

Roman Settlements and the "Crisis" of the 3rd Century AD

Ager Aguntinus

Historisch-archäologische Forschungen

Herausgegeben von
Martin Auer und Harald Stadler

Universität Innsbruck
ATRIUM - Zentrum für Alte Kulturen
Institut für Archäologien

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Martin Auer and Christoph Hinker (Eds.)

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The 4th Aguntum Workshop was dedicated to the so-called crisis in the *Imperium Romanum* during the 3rd century AD. The aim of the workshop was to bring together archaeological data from different parts of the *Imperium* pertinent to the 3rd century. In some areas, severe changes occurred during the 3rd century, which is linked to a loss of influence of the Imperial administrative structures. This is the case in the *municipium Aguntum*, where we were able to discover that a destructive fire raged in the area of the town center. This ruination took place during the 3rd century AD and, as a result, the area of the *Forum* of *Aguntum* currently under investigation fell out of use.¹ However, there are no traces of war-like activity that could have led to the fire. Although we do not know why the fire broke out, it is a fact that the area was not renovated afterwards. This neglect can be seen as an indicator of the town's decreasing economic power. Otherwise such an eyesore in the very center of the town would have been remedied. We therefore know that the Roman administration in *Aguntum* was in crisis in the 3rd century AD.

At the same time, the hilltop settlements around the Roman town begin to flourish again. Especially in Lavant, ca. 5 km east of *Aguntum*, the archaeological evidence shows a clear increase of findings connected to the 3rd century compared to those from the 1st and 2nd centuries.²

Although *Aguntum* was inhabited until at least the 5th century AD³, severe changes took place in the area during the 3rd century. These concern the organization of the settlement and administration of the area. Contrary to the first two centuries AD, when a strong central settlement controlled the *ager Aguntinus*, from the 3rd century onwards, different smaller centers are established. However, this does not necessarily mean that people living in the 3rd century would have recognized these changes as a crisis, but at least from a historical point of view it is clear that the administrative power of the *Imperium* began to crumble.

The abovementioned trends are true for the *ager Aguntinus* but cannot be applied to the *Imperium Romanum* as a whole. As urged by Karl Strobel, the developments of the 3rd century should not be referred to as a "Crisis of the *Imperium*" but instead have to be considered in the context of regional circumstances. Archaeological contexts have to be analyzed in detail before linking them to historical events mentioned in the written sources.⁴ However, considering both archaeological and historical data can be fruitful, as seen in the case of Athens (Beal). How new research can change the old picture developed of this decline has been shown in the areas of Eastern Gaul (Nüsslein), Northern Italy (Arioli; Bottos / Tasca) or Eastern *Noricum* (Marko). Although towns that emerged during the High Empire seem to lose their importance during the 3rd or even already towards the end of the 2nd century (Marko, Pintado, Grüßinger / Willmitzer, Mader / Jäger-Wersonig), there is a great variance in the further development of small settlements, as seen in the case studies analyzed by Benguerel, Bottos / Tasca, Marko, Schachinger et al. and Somma et al. In some cases it is especially the *villae* that become increasingly wealthy during the 3rd century. This may be seen as a development similar to the hilltop settlements, which also become increasingly important during the 3rd century, whereas the central administration of municipal territories seems to suffer from a lack of "imperial power". Nevertheless, there is also evidence for a crisis that affected a whole region, towns and the countryside alike. This might be especially true for North-Western *Noricum*, although there seems to be no historical explanation for the missing coins (Schachinger et al.). Despite this general

1 Auer 2018.

2 Kainrath 2011; Auer / Deschler-Erb / Sossau, in print.

3 Auer 2016; Auer / Deschler-Erb / Sossau, in print.

4 For a methodical approach: Hinker 2015.

development of settlement structures, new developments in the intellectual sphere also emerged in the 3rd century (Handy).

Altogether the 4th Aguntum Workshop has shown that the 3rd century was a time of severe transformation in different regions of the Roman Empire. However, change does not automatically mean crisis and for some settlements and regions the 3rd century was a time of great prosperity. Nevertheless other regions show a tendency towards the reduction of towns and decrease of centralized administration in favor of a range of smaller centers like rural and hilltop settlements or *villae*.

Innsbruck and Vienna, August 2020
Martin Auer & Christoph Hinker

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Brescia and its Territory: Settlement Transformations and the 3rd Century Crisis

by Luca Arioli & Andrea Breda

Abstract

This paper discusses settlement transformations in the city of Brescia (*Brixia – Venetia et Histria*). The study focuses on three areas: the city, the plains and the lake Garda shore. In each of them, the main contexts and case studies are presented and discussed. Despite being geographically very close, during the 3rd century, the three areas underwent different transformations, whose different developments and outcomes depend on the local background and on already ongoing long-term processes in each area. Traces related to traumatic events or to the insecurity of the times (evidence of fires, a carcass pit, coin hoards) are known, but it is almost impossible to relate them to precise historical events. The “crisis” affected the three areas in different ways. This is related to local backgrounds and to the social and historical actors involved at sub-regional and local level.

Keywords

Roman urbanism, Roman rural settlements, Roman villa, settlement transformations, Roman land property, 3rd century crisis, Roman Italy, *Regio Decima*, Brescia

Introduction

This paper will approach the topic of this conference through the discussion of a case study from Northern Italy. During the 3rd century, the region was involved in warlike activity for the first time in centuries.¹ At the same time, the local economy and society were transforming. Brescia is surely among the better-known Roman cities in the region and thus presents an excellent case study for the understanding of this time period. The situation of the city and its territory will be discussed with a focus on three different areas: the city itself, the plain and the lake Garda region (Fig. 1). Considering different territorial contexts will help to underline how geographically close and closely related areas were subject to different processes and underwent very different transformations, not only as a result of historical circumstances, but also due to local societal and economic conditions and processes.

