

13. The Roman Road system along the middle course of the Gallo d'Oro river. Montedoro territory (province of Caltanissetta and Agrigento) and the Gallidauro Landscape project

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This topic deals with part of a research linked to the ancient settlement along the middle course of the Gallo d'Oro river, which aims to draw up an Archaeological Map of the territory. The study is still in progress but, thanks to the data collected so far, an interesting summary picture of various phases of human settlement, from Neolithic to Medieval age, can already be drawn.

The territory and the Roman road system

The territory is located between Caltanissetta and Agrigento. It is a hilly landscape, with wide valleys that allow ample intervisibility even to the most modest reliefs. Main hills are Mount Ottavio with 538 meters above sea level, Mount Croce and Mount Sabucia with 466 m a.s.l. and Mount Villanuova, 600 m a.s.l.

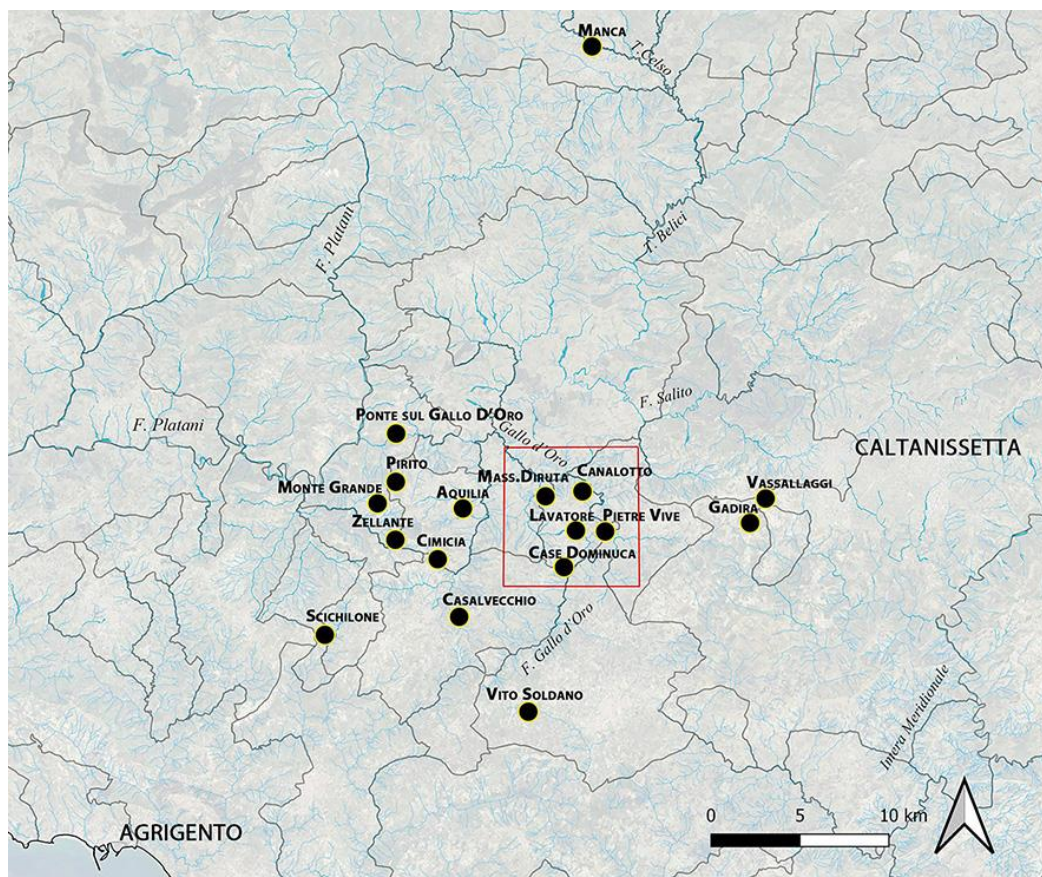


Fig. 1. Main Roman sites mentioned in text.

The main geographical feature is Gallo d'Oro river, which flows from west into the Platani river. Geomorphologically speaking, the examined area is distinguished by the so-called Caltanissetta trench, characterized by evaporitic deposits of the Gessoso-Solfifera Series. Thus, a strategic landscape framework of high value is outlined (Figs. 1-2).

