

THE LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL HABITAT AND CHURCH ON THE MONTE S. MARTINO, RIVA DEL GARDA DISTRICT, NORTH ITALY

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Introduction

North Italy in the late Roman and early medieval periods featured a landscape that saw increasing levels of insecurity matched by a progressive militarisation: in broad terms, towns were refortified, villa estates failed, military forts and watchtowers were established to guard communications networks along roads, rivers and lakes. In some instances, a military and state hand is very apparent as the authorities sought to retain power as the wider Roman Empire shrank inwards: as well as fortresses near the main passes over the Alps, fleet bases were established in the major northern lakes like Como and Garda. For the latter, at the southern end, for example, military posts were established at a gorge location such as Rocca di Rivoli; the villa complexes around the south end of the lake, once holiday homes to the highest elites, saw progressive abandonment. In the case of the extended promontory of Sirmione, girding fortification walls were constructed, as the military authorities established surveillance seats – a military district centred on Sirmione continued fully into the early Middle Ages. Less well understood, however, is the response of local populations – farmers, peasants, villagers and even townsfolk – to these wider changes and how far ‘normal’ life continued or how far they were encouraged to relocate to more secure locations. Was there an inevitable transfer to hilltop sites – reviving the image of small upland communities that prevailed before Roman peace had enabled and encouraged extensive settlement on plains, etc.? For the 6th century AD there are references to refugees being provided – *castella* – which might imply that not all chose to live in defended space; and there are churches which continue to occupy lowland sites across the early Middle Ages, signifying related working congregations.

This is how settlement patterns are generally thought to have evolved in the period AD 400–800 before towns generally began to revive, more open settlement resumed, monastic landscapes evolved, and manorial sites developed. For various parts of Italy, the related archaeology is fairly advanced in terms of charting

landscape change through field survey, and through excavation: for the lakes regions we can cite survey work around Verona, excavations at villas like Desenzano, urban explorations at Brescia, church excavations at Sirmione, and fortress studies like Monte Barro near lake Como (see, in general, discussion in Christie 2006; on fortifications see Brogiolo and Gelichi 1996; and, most recently, Possenti 2013). These have helped frame the changes, trace material cultural expressions and raised questions of scale and chronologies – e.g. how far are the noted defensive measures late Roman, Ostrogothic, Byzantine or Lombard in date (since the period AD 400–600 sees north Italy controlled by successive powers)? Peculiarly, perhaps, the distribution and placement of medieval castles in these same territories often seems to differ from the locations of fortified and upland seats of the early medieval period – although there are certainly instances where they coincide. Potentially the castle landscape was more an expression of personal territorial control, whereas the late Roman to early medieval pattern was dictated more by a wider strategy.

There is plenty of scope for more detailed regionalised case studies to enhance the picture, and we should be wary of expecting settlement forms and sequences in one Alpine valley to match that of another. There are varied routes for exploring the populations and places of the early medieval period: as well as stray archaeological finds (e.g. coins, burials), placename evidence, documentary references, church dedications and churches themselves may provide potential or tangible guides. Indeed, for the lakes region of north Italy there has been much fruitful research on churches and monasteries, with excavations, standing building surveys, or analysis of sculptural material undertaken, which help to ‘populate’ the early medieval landscape and give indications of piety, local elite investment, and architectural and artistic links. Recent publications such as *Chiese dell’alto Garda bresciano. Vescovi, eremiti, monasteri, territorio tra tardoantico e romanico* (Brogiolo et al. 2003), *Le chiese rurali tra VII e VIII secolo in Italia settentrionale* (Brogiolo ed. 2001) and *Nuove ricerche sulle chiese altomedievali del Garda* (Brogiolo ed. 2011) have done much here to explore the changing landscape patterns. Recent and ongoing projects meanwhile are adding to our understanding of fortified sites in the Trentino in Late Antiquity (e.g. Maurina 2005 on Loppio; Cavada and Forte 2011 on the church and fortress at Lundo-Lomaso). This paper considers recent work at one specific site in the Trentino

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– Lake Garda territory where a medieval church forms the last active component of a hilltop site that saw largely continuous usage from the latest Iron Age period.