The City

The city of Brescia is located in the Alpine foothills, at the northern end of the Po valley.² The urban center lies on the southern side of the Cidneo hill, in continuity with a Celtic settlement which was progressively Romanized between the 2nd century BC and the Augustan age. During this time, public buildings, city walls, an aqueduct and Roman-style houses were built. The course of the city walls is well known, except

1 Gregori 1990, 15–16.

2 Most of this summary is based on Rossi 1996 a and Breda 2008.

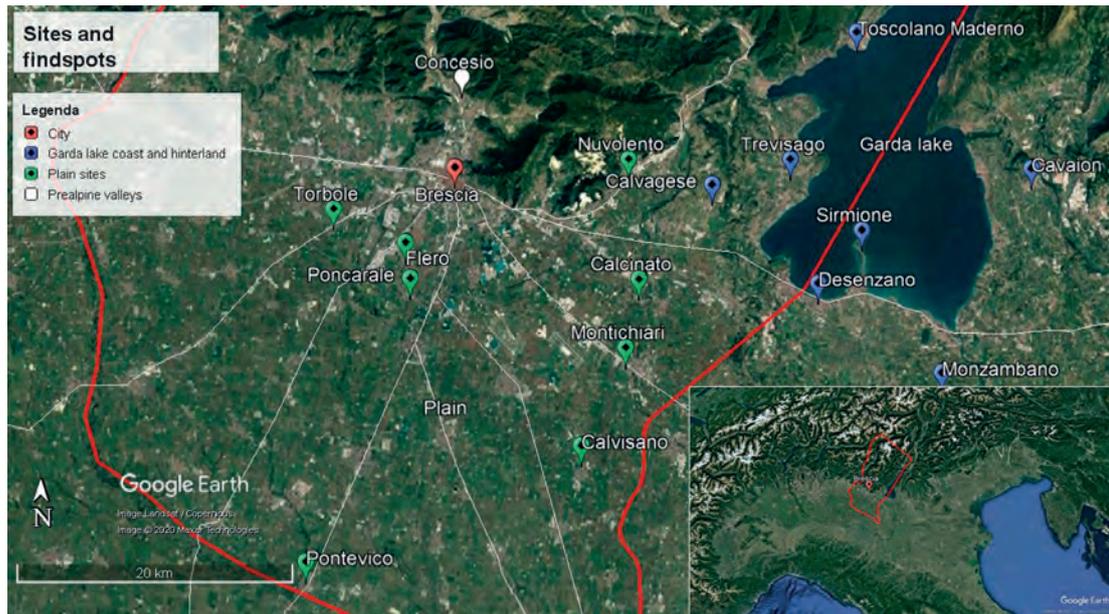


Fig. 1: Position of Brescia and the other mentioned places. The city territory of the Roman period is marked in red; the main Roman roads are marked in white.

for the southern part of the city. No traces of the Augustan walls have been found there yet, but a large portion of the city shows a coherent road and sewage system, implicating that a large urban area within the city walls was planned in a single phase.³ New fortifications were built probably after the 5th century AD; in the south, the area that had been enclosed by the Augustan walls was reduced. This new area was limited to the present-day Via Tosio – Piazza Arnaldo, with an addition for the *palatium* to the west. The city had a rectangular plan, the main axes corresponding to the roads heading to Milan, Verona, and Cremona, which converged at its center where the *forum* is located. The forum has some of the most well preserved Roman monumental buildings from the Flavian period in Northern Italy. At the northern and southern sides of the *forum* stand the *capitolium* and the *basilica*. To the east lies another public building, probably the *curia* (Fig. 2). Circa 80 private houses are known archaeologically, and most of them are of the *domus* type. The details of private housing in Brescia still remain unclear, as no house has yet been investigated in its entirety. The construction of the *domus* began during the 1st century BC and they were generally in use until the 5th century AD, a period corresponding to a general crisis in this Roman city.⁴ Archaeological investigations have not found evidence for relevant processes of transformation dated to the 3rd century. During this time period, public buildings were maintained and restored. This is well documented for the theater, which during the Severan period was equipped with new decorative elements⁵, and for a public building of uncertain nature located near the *forum*.⁶ Many cases of significant edifications or architectural phases dated to the 3rd century are known for other public and private buildings but none can be precisely dated to the years of the crisis.⁷ The golden bronze portraits of 3rd century emperors – probably *Claudius Gothicus*, *Aurelianus* and *Probus* – testify the continuity in monumental activity and Imperial propaganda in public spaces.⁸ Most of the senators from the city are documented between the Antonine period and the 3rd century AD; this circumstance is quite common for Cisalpine cities but acts of euergetism were extremely rare.⁹

3 This subject – which is important for the understanding of the Corso Magenta excavation – has been debated in recent publications: Brogiolo 1993, 41–42; Rossi 1996 a, 83; Breda 1996, 117; currently the area is considered to be part of the early Imperial city planning: Breda 2008, 6.

4 Brogiolo 1993, 43; Breda 2008, 9–10.

5 Rossi 1996 a, 83.

6 Rossi / Simonotti 2005.

7 Rossi 1996 a, 82–83.

8 Salcuni / Formigli 2011, 47–52.

9 Gregori 1999, 113–124; 255–257.

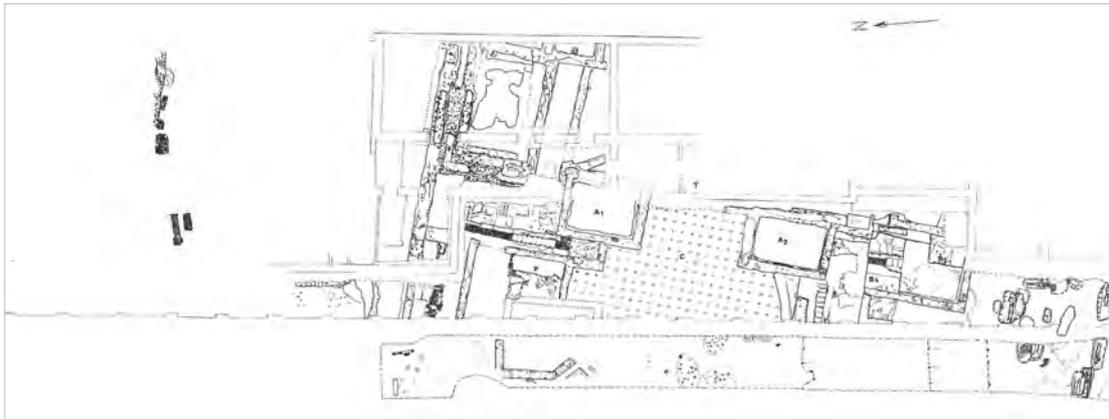


Fig. 3:
Excavations
on the Corso
Magenta.

graves for infants were found, all without any grave-goods; they are probably contemporary with the last phase of the southern necropolis (Fig. 3).