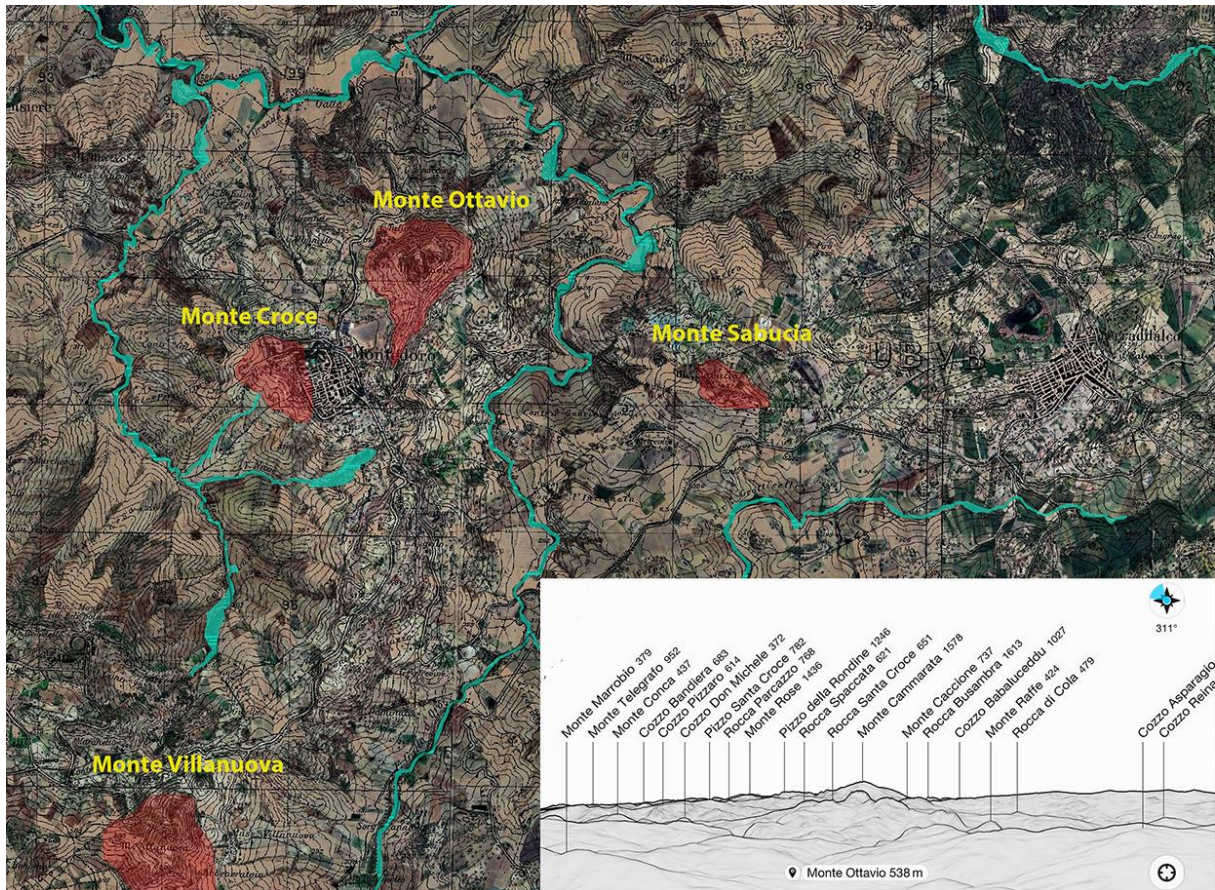


Fig. 2. Main hills and intervisibility from Monte Ottavio to the north-east.

According to the known Roman road system, there are two routes that are relevant to our study, and although they do not pass directly through the survey area, they provide important information (Fig. 3).