Monte San Martino – location and previous research

The upland site of Monte San Martino (c800m above sea level) lies in the northern territory of lake Garda, set just a few kilometres north-west of Riva del Garda (Fig. 1) and due west of the town of Tenno (which features both a medieval castle and the early medieval church of San Lorenzo) and close to the modern village of Campi (Fig. 2). Monte S. Martino is a complex, multiperiod settlement which offers much to the discussion of

settlement as well as military and religious activity from the latest Iron Age through to the Middle Ages. Its geographical setting can be read in a strategic sense, in that its position oversees communications from the upper lake plains (the ancient Sommolago) to the valleys of the Ledro and Chiese and thence westwards towards Brescia (across the bocchetta di Trat), while to the north it observes traffic towards the Ballino Pass, leading onto the outer Giudicarie zone and thence to the Non valley, passing through Molveno (on routeways, see Ciurletti 2007, 33, 64). Alternatively, one can read this topographic position in another sense, namely that the hilltop site could be seen by and could attract travellers approaching from a variety of directions.



*Figure 1 Location of Monte San Martino at the northern end of Lake Garda, north Italy. (Image by A. Gorfer and E. Turri (eds), *Là dove nasce il Garda*, Verona 1994, modified by ArcheoGeo.)*

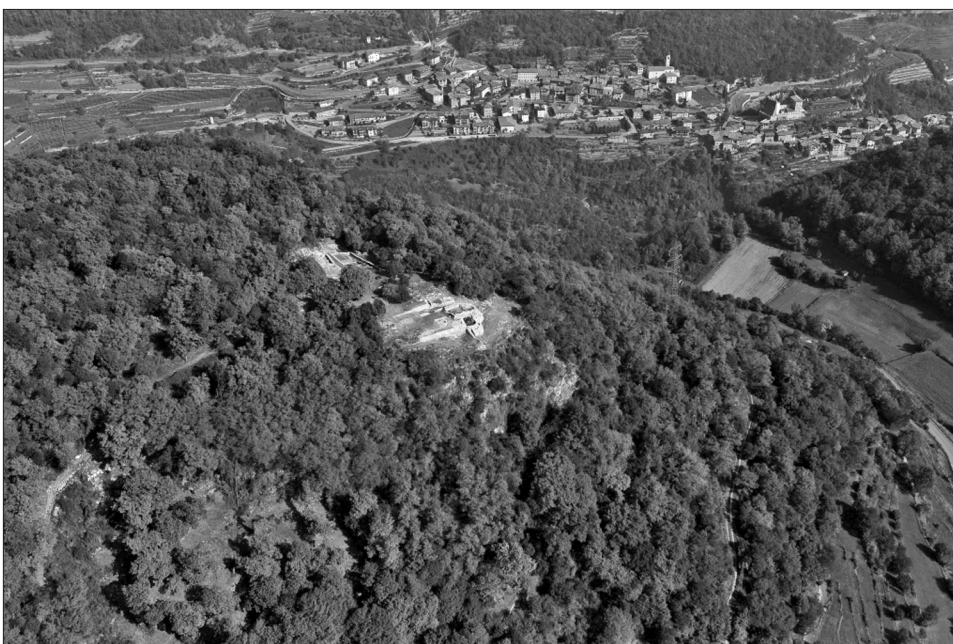


Figure 2 Aerial photograph of the heavily wooded hilltop site of Monte San Martino, showing the excavated 'village' and church complex; the sanctuary lies off picture to the upper left. The town of Tenno lies in the distance. (Photograph: foto Rensi. Image copyright Archivio della Soprintendenza per i Beni architettonici e archeologici, Ufficio Beni Archeologici.)



Figure 3 The series of 'altar rooms' terraced into the natural bedrock at the south end of the Roman-period sanctuary complex. (Photograph: Neil Christie.)