In previous literature, this context was considered to be of a suburban nature and was compared to examples from other North Italian cities such as Milan¹² and cases in the Emilia region¹³, where the abandonment of suburban areas was usually related to the insecurity of the times. The abandonment of the thermal complex is apparently an isolated case in Brescia as in other suburban areas settlement continuity is documented until the 4th century AD and beyond.¹⁴ In addition, during the 4th century, most of the early churches were built in the southern periphery of the city, suggesting that the more central areas were still occupied.¹⁵ The interpretation of the excavation's implications for the urban structure of Brescia is highly problematic. Current studies consider the *thermae* as part of the urban area, with the consequent implications of the disposal of the dead in Roman times. If this assumption is correct, it is possible to propose – as a hypothetic explanation for this almost unique case of the presence of burials inside the city – that the Corso Magenta necropolis may be the result of an otherwise unknown emergency, compelling some of the inhabitants to bury their dead inside the city in an abandoned area that continued to be used for funerary purposes for some years.

Coins and Small Finds: A New Role for the City?

The study of *militaria* and coin finds from some of the city excavations suggests that Brescia came into a new role during the 3rd century, probably beginning with the reign of *Gallienus*. The coin assemblages from two of the major city excavations – S. Giulia and the *capitolium* – show a significant presence of 3rd century Antoniniani that unexpectedly outnumber other coin types.¹⁶ Given the close relationship between this coin typology and the army, it has been proposed that the city was affected by the passage of troops or hosted an unidentified military unit.¹⁷ The wide circulation of Antoniniani is also indicated by the evidence from other excavations in the city where this is the most abundant coin type.¹⁸ The presence of army personnel is confirmed by an artifact uncovered in 1930 in the necropolis of the Bornata area. One of the graves found there contained a gold-plated bronze brooch of the Pröttel 1a type dated to 260–320.¹⁹ Other contextless gold-plated brooches of the same type are kept in the city's museum collections.²⁰ Continuity in the presence of army personnel in the 4th century is confirmed by finds of crossbow

12 Arslan / Caporusso 1991, 355.

13 Ortalli 1992.

14 Lupano 1996, 113–114.

15 Brogiolo 1993, 55, 65–68.

16 Arslan 1999, 354–358; 2002, 485–486.

17 Arslan 2002, 486; Morandini 2007, 150–156.

18 Arslan 1996, 227.

19 Bezzi Martini 1987, 65.

20 Buora 2002, 214, n. 37–39.

brooches from the S. Giulia²¹ and Via Cattaneo²² excavations. The army's residence has been associated with the city's new role in the defense of Northern Italy. Brescia did not become a first-line stronghold like Verona, on the way of Alpine passes, but became part of a second-line, in-depth defense system, as located along some of the most used traffic routes.

Same City, Different Society?

According to present research, it can be affirmed that – except for the problematic case of Corso Magenta – during the whole 3rd century AD, no significant and long-term changes occurred in the city's structure or organization, neither in public nor in private buildings. Major transformations occurred only much later in Late Antique times.²³ The 3rd century can thus be considered as being part of a period of continuity and stability for the urban structures and life rather than a moment of widespread “crisis” or rupture.²⁴ If we must define a change in city life, it would be a social and functional one: social, as the presence of the military surely had an impact on city life, and functional, as from this moment on, the city grew into a new role, which would later contribute to transforming Brescia into a fully fortified city during Late Antiquity.

The Plain

During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, land property and settlement reorganization processes were ongoing in the Po valley region. These processes have traditionally been related to a general crisis in Italian agriculture, but this historical explanation is considered outdated and is no longer accepted by all scholars. This is because these same processes can also be interpreted in a positive sense, as an adjustment of a land property system no longer adequate for the times.²⁵ Archaeological data from this period are clear, but no specific study has considered this problem on a wider scale, while it has been approached in local or regional case studies, the results of which have been quite interesting.²⁶ There is a significant drop in the number of settlements²⁷, with some abandonments being related to natural events and – probably – a decline in environmental and water control.²⁸ The desertion of settlements does not always correspond to the abandonment of fields, as in some cases the continuity of agricultural use is documented by the dispersion of agricultural earth above the demolished buildings.²⁹ Other settlements underwent internal and functional transformations, often leading to a differentiation of economic production and to the debasement of the decorative furnishings. This is linked to deteriorating economic conditions and to the establishment of a hierarchically connected system of settlements possibly depending on a single property.³⁰ An in-depth study of settlement transformations that occurred in a short time range in the plains of Brescia has to face the problems of the current progress of archaeological studies. Lots of sites are known, but published preliminary data are available for only a few of them and only one site – the *villa* of Nuvolento – has been published in detail together with its finds. However, some case studies may help in understanding the local development of these processes in terms of settlement networks, landscape structure and individual sites.