The first route, in a north-south direction, used to connect the southern coast to the northern coast of Sicily. For this route, the existence of a double Agrigento-Palermo route has been hypothesized, one identified as the Via Aurelia, thanks to the discovery of the milestone near Corleone, the other passing east of Platani river.¹ About the latter, in the proposed route between Aragona and Cam-

¹ O. Belvedere, Sulla via Agrigento-Palermo, in: Viabilità antica in Sicilia. Atti del III Convegno di Studi sulla Tutela dei beni culturali ed ambientali e la loro funzione economico-sociale nel territorio ionico-etneo Riposto 1987 (Giarre 1991) 71-73; Another interesting hypothesis regarding this route has been formulated (J. Bergemann, this

pofranco, passing through the Roman site of contrada Piritto, the crossing of the upper course of Gallo d'Oro river has been hypothesized, by means of a bridge accessible from Passo Funnuto.²

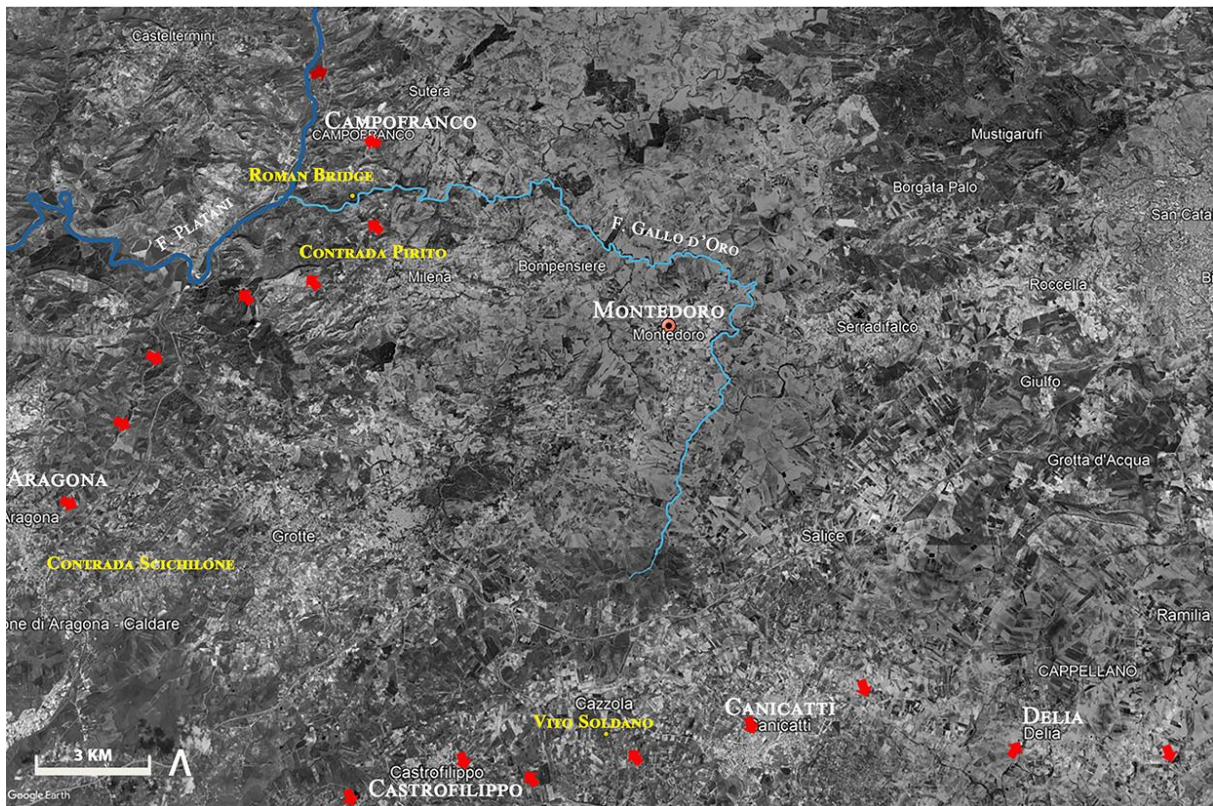


Fig. 3. Roman routes in surrounding areas.

