Part 3

The impact of the Roman urban model
Chapter 14

From Potentia to Porto Recanati: The Roman coastal colony and its modern legacy

Frank Vermeulen

Introduction

Ancient Rome understood how to combine urbanisation and its imperialistic objectives, and this is most obvious in the way it organised colonisation and built colonial settlements of the urban kind. The Roman state had gradually made urban self-administration a cornerstone of its system of government and the expansion of its city culture created an extraordinary unity that manifested itself visually in many aspects of its spatial planning and building program, in homeland Italy as well as in the provinces. 1 Although Roman cities often display careful modulated organisation, they were as much influenced by the diversity of their climate, geology, landscape, relief and pre-existing settlement systems, as by the differences between the ethnicities and cultures that Rome integrated in the course of its expansion. The apparent core similarities of monumental Roman cityscapes and the accompanying conformities of the urban lifestyle was thus accompanied by an extraordinary diversity of town plans. Even in the way the Romans created colonial landscapes in Italy from mid-Republican times onwards there is diversity, notwithstanding the crucial role of the orthogonal street grid and the often quite regular shape of town limits and civic centres that are so much part of the Roman imprint in many confiscated or conquered territories. A traditional characterisation of a colony has been as that of a 'mini-Rome', as defined from the perspective of Rome and the Romans. 2 However, it is now becoming clear that no two colonies are fully alike, and a blueprint for such a Roman foundation can hardly be defined with precision. 3

2 Brown, Cosa, the Making of a Roman Town, 53.
3 Sweetman, Roman Colonies in the First Century of their Foundation.
Between the mid-fourth century BC and the reign of Augustus a great number of colonies were created all over the peninsula. During the main phase of territorial expansion in Italy, between the fourth and second centuries BC, these were essentially two types: ‘Latin colonies’ (until 181 BC), or very large and independent communities with their own administration often inhabiting the site of a former settlement centre, and colonies of Roman citizens (‘Roman colonies’), which are often regarded as smaller new towns or maritime garrisons whose inhabitants were legally more integrated into the Roman state as they were full Roman citizens. From the later second century BC onwards colonies founded within the scheme of land reforms and colonies for army veterans complemented the ever denser spread of new foundations, gradually replacing many high order settlements of the traditional Italic type that dominated the peninsula before the advent of Rome. While many of the earlier Latin colonies transformed, expanded and reorganised the existing central settlements of defeated peoples, most of the Roman citizen colonies were newly planned, gridded towns demonstrating the rationale of the new Roman urban wonder. The large majority of these were situated along the strategic coastlines of the Italian peninsula, and in this paper I would like to focus on these coastal colonies. I will also provide some argumentation for the lasting impact of this coastal model of the gridded city in post-Roman Adriatic Italy where, up until the present day, certain modern town centres are a good reminder of similar choices in city planning and landscape siting made more than two millennia ago. This will trigger the question of whether the later grids were conscious imitations of earlier Roman patterns, and whether they were trying to achieve the same type of urban organisation and control.

**Roman colonial cityscapes in maritime Italy**

The first of Rome’s colonies that were inhabited exclusively by their own citizens were tiny places estimated to have covered less than 3 hectares, like Ostia and Minturnae. They were enclosed by rectilinear fortifications and probably already had an orthogonal street system with the same orientation as the walls, but not yet a large forum and political structures like later towns. A strategic location near the mouth of rivers was typical, while their function is believed to have been to defend the entrance to the river and a stretch of coastline against superpower Carthage and seaborne raiders. Ancient literary sources indicate that Rome founded more than twenty such coastal colonies of Roman citizens down to around 180 BC, and the archaeological sites of all but two of them have been found with relative certainty. Although they differ in size, most of them are characterised by straight fortifications with right angled corners as a response to building on level terrain, and many of these centres were located on coastal plains. To a certain degree, the colonies can be

---

4 For a good overview with further references, see Sewell, *The Formation of Roman Urbanism 338–200 B.C.*
considered as permanently manned forts\(^5\) founded as completely new settlements, with the remainder being set up within or very close to pre-existing centres. Like the colony of Pyrgi, which is believed to have replaced the port-town of the great Etruscan centre of Caere, most of these coastal settlements have a topography linked to the orientation and proximity of the coastline, and many probably held a strong logistic relationship with a coastal road.\(^6\) Those *coloniae civium romanorum* of the early second century (created after 184 BC) were, it seems, increasingly provided with public amenities around a central plaza.\(^7\)