Field survey in Flero and Poncarale

In the municipalities of Flero and Poncarale, located 10–15 km south of Brescia, an intensive field survey was carried out over an area of 6 sqkm. The fieldwork was followed by the study of the finds, which allowed

21 De Marchi 1999, 316, tav. CXXXI, 7–8.

22 De Marchi 2010, 240–241, tav. 2, d.

23 Brogiolo 1993, 43.

24 Gregori 1999, 304–305; Rossi 2002, 225.

25 Vera 1994.

26 Ortalli 1996; Saggiolo 2010.

27 Ortalli 1996; Mancassola, Saggiolo 2000; Saggiolo 2010.

28 As in the case of buildings destroyed by river floods: Ortalli 1991; also, Cremonini, Labate, Curina 2013, focusing on the Emilia region.

29 As in the cases of Nuvolera (Brescia) and Bentvoglio (Bologna): Dander 1998; Ortalli 1994, 189–191.

30 Ortalli 1996.

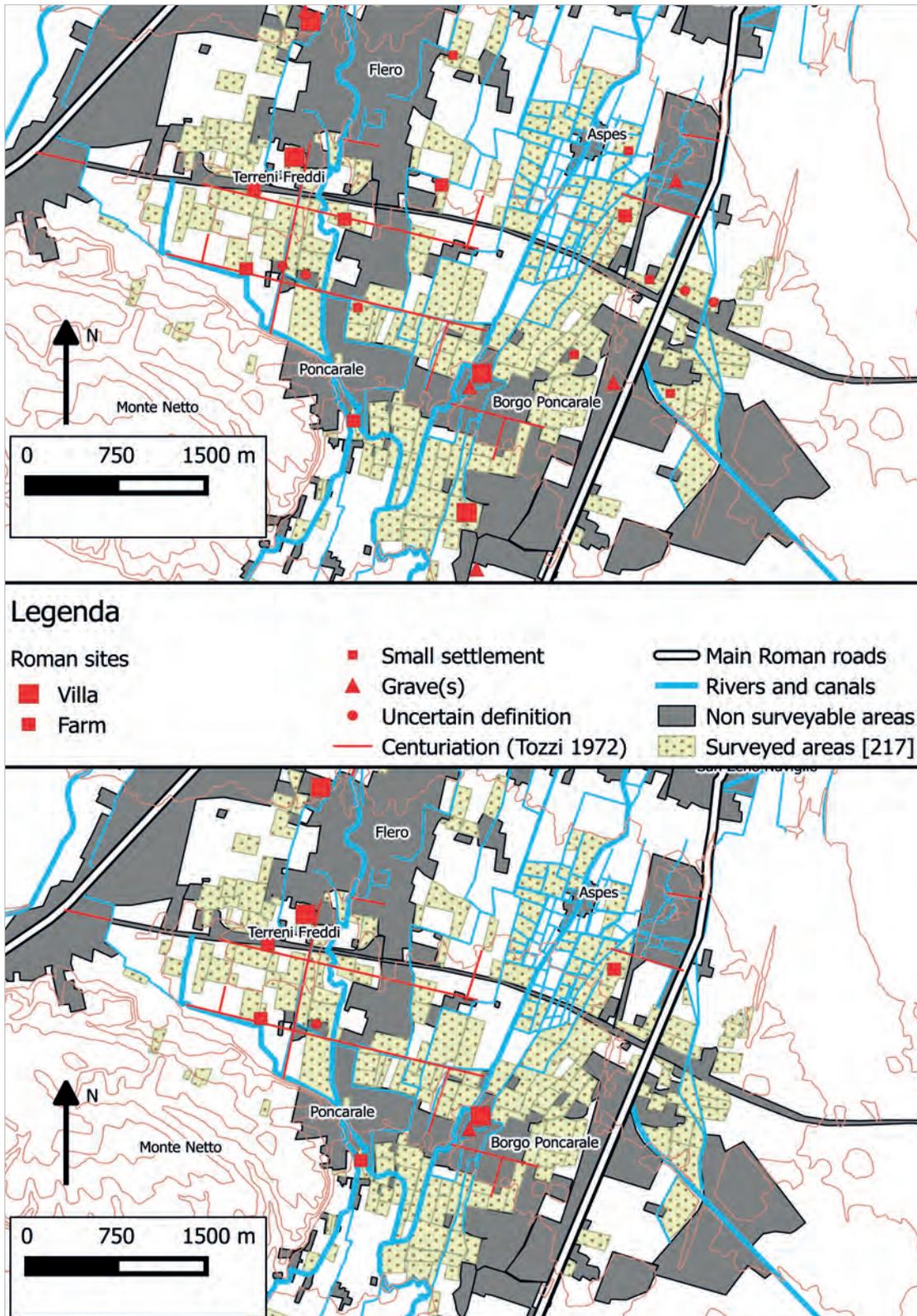


Fig. 4: Transformation of settlement network in Flero and Poncarale. Above, early Imperial settlements and finds; below, settlements and finds dated to the late 2nd–3rd century AD.

us to describe the settlement and economic patterns of the area between the Iron and Middle Ages.³¹ The settlement network of the Early Imperial period was based on the presence of some *villae* in combination with more numerous farms and small settlements. The most notable site is the *villa* of Borgo Poncarale, which extended over 25000 sqm, richly equipped with décor consisting of mosaic floors, painted walls and marble outfitting. It probably belonged to high-status members of the local society.³² By the 2nd century AD, all the small sites had been abandoned, and circa half of the farms and *villae* seem to have succumbed to the same fate between the 2nd and the 3rd century AD (Fig. 4). At the *villa* of Borgo Poncarale there is evidence for continuous occupation up to the 7th century, but in the 3rd century AD, it seems to have entered a new phase. From this moment onwards, the economic trajectory of the *villa*, which was the richest and highest-consuming site in the area, seems to have changed, with a possible drop or an interruption in the consumption of fine wares and amphorae. The same applies to the whole surveyed area (Fig. 5). This circumstance is quite interesting and – at least for the *villa*, which was repeatedly surveyed – unlikely to be connected to the natural discrepancies of field survey sampling.³³ A possible explanation is a transformation in the role and status of the *villa*, which may have gone from being the residence and center of investments and socio-economic relationships of a rich *dominus* to becoming a mere productive site or a main center for the exploitation of the countryside.³⁴ A small Roman farm was found in Flero, at Terreni Freddi during the construction of a highway. The site was occupied over a lengthy period of time ranging from the Celtic to Early Medieval era. No relevant transformations were noted for the settlement structure and organization between the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and major changes occurred only in Late Antiquity.³⁵