The second concerns the internal Catania-Agrigento Road and specifically its northern route, assumed on the basis of the double testimony found in the *Itinerarium Antonini*³, with the indication for the northern variant of 'mansionibus nunc institutis'. The latter, which is indicated in the document as passing through Philosophiana-Calloniana-Cosconiana, crosses the border between the towns of Caltanissetta and Sommatino and then reaches Delia, Canicattì with Vito Soldano and Castrofilippo. Therefore, the route essentially passes immediately south of the Greek-era route, which in Adamesteanu's reconstruction, connects

volume contribution n. 8 p. 158 ss.), in which it is stated that the Agrigento-Palermo Roman route passes through Raffadali instead of this area, because the old reconstruction is longer than the 57 miles of the Corleone milestone.

² A. Castelli, The Roman Sites between Sutera, Campofranco and Milena, in: O. Belvedere – J. Bergemann (a cura di), *La Sicilia Romana. Città e Territorio tra monumentalizzazione ed economia, crisi e sviluppo* (Palermo 2018) 391–394; G. Uggeri, *La viabilità della Sicilia in età romana* (Galatina 2004) 97–117.

³ G. Uggeri, *La viabilità della Sicilia in età romana* (Galatina 2004) 253.

the area of Castrofilippo station to Vassallaggi via Monte Grotta Rossa, which is just over 5 km from the current course of Gallo d'Oro river.⁴

Previous archaeological knowledge

In the archaeological literature the territory was known thanks to the Bernabo Brea's mention of a Bronze Age station, based on some findings studied by Paolo Orsi, who believed them to come from Montedoro.⁵

In the 1970s and 80s, La Rosa and a team of Catania University carried out explorations in the upper course of the Gallo d'Oro, which led to the knowledge of Milena territory long history, from the numerous and important prehistoric sites to Roman sites in a strategic position, later occupied in Medieval Age. During this research project, aimed surveys were in selected areas of the surroundings, including some districts of the middle course of the river.⁶ In Montedoro territory, three archaeological sites have been identified: a village in the contrada Finaita, dating from the end of the Chalcolithic to the beginning of the Bronze Age; a necropolis on the slopes of Mount Ottavio, with grotticella tombs and tholos, which was used until the thirteenth century BC; a rural settlement with evidence of imperial age, near the Masseria Diruta.⁷

Research methodology and the Gallidauro Landscape project

After having carried out a geomorphological and historical-archaeological survey, and having delved into the itinerary sources, the territory was investigated using the methods of landscape archaeology, such as: study of ancient and recent cartography; analysis of the Regie Trazzere, the Borbonic ancient streets, both the royal roads and secondary roads; a toponymic census and analysis of

⁴ A. Burgio, *La viabilità greca*, Nuove Effemeridi III, 35, 1996, 29–35; O. Belvedere, *Il ruolo dell'Imera settentrionale e dell'Imera meridionale nel quadro della colonizzazione greca*, in: *Atti della seconda giornata di studi sull'archeologia licatese e della zona della bassa valle dell'Himera* (Licata 1985) 91–96; D. Adamesteanu, *L'opera di Timoleonte nella Sicilia centro-meridionale vista attraverso gli scavi e le ricerche archeologiche*, Kokalos 4, 1958, 31–68.

⁵ L. Bernabò Brea, *La Sicilia prima dei Greci* (Milano 1958) 130–148; P. Orsi, *Contributi all'archeologia preellenica sicula*, BPI 25, 1889, 197–202.

⁶ Data on the extent of areas investigated and the distribution of finds have not yet been published.

⁷ V. La Rosa (a cura di), *Dalle Capanne alle Robbe. La storia lunga di Milocca-Milena* (Caltanissetta 1997); V. La Rosa, *Nuovi centri indigeni nella media valle del Platani*, Kokalos 34/35, 1988/89, 551–557.

aerial photographs. From the confluence of all these data, we have created a geo-referenced preliminary map for fieldwork.⁸

About the study of ancient cartography, the oldest documents of interest are the Dutch cartography and the pocket atlases of 17th century, that provide valuable toponymic and socio-economic information, although they do not contain accurate topographical data.⁹ The map of Sicily, drawn up by Baron Samuel Von Schmettau for planning Austrian military strategies and published in three editions in 1721, 1800 and 1810, has greater topographical precision.¹⁰ The road information given in this map has been compared with data collected from the study of the Regie Trazzere and from the comparison with recent cartography, allowing a more precise localization of ancient routes.

