

II. TOWNS AND HINTERLAND FORUM NOVUM –VESCOVIO

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1. Research objectives

The Tiber Valley Project identified three main gaps in settlement knowledge: the study of urban centres, the relative lack of data from the east bank of the Tiber, and the poor understanding of the late antique and early medieval landscapes. Forum Novum - Vescovio, located in the Sabina on the east bank of the Tiber, offers an opportunity to address all these issues. This project aims to provide a detailed study of the Roman town and early medieval bishopric. It focuses on a specific form of urbanism – fora – which has been much neglected in studies of Roman urban history, while the continuity of occupation at Forum Novum from Roman town to early medieval bishopric offers the opportunity to examine this period of transition. The work at Forum Novum is carried out in collaboration with the Soprintendenza Archeologica del Lazio.

The project uses surface survey techniques combined with excavation to examine the extent and organization of the centre, its development through time and its relationship with the surrounding territory. The application of a range of remote sensing techniques (magnetometry, resistivity and georadar), proved essential for an understanding of the size and layout of the centre. Further, the results of the remote sensing survey permitted the selection of key areas for more detailed investigation through excavation which is allowing us to trace the history of the centre through time.

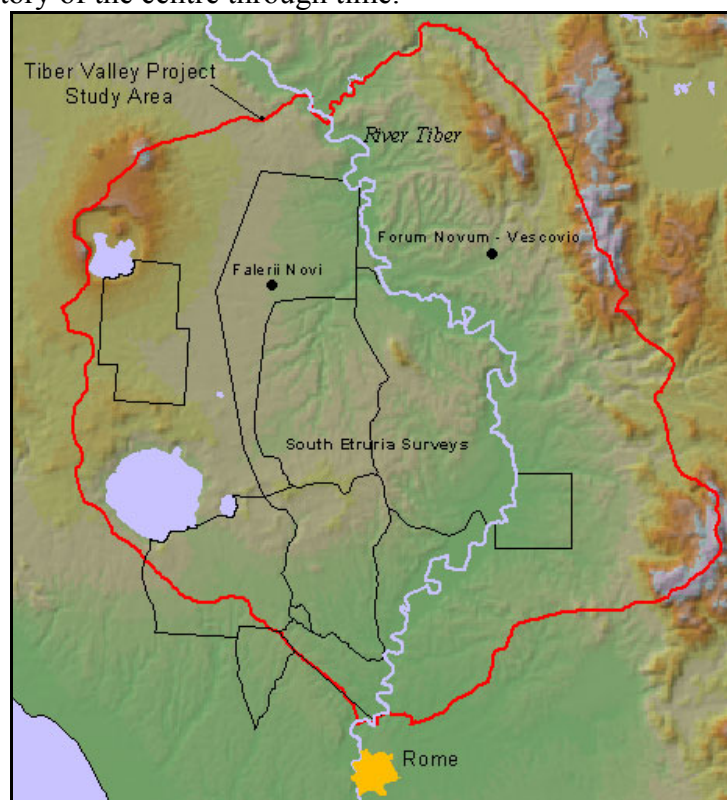


Figure 1. Location of Forum Novum - Vescovio and the study area of the Tiber Valley Project (indicated in red; black lines indicate the different South Etruria Surveys).

2. Data collection and analysis

Prior to the current project, knowledge of the layout of the town and its history was derived from epigraphic evidence, which refers to a campus, temples etc, and brief mentions in the literary sources. Visible remains were restricted to part of the forum complex, excavated by the Soprintendenza Archeologica del Lazio, which revealed a temple complex, basilica, part of the forum and associated structures, and the church of Santa Maria in Vescovio. Although the location of the *mausolea* aligning the roads into the town indicated that Forum Novum was a moderately sized centre, its exact dimensions and layout were unknown.

From 1997 to 2001, a series of topographic and ground-based remote sensing surveys took place at Forum Novum which provide a basic map of the ancient centre. The topographic survey permitted standing monuments and contemporary features to be located within a common grid, while remote sensing surveys allowed the identification of buried structures and features.

Initially, remote sensing survey was restricted to magnetometry and resistivity which produced interesting results, in particular structures just to the south of the forum complex, a semicircular feature to the southwest of the complex and just outside the centre to the northeast, the plan of a large suburban villa. However, it was clear that, in order to understand the layout of the town itself, these techniques alone were not satisfactory. Much of the ancient town lay under modern structures where conditions were not suitable for magnetometry and resistivity.

In 1998 georadar survey, directed by Salvatore Piro (CNR - Istituto per le Tecnologie Applicate ai Beni Culturali) with Dean Goodman (University of Miami) and Yasushi Nishimura (Nara Cultural Institute of Japan), was applied over two areas. The advantages of georadar survey are that firstly, it could be applied in conditions where it was impossible to use magnetometry and resistivity (for example tarmac and gravel surfaces), and secondly, that it provides plans of the buried structures at different depths. The georadar results have confirmed this potential, clarifying the results of the magnetometry and resistivity surveys and identifying a number of new structures including the clear plan of an amphitheatre.

In order to fully understand the chronology of the structures identified, their function, and the development of the centre overall, excavations were carried out of five selected areas, chosen primarily on the basis of the results of the remote sensing survey. These were as follows a) the amphitheatre, b) the suburban villa, c) the funerary complex, d) the possible bath complex, and e) excavations of an area directly behind the apse of the church aimed specifically at investigating the late Roman to medieval transition.