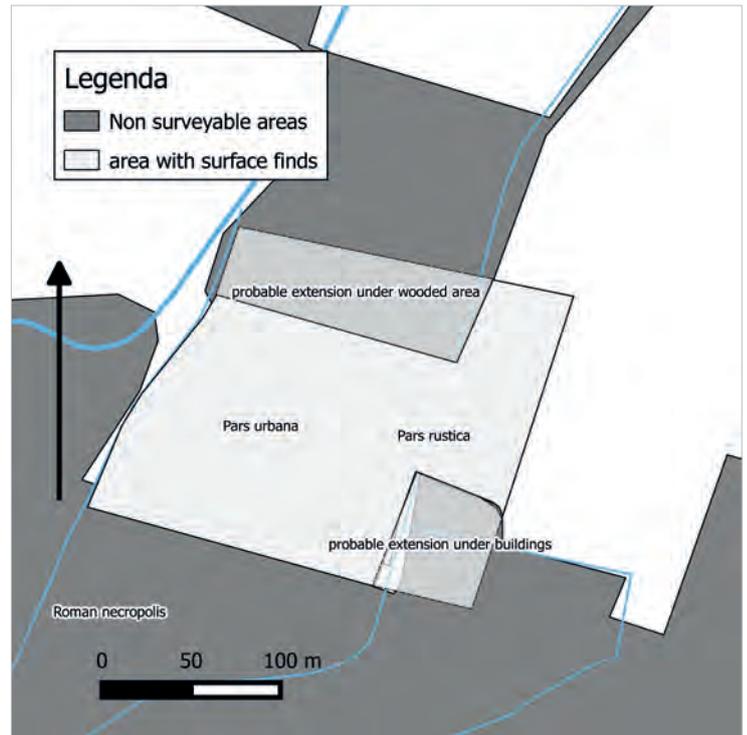


Fig. 5: Survey data from the Roman *villa* in Borgo Poncarale.

The Centuriation-related Canals in Calvisano, cascina Santi

Rescue excavations, which took place during the construction of a pipeline, allowed us to document a series of Roman canals related to the local centuriation as well as funerary and settlement evidence dating to between the Late Roman and Lombard period. A cremation tomb dated to the second half of the 2nd century was located in the small space between two minor canals, respecting their course; some meters away, a Late Roman necropolis with inhumation tombs (with grave-goods mostly dating to between the late 3rd and the late 4th–early 5th century) was found and many of the graves were cut through the fillings of the same canals, implicating that they were still active during the late 2nd century, but had already been in disuse before the late 3rd–early 4th century (Fig. 6).³⁶

The local centuriation has only been proven by a single study³⁷, and no other local data are available for comparison, as no similar evidence has been found in the plain of Brescia, thus making it difficult to

31 Arioli 2019 a.

32 Sites of a similar size with comparable decorations are quite rare in the region. It is possible to propose a generic comparison in size and level of décor with the villa of Nuvolento which belonged to the family of the *Laelii*: Gregori 2012.

33 Local-produced fine wares and imported African amphorae from the 5th century AD were found.

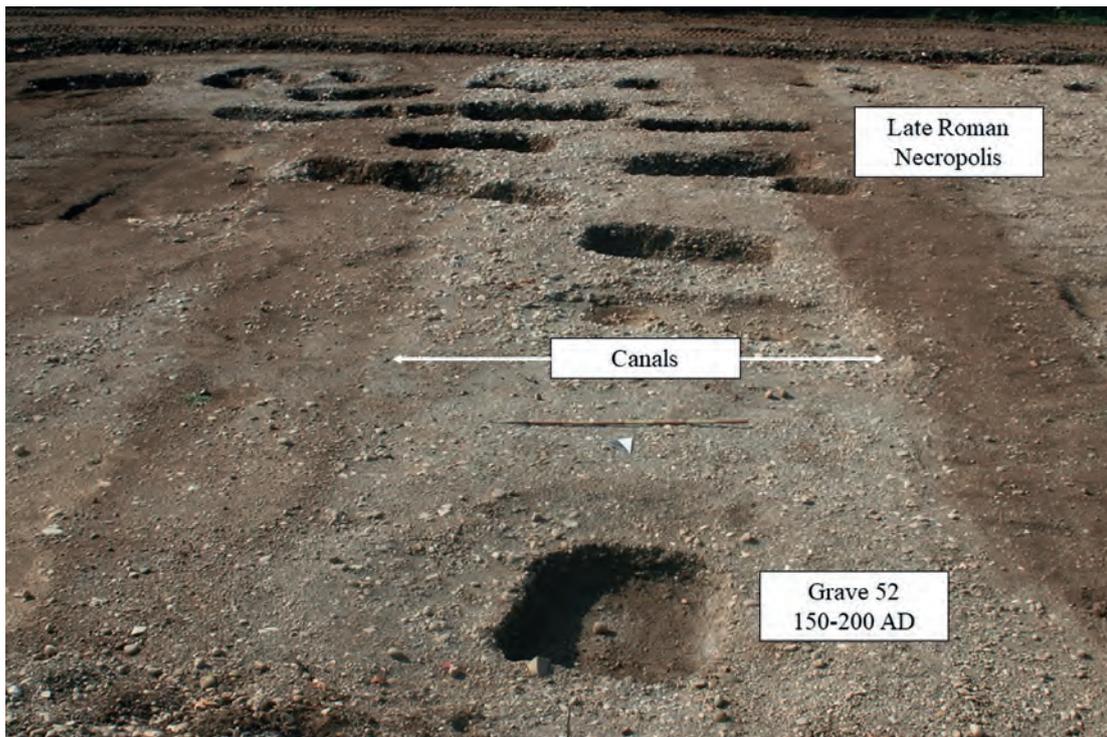
34 On the presence and interests of local elites in the countryside, Cenati / Gregori / Guadagnucci 2015, 187–195.

