperial age and which, unlike the settlement of Casa S. Maria, seems to be abandoned perhaps as early as the beginning of the third century AD.⁸

⁵ O. Belvedere et alii, Himera III.2. Prospettiva archeologica nel territorio (Roma 2002) 137–142 UUTT 91–96.

⁶ The archaeological investigations were financed by SNAM and carried out by Filippo Iannì.

⁷ Sclafani and Caltavuturo were besieged and conquered by the Arabs in 938/39 A.D.: cfr. R.M. Cucco – A. Mammato, L'insediamento medievale di Terravecchia di Caltavuturo: la storia della ricerca archeologica e la documentazione numismatica, in Studi in onore di Stefano Vassallo, M. Chiavarò- R. Sapia (eds.) (Palermo 2020) 91–99 especially 92.

⁸ O. Belvedere et alii, loc.cit., 125–131 UT. 84.

Along the route of Via Catina-Thermae, between the territory of Caltavuturo and the junction with Via Valeria, there are two bridges (Fig. 5), which have already been the subject of studies in recent years, but which gave no useful indications in order to date precisely the currently visible ruins: they are Ponte Grande Diruto, or Ponte Vecchio, and Ponte 'della Meretrice'.



Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the Via Catina-Thermae from the junction with the Via Valeria to Cozzo Vurrania south of Caltavuturo (Graphic elaboration based on IGM 1:25.000 by F. Ianni). 1. Ponte Grande Diruto o Ponte Vecchio. 2. Ponte "della Meretrice" (pictures: Archivio Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Palermo).

Ponte Grande Diruto or Ponte Vecchio (Old Bridge)(Fig. 5)

This bridge, built to cross the Salito stream, tributary of southern Imera River, along the hypothesised route of Via Catina-Thermae, according to Giovanni Uggeri could date back to Roman times.⁹ Surface finds document that the area near the bridge was frequented and permanently inhabited between the Re-

⁹ G. Uggeri, La viabilità della Sicilia in età romana (Galatina 2004) 238.

publican and Imperial ages, and attest the presence of a farm.¹⁰ Thanks to recent archival research conducted by Luigi Romana, a scholar and expert on the local history of Caltavuturo, we can reasonably affirm that the bridge visible today is probably from the modern age and precisely from the second half of the 17th century. A reading of the records of the Historical Archive of Termini Imerese leads to this conclusion, because for the year 1666 there is mention of the reconstruction of the Caltavuturo bridge, called 'lo pontigrandi'.¹¹ These data do not exclude an older origin of the bridge, which probably needed maintenance and reconstruction during its long period of use in relation to the road.

The 'Meretrice' Bridge (Fig. 5)

The ruins of this bridge, largely buried and covered by vegetation (Fig. 6), was identified thanks to an indication on a historical map, at the State Archives in Palermo,¹² consulted during historical-topographical research in the valley of the Fiume Torto.¹³

¹⁰ O. Belvedere et alii, loc.cit., 146–151 UT. 100.

¹¹ Thanks to Professor Luigi Romana for his study.

¹² "Pianta geometrica di un ponte sul fiume Torto, delle strade e de drizagno per rettificare il corso....."(1851) Archivio di Stato di Palermo. Cfr. R.M Cucco, La cartografia storica: fonte indispensabile negli studi di topografia antica. Il caso del comprensorio imerese, Atti 5^a Conferenza Nazionale ASITA La qualità nell'Informazione Geografica, Rimini 9–12 ottobre 2001 (Milano 2001) 627–632.

¹³ R.M. Cucco, Ricognizione archeologica nella valle del F. Torto: avvio di un progetto per la realizzazione di un Sistema Informativo Territoriale storico-archeologico, tesi di dottorato di ricerca, in: Metodologie Conoscitive per la Conservazione e la Valorizzazione dei Beni Culturali II, Università degli Studi di Napoli, Anno Accademico 1999–2000 (unpublished).

