



«Oppida posse mori» Volaterran resilience to late antique city decline

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Abstract

Considering landscaping in the past, increased attention is now given to perception of changes, the concept of resilience and methods of power ostentation. In this sense, the role played by urban centers as a local arena for competition, ostentation, and negotiation is fundamental. The continued use or the abandonment of ancient urban areas or hinterland settlement was determined by a complex mix of religious feelings, political attitudes, cultural influences and tied to the ruled space organization determined by representatives of the civic community. An approach considering landscaping as strongly connected to the role of local elites is fundamental in order to find a general model, especially reflecting the question: did social and cultural conditions influence landscaping more than environmental contingencies?

In this context, the urban status, both on civic and religious levels, of Volterra represents an example of extraordinary resilience to the macro-events of Tuscany between the 3rd and the 5th centuries AD.

Studies on Volterra territory are extremely varied and there is a lack of integration of archaeological and literary data and results of previous research. Analyzing the 3rd-century Roman city, the 5th-century bishopric and the Lombard center, this research tries to explain the great resilience by examining how the Volaterran elite organized and controlled the urban and rural landscape.

The emerging idea is that certain environmental conditions are fundamental for settlement but also that cultural, social, economic interests of local elites had a very important, and often much stronger impact on landscaping spaces of power.

Matters of peculiarity for a 'second-rank' city

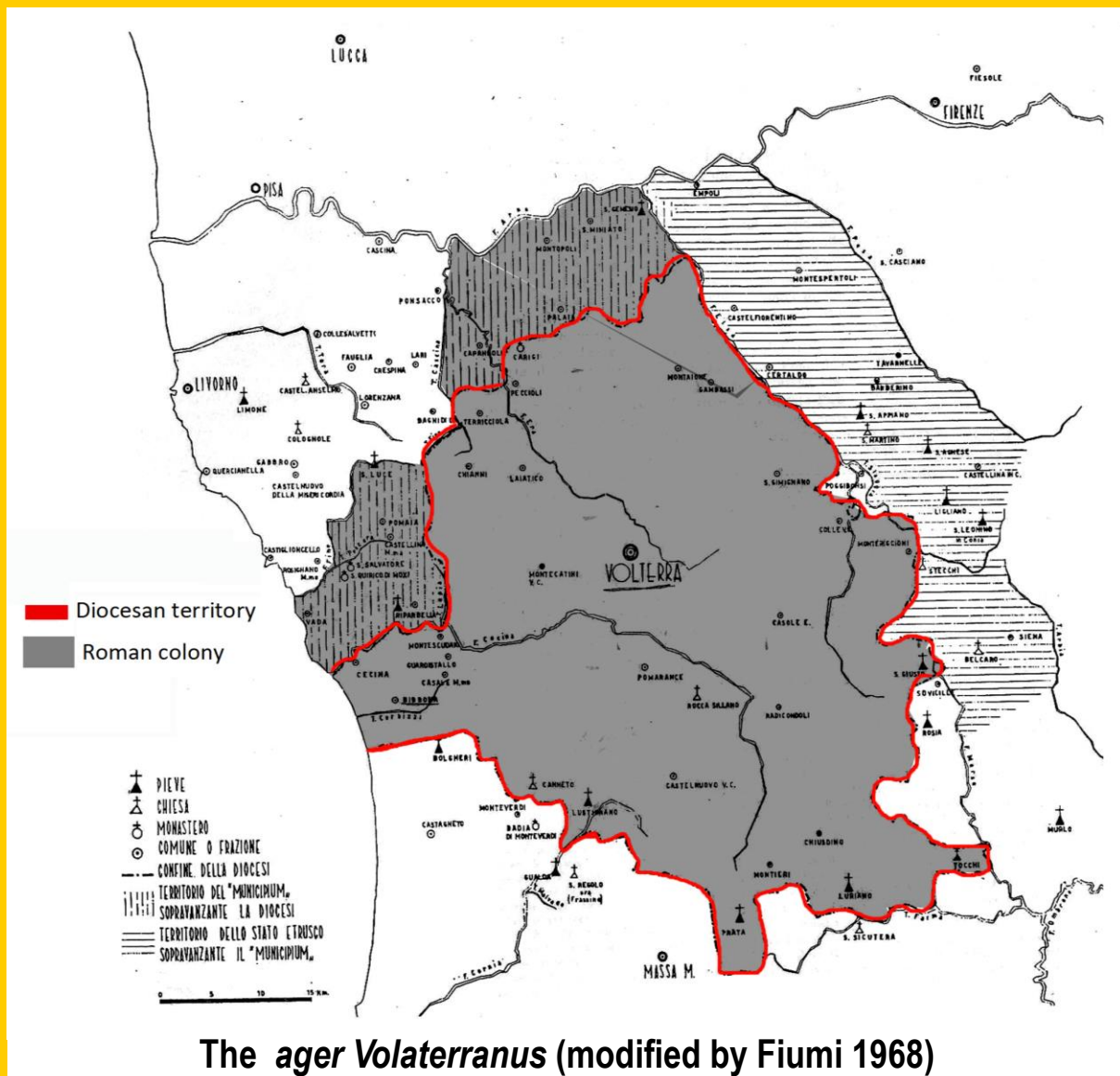
A strategic position



QGIS chart scale 1: 400000

The border between the two vicariates of *Italia Suburbicaria* and *Annonaria* progressively shifted towards the south but it passed from Volterra and river Rubicone in 395 AD and river Eusino in 398 AD.

A strong Christian elite



The ager Volaterranus (modified by Fiumi 1968)

Volterra hosted a bishopric since the second half of the 5th century AD organized with its own bishop, archdeacon, legal counselor, administrative tutor and its own movable and immovable heritage.

An important administrative center

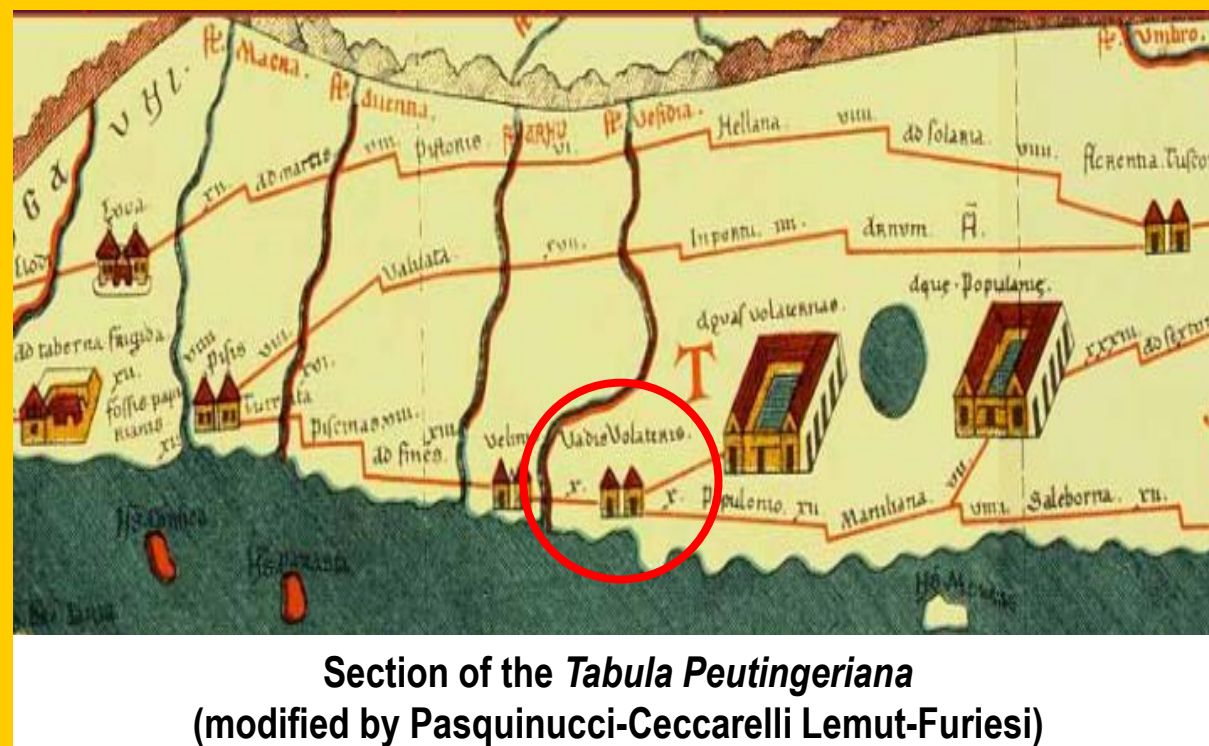


Byzantine and Lombard Italy (modified by Atlante Storico Zanichelli 2011) scale 1:80000

The Byzantine historian *Agathias* (I, XI, 6) testimony the urban status of Volterra in the 6th century.