35 Breda et al. 2007. No data on pottery consumption on the site are available.

36 Unpublished data by courtesy of Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio di Bergamo e Brescia.

37 Tozzi 1972, 112–116. See also Bosco 2019.

Fig. 6:
Excavations
in Calvisano,
cascina Santi.
2nd century
grave between
two canals and
Late Roman
necropolis
with tombs cut
through the
canals' fillings.
Excavation
photo, cour-
tesy of the
Soprinten-
denza
Archeologia
Belle Arti
Paesaggio
di Bergamo
e Brescia.



draw any conclusions on a larger scale. However, this evidence points out that landscape structures were transforming together with settlement networks.

The *Villa* of S. Cristina in Montichiari

Field surveys and excavations carried out along the river Chiese by the Gruppo Archeologico Monteclarese led to the investigation of various settlements, mostly *villae*.³⁸ The *villa* of S. Cristina, excavated in 1994, can be considered an archaeological example for the transformations occurring to single settlements during this period (Fig. 7).³⁹ The *villa* was luxuriously decorated and extended over an area of circa 5–6,000 sqm; the site was occupied from the 2nd–1st century BC until Early Medieval times. Through archaeological excavations over an area of 300 sqm, two rooms were investigated: one with an apsis of which only the foundations remain (room B), and a vast underground room filled with discarded pottery and dismantled building material (room A). The two rooms were on each side of a courtyard, at the center of which was a well. To the west, an agricultural canal marked the outer limit of the settlement. During the Middle Imperial period, probably during the 2nd or possibly 3rd century, the underground room was stripped of its brick floor and filled with earth, pottery (fine and coarse wares and amphorae), architectural materials and fragments of fresco wall paintings, probably originating from the demolition of decorated rooms. The canal is evidence that the area was continuously agriculturally used. Its filling contained some fragments of Early Imperial pottery and a large amount of common ware pottery dated to between the 4th–5th century AD. Nothing is known of the other parts of the *villa*; the presence of 4th–7th century pottery and traces of Late Antique–Early Medieval graves near the room with the apsis suggest that the site was continuously occupied, but no fine wares or amphorae from the time after the 3rd century were found, suggesting a drop in consumption.

38 Prùneri 2007.

39 Venturini / Portulano 1994; preliminary data on the revision of the finds are provided in Arioli 2019 b.

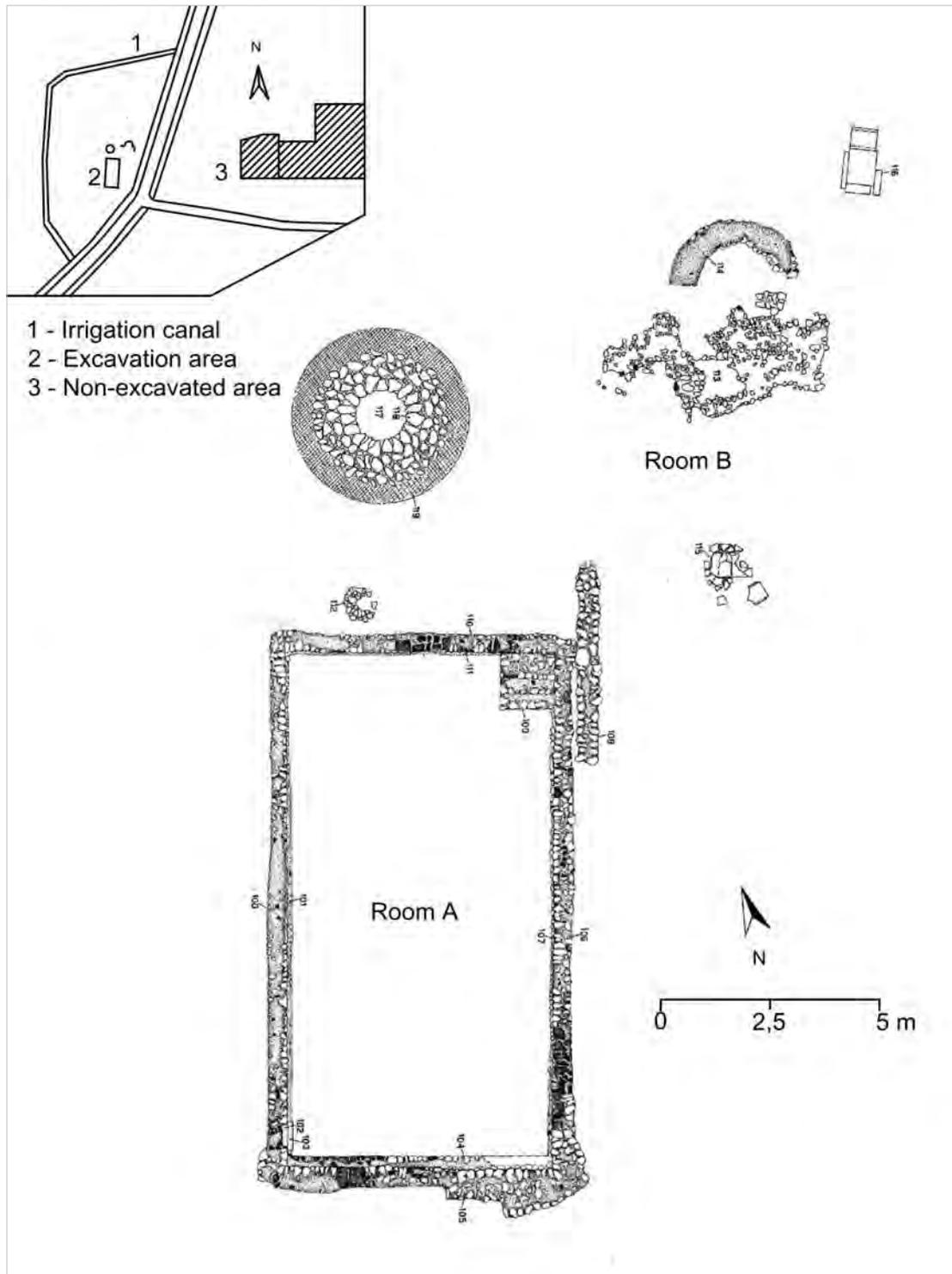


Fig. 7: Roman villa in Montichiari, S. Cristina.