While the first group of ten colonies for Roman citizens, located essentially on the central-Tyrrhenian coast, near Rome, were mostly smaller fortress-like maritime strongholds, soon the colonial foundation was assimilated to the full-scale urbanisation effort of Rome in Italy. My own research in recent years has focused on the central-Adriatic urbanisation and here, in an Italic region that knew no fully developed cities before the coming of Rome in the early third century, the colonies were at the forefront of regional urbanism.\(^8\) The extensive foundation in this region between 290 and 247 BC of the Latin colonies Hatria (c. 290 BC), Ariminum (268 BC) and Firmum (264 BC), and the Roman colonies Castrum Novum (c. 290 BC), Sena Gallica (c. 290–283 BC) and maybe Aesis (247 BC ?) generated a strategically well-distributed urban strip along and near the coast, forming a coordinated system of control of the central Adriatic and the now-expanded eastern section of the *ager Romanus* (Fig. 14.1).\(^9\) At the same time, a gateway was created for the later conquest of the very important Po Plain, and possible expansion towards the eastern Adriatic and ultimately Greece. It is likely that the locations chosen for the embedding of the six central Adriatic colonies and their subsequent urbanisation was in part, if not totally, marked by some form of preceding occupation.\(^10\) Their locations, on a stable terrace dominating a strategic river mouth (Ariminum, Sena Gallica) or on an elevated site near the coast controlling the lower valleys of some river corridors (Firmum, Hatria, Castrum Novum, Aesis) had been beneficial in pre-Roman times. Archaeological research is procuring more and more evidence of these older occupation phases, and it becomes all the more clear that the Romans did not much take into account the pre-existing infrastructures and houses of the Italic and Gallic peoples settled there. This archaeological research into the foundation of the third century colonies is however hindered by topographic continuity into modern cities, despite good efforts by our Italian colleagues in the two neatly gridded cities on relatively flat terrain:

---

\(^{5}\) The most important literary source on the Roman army of this period are *The Histories* of the Greek historian Polybius, published in c. 160 BC. The surviving chapters cover the First and Second Punic Wars and contain details about the organisation of Roman camps in the mid-Republican period.

\(^{6}\) Enei, ‘Pyrgi e le sue mura poligonali: recenti scoperte nel castrum e nell’area portuale’.

\(^{7}\) Gros and Torelli, *Storia dell’Urbanistica*, 130.

\(^{8}\) Vermeulen, *From the Mountains to the Sea*.

\(^{9}\) Laffi, *Colonia e Municipli nello Stato Romano*.

\(^{10}\) Vermeulen, *From the Mountains to the Sea*, 62.
We are archaeologically better informed of the Roman expansion and further colonisation in this region from the second century BC onwards. Shortly after the departure of the Carthaginian army from Italy in 203 BC, concluding the second Punic war with Rome, things returned swiftly to normal and economic activity and the ongoing processes of Roman political growth and expansion of the Italian territory dominated by Rome restarted.\(^{12}\)

Certain operations were necessary for the reconquest of Gallia Cisalpina, lost during the passage of Hannibal, and the reconstruction and fortification of the colonial borderland system occurred soon after the war, with a whole series of town foundations and reinforcements between 190 and 174 BC across practically the whole of Italy.\(^{13}\) In that period the central Adriatic sector saw the foundation of three new colonies for Roman citizens: of Pisaurum and Potentia in 184 BC, and of Auximum probably around 174 BC.\(^{14}\) The locations of these three new fortified towns were well chosen. Pisaurum and Potentia – both lying directly on the coast – fill the still existing wide gaps in the coastal defences of respectively the central part of the *ager Gallicus* and the northern part of Picenum. Their foundations are most likely connected with the needs of the navy, also shown by the creation in 181 BC of *duumviri navales*, and by the problems with Istrian piracy in the Adriatic. The colonial levels of Pisaurum, modern day Pesaro, are again obstructed by the modern city built on top. The site of Potentia, however, today a greenfield site south of the town of Porto Recanati, and the playground for field operations since 2003 of my Ghent University team, has allowed us to better comprehend the birth of a gridded coastal city.

---

\(^{11}\) Lepore and Silani, ‘The Roman colony of Sena Gallica’.

\(^{12}\) Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic*.

\(^{13}\) Laffi, *Colonie e Municipi nello Stato Romano*, 22.