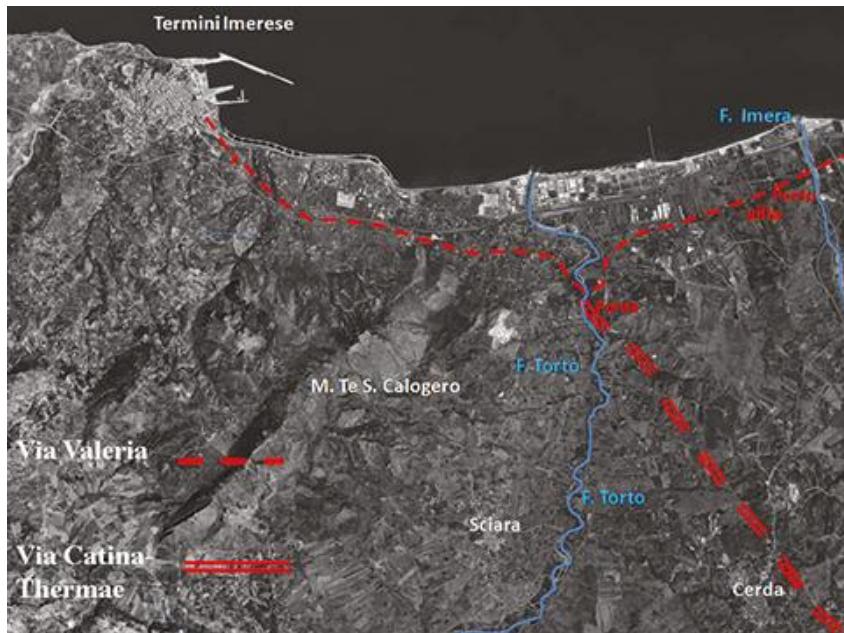


Fig. 6. Torto River valley district where via Valeria and via Catina-Thermae intersect (picture: Archivio Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. Di Palermo. Graphic elaboration by R.M. Cucco).

The bridge stood by the confluence of Via Catina – Thermae in Via Valeria¹⁴. Vito Amico gives us the name of the bridge 'della Maretrice' and stresses its state of disrepair,¹⁵ providing us with a *terminus ante quem* for the time when the bridge was already in disuse, around the middle of the 18th century. In the historical map, dating to a century later than Amico's text, the ruin of the bridge was drystone and surmounted a fossilised bend in the River Torto. Perhaps the dating of the 'Maretrice' bridge, a three-light bridge, to the Roman period could be clued by the stone slab construction technique, reminiscent of that of the main imperial monuments of Thermae.¹⁶ It was abandoned or otherwise damaged by a flood in 1610, as attested in the Acts of the Magnificent Jurors of Termini.¹⁷

The importance of the site where the 'Maretrice' bridge stands, as a road junction between the coastal area and the Madonie hinterland and beyond,¹⁸ is also indicated by the 'Floriopoli' complex, which overlooks the area where the

¹⁴ Cucco – Iannì, loc.cit. 120.

¹⁵ R.M Cucco, Il tracciato della via Valeria da Cefalù a Termini Imerese, *Journal of Ancient Topography* 10, 2000, 177.

¹⁶ For better details on the structure of the bridge, see: R.M Cucco, *ibidem* 165–185.

¹⁷ A. Contino, *Aqua Himerae* (Terme Vigliatore 2019) 212.

¹⁸ The Cerda crossroads is the confluence point between the SS 113 and the SS 120, the latter crosses central Sicily and its mountains until the slopes of Etna, on the eastern coast of the island. From the mouth of the Torto river, the railway and a rolling road branch out towards the southern coast (unto Agrigento).

bridge stood from East. The Cerda junction, where the two Roman consular roads met (Fig. 6), became the starting and finishing point of the Targa Florio at the beginning of the 1920s, the site of the grandstands of the car race conceived in 1906 by Vincenzo Florio.¹⁹

As already mentioned, near the present junction of Cerda, Via Catina – Therme intersected with Via Valeria and by following the latter in a western direction it reached Termini.