These documents were also subject to the toponymic census, supplemented by some words of micro-toponymic. All the place names were included in a geo-referenced glossary. In general, the largest number of place names are those related to water resources (in the northern area of the territory), crop names and anthroponyms. For some place names, the survey proved that they are linked to archaeological evidence, such as Palombaro and Grottazze for the necropolis or Vecchio, Mulinazzo and Vecchio Mattè for the ruins.¹¹

The analysis of aerial photographs was also very effective. In particular, some micro-relief and soil moisture traces are visible in the 1987 frames, and they are linked to ancient path and high concentrations of findings.¹²

After carrying out some preliminary surveys, we developed a series of initiatives, aimed at involving citizen, with the objective of raising awareness for the preservation of the historical-archaeological heritage. Thus, in agreement with the Soprintendenza ai Beni Culturali e Ambientali of Caltanissetta, we wrote a public archaeology project, patronised by the Municipality of Montedoro and aimed at citizens of different age groups. Among the various project initiatives, including seminars and workshops in schools, participants were also involved

⁸ O. Belvedere, *La ricognizione sul terreno*, *Journal of Ancient Topography* 4, 1994, 69–84.

⁹ A. La Gumina (a cura di), *La Sicilia raccontata dai cartografi. XVI–XIX secolo*. Catalogo della mostra, (2 luglio 2011–30 giugno 2012, Museo dei viaggiatori in Sicilia, Palazzolo Acreide SR) (Palermo 2012) 65–100.

¹⁰ L. Dufour (a cura di), *La Sicilia Disegnata. La carta di Samuel von Schmettau 1720–21* (Palermo 1995) pl. 18.

¹¹ G. Caracausi, *Dizionario onomastico della Sicilia I–II* (Palermo 1993); D. Adamesteanu, *Toponimi a carattere archeologico nella Sicilia centro-meridionale*, in: M. Renard, *Hommages à Albert Grenier* (Bruxelles-Berchem 1962) 79–88.

¹² *Volo ATA 1987*, quota 1500 m, Foglio 630 I, strisciata 750, fotogrammi 13–20.

in fieldwork. This made the Gallidauro Landscape an integral part of our research, prompting us to reflect methodologically.

The aim was to keep productivity value of the survey constant while having a variable number of surveyors. If productivity is the result of the product of the number of surveyors, the number of working days and the visibility of the soil, therefore, as the first value changes, consequently, it is essential to balance the others in order to obtain the same result (by increasing the intensity of the survey or repeating working routine in better visibility conditions).

The surveys were intensive and were performed in all accessible areas.¹³

Not all findings were completely collected, but they were surveyed and documented in a dedicated tab, in which the quantity of classes, forms and types was recorded and that, combined with the Topographical Unit tab, permitted the elaboration of distribution percentages. Finally, some samples were selected to be analysed for comparisons.

Survey results. The Roman sites

The survey results are 52 Topographical Units in an area of almost 13 sqkm. Many of these are areas of fragments, which refer to the scattered settlement of the medieval period and above all to a widespread dispersion of fragments from the prehistoric period, but the most consistent data, both for number and for quality, refer to the Roman period.

It is possible to distinguish 5 areas or Reconnaissance Units (RU) into which the major sites are grouped. All areas are served by a large spring. One or more trazzere are crossing. As well they have traces of frequentation in the Hellenistic age and a very long period of frequentation afterwards, always until Late Roman and Early Medieval times (Figs. 4–5).

RU 1 and 2 are located north of Montedoro territory, immediately south of the river course. RU 1 is in the district called Fontana Grande. It is characterised by a high plateau (300 m a.s.l.) on the slopes of Monte Croce, and by fertile river terraces. The sites are located both on the plateau and on the slopes. The area is served by the RT (Regia Trazzera) 45, which connects Montedoro to Sutera and is called trazzera dell'acqua, and RT 602, which connects Montedoro to Mus-

¹³ O. Belvedere, *La ricognizione di superficie. Bilancio e prospettive*, *Journal of Ancient Topography* 20, 2010, 31–40.

someli, crossing the Gallo d'Oro and the Salito river, passing also through the site of Monte Raffe, called trazzera Buonanotte. The main site is UT 29, nowadays Masseria Diruta. It is a stable settlement, characterized by a high density of findings, to be referred to many classes, such as bricks, amphoras, pithoi, common ware, lamps, unguentaria, louteria, black-gloss ware. But, the most numerous presences are Roman and Byzantine tiles, MGS V and Dressel I amphoras, African cooking ware and especially fine pottery like Italic Terra Sigillata and African Terra Sigillata dating to the Early, Middle and Late Imperial Age.