\(^{14}\) Paci, ‘La politica coloniaria di Roma nell’agro Gallico e nel Piceno’.
Potentia: A Republican colony on the Adriatic coastline

The place in Picenum chosen by the Romans in the early second century to found the colony of Roman citizens at Potentia was probably not virgin land. Here, on the left bank of the ancient course of the river Flosis, and situated on a somewhat higher beach ridge allowing permanent settlement directly on the coast, surface survey and small scale excavations located the presence of an Iron Age settlement occupied in the fifth to fourth centuries BC (Percossi 2012; Vermeulen 2017). This habitation core near the river mouth was probably rather small and may have functioned just as a satellite of the c. 6 hectare large defended Picene village of Montarice, lying 2 kilometres northwards on a hilly river terrace. The Iron Age habitation layer is situated under a clay deck, about 1 metre thick, on which the Roman colony was ultimately laid out – according to Livy in the year 184 BC – suggesting that there was no direct link between this Picene occupation and the later Roman developments. Like the contemporary northern Italian colonies of Roman right Mutina, Parma and Luna the new Roman settlement on the Adriatic shore probably consisted of some 2000 colonists.

The recent field investigations in Potentia gave us the opportunity for a full evaluation of its extent, character and evolution. As this site near the mouth of the Potenza river was abandoned in early medieval times for safer locations on nearby hilltops, and was gradually transformed to its present state of agricultural land, it offers good opportunities for archaeological research. Sporadic rescue excavations since the 1960s, many years of systematic excavations by the Soprintendenza of Marche on the central site of a late Republican sanctuary and its Imperial successors and most of all the intensive non-invasive surveys and some focussed excavations on and around the wider town site by my Ghent University team, have delivered a really detailed plan and some insight into the phasing of urban development (Fig. 14.2).

It is evident that the geomorphology of the site greatly dictated the choices of the town builders. The selected area, the narrow beach ridge north of the Roman Potenza

---

15 During the Middle Ages the ancient name was converted into Potenza, a reference to the ancient town at its mouth.

16 Archaeological evidence from the hill of Montarice, where archaeological research by my team is still ongoing, indicates that this settlement was progressively abandoned from the mid-second century BC, a process that culminated in the first century BC. Vermeulen, ‘Settlement dynamics from the 4th to the 2nd century BC’.

17 Livy, Ab urbe condita, 39, 44, 10.

18 For a good discussion of the numbers of colonists see Pina Polo, ‘Deportation, kolonisation, migration’. This number of 2000 is much higher than the 300 men normally sent in third or early second century colonies. In fact, the now archaeologically known size of Potentia (see below) compares well with, for instance, the town area of the well-studied colony of Luna.

19 For the Soprintendenza, Percossi Serenelli, Potentia. Quando poi Scese il Silenzio; Percossi ‘Le fasi repubblicane di Potentia’. For the most recent overview of the research operations and results obtained by the Ghent University archaeologists at Potentia, see Vermeulen et al., The Potenza Valley Survey and Vermeulen, From the Mountains to the Sea.
river mouth, was the best location for the realisation of a quite slim rectangular town, bordered on three sides by natural impediments: the sea to the east, the river to the south and the alluvial wetland to the west. Continuous silting has gradually reduced the relative height of the beach ridge, but during the second century BC we can envisage a town on an elevation that stood out several metres above its surroundings, close to a ford where the river communicated with the sea, and partly surrounded by a lowland, mostly marshy, environment. The specific topographic position on this higher and dryer beach ridge, aerated by sea breezes and visually well positioned versus the coast, with a direct link to the presumed river harbour directly south of its walls, nicely combined the Aristotelian concern with defence with the Vitruvian
considerations of health. The north-north-west–south-south-east orientation of the plan and its rather elongated shape are perfectly parallel to the nearby coastline and must have originally consisted of a defended space of approximately 16 hectares. The original defences of the initial period, when the settlement must have looked more like a camp than a town, are still poorly known. Excavations near the western entrance have shown that the site was probably surrounded by a V-shaped ditch, delimiting the *pomerium*, which was probably flanked by a small *agger* with palisade. Thanks to central intervention from Rome the settlement was soon transformed into a real town. The financial support in 174 BC from censor Quintus Fulvius Flaccus must have been impressive, and after a decade of existence the settlement must have received: a temple for Jupiter, a circuit wall with three arched gates, a regular street network with sewers, an aqueduct and a portico with shops bordering the forum square. Apart from the aqueduct, almost all these historically attested features have now been defined in the field.