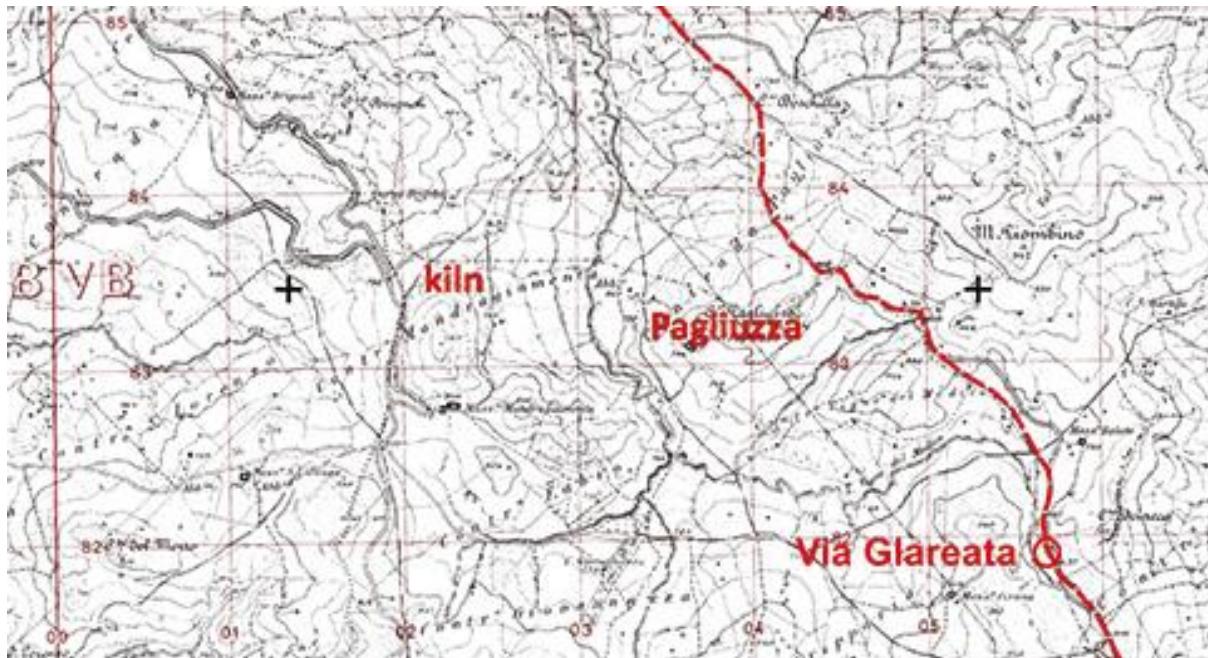


Fig. 7. Area where the byzantine kiln was found (Graphic elaboration based on IGM 1:25.000 by R.M. Cucco).

To conclude, I report a very recent discovery.

Further archaeological excavations are currently underway along the route of the methane pipeline in the territory of Caltavuturo (Figg. 7-8). Along the provincial road n. 8, to Valledolmo, in the Mandragiumenta area, so far, we excavated the remains of a Byzantine kiln²⁰ (Fig. 9). Interesting is the location of the site upstream from the Roman farm in contrada Pagliuzza where a

¹⁹ G. Alvarez Garcia, La Targa Florio. Gattopardi, Piloti, Gentiluomini, D. Alessi (ed.) (Palermo 1987) 81. 137-144.

²⁰ The archaeological investigations financed by Sicilsaldo were carried out by Pinella Laudani e Tommaso Scerbo. The discovery of various types of striated tiles in the kiln is noteworthy. Cfr. L. Arcifa, Indicatori archeologici per l'alto Medioevo nella Sicilia orientale, in Piazza Armerina: Villa del Casale e la Sicilia tra Tardoantico e Medioevo, a cura di Patrizio Pensabene (Roma 2010) 105-128 especially 109-112.

treasure with 523 silver *denarii*, datable to the end of the 3rd- 1st century BC, was found.²¹



Fig. 8. Worksite of the methane pipeline, along the road No. 8 in the Mandragiumenta district, and the remains of the byzantine kiln (pictures: Archivio Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Palermo).

The importance of rescue archaeology is undoubtedly and certainly the frequent coincidence between the route of the methane pipelines and the road system may reserve further important discoveries on ancient settlement dynamics and the relationship between these and the road system.

²¹ E. Mantegna Pancucci, D. Pancucci, S. Vassallo, Il ripostiglio monetale e l'insediamento rurale in località Pagliuzza, in: *Di terra in terra. Nuove scoperte archeologiche nella provincia di Palermo* (Palermo: Arti Grafiche Siciliane 1993)140-156.



Fig. 9. "Combed Tiles" found inside the byzantine kiln (pictures: Archivio Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Palermo).

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