In 590, Volterra became a *curtis* of the Lombard reign with a *gastaldus* officially appointed by the king.

A vital harbour system



Section of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (modified by Pasquucci-Deccarelli Lemut-Furiosi)

Vada Volaterrana, mentioned by Cicero, was the main center of the harbour system of Volterra. Despite the progressive waterlogging of the coastal area, the site of *Vada* was mentioned by *Anonimus Ravennatis* and *Guidonis* in the 7th-9th AD.

Materials

- A detailed collection of data from different sources (historical, archaeological, epigraphs, archival documents from Soprintendenza Archeologica in Florence).

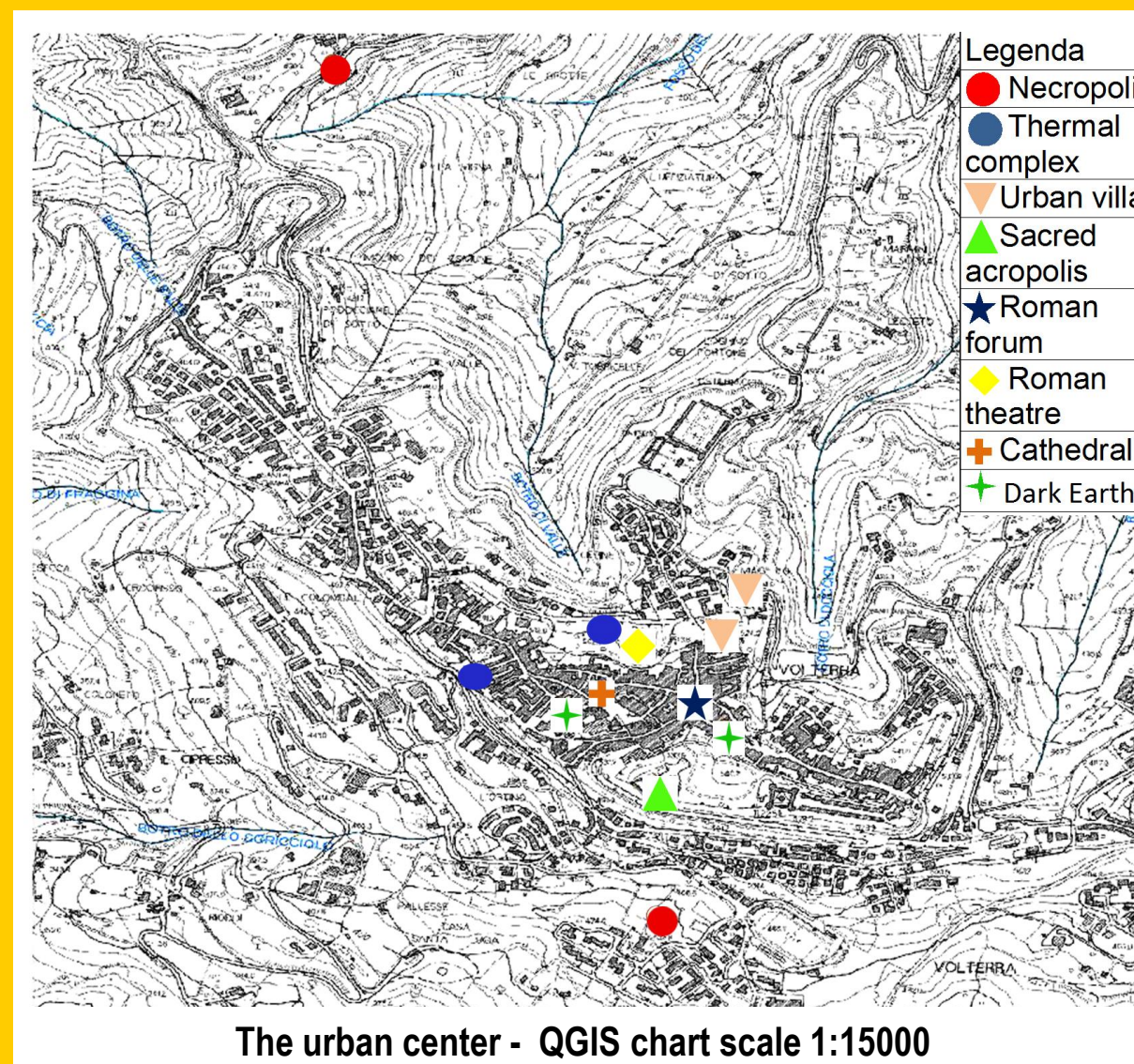
-Results of systematic surveys in the *ager Volaterranus*.