20 Vitruvius wrote his *de Architectura* almost two centuries after the foundation of *Potentia*, but he passed on traditional ideas.
21 Q. Fulvius Flaccus had been governor of *Hispania Citerior*, where he captured and plundered the *oppidum* of *Urbicana* and fended off attacks from the Celtiberians in 182 BC (Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 42.4.3–4). As consul a few years later in 179 BC, he ordered the building of a temple of Fortuna Equestris in Rome to fulfil a vow connected with this campaign, using money collected in Spain for this purpose (Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 40.44.8–12).
The spatial expansion of town and suburban area from the end of the Republic onwards can also be reconstructed on the basis of a combination of historical and archaeological data. At the latest during the reign of Augustus, the town grid of the original second century BC colony was probably extended towards the coastline, with one row of additional *insulae*, enlarging the town’s surface area to almost 18 hectares. Potentia was, according to Cicero,\(^{23}\) hit by an earthquake in the year 54 BC and serious repairs were needed, while additional veteran colonists joining its territory during the second Triumvirate\(^{24}\) probably had to be housed in the urban centre, an action that might have helped to revive the town. It was well attested during excavations that the city wall was rebuilt in this later phase and that the forum area was monumentalised, while the aerial and extensive geophysical surveys suggested that the town was spatially extended some 50 metres towards the sea on its eastern side, creating not only more space for housing, but also possibly for a small theatre. This all fits very well with the national Augustan programme of urban renewal and the emperor’s principles of monumentality and scenography, which involved a re-presentation of Hellenistic ideas in the service of Roman political strategies (Fig. 14.3).

A town like Potentia, founded *ex novo* on the coast, was obviously part of a broader program designed to structure a large territory based on the creation of a new urban centre. The inland towns in its valley, such as Trea, Septempeda and Ricina display obvious differences with the hard colonial model of Potentia: they have irregular polygonal enclosures and a less strictly orthogonal street system, based on their origin as *praefecturae* with an organic topographic development as street villages. These new towns developed in areas where the population may have created nucleated settlements, but had not had experience of, or seen the cause to reproduce, the aesthetics of Roman urbanism, as seen in Potentia. In the course of the second half of the first century BC and during the first two centuries AD the latter can be seen in the development of a more regular street grid parallel to the main road axis and the adoption of architectural types like the strictly organised fora, temples, theatres and amphitheatres. These features of urbanism were not adopted uniformly, and variation in the adoption of the architecture of Roman urbanism in time and space clearly demonstrates the variation in the city phenomenon within Italy, spurred by inter-city competition and comparison, the active role of elites and factors of financial resources and sustainability.\(^{25}\)

An important characteristic of this urban centre, apart from its specific administrative status, assumed number of inhabitants and surface area, is its physicality. This is most clearly expressed through the urban layout dominated by an expected pattern of buildings, streets, squares, passages and gates that help locals and visitors to navigate the city, and by the presence of certain (public) buildings and monuments that offered a range of public amenities and characterised the conformity of life as experienced in Roman townscapes all over the empire. The relationship of the forum to the rest of its urban environment might usefully be thought of as analogous to that of the town to

\(^{23}\) Cicero, *De Haruspicium Responsis*, 28, 62.

\(^{24}\) *Gromatici Veteres*, 259 L.; *CIL* IX, 5654.

\(^{25}\) Laurence *et al.*, *The City in the Roman West*. 
its surrounding countryside, as an island where most of public life was played out and within which the expression and experience of ‘being Roman’ was intensified.\textsuperscript{26}

Much more than the inland urban centres, coastal towns in Italy held a vision and local embedding that was much more directed by the central state. Like many other similar maritime towns with colonial roots, it appears that the basic purpose of the coastal centre of Potentia was to fortify the coast and control the valley entrance, located as it was on the very edge of the Adriatic Sea, near the main inland corridor and river mouths, and on the developing coastal road. Its strategic value was emphasised by the influence of the military upon its establishment. The imposing walled enclosure suggests that it had a very strategic role, but another function would have been to structure the territory, in which were settled not only Roman citizens, but also the indigenous population and probably also other settlers coming from Tyrrhenian areas. The objective would have been to organise a political community that would embrace an extensive territory and its inhabitants.

The specific town model of Potentia has not been invented for this site only, as it is derived from earlier examples of Roman town planning. It is likely that third century BC central-Adriatic colonies, like Castrum Novum and Sena Gallica, which might both have been conceived as experiments among the early Roman citizen colonies that tried to combine the military function of coastal control with the more populated and larger forms of the contemporary colonies of Latin right, were influential on Potentia’s city plan. The emulation of earlier Latin colonial planning is expressed here by being a larger population centre, and by such urbanistic features as an elongated forum, long narrow insulae with tabernae flanking the sides of the forum, and possibly a capitolium-curia complex dominating the plaza. The colony was no longer a small military stronghold, but must have soon appeared as a fully-fledged town aiming at self-government and at full self-sufficiency by way of extensive economic exploitation of the land and the nearby maritime world. But it is also evident that the position of the town demonstrates a close connection between its forma urbis and physical geography. Urban planning was adapted to the shape and contours of the land to take advantage of the elevated features of the narrow beach ridge, using its natural slopes as an additional defence against enemies, but mostly water. Not surprisingly, the detailed planning of the strategically placed town followed basic rules connected with the presence and orientation of crucial road connections, easy river crossing and possibly newly constructed river mouth landings as embryonic sea port.