Local knowledge of the archaeological site can be traced back into the 19th century, while the first secure academic reference is known from 1880 when the renowned scholar Paolo Orsi reported the finding of a number of objects, including the capital of a column, on the hill between the town of Pranzo and the village of Campi. In the 1902 Guide to Trentino, Ottone Brentari observed how *'on Monte S. Martino there are ruins which are Roman, and which, according to local tradition, are believed to belong to a temple'*. In 1924, the Trentino archaeologist Giacomo Roberti reported that the Civic Museum in Trento had acquired a small bronze statue depicting Apollo, which was thought to have been found *'on Monte Englo near Riva.'* (Earlier finds, including burials, are reported in Guella 1973, 84–91; Ciurletti 2007, 38–41. Englo was the former name for Monte San Martino, used in documents into the 17th century – Guella 1973, 82–83; 1996, 17; Ciurletti 2007, 33 n. 27).

In historic periods the sides of Monte San Martino were used for pasture, firewood collection and occasional cultivation of crops on the slopes, but it was generally heavily wooded and covered with thick undergrowth, which meant that almost nothing of the putative temple could be seen. However, in 1969 the casual discovery of numerous fragments of curved and flat Roman roof tiles began to stir up interest; in the summer of that year excavations were carried out on the temple site by a group of enthusiasts from the nearby township of Pranzo, under the guidance of Arrigo Guella and Cesare Dongilli (see interim in Guella 1973). Until 1975 permits for excavation came from the Antiquities Office of the Venezie; subsequently the site transferred to the jurisdiction of the Autonomous Province of Trento, which helped complete investigations of the sanctuary area (the final campaign was in 1979), under the direction of Gianni Ciurletti. While occasional short notices of the excavations were published locally, the

results of these investigations were finally and fully brought to publication by Ciurletti (2007). Systematic research excavations only began again in 1996, overseen by the Trentino Archaeological Superintendency, employing the contract archaeologists ArcheoGeo s.n.c. and involving students from various Italian and, most recently, UK universities. In contrast with the earlier studies, the emphasis of these ongoing research-driven campaigns has been on the wider occupation of the hilltop downslope from the sanctuary.

Excavation results – the Iron Age and Roman sanctuary

The site shows evidence of frequentation (but not necessarily fixed settlement) across a vast timespan, from Bronze Age to early modern times. Hunting, access to timber and other woodland resources must have been relatively constant uses, though religious or cultic activity also seems to have been an important draw for people from the vicinity and further afield. Apart from stray, residual finds of earlier prehistoric date, the first stable usage of the mountain belongs to the second Iron Age period (3rd to 1st centuries BC) when the summit was selected for a cultic role, used as a likely open-air upland shrine featuring votive fires (*Brandopferplatz*). Offerings appear to have included animal sacrifices and agricultural produce as well as metal and ceramic objects. Such ritual practices are attested throughout the central-eastern Alps from as early as the 14th century BC, and in some cases continued into the Roman era. At Monte San Martino various carbonised deposits containing deliberately shattered bowls and jugs plus occasional small, sheet bronze objects, have been revealed near to terrace walls; often the finds feature incised markings and even short inscriptions in the local pre-Roman alphabet.

With Roman occupation of the territory from the mid-1st century BC changes occur in the fabric of the Monte San Martino cult site, with substantial monumentalisation evident: the new, stone-built sanctuary, of roughly rectangular plan and constructed over different periods, extends over an area of around 1500 m² across the highest part of the hilltop. Stairways, ramps and altar rooms combine to suggest formal routeways and ceremonial spaces as well as storage areas (Fig. 3). The sanctuary was the focus of religious functions up to but not beyond the 3rd century AD, although other (less well understood) site activities are attested until the 4th century. While many of the cult rituals continued probably to be celebrated in the open air in the large, levelled space at the summit; changes to the older traditions included diverse offerings of food and drinks made at specific altars. As well as fragments of these altars, there are numerous fragments of single-handled ceramic jugs, which were presumably used for libations to the gods; one notable find was an intact stone urn, which contained a clay vessel – perhaps a special item for specific offerings. While there are many small terracotta statues depicting Roman gods such as Minerva and Venus (these, along with other votive offerings, suggesting a dominance of female divinities at the site), continuity with pre-Roman cult practice is seen in the way one altar carries an epichoric inscription – i.e. in the local language but written in the Latin alphabet. Another altar is dedicated by two brothers, *L(ucius) Tre(---) Primus et Bitumus Sec(undus)* to an unknown local divinity, whose name is perhaps set within the invocation *Mainiali* (on this sanctuary phase see papers in Ciurletti 2007, including Marzatico 2007 and Mottes 2007).