Methods

To compare data for a better understanding of the city and its organization in the 3rd century, in the 5th and in the 7th century, approaching Volaterran landscape as strongly connected to local elites.

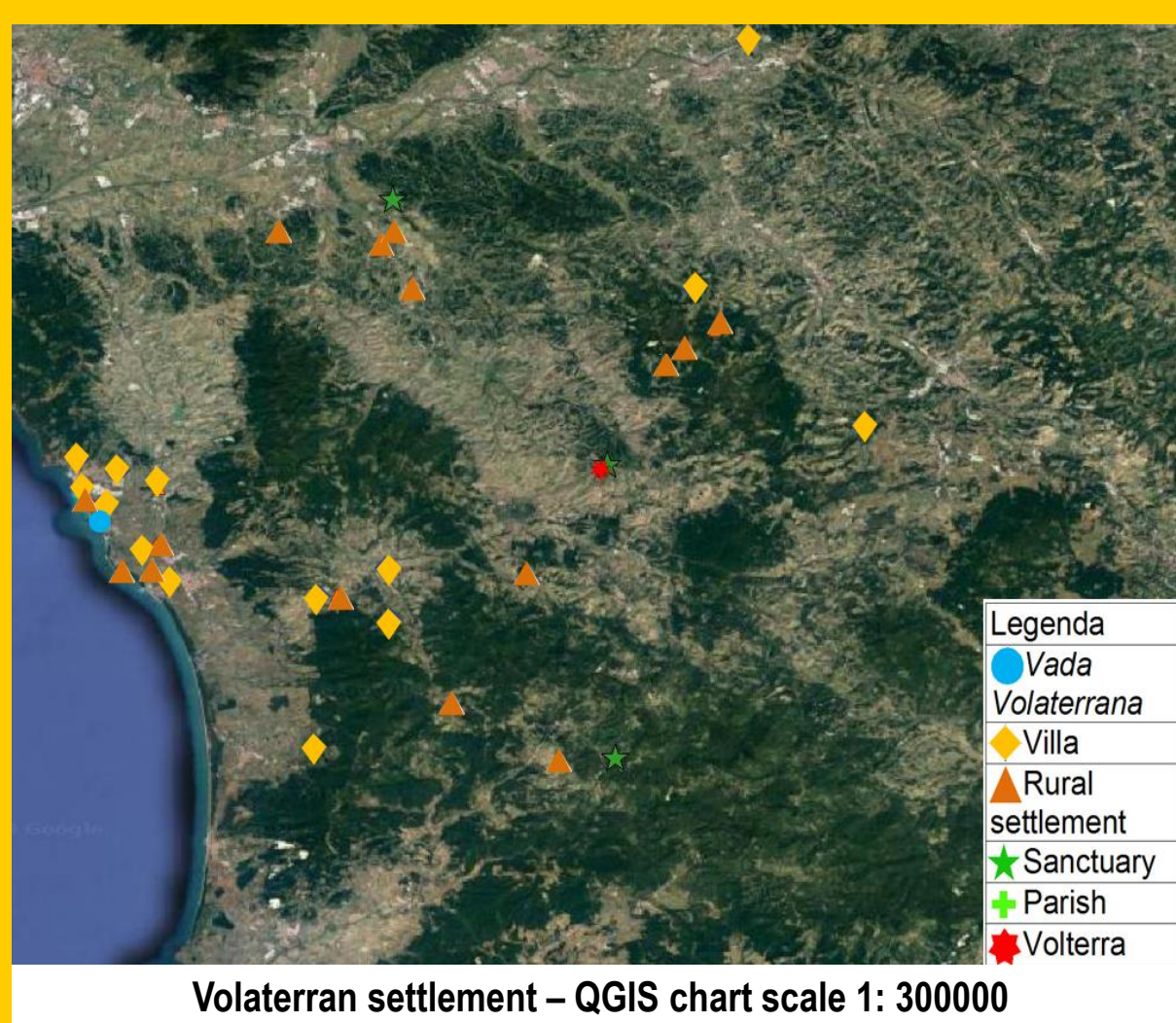
Matters of Resilience

Centuries 3rd - 4th AD



The urban center - QGIS chart scale 1:15000

Volterra experienced the recovery of a monumental euergetism with the building