

Salvatore Basile: *Lucca Romana e Tardoantica. Analisi spaziali e modelli computazionali per lo studio dei paesaggi urbani e rurali*. Oxford: BAR Publishing 2023 (BAR International Series S3152). XVII, 164 p., 114 ill. £ 53.00. ISBN: 978-1-4073-6109-3. PDF ebook: £ 41.00. ISBN: 978-1-4073-6110-9.

This impressive and stimulating book is a revised version of the author's Pisa doctoral thesis (2018–2022). This was supervised by Fabio Fabiani, who provides a short foreword to this published version (“Presentazione”, p. XVII). As noted there, and amplified in the book's introduction, Salvatore Basile is presenting not the results of new excavations, but rather a systematic re-evaluation of existing data for Lucca and its surrounding territory (the *ager Lucensis*).¹ That landscape is divided into four zones (p. 2) which provide the topographical framework for the discussions in the chronologically-structured chapters later in the book (see below). First comes “città e suburbio” (p. 33), the urban centre of Lucca itself and its immediate surroundings. Secondly, there is “la pianura” (p. 44), the plain of the river Serchio (the ancient Auser), which is the first of Basile's three divisions of the *ager*. In third place comes the mountainous upland areas north of the city in the Valle di Serchio, its tributary the Lima, and the Garfagnana district surrounding the upper reaches of the Serchio. Fourthly, there is the hilly area to the south-east of the city covering Monte Pisano and the Valdinievole in the direction of Pistoia. These regions are examined across a broad chronological range, stretching from the establishment of the Latin *colonia* of Luca in 180 BCE, through the Roman and immediately post-Roman periods, and down to the coming of the Lombards in the later sixth century CE.

The methodologies deployed and the scope of the volume are set out briefly in the “Introduzione” (pp. 1–3). The author adopts geographic information

1 The material underpinning the analysis are available as Open Access downloads published as S. Basile: *Lucca e l'ager lucensis dall'età tardo repubblicana al tardoantico: le trasformazioni di una città e del suo territorio – (Dataset)*. Pisa: Mappa Open Data Archive, accessible at: <https://digitallib.unipi.it/it/raccolta/Lucca-e-lager-lucensis-dalleta-tardo-repubblicana-al-tardoantico-le-trasformazioni-di-una-citta-e-del-suo-territorio/>. Of particular use in making sense of the data presented in the volume is the Excel spreadsheet labeled “Scheda_intervento_descrizione”, which lists the various sites discussed according the ID numbers used in the text and the maps: this can be downloaded as part of zip file at: <https://digitallib.unipi.it/it/ricerca/digitale/?id=mag:1127> (last accessed 09/01/2026).

systems (GIS) as a means to analyse the archaeological evidence from Lucca and its territory in terms of spatial and geostatistical frameworks in order to reconstruct settlement patterns in the local landscape across a *longue durée* of nearly eight centuries. While the author recognises the value of GIS and statistical models as analytical tools, not least in terms of establishing temporal and spatial relationships between archaeological data, he makes clear that in and of themselves they cannot produce conclusive analyses: that requires specialist knowledge to reach an understanding of the relationships between settlements and their landscapes (p. 2).

After this, chapter 1 (“La storia delle ricerche”, pp. 5–8) offers an overview of the history of scholarship on ancient and late-antique Lucca and its hinterland from the sixteenth century to the present. Antiquarian researches, here as elsewhere, were often patchy, but occasionally important, such as the recovery in 1613 of an inscription (subsequently lost and known now only through written records) recording a restoration of Lucca’s walls by the emperor Probus (276–282).² The 1980s are presented as a watershed moment between incremental discoveries and more systematic research both in the city itself and surrounding *ager*, particularly owing to the activities of Giulio Ciampoltrini at the regional Soprintendenza Archeologica (indeed, Ciampoltrini’s publications account for about 30% of the bibliography cited at the end of the volume). The same period also witnessed an increase in ‘rescue’ archaeological investigations occasioned by new building works, a practice applied only inconsistently before that. The digitization of archaeological records begun in 2011 provides the basis of the dataset used by Basile in this study.

The scientific approach to the data is explained in more detail in chapter 2 (“La raccolta dei dati: metodologie e problematiche”, pp. 9–17). There is ample discussion of how the archaeological database functions, illustrated with examples, and of the sources (many of them archival) on which it is based (pp. 9–13). Variations in the richness of the archaeological record across the territory are also set out (pp. 13–17): some 54% relate to the city of Lucca itself, 23% to the plain of the Auser/Serchio (and most of those are localised in the south east of the plain; the mountainous region to the north accounts for 11% of the data, and the southern hilly region for 12%). These variations reflect the intensity and nature of archaeological investiga-

2 CIL 11, *204 = AE 1991, 655 = EDR104889 = EDCS-41700203.

tion across the *ager* as a whole, which have implications for the sort of analysis that can be built upon the available data. A variety of spatial strategies are adopted for the analysis of these data, particularly kernel density estimations (which smooths out distributions between isolated sites, known as kernels, to produce continuous gradient maps of land use) and kriging (which is used to predict expected sites in a landscape on the basis of identified sites).³ These are used to generate in particular the various ‘heat maps’ that illustrate the volume.