A re-designed hilltop: the Late Antique village

Perhaps prior to the (uncertain) end of the sanctuary (in reality the 1970s excavations did not recognise clear traces of the final phases of religious activity),

the 4th century is marked by the planning out of a village settlement, located roughly 100m south-east and downslope of the sanctuary complex ('Sectors VI and X') (Fig. 4). The new community comprised numerous dwellings and an orderly set of lanes and passages between these. While only a sample has been excavated, the work reveals that the houses featured relatively similar layouts, being constructed in mortared stone, and partly exploiting pre-Roman terraces and in other cases cut into bedrock outcrops (Fig 5). Cisterns were used for water storage. Roofing seemingly comprised alternating flat and curved tiles; in one building there are traces of a vaulted ceiling. This same building featured stairs next to a small room (this was probably a kitchen, given discovery here of a millstone), signifying that this and other properties probably had upper storeys, with the accommodation on the upper level. One building had a large, partially paved quadrangular room, identified as a workshop, probably linked to weaving given the presence of numerous loom weights in one corner. Another paved room in a third building may have been used for artisanal activities: it contained a double mortar in red stone (perhaps for crushing cereals). Some internal partitions and parts of the floor may have been in wood, as numerous carbonised wooden remains have been traced: this part of the village was in fact totally destroyed by a fire, probably before the 7th century AD.

The full layout of this late antique village is yet to be determined. Many presumed houses lie shrouded in trees and bushes and covered by tumbled rock; it is unclear if these are later outliers or whether we should read some different social activity in those structures away from the main planned unit – the planning may simply relate to the availability of open space on the otherwise sloping hilltop. Notable is one house in Sector IX set c 30 m north-west of the main housing zone, from whose floor was recovered a coin of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (AD 610–641) (on the coin type, see Arslan 1984, 429).

More substantial than these dwellings is 'Building 1', oriented W–E and sited at the edge of the steep



Figure 4 Aerial (kite) view of houses in the late antique 'village' zone of Monte San Martino. (Photograph: foto Rensi. Image copyright Archivio della Soprintendenza per i Beni architettonici e archeologici, Ufficio Beni Archeologici.)



Figure 5 View looking north-east across the face of adjoining houses in the late antique 'village' zone of Monte San Martino. (Photograph: Neil Christie.)

southern slope of Monte San Martino (Sector VIII): at nearly 24m long and of internal width 8.5m, its superstructure, of roughly shaped and coursed local limestone with mortar bonding, survives to nearly 2m in height. Although part of the interior has been robbed or removed, a wide portion remains to be examined archaeologically. The scale of the structure, whose build and location are such that it will have been visible for some distance for travellers approaching from Riva, would imply some 'public' function; while currently termed a 'palace', it may have formed a headquarters building.

One possible interpretation is that Monte San Martino was assigned some military role in the late Roman period and that the 'village' provided dwellings for soldiers and their families or for personnel attached to a garrison. The 'palace' could have also held some public/communal role, and may have contained stores such as grain reserves; however, without more excavation it is dangerous to speculate too far. For the site as a whole, however, a defensive curtain wall is lacking. This is in contrast with the very clear military role for another Monte San Martino site, that at Lundo/Lomaso c. 20km north east, with circuit walls of the 5th–6th centuries (Cavada and Forte 2011, 140–3). Perhaps the defences at Monte San Martino at Campi-Tenno have largely succumbed to loss through the erosion of the hillsides; however, there appears to be good evidence for a rock-cut ditch/moat at the northern approach to the site and sanctuary. The steep slopes beyond this moat may not have needed more substantial protection. The investment in the 'palace' is clear; the presence of coinage and imported materials might also support the argument that a paid garrison was based here. The specific role may have been for surveillance – observing movement along the valley lines while simultaneously providing a visual warning of a defensive apparatus to any intruders;

but it might also have been a place of refuge. Clearly, fuller excavation is required to help test and clarify these hypotheses.