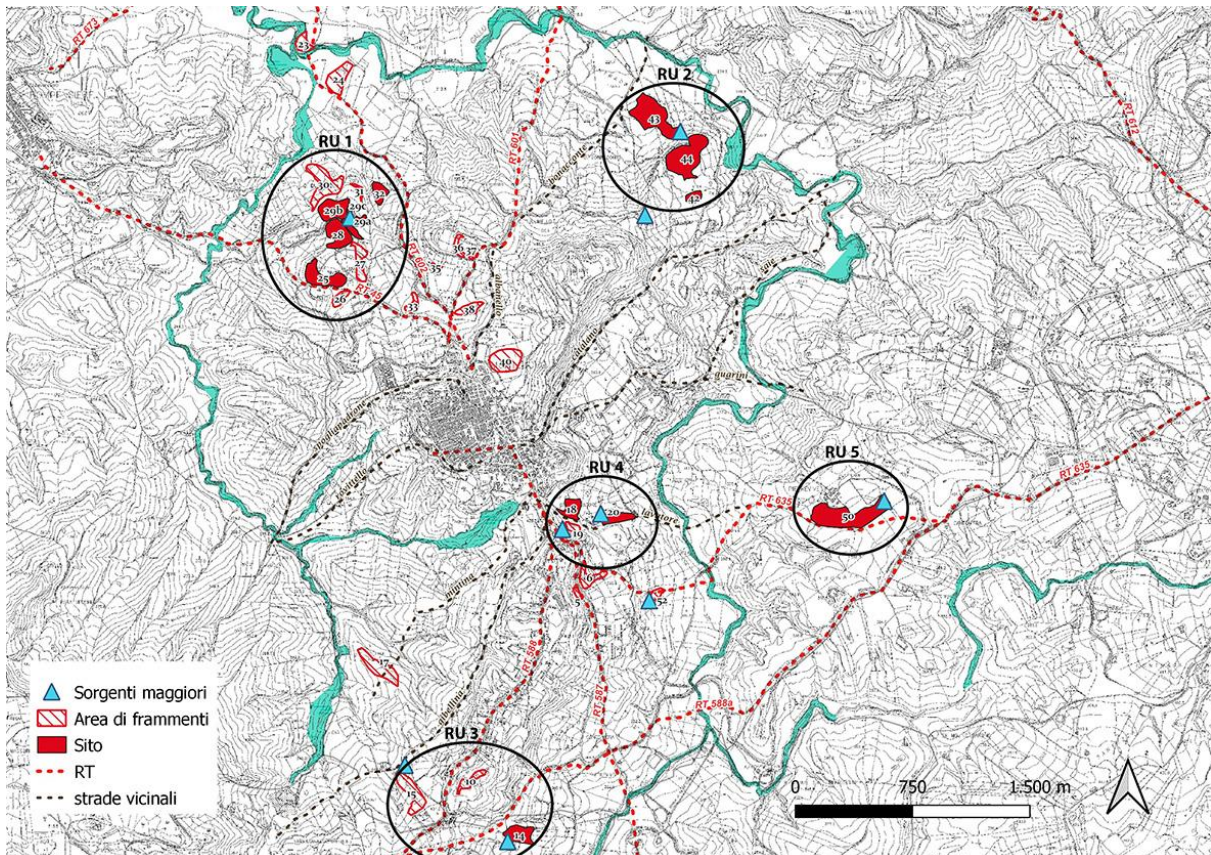


Fig. 4. Archeological map of Roman sites.

