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 communicatiosn newtworks 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 refuges being provided – *castella* – which might imply than 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.

The above is an outline summary of the settlement patterns 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.

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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 – 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, if in ever changing guises.

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)

Monte San Martino – location and previous research

The upland site of Monte San Martino (*c*800m 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.

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

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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).

Across this period the height of Monte San Martino was one used for pasture, firewood collection and the 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, the casual discovery in 1969 of numerous fragments of curved and flat Roman roof tiles was made, stirring up interest; and 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 duly shows evidence of frequentation (but not necessarily fixed settlement) across a vast timespan, from Bronze Age to early modern times, if undoubtedly for disparate reasons, though hunting, access to timber and other woodland resources must have been relatively constant. But, as we shall see, religious or cultic activity appears equally an important draw for local and wider groups of people. Apart from stray, residual finds of earlier prehistoric date, the first stable usage of the height 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, 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 fully 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.

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)

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 m^2 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 divinites at the site), nonetheless, 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 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.

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)

The full layout of this late antique village is yet to be determined. Many presumed houses lie shrouded in tree and bush cover and covered by rock tumble; 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 – perhaps the planning simply relates 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 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 have 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 argument put forward is that Monte San Martino in the late Roman period was assigned some military role 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 garin reserves; however, without more excavation it is dangerous to sepculate 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 & Forte 2011, 140-143).

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. Perhaps the steep slopes beyond this moat did not require more than nominal 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. It might also be envisaged to 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). But 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. This location might suggest conversion into a sacred edifice, but there are no supporting features to support this idea. Abandonment of this room and perhaps the 'palace' should lie in the 6th century, as indicated by recovery of a coin of the Ostrogothic king Totila-Baduela (AD 541-552) in a stratigraphic context (a layer of abandonment for the access stairs) 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. Perhaps at this moment a deep-set sub-rectangular space of *c* 1m^2, paved with stone slabs and with plastered flanks, was then set in this apse space and is interpreted as a *cella memoriae* – a repository for relics. These changes and additions suggest that the first likely church was operative; although whether 'Building 1' (whose east wall was used 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, part as a boundary for the church and 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, these both incorporating fragments of *spolia* – reused material such as fragments of millstones, architectural components and even Roman inscriptions, these 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. If not already present, then this stage features the noted *cella memoriae*. A new doorway was created in the west, as the former northern stepped entry was blocked up (with the noted Totila coin from an abandonment layer).

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)

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, thus Carolingian-era interventions.[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 groups in the valley spaces around the site. Either way, it occupied a prominent position on the southern slopes, in full sight of local farmers and pilgrims (Fig 7).
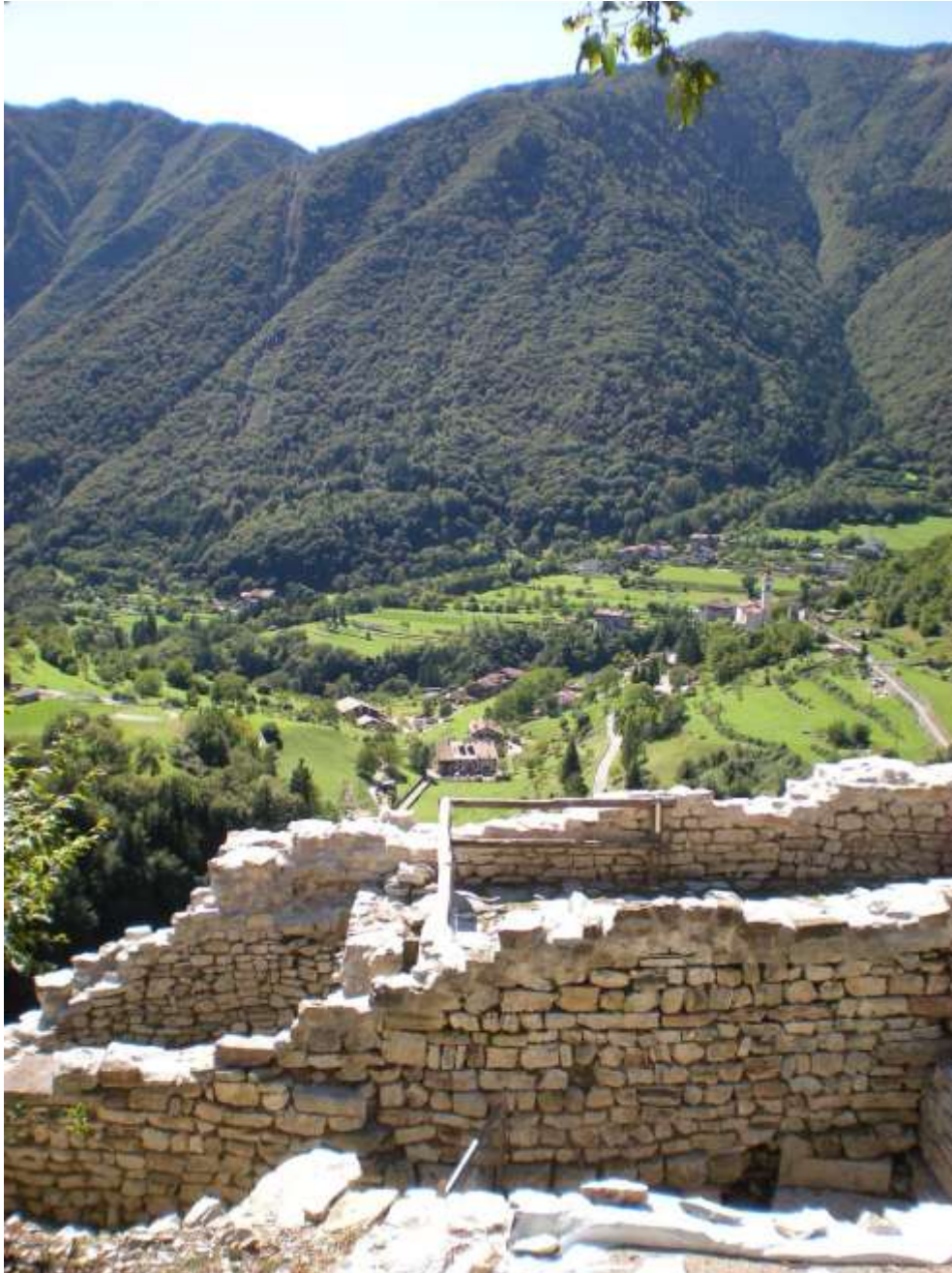