A secondary phase to Building 1 saw the addition of a room adjacent to the eastern flank. Of rectangular form with a northern entrance, its southern end was apsidal with 'fan-type' buttresses (these are reminiscent of designs on forts on the Danube *limes* – see Johnson 1983, 169–195). This unit was short-lived in this form, giving way to a partitioned squared room (D). A small channel and the presence of carbon suggests this room potentially was used for heating a bath-suite. An apse (of deep, semi-circular form, 3.38m in diameter) was reconstituted in a final phase, this time set on the east side, if slightly skewed. The location might suggest conversion into a religious building, but there are no particular features to support this idea. Abandonment of this room and perhaps the 'palace' may lie in the 6th century, as indicated by recovery of a coin of the Ostrogothic king Totila-Baduela (AD 541–552) in a stratigraphied context (a layer of abandonment for the access stairs) which is securely later than the structures (for coin type: see Arslan 1984, 424).

The first church

A further notable structural change comes in the 6th century, with the demolition of the east wall of Room D, obliterating the channel. This allowed for a larger, open room with an apse (dimensions c. 7.5 x 3.5m), and with stepped entry down from the north. It is possible that a deep-set sub-rectangular space of c. 1m², paved with stone slabs and with plastered sides, was set in the apse space at this time. It is interpreted as a *cella memoriae* – a repository for relics. These changes and additions suggest that the structure was operational as a church, although whether 'Building 1' (whose east wall was used

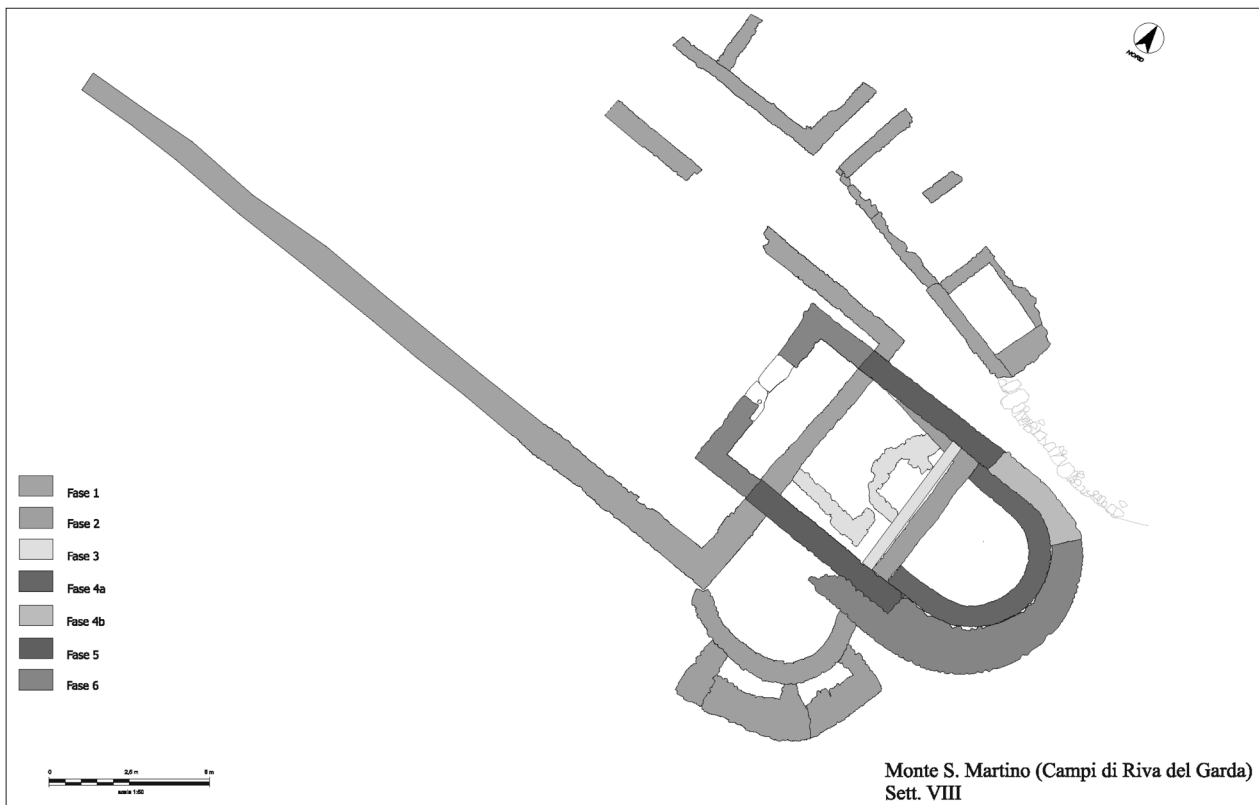


Figure 6 Composite plan of the church complex. (Image by riprese Arc-Team srl and copyright Archivio della Soprintendenza per i Beni architettonici e archeologici, Ufficio Beni Archeologici.)