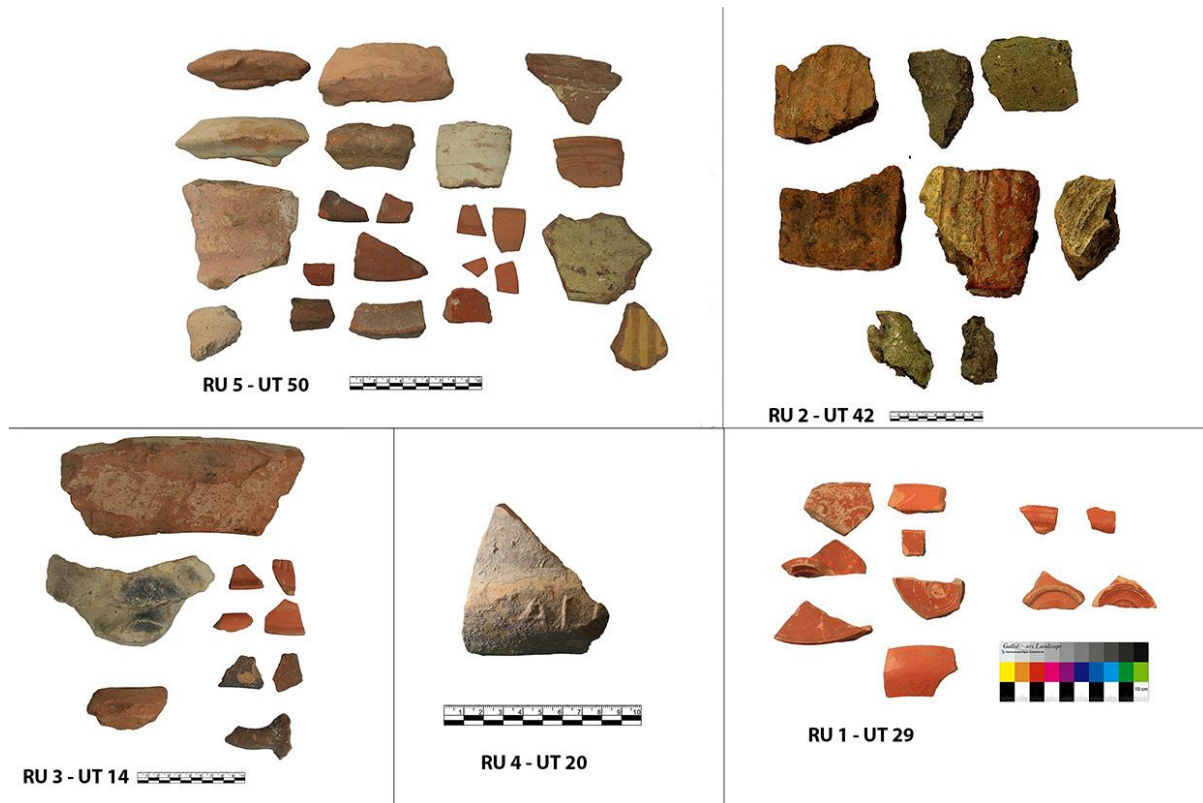


Fig. 5. URs 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 findings selection.

In the RU 2 the sites are also located on the eastern slope of Monte Ottavio and on the banks of Gallo d'Oro river. The main site is UT 44. There is a high distribution of Hellenistic and Roman tiles, lamps and common ware. Several Roman roof tiles and amphoras were also found inside modern drystone walls near the site. An interesting aspect to pay attention to, is the presence of two productive areas. The first is a huge furnace (UT 42), which has got several production indicators, and it seems to be a roof tile furnace. We can't give a precise interpretation because we still don't have enough diagnostic materials available, but there is a considerable number of bricks with engraved lines on their surface. Instead, the second site (UT 43) is characterized by a high density of Roman roof tiles and amphoras and few furnace slag. The area is crossed by the Bonacconte route, that splits from RT601. It connects Montedoro to Villalba, crossing also Monte Polizzello.