Larger Properties?

2nd and 3rd century epigraphic sources from the territory of Brescia suggest the formation of significant estates belonging to members of senatorial families, such as the *Roscii*, the *Umbrii* and the *Nonii*; some of them mention professionals like *actores*, *procuratores* and *saltuarii*, who were charged with the adminis-

tration of consistent agricultural funds and appear only in the inscriptions of this period.⁴⁰ Many of these documents refer to areas outside of the plain; however, it can be inferred that properties were not necessarily restricted to the find spots of the inscriptions. For example, a now-lost altar was dedicated to *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus* for the protection of the *possessiones Rosciorum* and was found in Concesio, at the lower end of the Val Trompia⁴¹. A similar circumstance could suggest that the family had interests focused on the mountain area, but at least two praedial toponyms referring to the *Roscii* suggest instead that they had widespread interests and spread out possessions.⁴² Similarly, the family of the *Nonii* is well documented in the city and on the lake coast, but the fact that a freedman of *Nonius* owned slaves in Calvisano, south of Montichiari, suggests the vastness of their interests.⁴³ The *villa* of Nuvolento belonged to a senatorial family⁴⁴ and provides an example for the evolution of a residence in the hands of high-ranking members of society. Generally speaking, 3rd century is the turning point that marks a new phase of investments in structural and decorative furnishings.⁴⁵ Although we cannot directly prove that there is a connection between this site and the dynamics described for Flero-Poncarale and Montichiari, this *villa* does seem to point in an opposite direction. These owners who certainly had high-level socio-economic standards seem to have followed a different trend.

Traumatic Events

The plain of Brescia has provided some cases of finds related to traumatic events. Coin hoards dated to the years of the crisis have been found in Torbole Casaglia and Calcinato. The still unpublished Torbole Casaglia hoard was found in 1926 at Fornaci Deretti, in an area occupied by a rural necropolis: It consisted of circa 200 coins from Severus Alexander to Volusian and was kept in a metal box.⁴⁶ The Calcinato hoard is only partly known, as a large part of it was dispersed after its discovery in 1985. Only 82 coins dated to between the Flavian period and 240/241 AD were recovered.⁴⁷ In both cases, information on the hoards and their archaeological context is incomplete and does not allow for a proper understanding of the finds.

Two other contexts are more directly related to the problems and transformations of rural settlements: In Flero, at Terreni Freddi, a Roman farm in use between the 1st century BC and the 6th century AD was excavated.⁴⁸ Many structural transformations occurred during the site's life, but one context is especially exceptional. SU 108 is a pit filled with the carcasses of cattle, pigs, sheep and other farm animals. All of them exhibit traces of gnawing and were thus exposed for some days after their death before being buried. The carcasses have been carbon-dated to between the 3rd and 4th century AD.⁴⁹ This context provides an example for a possible traumatic event which hit the local community, ensuing herd losses and some degree of loss of control over territory, as the dead animals remained exposed; an epidemic or a flood are among the possible explanations, but its uniqueness makes it difficult to properly interpret or understand it (Fig. 8). In Ponteviso, a large Roman building – probably a *villa* – was found near the church of Madonna di Ripa d'Oglio and partly investigated.⁵⁰ Excavations brought to light two large rooms with brick floors and walls built during the 1st century AD; during the 3rd century, a large fire destroyed the building and burnt it to the ground, leaving a thick layer of destruction. Soon after the fire, some spaces underwent small reorganization measures, but a large-scale reoccupation of the site with wooden buildings only began during the 4th and lasted until the 6th century AD.

40 I.It. X, 5, 1098 = C.I.L. V, 5005; I.It. X, 5, 732 = C.I.L. V, 4241; I.It. X, 5, 137 = C.I.L. V, 4347; I.It. X, 5, 806; Suppl. It. 25, 109.

41 I.It. X, 5, 732 = C.I.L. V, 4241.

42 Rossano, near to Provaglio d'Iseo; the place name *Roxanum*, in Verolanuova, appears in a Medieval document dated to 1194: Codice Diplomatico della Lombardia Medievale, SS. Cosma e Damiano, Cartula permutationis, 1194, 27–2, Verolanuova.

43 I.It. X, 5, 842 = C.I.L. V, 4139.

44 Gregori 2012.

45 Fausti / Simonotti 2012.

46 Rossi 1991, 196, n. 1653.

47 Arslan 1990.

48 Breda et al. 2007, 232–235.

49 Bona 2013.

50 Rossi 1987; Rossi 1996 b, 35–37.



Fig. 8: Carcass pit from the Terreni Freddi excavation in Flero. Excavation photo courtesy of the Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti Paesaggio di Bergamo e Brescia.

Conclusions

During the 3rd century in the Po valley, social, economic and property transformations were already ongoing as a continuation of long-term processes that had started in the 2nd century AD. Their effects on settlements are recognizable on two levels: on a wider scale, as illustrated in the Flero and Poncarale cases, and through single settlements, as shown by the *villae* of Borgo Poncarale, S. Cristina and Nuvolento. In the studied areas, the most common results of these processes seem to be a redefinition of the role of some sites and a general impoverishment of the countryside, with a drop of consumption. Traumatic events do not seem to have had long-term effects and also seem to be quite exceptional in the local archaeological record, but their connection with historical events is unclear and therefore they cannot be fully understood. The most significant settlement transformations are related to the reorganization of land use and/or ownership, and circumstances directly connected or depending on the 3rd century crisis are difficult to recognize or understand and seem to have had little impact on these long-term processes.