for the church's west flank) still functioned as a 'palace' or else as a forecourt has yet to be determined. There are later indicators of a partial demolition or robbing of the palace's west and north walls; the south wall was retained, partly as a boundary for the church and partly as a wider terrace for the site's south flank (see Figs 6 and 8).

At an uncertain date the apse of the church was reinforced on its northern side, while there was rebuilding of the north and south church walls, which both incorporated fragments of *spolia* – reused material such as millstones, architectural components and even Roman inscriptions that were presumably drawn from the ruinous sanctuary and perhaps from the 'village' houses (the Roman texts are discussed in Paci 1993 and Bassi 2001). Internally the division between (presumed) nave and presbytery was marked by different flooring – lime/mortar for the former, paving slabs for the latter. The *cella memoriae* described above can have been inserted no later than this phase. A new doorway was created in the west, as the former northern stepped entry was blocked (with the coin of Totila noted above from an abandonment layer).

Although the full chronology for this first church and its restructuring cannot yet be determined with precision, a primary 6th-century phase is likely, while some fragments of sculpted stone fittings (found in later collapse levels) such as chancel posts with interlaced work point to 9th-century, Carolingian-era activity.² Yet

this is a church that remains unrecorded in documentary sources and so we have only the archaeology to show its presence. What is unclear, in addition, is whether a congregation was resident on Monte San Martino or whether the church served dispersed farming communities living in the valleys around the site. Either way, it occupied a prominent position on the southern slopes (Fig. 7).

The medieval church and burial population

Major efforts were subsequently made to reinforce the whole apse, while both the southern and northern church walls were extended westwards to create a longer building and a new western entrance (Figs 6 and 8). Construction techniques did not differ greatly from the previous phase except for the wider use of recycled materials (chiefly fragmentary architectural pieces). A low N-S wall marked the division between the nave and the presbytery internally. While no trace of the flooring for the latter was preserved, the nave was now paved in stone slabs set 40 cm higher than the earlier floor.

A series of associated inhumation burials has been investigated, comprising at least eight tombs, four set directly into the ground, but the other four featuring rough stone surrounds. The deceased were a mix of N-S as well as W-E orientations, supine and extended, generally with their hands crossed over at the belly area. As well as the stratigraphic data, the chronology of the burial group is suggested by a bronze buckle of oval-circular form, found at the waist of one

² Our thanks to Dott.ssa Monica Ibsen for this provisional dating, which may be modified in light of new finds and analyses.