The RU 3, 4 and 5 are located in the south and east part of the investigation area. The most interesting site of RU3 is UT 14, which stands on the plateau between Serra Montagna and Monte Villanuova. This site also has long term evidences from the Hellenistic period to early Medieval Age, with a high concentration of African fine pottery, such as African Terra Sigillata produced in Tunisia, datable from the early and middle imperial age. The site is crossed by RT 588, which

connects Racalmuto to Serradifalco, the so-called Via dei Salinari because it was used by modern salt tradesmen to transport salt from the salt mines still present near the area.

RU 4 is located on the slope of Serra Montagna. It is characterized by many mostly sulphurous water sources. The main site is the UT 20. It has a long-time frequentation from Hellenistic period to 13th cent. A.D., with a high density of roof tiles and bricks and many fine and cooking pottery, datable to the early, middle and late Roman age. A roof tile with a stamp, unfortunately not in perfect conditions, still shows the letters 'A' and 'L'. The site is crossed by the trazzera Lavatore that crosses the river and connects to RT 635. The latter crosses RU 5 east of the river, which is in contrada Pietre Vive, on the slope of Monte Sabucia. In this area there is a consistent water source and nearby there is a wide UT (UT 50), characterized by a high density of amphoras from late Hellenistic period to first imperial age, and few fine pottery and cooking pottery, like Pantellerian ware, mainly near the water source surroundings. Unlucky, for the investigation Units 3, 4 and 5 it was impossible to find the site edges because of inaccessibility of private properties.

The chronology and interpretation of the sites have been revealed thanks to the main pottery classes. But the study is still in progress and a deeper study of the material will be necessary for a better archaeological definition of the areas. However, thanks to the fine pottery data, one relevant aspect can be highlighted: the main sites, in particular of Units 1, 3 and 4, show a great activity in the second century AD. During this period there was a great exploitation of the sulphur mines in the surrounding area.¹⁴

Conclusions: First fragments of the road system

Concerning the street network no actual connections with the already known routes of the territory can be traced. But some directions can be revealed from the location of the sites.

The roads that cross the northern territory are split in two directions: on the western side they are directed towards the Roman sites of contrada Aquilia and

¹⁴ L. Zambito, *Miniére di zolfo tra le guerre servili e Augusto*, in: L.M. Calì - L. Campagna - G.M. Gerogiannis - E.C. Portale - L. Sole (eds.), *La Sicilia fra le guerre civili e l'epoca giulio-claudia. Atti del I Convegno Internazionale*, Palermo 19-21 maggio 2022, vol. I (Roma 2024) 135-154; L. Zambito, *La produzione di zolfo in Sicilia in età romana* (Alessandria 2018); G. Salmeri, *Sicilia Romana. Storia e storiografia* (Catania 1992) 29-43.

Pirito (in Milena territory) and connected to the crossing of Gallo d'Oro river.¹⁵ On the eastern side, the historic RT 601 is nowadays covered by the Provincial Road 16. Furthermore, this road crosses through the hilltops of Vallone Nisseno connecting to SP18, which serves a recently discovered site near Valledunga Pratameno, in contrada Manca. This is in a strategic position towards the northern coast and covers the same chronology like the sites in our area.¹⁶

Finally, in the Southern part of our territory, there is a contemporary use of the east-west segments of the Lavatore Street and RT 635. The east-west direction also directly connects our territory to the sites of the roman sulphur mines,¹⁷ that lead to the Agrigento- Caltanissetta route (Fig. 1).

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¹⁵ C. Guzzone, *L'Antiquarium Arturo Petix di Milena e l'archeologia del territorio alla confluenza fra il Platani e il Gallo d'Oro* (Caltanissetta 2002) 58–60; V. La Rosa, *Nuovi centri indigeni nella media valle del Platani*, *Kokalos* 34/35, 1988/89, 551–557.

¹⁶ M. Congiu, *La villa romana di Valledunga: primi dati*, in: L.M. Calì – L. Campagna – G.M. Gerogiannis – E.C. Portale – L. Sole (eds.), *La Sicilia fra le guerre civili e l'epoca giulio-claudia. Atti del I Convegno Internazionale*, Palermo 19–21 maggio 2022, vol. II (Roma 2024) 575–591.

¹⁷ L. Zambito, *La produzione di zolfo in Sicilia in età romana* (Alessandria 2018).