Lake Garda

The lake Garda region was close to some of the most important roads to Alpine passes and to the cities of Northern Italy.⁵¹ Its position and climate were appreciated in Roman times, as is testified by the abundant findings, suggesting an increase in settlements between the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD.⁵² In recent years, a series of archaeological investigations has examined the evidence for Roman period settlement in the lake Garda area, focusing on large-scale surveys and excavations of single sites, among which the most prominent are large monumental *villae* on the lakeshore.⁵³

51 Buonopane 1997.

52 Brogiolo 1997; Saggiaro 2006, 196.

53 Roffia 1997.

Lakeside *villae*

The southern and western shores of the lake are characterized by the presence of large *villae*, among which the most notable are those of Desenzano⁵⁴, Toscolano Maderno⁵⁵, and Sirmione's "Grotte di Catullo"⁵⁶ and "Via Antiche Mura"⁵⁷. The eastern shore shows no imposing monumental examples of such buildings and in general there are fewer settlements: Only few *villae* are known, and none of them have been investigated to any larger extent.⁵⁸ The importance of the buildings and the findings of inscriptions suggest that these complexes were property of members of the municipal élite from Brescia and Verona or – as is likely in the case of the largest buildings – of individuals who were connected to the imperial court and invested in prestigious residences.⁵⁹ Most of the *villae* have building phases dating to the 1st century AD, with investments in decorative and monumental elements at the end of the 3rd or, more often, during the 4th century, as in Toscolano Maderno and Desenzano. The peninsular complex of the so-called "Grotte di Catullo" in Sirmione is the largest on the lakeshore: During the 3rd century it underwent a radical redefinition probably due to the consequences of a large fire. This caused the whole area to be used in a completely new way. In fact, a direct relationship has been recognized between the 'Grotte di Catullo' and "Via Antiche Mura" *villae*. After the fire, some architectural parts from the "Grotte di Catullo" were reused and transferred to the "Via Antiche Mura" *villa*, suggesting a conscious re-planning of the whole peninsula area.⁶⁰ The Grotte di Catullo, instead, was assigned a public and most likely military function, as testified by the findings of crossbow brooches and military belts among the grave-goods from the necropolis established in a part of the *villa*.⁶¹ It has been proposed that during Late Antiquity, the complex hosted a military garrison, possibly a fleet for the control of the traffic on the lake, as is documented for lake Como during the same period.⁶²

Inland Settlements

The lake hinterland is characterized by the presence of moraine hills and valleys. On the south side lies a large forest, the *Silva Ligana*, which is already mentioned in Roman sources⁶³; an inscription referring to a *saltuarius* as well as some place-names suggest that other areas may have also been covered by forest⁶⁴. The settlement pattern of the inland area was marked by both agglomerations of and isolated rural settlements. Some *vici* – such as *Ariciacus* and *Probianus* – are mainly known through written sources⁶⁵. Surveys carried out at the site of Cordevigo in Cavaion have provided archaeological data, suggesting the existence of a sparsely settled area of up to 10,000 sqm.⁶⁶ Similar evidence was gathered from excavations at the sites of Calvagese and Trevisago off of the western shore.⁶⁷ Most rural settlements were of a productive nature, but there are cases of extensive residential areas, among which the *villae* of Mansarine in Monzambano⁶⁸ or Faustinella⁶⁹ near Desenzano are extensively published. After the 3rd century, the residential parts of these sites were developed further during the 4th century. Systematic research on the eastern shore has shown that the *villae* were flanked by "minor" residential and productive units. Surveys

54 Scagliarini Corlaita 1997.

55 Roffia 2015.

56 Roffia 2018 a.

57 Roffia 2018 b.

58 Cavalieri Manasse 1997, 111.

59 Brogiolo 1997, 266; Saggioro 2006, 197.

60 Roffia 1996, 43–45.

61 Roffia 1999, 35–36; on the necropolis, Bolla 2018.

62 Roffia 1999, 35–36. A *praefectus classis Comensis* is mentioned in Notitia Dignitatum, pars occidentis, XLII.

63 Roffia 2018 c.

64 I.It. X, 5, 806; Brogiolo 1997, 255.

65 Gasperini 1996.

66 Saggioro 2006, 201–203.

67 Brogiolo 1997, 263.

68 Breda 1997.

69 Roffia 2007.

have also revealed a substantial continuity in the pattern of settlement and landscape use between the 2nd and 4th century, with rare cases of abandonment, limited in most cases to farms and modest settlements.⁷⁰

General Conclusions

The selected case studies offer an overview and hints for the understanding of settlement transformations occurring during the 3rd century. Despite their proximity and connections, the three areas had varying histories and took diverging courses. The same historic events and circumstances affected areas with different backgrounds and problems, resulting in different outcomes. Rather than trying to delineate a general pattern of transformation or to recognize common trends in the area, it seems more interesting to underline the existence of local and sub-regional variances in these transformations. They can only be properly understood with the knowledge of the general background and that of local sites, together with the general frame of the wider historical context and long-term processes. It is useful to remember that – despite possible similarities in the stratigraphic record – each case and each site is potentially unique and is autonomous and peculiar in its own way, which is not always possible to fully understand through archaeological excavations, let alone field surveys. Also, situations emanating from a similar event can evolve in different ways, as in the case of the *villae* destroyed by fires. In Ponteviso, recovery is not immediate and in the long term is only partial, consisting solely of wooden buildings; after the fire in Sirmione, a new, large *villa* was built in Via Antiche Mura and the “Grotte di Catullo” became the home of a military garrison. Such a difference surely depends on the resources the respective people had access to at the time – and of course the state and rich owners had plenty – but also on what people judged to be more convenient, practical and fitting to their needs. The agents, together with their needs and reasons, may change from area to area and from site to site, in combination with long-term trends and short-term situations influencing their choices and actions.

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