Figure 7: View looking south across the early to late medieval church of San Martino (the apse is to the left of the image). In the background is the loose series of houses and farms making up the habitat of Campi (Photograph: Neil Christie)

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

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)

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 strongly from the previous phase except for the wider usage of reused materials (chiefly fragmentary architectural pieces). A low N-S wall internally marked the division between the nave and the presbytery; 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 traced, 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 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 is a virtual void in the sources related to this church and site: there is a first reference 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

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[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.

evidence for metalworking – connected to which might be 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; in length this covered *c* 9m, while the southern extent was lost through erosion but was *c* 6m in width. The interior contained a sizeable hearth framed by fragments of Roman tiles and with much ash and charcoal; from the workshop floor came a variety of objects including knives, keys, buckles and silver coins; 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 the change in flooring from stone slabs to rectangular bricks (dimensions of 29.7 x 15.2 x 2.4cm) 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.[4] The Monte San Martino edifice 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 (Crosina 2000; Ciurletti 2007, 82-84).

In 1612 the church was interdicted. However, in 1718, some restoration works were funded, implying that the edifice had not been demolished between times. The sources indicate that the church had fallen into use as a stable, perhaps indicating a semi-ruinous state.[5] Its subsequent appalling state of repair led to its final demolition, as reported in Acts of 1750.

Conclusions

While issues remain in securing the first date of the church at Monte San Martino and in whether we can identify an early (i.e. 4th- or 5th-century) chapel attached to the palace structure ('Building 1'), we can overall 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 around: arguably for the majority of its lifetime this may not have served 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 answers are forthcoming, but a full analysis of the excavated late antique ceramics may provide a better guide to possible perseverance of the '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 indication regarding settlement patterns in the zone from this period, although churches at Riva and at Tenno might suggest resumed 'open' settlement system, if one exploiting the upland resources.[6]

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 height's southern slope.

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[4] Crosina 2000, 383. The document does not detail the nature of the expenses: *pro expensa facta ad ecclesiam Sancti Marti in fabrica per communem Rippe* […].

[5] Crosina 2000, 383: "Chiesa, o per meglio dire stalla, ai confini di Pranzo Pieve di Tenno serve di ricovero agli animali e di comodo alle iniquità di sesso diverso, già interdetta avanti l'anno 1612…]"

[6] See the settlement models for the Lombard period for the Garda region proposed by Brogiolo 1991, 159, 161, noting also (p 158) the minimal presence of Germanic toponyms in the upper Garda zone

Moreover, we should think of the "continuità e della tenacia della persistenza attraverso i secoli della sua sacralità presso le comunità rurali".[7] Having served the needs of a protohistoric and then a 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, as well as in reusing stonework from the old sanctuary. There is scope also to explore more any significance in the site dedication: saint Martin is very much a favoured dedication across the region of the Giudicariae – the so-called *Loci Sancti Martini* – and may well denote a deliberate Carolingian policy of chapel foundation. [8]

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 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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[7] Ciurletti 2007, 81-82. ['the continuous and tenacious persistence across centuries of the sacredness of places among rural communities']

[8] See first discussion in Cavada 2007, nb 250-252. See also the various contributions in Brogiolo ed 2011 and Brogiolo *et al* 2003 to observe the fairly 'busy' early medieval religious landsacape of the Lake Garda region and for discussions on bishops, monks and patrons.

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