of two thermal complexes (San Felice, Vallebuona). At the same time, monuments such as the Roman theatre and the temples of the acropolis were abandoned.



Volaterran settlement - QGIS chart scale 1: 300000

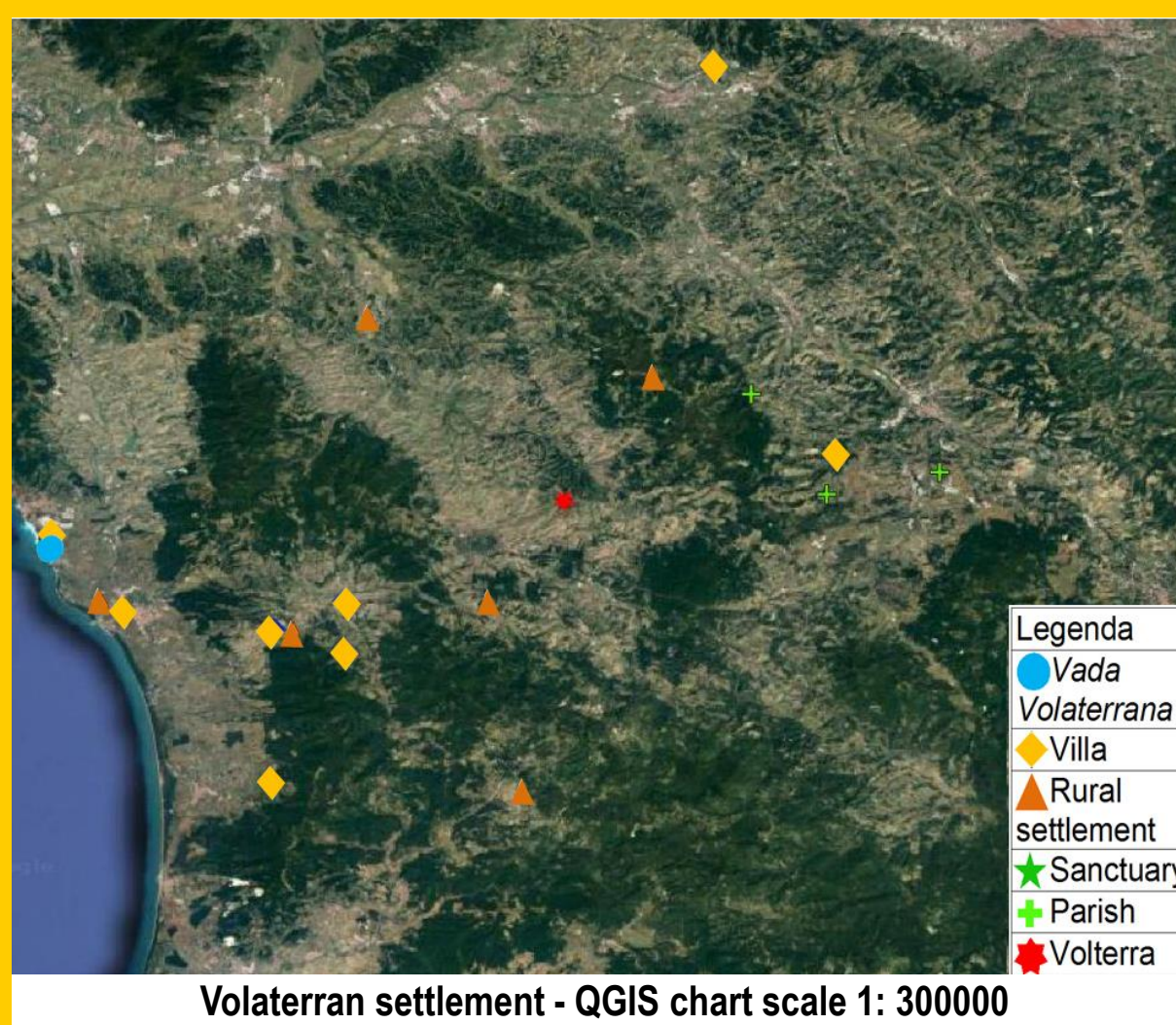
In the territory, a reduction of sites is registered but several villas owned by the senatorial aristocracy from the 1st AD, as well as smaller farms, continued to be occupied.