**Examples of coastal Adriatic foundations between the Middle Ages and modern times: A Roman legacy?**

Certain urbanistic developments in the longue durée of post-Roman Italy, before the unambiguous revival of the Roman colonial model by the Italian Fascists, seem to have some direct or indirect link with the success of ancient Roman urbanism. The general

\textsuperscript{26} Dickenson, ‘Making space for commerce in Roman Britain’.
decline of city life in most parts of the central and western Mediterranean during the early Middle Ages could not prevent many urban settlements with continuous habitation until modern times from retaining the imprint of the ancient urban fabric for a long time. In many Italian towns with continuity of life since Roman imperial times, crucial morphological aspects of the street system (whether gridded or more loosely organised), the ancient city defences and certain monumental complexes can easily be detected without (difficult) archaeological research. By looking primarily at city layouts using techniques such as planimetry and the graphical and strictly morphological analysis of town structures one can quite easily perceive the crucial impact of ancient urbanism on later generations, even if the study of modern morphological survival in the current cities, and uncritical use of cadastral and other maps for the reconstruction of town grids and modules, has sometimes proven to be quite conjectural.27

In those parts of Italy where town continuity has generally prevailed, however, the transformation of the classical city in the early medieval period was quite serious. It went hand in hand with the redesign or the creation of new defensive systems (e.g. by the Lombards and Byzantines), new centres of power in the town (away from the old forum), networks of churches (depending on the bishops) and new suburban areas focussing on martyr or funerary sanctuaries.28 As a result, in most ancient cities the urban landscape became less coherent and more disordered, often included abandoned and ruralised areas and integrated a scattered funerary landscape no longer separated from the town of the living.29

Until the later Middle Ages the creation in Italy of well-ordered new cities is highly exceptional. The morphologies of new or renewed cities created between the fifth and tenth centuries by the strong leaders of that time, such as Justinian, the barbaric kings, the pope and Charlemagne, differed in accordance with crucial variables such as propaganda, security and economic necessity. Coastal examples of such towns founded from scratch in Adriatic Italy are Grado, Comacchio and Venice, all implanted in its northern lagune landscapes.30 These new Byzantine centres arose due to the necessity of reorganising coastal possessions after the Lombard conquest of most of northern Italy and the requirement to guarantee the long-term continuity of commercial activity in this part of the Mediterranean. Although these new towns differed greatly from one another, they shared a series of common features: city walls, a basic street network, a system of cisterns for water provisioning, a number of churches, a commercial/port quarter and an administrative/fiscal/military power base. Gone from the urban landscape so typical of the classical city are the rich domus of the urban elite, the central forum-type square, the baths and the majestic buildings for spectacles and display.

27 Vermeulen, From the Mountains to the Sea, 20.
28 Brogiolo, Le Origini della Città Medievale, 88.
29 Ward-Perkins, From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages.
30 Brogiolo, Le Origini della Città Medievale, 123.
After the decline and transformation of city life during the early Middle Ages we see in the peninsula a renewed rise of towns, on many old and some new sites, in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the establishment of these medieval towns and of Italian city-states and maritime republics, the patriciate, as a formally defined class of governing wealthy families, played a crucial role. They were found in the well-known and thoroughly studied Italian city states and maritime republics, such as Venice, Pisa, Genoa and Amalfi, but were also at the base of many other local developments and smaller centres spread organically over the peninsula. Especially from the Renaissance onwards and into modern times the urban architecture and planning of public space in the towns of Italy absorbed many ideas and forms which can be traced back to the townscapes of antiquity. It is not my intention here to discuss this very broad and interesting subject. I would like to focus succinctly, and no doubt in an anecdotic way, on a specific form of survival in Adriatic Italy of the gridded maritime colonial model discussed above.