The excavations proved invaluable for our understanding of the history of the centre. Furthermore, although confirming the results of the geophysical survey, in some cases they showed its limitations. For example, geophysical survey of the area directly behind the apse of the church failed to produce satisfactory results. Excavations of this area revealed the longest, and most complex, period of occupation identified so far (1st to 13th centuries AD).

3. Results and conclusions

Remote sensing survey (magnetometry, resistivity and georadar) permitted the following conclusions regarding the urban topography of the Roman town. Forum Novum was a small centre, *circa* four hectares in size, and composed primarily of public buildings. In the immediate vicinity of the excavated forum complex, the survey identified several structural features, including the podium of a temple. To the south west of the forum, the survey revealed the foundations of an amphitheatre, its oval arena, with two main and six secondary entrances. Immediately to the south of the basilica, structures were revealed which were originally interpreted as housing and as such appeared to represent the only evidence for residential building within the town, re-reading of the evidence suggests that this is not the case and that these structures maybe *horrea* or warehouses. Interesting evidence was also

found for structures just outside the town centre. To the northeast of the forum, the clear plan of a large suburban villa was revealed. Immediately to the southwest of the villa, the survey identified a large diamond-shaped precinct, whose function is uncertain, however it has as its focus a probable mausoleum and associated funerary complex. The northern wall of the precinct follows the same orientation as the villa, while a major resistance anomaly, later excavated and shown to be part of a bath complex, aligns the southern edge of the precinct. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has suggested that this precinct may represent a funerary garden or *kepatophion*. Other features revealed by the remote sensing survey, which require further investigation, are a sinuous magnetic feature close to the river that may be associated with a port facility and generalized magnetic activity along the bank of the river.

Although the research is on-going, the combination of remote sensing survey and excavations allow some preliminary conclusions regarding the history of the centre. A detailed description of the excavation results has been published elsewhere (Gaffney et al, 2001).

Founded in the Republican period (the earliest structures identified so far are of the 2nd century BC), Forum Novum enjoyed a period of growth during the Augustan period and the 1st century AD, perhaps the result of investment made in the town by one or more wealthy patrons. In this period the forum complex was probably rebuilt on a larger scale and on a different alignment, and the basilica was built, the amphitheatre was constructed, and the foundations of the large suburban villa with a *piscina* were laid down. However by the early 3rd century AD the town was already in decline with many of the monumental features, such as the amphitheatre, the baths and the funerary complex, being abandoned. The last organized use of the villa may also date to the same period. Still, we know from the literary sources, the centre continued to function with a market being held in the 4th century AD and it retained its importance as a local and regional focus with the establishment of a bishop's seat in the 5th century AD. The only area so far to produce a sequence stretching from the Roman to medieval periods is behind the apse of the church, where excavations have identified a sequence stretching from at least the 1st until the 13th century AD (unfortunately in situ contexts of the 8th to 10th centuries are lacking). The recent discovery of a late 6th to 7th century midden in this area is of particular interest and emphasizes the importance of Forum Novum in this period. The range of material, including both imported and local products, is characteristic of major urban and ecclesiastical sites only in this period.

Throughout its long history, Forum Novum-Vescovio remained a small centre with no real evidence for settlement. The Roman town did not exceed 4 hectares in size and, with a sole exception, all the buildings identified have a public function. Forum Novum acted, therefore, as an administrative, legal and religious focus for its territory. It also offered markets and entertainment and probably served for display. However, few people actually resided at the centre. It appears to have fulfilled a similar function in the early Middle Ages, acting as a focus for the surrounding population and continuing to have a religious and political role, but it never attracted settlement. Even today, the role of Vescovio has not greatly changed, with its church, twice yearly market, a restaurant and bar.

4. Publications

Alvino, G. and Patterson, H. (1997) 'The Archaeological Area of Agro Foronovano'. Ministero per i Beni Culturali, Grafica Sabina, Rieti.

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Gaffney, V., Patterson, H., Roberts, P. with contributions by D. Goodman, Y. Nishimura and S. Piro (forthcoming). "Forum Novum (Vescovio): a new study of the town and bishopric. In H. Patterson (ed.) *Approaches to regional archaeology in the Tiber valley* (Archaeological Monographs of the British School at Rome), London.

Gaffney, V., Patterson, H., Roberts, P. and Piro, S. With contributions by G. Barratt, A. Bradley, W. Clarke, D. Goodman, Y. Nishimura, B. Sudds and M. Watters. (2002) Forum Novum: from Roman town to bishop's seat. In Lazio e Sabina I, Rasmus Brandt, J., Duprè Raventós, X., Ghini, G. (eds.) 28-30 January, 2002. Istituti Nordici, Scuola Spagnola, Soprintendenza Archeologica per il Lazio.

Patterson, H. 2003. Roman towns in the Tiber valley and remote sensing survey. International Congress on Archaeological Science, Nara Nationalò Research Institute for Cultural Properties.

5. Future research directions

- Completion of the georadar survey, focusing on the area immediately to the north of the forum complex in order to define the north western most edge of the town. Recent ploughing in this area brought to light large quantities of building material. Provisionally planned for 2003.
- Excavation of a section of the diamond-shaped precinct relating to the funerary complex and *ustrinum* to understand the function, chronology and relationship of the complex with the villa and town. Planned for 2003.
- Continuation of excavations behind the apse of church, aimed at understanding the latest phases of frequentation of town and Roman-medieval transition. Planned for Summer 2004.
- Field survey of the valley to understand relationship between town/bishopric and territory. Provisionally planned for 2004.

6. Acknowledgements

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