Centuries 5th - 6th AD



Thermal complex at Vallebuona

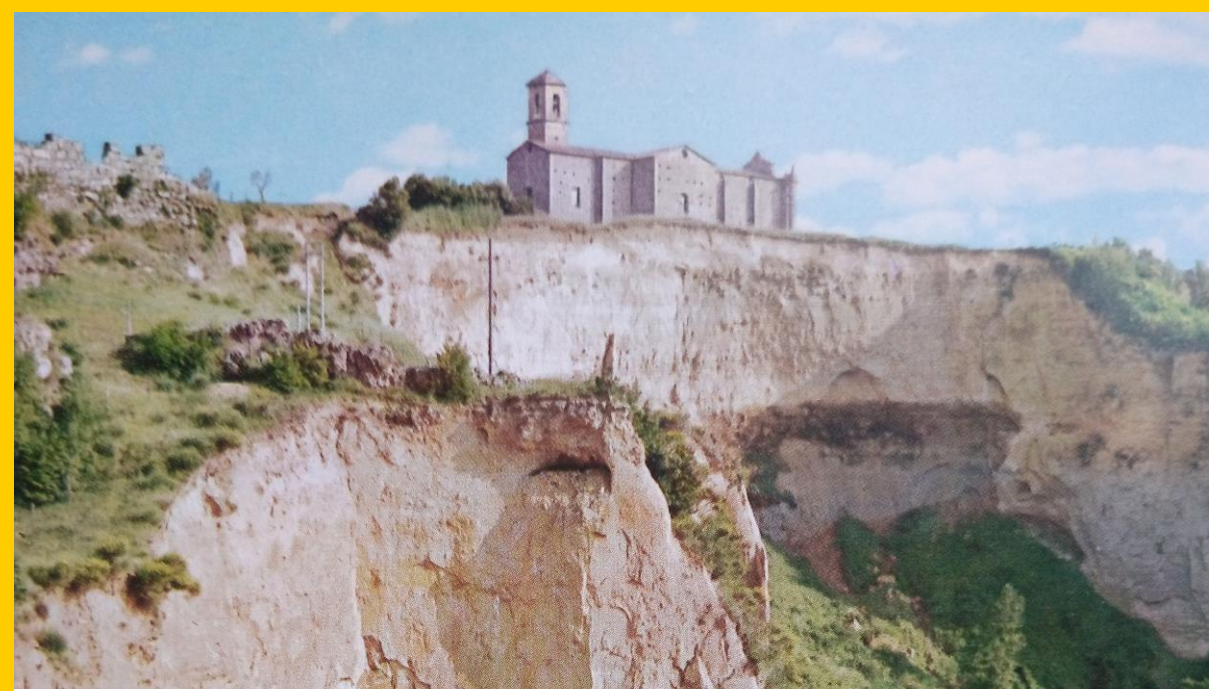
The thermal complexes were abandoned and dark earth levels found in some area of the city, attested a modified way of administration. Foreign materials proved the vitality of commercial activities and of the harbour system.