It is my opinion that this model can be discerned in two very different examples of medieval and post-medieval urban planning and development along this coastline. Both examples are taken from the interesting notion that many Roman cities in Italy were gradually and completely abandoned in late antiquity or the early medieval period, even if sites in their immediate vicinity, such as on higher and safer locations, often inherited some form of population continuity. For the whole of Italy there is general agreement that the late and immediate post-Roman period saw a widespread and marked decline in town-dwelling, with various Roman centres progressively abandoned and those that survived were less populous and certainly less monumental than before. Indeed, it can be claimed that one third of the 372 cities listed by Pliny in the eleven Augustan regions in Italy were no longer occupied in the post-Roman period. However, we must bear in mind that the abandonment of cities was probably a gradual phenomenon, very rarely with wholly abrupt ends. But in coastal environments, where urban development was for many centuries much hindered by factors such as geomorphological dynamics, health problems (e.g. malaria) and most of all security issues, town renewal was often problematic and new town foundations were for a long time especially rare.

31 Wickham, *Sleepwalking into a New World*.
32 Part of the archeological and historical discussion on the transformation of settlement patterns and the move and reorganisation of the population to higher parts of the topography towards the end of the early Medieval period has been centred on the ‘incastellamento’ phenomenon. See mostly: Wickham, *Il Problema dell’incastellamento nell’Italia Centrale* and Francovich and Milanese, ‘Lo scavo archeologico di Montarrenti’.
33 In central-Adriatic Italy about one out of three Roman towns were abandoned; of the thirty-eight Roman cities in Le Marche, once cited by Pliny, only twenty-three became episcopal seats, six were reduced to simple villages and nine others were never heard of again; as we know from Potentia, even some of the bishop seats eventually vanished. Vermeulen, ‘Potentia: A Lost New Town’ and Cirelli, ‘La ridefinizione degli spazi urbani’.
34 Delogu, ‘Longobardi e Romani: altre congetture’.
Nevertheless, as some cases in Adriatic Italy show, even in late- and especially post-medieval times the phenomenon of moving populations and expanding or creating more planned towns has not fully disappeared from the maritime context. This can be well illustrated by the following two examples from central/north Adriatic Italy, which indeed are cases where a previous high order settlement for the area is now abandoned and reduced to a greenfield area, and new interesting town models developed on nearby coastal sites. It is likely that these two examples stand for the two main development types of new cities in post-medieval Adriatic Italy. They are the coastal towns of Porto Recanati – indirect successor of Roman Potentia – and the more northerly situated town of Cervia. The first is an example of a town with a grid plan that gradually developed out of a discrete medieval military core, while the second is a very intentionally planned small gridded town of strictly post-Medieval signature.

**Porto Recanati**

The origin of Porto Recanati can only partly be traced back to the human ‘diaspora’ from the Roman town near the ancient the Potenza river mouth, located some 2 kilometres further southwards and abandoned in the early middle ages to different locations on hilltops in the hinterland (e.g. the hilltops of present-day towns like Potenza Picena, Loreto and Recanati). At the end of the twelfth century, when the marshy and under-exploited coastal strip moved from the hands of the more rural based Conti delle Marina to the flourishing inland urban community of Recanati, things changed in this part of maritime Marche. In this same period that large tracts of land in various Marchean coastal plains were being reclaimed. In 1240, Pope Gregory IX wrote a letter addressed to the inhabitants of Recanati ordering them to arrange a confluence between the Potenza, Musone and Aspio rivers, and to plan a port there. The core of the new settlement of Porto Recanati, which was ultimately to replace the city of Potentia as coastal centre, is actually a castle founded directly on the coast by the inhabitants of the town of Recanati, lying 12 kilometres inland. This Castrum Maris, of which today the so-called Swabian Castle (Castello Svevo) remains, was a stronghold built in 1225, in defence of the newly projected port, and granted by Federico II the Holy Roman emperor to the inhabitants of Recanati.

It is clear that the initial non-urban settlement of Porto Recanati had a defensive objective; it possessed a signalling tower and was the first barrier to resist invaders or raiders from the sea. At the same time this stronghold was a kind of symbolic outpost and a demonstration of power of inland Recanati, at a time when in Italy many cities

---

35 Cenci and Varani, ‘Per una storia ambientale’.
36 Buli and Ortolani, *Le Spiagge Marchigiane*.
37 Moroni, ‘Le campagne lauretane dal XII al XV secolo’.
38 Foschi, *Federico II di Svevia*. Combined research on historical documents and geomorphological observations have allowed the Ghent team to understand better the early development of the port of this is town, see Corsi *et al.*, ‘River bed changing in the lower Potenza Valley’.
competed for power and success. Soon the economic aspirations of the urban elites of Recanati, who towered topographically over the coastline from their regional market centre on the inland hilltop, also saw the economic advantage of developing this coastal settlement around their castle and especially its port. However, many attempts at constructing a durable port in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries failed and an ambitious project for the construction of a significant harbor at the confluence of the river Potenza was abandoned in 1474.