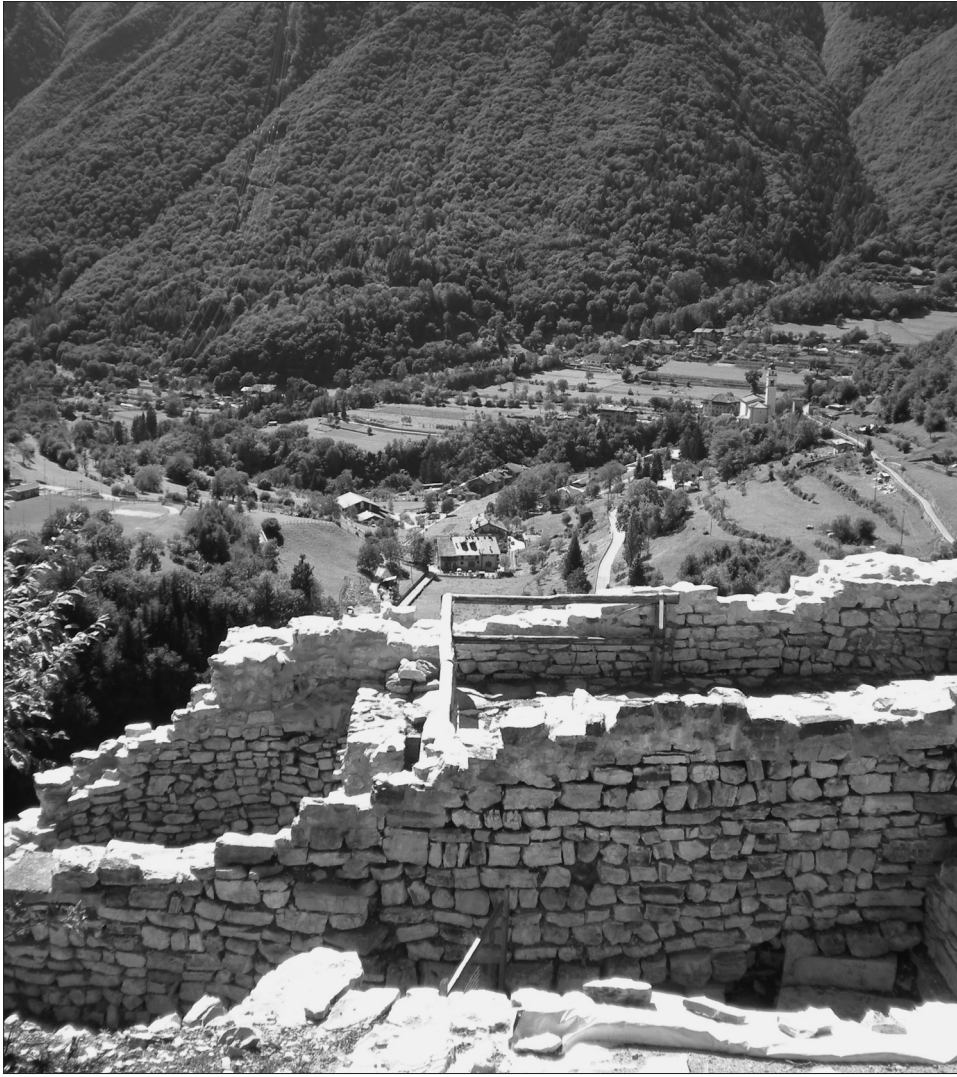


Figure 7 View looking south across the early to late medieval church of San Martino (the apse is to the left of the image). In the background is the loose series of houses and farms making up the habitat of Campi. (Photograph: Neil Christie.)



Figure 8 Aerial image of Sector VIII and the excavated church complex and underlying 'palace'. (Photograph: Arc-Team srl. Image copyright Archivio della Soprintendenza per i Beni architettonici e archeologici, Ufficio Beni Archeologici.)

skeleton; the buckle typologically fits a 13th-century date.³

Most probably the expanded church and its burial plot belong to the full medieval period, although peculiarly, there are very few sources related to this church and site: the first reference occurs in 1288 (...*via per quam itum ad Sanctum Martinum*...), but we then wait until 1489 when the name San Martino reappears linked to the landholding 'alla Luna' on monte Englo (the older name for Monte S. Martino) (Crosina 2000, 382; Guella 1996, 111). However, since no reference specifies the function of the church, it is difficult to determine if this was an isolated chapel or an oratory. Recent excavations against the exterior of the old 'palace' south wall have uncovered evidence for metalworking which might be connected to a building with a cistern, whose limited traces lie a few metres from the church facade. The 'workshop' space was set against the 'palace' south wall and featured a stone wall as its east end and a timber west side. The building was c. 9 m long and though the southern extent was lost through erosion it was c. 6 m wide. The interior contained a sizeable hearth framed by fragments of Roman tiles and with much ash and charcoal; a variety of objects came from the workshop floor including knives, keys, buckles and silver coins which all point to a 13th- or 14th-century date.

There were certainly visitors to the church because the fabric reveals some maintenance work, such as a change in flooring from stone slabs to rectangular bricks (dimensions of 29.7 x 15.2 x 2.4 cm) laid out in a geometrical design; potentially this specific work might relate to costs recorded in a listing of the Riva comune/council in 1547 (Crosina 2000, 383). The Monte San Martino building appears to have been one of a group of chapels belonging to Riva, but it was likely an impoverished and fringe structure even if still involved in festivals following Easter and for the Rogations to saint Martin (Ciurletti 2007, 82–84).