Volaterran settlement - QGIS chart scale 1: 300000

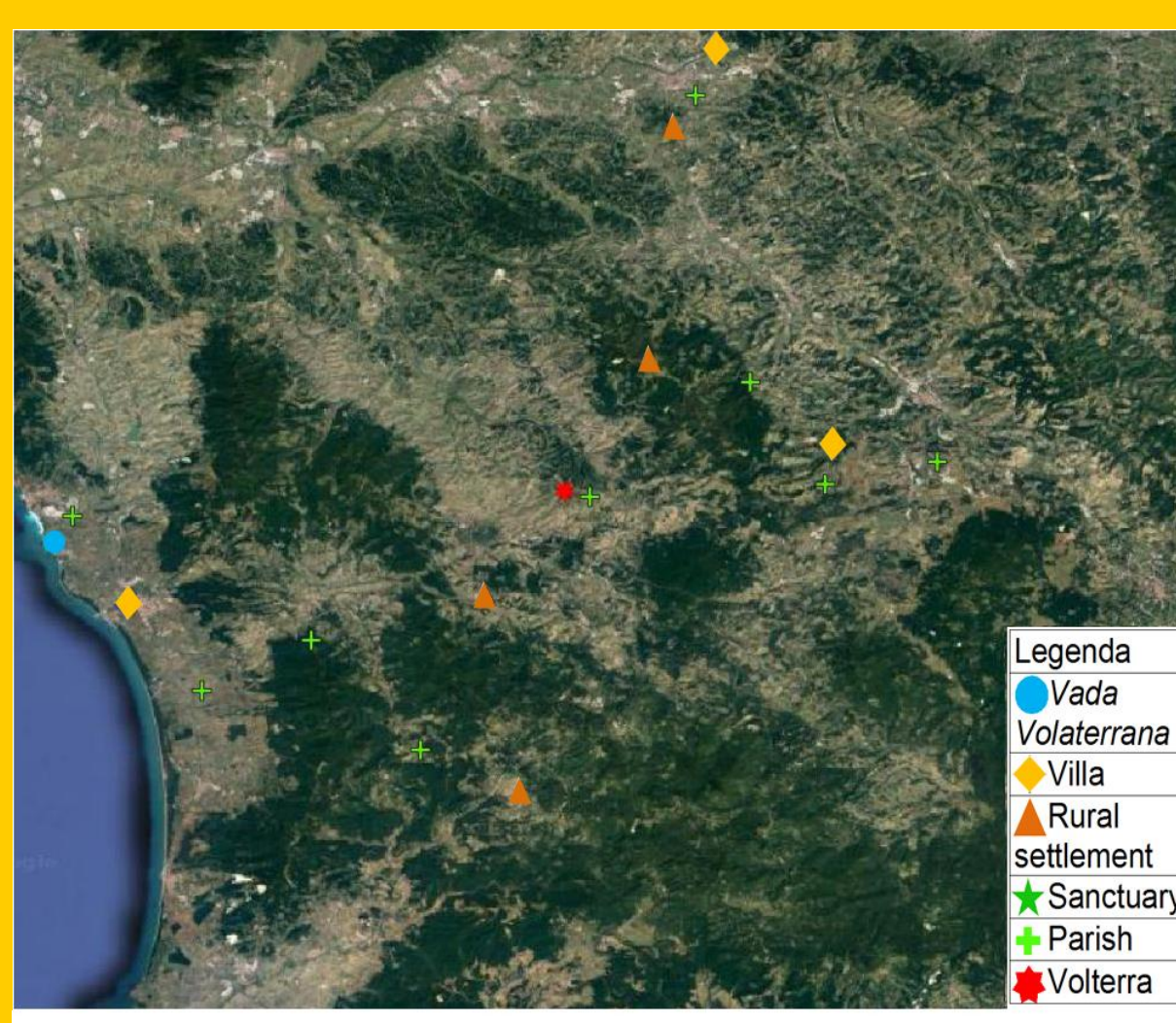
A reduction of sites is registered, but in contrast with the general decline of Italian cities visited by *Rutilius Namatianus*, who sadly affirmed «oppida posse mori» (I, 414), the Cecina's villa in *Vada Volaterrana* attested an organized and active landscape controlled by Volterra and its elite.

Centuries 6th - 8th AD



The Balze (modified by Liburni, *Volterra guida, arte, storia*, 1978)

Alchis, the Lombard *gastaldus*, restored or rebuilt two worship chapels dedicated to the Saints Giusto and Clemente in the collapsed area of the Balze.



Volaterran settlement - QGIS chart scale 1: 300000

Wars, famines, epidemics completely changed the landscape but, some of the villas were still occupied. Monasteries and parishes were the emerging features of the territory.