Until the fifteenth century, documents attest that all inhabitants of the small settlement lived within the castle walls. 39 In post-medieval times, a somewhat larger village of fishermen and people connected itself to the limited port functions, which had developed here along the coastal road immediately to the south of the castle, and ran neatly parallel with the coastline. Both a perpendicular road, which departed from the castle, and this main axis, which pointed inland towards Recanati, created the second orientation of streets in the growing village, thus forming the basis of a grid-shaped plan (Fig. 14.4). This grid plan was only fully materialised in the first half of the nineteenth century, and was finalised at the end of that century when

39 Alessandrini, *Disegno per una Storia di Porto Recanati*, 23.
the railroad and station were accomplished and a much larger population centre had developed (Fig. 14.5). As with its predecessor Potentia, the main long distance coastal road remained the principal axis of the grid. It is interesting that the open area between castle and coastline, where the monumental port was projected to be built, was used much later to create a plaza (today Piazza Brancondi), comparable to the Roman forum square: neatly located in the centre of the town, along its north–south oriented corso and in front of its main building, the medieval castle. In this way the town plan looks more than a bit like an orthogonal Roman colonial settlement and its location near the river mouth, which in the course of time was artificially moved northwards from its original Roman site, is precisely the same as that of its ancient predecessor. The similarity in orientation and its oblong form, partly shaped by the same geological context as the nearby site of Potentia, namely the location parallel with and nearby the coastline on a higher and dryer beach ridge, also strengthens this comparison.

40 The title of ‘City of Porto Recanati’ has been recognised since 24 April 2013 by Presidential Decree.
41 For a good discussion on the relation between local geology/geomorphology and the foundation of cities see Gisotti, *La Fondazione delle Città*. 

Figure 14.5. Present-day aerial view of the oldest gridded part of Porto Recanati, squeezed between the railroad and the coastline. The grid is centrally dominated by the almost north–south oriented corso and by the square in front of the Swabian castle, once the location of the harbour installations built by the inhabitants of inland Recanati (Google Earth, 18 August 2020).
The most important buildings of the town: the post office, the church and the main shops, were located along the main road axis (originally called *via larga* or *primo Stradone*), like in many an ancient Roman city. The simple one-storey houses of fishermen lined the perpendicular and parallel streets of the regular grid, which were also called *Stradoni* and numbered according to the distance from the main street. The full autonomy of this settlement, which during most of its long history could be considered a small colony of the nearby autonomous city Recanati, and even the central power of the Papal State in Rome, was only achieved after the end of the nineteenth century. In 1893 the municipality of Porto Recanati was born when by virtue of a Royal Decree, signed by the King of Italy Umberto I, the coastal village was detached from Recanati. The town’s autonomy was completed when a few years later a civic aqueduct was inaugurated to provide the inhabitants with drinkable water, and the train station was built, allowing full connection with the rest of Adriatic Italy and beyond. The comparison with many ancient Republican colonies and towns becoming fully independent municipia after the Social War of the early first century BC, and investing in their water provisioning and communication system is certainly not so far-fetched.

**Cervia**

The second example of a remarkable gridded post-medieval maritime urbanism along the northern sector of the Adriatic coast is Cervia. Here, in the southern part of the Po plain and in the shadow of Ravenna, higher order settlements of antiquity are less well known. A possible Greek or Etruscan presence – connected with the name *Ficocle* – and a Roman roadside settlement along the coastal via Popilia can be directly linked to the long history of salt exploitation in these coastal wetlands. This important economic asset spurred on urban development, giving rise to a flourishing medieval town amid the ‘saline’ with a city wall, a castle and seven churches. Cervia ultimately became part of the Papal States and was even mentioned in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. However, by the end of the seventeenth century the landscape had changed and gradually turned the salt ponds into a marshland, greatly diminishing the malaria-stricken population. Pope Innocent XII ordered the town to be rebuilt in a safer and healthier location closer to the coastline and its higher beach ridges (Fig. 14.6).

The new city built for the salt-digging population of Cervia, which remains perfectly preserved today, received a plan that can be best compared to some of the typical Roman Republican maritime colonies discussed above (Fig. 14.7). The city was organised as a fortress: it was entirely enclosed by defensive walls, with only two

---

42 As suggested in an eighteenth century poem by Pietro Antonio Zanoni, “*De salinis Cerviensibus*”, Pilandri, ‘La leggenda delle saline’.

