

THE SANGRO VALLEY RESEARCH PROJECT (ABRUZZO): EXCAVATION AND RESEARCH AT COLLE SANT'IANNI (VILLETTA BARREA, PESCASSEROLI),

1997-2000

The '*Sangro Valley Research Project*' was initiated in 1994, organised and in part directed by Prof. John Lloyd[†] (Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford) who sadly died in 1999. It was co-ordinated with the British School at Rome who offered financial and material support, and further funds were provided by the British Academy, The Roman Society, and the Craven Committee. The basic scope of the Project was to analyse the settlement and landscape sequence of different zones of the broad valley of the river Sangro in the Abruzzo region of east central Italy spanning the periods from early prehistory to the medieval epoch. The Project featured a wide methodology, combining field/surface landscape archaeology, geomorphological analysis, excavation, GIS, and ethnographic research). A detailed account of the aims, methods and initial results from the 1994-95 seasons was published in 1997 (Lloyd, Lock & Christie 1997).

There were two distinct zones that formed the focus to this landscape project: 1) The site and territory of Monte Pallano, a late Iron Age or Samnite hillfort/town or *oppidum* in the middle valley, where excavations by the Soprintendenza Archeologica per l'Abruzzo had already identified various levels of consistent settlement and religious activity extending fully into the second century AD; our Project contributed to the archaeology of this settlement and aimed to locate Monte Pallano into its landscape context. 2) The zone between the medieval towns of Barrea and Pescasseroli in the upper valley, an upland region in the Appennine mountains, and now part of the nature reserve of the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo (and thus with problems of access and visibility for archaeologists): here the aim was to identify settlement and landscape exploitation and evolution along the corridor of the Sangro river and to observe aspects of the economic role of the region, with particular emphasis on the systems of transhumance – of major significance in the pre-modern eras. The Project extended from 1994 to 1998 in the field, followed by campaigns of analysis of the materials recovered from the surface survey work and from targeted excavations. A second phase of study centred on Monte Pallano began in 1998 directed by Ed Bispham of Oxford.

Excavations at Villetta Barrea

Linked closely to the wider landscape project, from 1997 our Leicester team began a small programme of excavation and ethnographic study in the upper Sangro valley, based around the hilltop site of Colle Sant'Ianni near Villetta Barrea (itself near to lake Barrea) – this a project also in close collaboration with the Soprintendenza Archeologica per l'Abruzzo and with the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo authorities; funding was again kindly via the British Academy. The studies continued until 2000. In the course of the *Sangro Valley Research Project*, we had recognised a fortified medieval site on the extended but narrow height of Colle Sant'Ianni, with surface traces also of Iron Age or Samnite-period occupation. The hilltop occupies an elevated but very strategic location, capable of controlling traffic (human and animal) along the tight Sangro corridor; Colle Sant'Ianni is closely connected to the documented medieval castle of Rocca Intramonti, this located in a lower-lying position (see photo below).

The excavations at Colle Sant'Ianni sought to tackle three main archaeological problems:

1. To identify the form, chronology and material culture of the settlement at Colle Sant'Ianni and to determine its relationship with Rocca Intramonti,

2. To improve understanding of the medieval ceramic sequence of the upper Sangro valley,
3. To establish the role of transhumance in the social and economic organisation of the zone in the medieval period.

The summit of the hill is articulated into two areas: the western and higher part is a 'military zone' and features a tower and circuit wall; the eastern part is broadest at its eastern extremity and has spaces here for housing (the 'occupation' or 'activity' zone). Trenches were made at the tower and at three houses: all units examined were medieval in date, with a chronology set at c. AD 1150-1350.



Total Station survey by Oliver Creighton (Exeter) and Luisa Dallai (Siena) on the height of Colle Sant'Ianni – the castle site of Rocca Intramonti lies in the background, above the distant ranging pole of Dr Creighton

The exact form and dimensions of the summital tower were hard to determine as excavation of the collapsed edifice was problematic. Erosion (due to weathering, location and collapse, and earthquake damage) meant also that the house structures were not well preserved: in general, only parts of the foundation level of the walling survived, these often built directly onto the angled bedrock and bonded with a weak mortar or clay. Nonetheless, a surprisingly high quantity and good range of artefactual data were recovered from all trenches: glazed (mainly part-glazed) and cooking ceramics, tiles, nails, blades, plus personal dress items (buckles, earrings), coins, glass, and even a fragment of shaped green marble (probably an item taken from the remains of an old Roman villa site nearby). Animal bones were also retrieved which indicate a strong consumption on site of sheep (especially lambs), plus cattle, chicken and also some wild species (including bear). The presence of slag and wasters signified on-site production of metalwork and pottery; there were also items to suggest weaving of local wool – activities which suggest that Colle Sant'Ianni was not a purely military site, but was a point of fairly stable occupation, with a likely female presence too.

Colle Sant'Ianni functioned as a strategic watchtower for the Sangro valley, linking visually with Rocca Intramonti and other fortified sites in the zone, notably Barrea and Opi. The lower-lying castle at Rocca Intramonti was strategically sited to control the passage and pasturage of sheep and their shepherds; indeed, traces of the documented drove-road or

tratturo remain evident in the adjoining landscape, part delineated by field walls. Effectively, our studies indicate that in the Middle Ages the control of transhumance and of the valley road created a network of diverse, but linked, military, civilian, economic and even religious sites, some of which may have their origins in the prehistoric era; the medieval pattern signifies enduring continuity of land use and population in the upper Sangro valley.

Bibliography

The final publication on the excavations at Colle Sant'Ianni will be included in the monographs programmed for the results of the fuller Sangro Valley Research Project; these monographs are planned for publication in late 2005.

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