Matters of Success

Persistence of ancient families



Dedicatory inscription of the Roman theatre, Museo Guarnacci

The presence of the Etruscan family Cecina, from the 7th BC to the 5th AD is a clear example of how local elites influenced the landscape and shaped it, following specific family strategies.

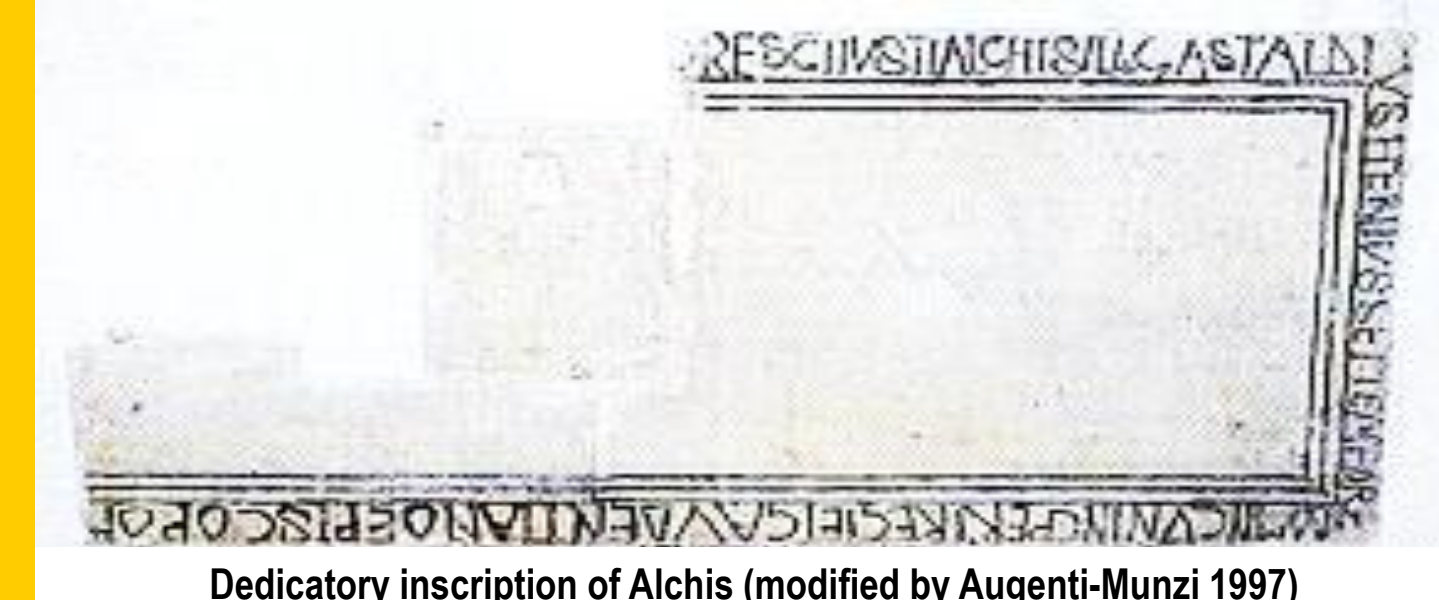
New local elites



The Galognano Treasure (modified by Hessen-Kurze-Mastrelli 1977)

The role of the local Christian elite from the 5th AD was fundamental. The collaboration between the local elite and the Goths is proved by the so-called Galognano Treasure, dedicated in the 6th AD by *Sivigerna* and *Himnegilda*, new *dominae* in the territory of Volterra.

Coexistence of powers



Dedicatory inscription of Alchis (modified by Augenti-Munzi 1997)

The involvement of Alchis *gastaldus* as patron underlines a challenge in the way of displaying power but also the established control of both a civic and a religious authority in the 7th-century city.

The resilience of Volterra is proved by the strong resistance of landscape structures. Volterra did not die as a city, but it was successful in maintaining its administrative role from the Late Antique period until the Middle Ages, even if in changed conditions.

Power needs to be continually negotiated, acknowledged, displayed. Each elite group pursued specific strategies in the competition for local power where diplomacy and diversification were fundamental.

The continuative presence of a strong local elite, active in the control of landscape, and its ability in negotiating power was the fundamental key for success.

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