In 1612 the church was interdicted. However, in 1718, some restoration works were funded, implying that the building had not been demolished in the interim. The sources indicate that the church had fallen into use as a stable, perhaps indicating a semi-ruinous state (Crosina 2000, 383). Its subsequent appalling state of repair led to its final demolition, as reported in Acts of 1750.

Conclusions

Securely dating the first church at Monte San Martino is still problematic since it is unclear whether there was an early (i.e. 4th- or 5th-century) chapel attached to the palace structure ('Building 1'). Nevertheless, we can recognise a fascinating sequence of evolution of the cult building from at least the 6th century through into the later Middle Ages. The structure evolves on a limited scale, but its fabric gives sufficient hints regarding activity in the vicinity. It is possible that for most of its lifetime the church did not serve a community based on the hilltop,

but drew instead from a scattered peasant population. This implies the role of the 'palace' and 'village' of the late Roman to Byzantine period had dissolved. Did the Lombard takeover of the region from the late 6th century curtail any former military function? Should we envisage a rapid, piecemeal or slow movement of people away from the hilltop? No definitive answers are yet forthcoming, but a full analysis of the excavated Late Antique ceramics may provide a better guide to the persistence of any 'village' community. As noted above, the 7th-century coin of Heraclius does at least point to some human activity beyond the church confines. What we also lack currently is adequate evidence for settlement patterns in the surrounding area from this period, though churches at Riva and at Tenno might suggest that an 'open' settlement system was reestablished, if one exploiting the upland resources (see the model proposed by Brogiolo 1991, 159, 161).

The archaeology of the zone around the church on Monte San Martino has scope to deliver additional data to clarify church context and potential related settlement activity, although the surviving stratigraphy is in places very limited due to erosion and truncation. At present we rely as much on structural typology and sculptural evidence to argue that the first secure church building relates to an 8th- or 9th-century foundation. But why build this here if, as suggested, the site lacked a resident community? If nothing else we must remember that the hilltop site had a 'past' and a visible one given the upstanding walls of the 'palace' displayed on the hill's southern slope. Moreover, we should think of the 'continuità e della tenacia della persistenza attraverso i secoli della sua sacralità presso le comunità rurali' ['continuous and tenacious persistence across centuries of the sacredness of places among rural communities'] (Ciurletti 2007, 81–82). Having served the needs of a protohistoric and then Roman cult, this upland site might well have been chosen for a Christian building to serve local farmers and perhaps even pilgrims; there might even have been a conscious 'cancelling out' of the pagan past in erecting the church here, and in reusing stonework from the old sanctuary. There is also scope to explore more the significance of the dedication further: saint Martin is very much favoured across the region of the Giudicarie – the so-called *Loci Sancti Martini* – and may well denote a deliberate Carolingian policy of chapel foundation (Cavada 2007, 250–252. See also Brogiolo 2011 and Brogiolo *et al* 2003 for the 'busy' early medieval religious landscape of the Lake Garda region).

It is to be hoped that further burials and skeletal analysis will teach us more about the medieval burial population at Monte San Martino and of the duration of use of the burial ground. Were these locals or pilgrims who chose to be interred alongside the church? Does this cemeterial activity fade away long before the documented 17th-century decay?

The detailed analyses of materials (ceramics especially) from this recent programme of excavations are crucial for pinpointing the longevity of the late antique 'village', for clarifying whether the population here might be deemed 'military' and for giving some guidance on early medieval survivals; but new work is planned to explore additional areas for non-nucleated

³ The buckle's iron tongue bears comparison with an example from Rougiers (Var, France). If the identification is accurate, the type is best recognised from the second half of the 13th century: Démians d'Archimbaud 1980, 490, fig. 465/13). See also examples for Trino in Piedmont – Lebole Di Gangi 1999, 409 and from the castello di Manzano in Udine province, Friuli – Favia 2000, 146.

housing activity as well as to examine the remaining palace stratigraphy. We anticipate that Monte San Martino's story will continue to evolve accordingly.

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