43 Dante, Inferno, Canto XXVII, 40–42: ‘Ravenna sta come stata è molt’anni: l’aguglia da Polenta la si cova, sí che Cervia ricuopre co’ suoi vanni’; translation: ‘Ravenna remains as it has been for years. The eagle of Polenta broods over it such that he covers Cervia with his wings’ (The Online Library of Liberty).

44 For a detailed discussion of the planning process and architecture of Nuova Cervia see Benincampi, ‘Architects and institutions’ and Foschi, *La Costruzione di Cervia Nuova*. 
access gates which were closed every evening. The quadrangular shape of the city, which was laid out on a grid plan oriented parallel to the coastline and fully linked to the coastal road, is exactly the same as what we see in Potentia and in some other Roman Adriatic colonies. The central square was organised on the main street as one would expect an ancient forum plaza to be. The foundation document indicated exactly the number of houses to be built, namely forty multi-family houses for the salt diggers and their families, with larger houses for the magistrates and important families lining the main longitudinal street. The location of the cathedral, the bishop’s palace and prisons on the central plaza seems a direct reference to the concentration of public buildings around ancient Roman forum models. Also interesting is that the planning incorporated the construction of a small market square and a public building for storage of grain, which might remind us of the *macellum* and *horrea* so typical of many Roman towns. An imposing tower controlled the well-structured port along the now canalised river mouth and the crucial and monumental storehouse for the all-important salt supplies. We should also mention that during the building process the inhabitants were allowed to demolish the old town in the ‘saline’ and to reuse its building materials for erecting the new houses.

It is not known whether the alleged ‘rediscovery’ of Vitruvius’ books after the Renaissance served directly to create this new model of city planning applied in Cervia. The developments of these ideas within the post-medieval Italian cultural context surely had an indirect influence on the choices made by the Roman architects in the service of pope Innocent XII. Formally the architects of Cervia based their project on functional criteria in order to promote an image of modernity and to

45 See Wallace-Hadrill, this volume.
46 Architects such as Girolamo Caccia (c. 1650–1728), Francesco Fontana (1668–1708) and Abram Paris (c. 1641–1716) played a key role in the definition of the new city grid and of the design of its principal buildings. Benincampi, ‘Architects and institutions’.
create a constant dialogue between both central and local institutions. The result was an agreement of utilitarian and very symbolic concepts. The new town was a demonstration of urban vitality in its own time, even in such a peripheral area of the state. There was a dynamic dialogue between central institutional decisions and the requests of the local administration and population, even if that dialogue was not always easy.

We might ask whether this is not precisely what often happened with the Roman city planners in antiquity? The decision to embrace the ancient ‘grid-and-forum idea’ for this small new town of salt diggers surely depended upon some sort of economic-egalitarian ideology, and indirectly the model of ancient Rome’s tax-based imperialism was applied here to the full. The town model also imposed reflections on the cohabitation between diverse social classes, as no doubt had happened exactly with the ancient Roman colonial settlements of the urban kind. It is interesting to compare this post-medieval urban intervention to the Roman colonies we see on the Adriatic coast, which in ancient Republican times were also implanted quite far away from the central power. Although not many new inhabitants were brought to Nuova Cervia, the planning of town and port was clearly part of a policy to rationally exploit the salt pans of the area and to export the white gold. Surely the Roman ‘maritime’ colonies of the Potentia-type also sought to economically exploit the (agrarian)
hinterland and to facilitate the export of produce overseas. These Republican colonies were also often the result of direct elite intervention from Rome, with forthright economic policies as main objective, in their case especially for the promotion of the international wine business. Likewise, elites active in the Papal States, such as cardinals and other influential clergy, played an active role in economically promoting an important centre for the collection and sale of salt from its hinterland.

Bibliography

Primary


Secondary


Brown, E., *Cosa, the Making of a Roman Town* (Ann Arbor, 1980).


Dickenson, C., ‘Making space for commerce in Roman Britain – re-evaluating the nature and impact of the forum/basilica complex’ in A. Zuiderhoek and F. Vermeulen (eds.), *Space, Movement and the Economy in Roman Cities in Italy and Beyond* (London, forthcoming).


---

47 Patterson, ‘The relationship of the Italian ruling classes with Rome’.
14. From Potentia to Porto Recanati


Vermeulen, F., *From the Mountains to the Sea: The Roman Colonisation and Urbanisation of Central Adriatic Italy* (Leuven/Paris/Bristol, 2017).