Chapter 3 (“Tra terra e acqua: il fiume Auser nella Piana di Lucca”, pp. 19–32) examines the natural setting offered by Lucca’s hinterland and makes efforts to reconstruct from various sources (ancient urban structures, medieval toponomy, and remote sensing) the ancient environment and the impact on it of the river Auser/Serchio. This is an important precursor to any consideration of human activity in the landscape as the river historically had been prone to episodes of flooding. The author points out that this landscape has changed quite dramatically over the centuries and devotes some of the discussion to assessing the course of the river in antiquity. It divided into two major branches, and several lesser ones; Lucca itself sat in between those two main channels (“Il fiume Auser: le conoscenze pregresse”; pp. 20–23). The courses of these various waterways were constantly shifting (there is technical discussion of how they might be reconstructed at pp. 23–30) and Basile reminds us that human activity in the region of Lucca existed in a dynamic interrelationship with that changing environment, which could be affected also by shifting climatic factors. In its turn, human activity could have an impact on the landscape, not least through the drainage channels constructed as part of the process of centuriation in the *ager* during the late Republic and early principate. That said, the relationship between these various factors is not always clear, as for example when seeking to explain flood

3 For archaeological use of kernel density estimations, see M. J. Baxter: Kernel Density Estimation in Archaeology, 2017. Online available at URL: https://www.academia.edu/34849361/Kernel_density_estimation_in_archaeology (last accessed 03/03/2026); and L. Steinmann/B. Weissova: Datplot: A New R Package for the Visualization of Date Ranges in Archaeology. In *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 9, no. 4, 2021, pp. 288–298, especially p. 291. For the application of kriging in archaeology, see D. Wheatley/M. Gillings: *Spatial Technology and Archaeology: The Archaeological Applications of GIS*. London/New York 2002, pp. 195–199; and C. D. Lloyd/P. M. Atkinson: *Archaeology and Geostatistics*. In *Journal of Archaeological Science* 31, no. 2, 2003, pp. 151–165, at p. 152.

events in the period between the third and sixth centuries and the extent to which they might be the product of climatic factors or the declining maintenance of drainage channels (p. 31; cf. pp. 97–98).

The next five chapters offer a chronological analysis of the archaeological data for Lucca and its territory set against this context. The chronological divisions are as follows: from the foundation of the *colonia* to the end of the Roman Republic [chapter 4: “L’età tardo repubblicana (Inizio II – metà I secolo a.C.)”, pp. 33–56]; the early principate (chapter 5: “L’età augustea e il I secolo d.C.”, pp. 57–88); the later principate (chapter 6: “Il II secolo e la prima metà del III secolo d.C.”, pp. 89–108); the transition to Late Antiquity (chapter 7: “La seconda metà del III e il IV secolo d.C.”, pp. 109–126); and the period covering the end of the western empire to the arrival of the Lombards (chapter 8: “Il V e il VI secolo d.C.”, pp. 127–143). For each of these periods, Basile organises his material according to the four territorial divisions noted above (city and suburbs; river plain; upland areas to the north; and hilly areas to the south). In each chapter, the preponderance of archaeological data for the city and suburbs of Lucca means that it occupies more of the discussion than that about the surrounding *ager*. Moreover, for the period from the early principate to the third century, the quantity and quality of the evidence for the city and its suburbs allows Basile to divide his analysis of it into shorter temporal chunks. Thus chapter 5 divides discussion into two periods, one going down to the mid-first century CE (“Città e suburbio fino alla metà del I secolo d.C.”, pp. 57–67), the other dealing with the second half of that century (“Città e suburbio nella seconda metà del I secolo d.C.”, pp. 67–72). Similarly, chapter 6 divides its discussion between the second century (“Città e suburbio nel II secolo d.C.”, pp. 89–93) and the first half of the third (“Città e suburbio nella prima metà del III secolo d.C.”, pp. 93–97). Such granularity is not feasible for the earlier or later stages of the city’s history, or for the more sparsely distributed sites examined in the *ager*.

Within the topographical sections of each chapter, there are broadly comparable subheadings. For example, the discussions of the city itself and its suburbs are organised around topics such as areas for public buildings, residential quarters, areas for economic activity, and cemeteries. Meanwhile rural districts are considered in terms of evidence for settlement and various forms of agricultural production and industry, as well as areas for burials. This elegant, repeated structure usefully allows for comparisons to be made across the five chronological periods into which Basile divides his study.

Each topographical section of the discussion ends with a useful synthesis summing up developments in the city and suburbs, river plain, mountains, and hills for each period. That said, the division is not entirely mechanical or uniform, since changes in the evidence from period to period mean the discussion and its organisation need to be nuanced to take account of that variability. Thus discussions of centuriation in the *ager* cluster in the chapters covering the period from the foundation to the early third century CE (“Centuriazione e opere di bonifica”, pp. 44–45, pp. 72–75, and pp. 97–98), after which the data for rural settlements become too sparse for there to be full discussion of the topic. Similarly, the chapters dealing with the urban centre from the second century onwards examine evidence for demolition, spoliation, and layers of dark earth, and consider their significance in terms of the abandonment or changing use of spaces within the city, such as the development of gardens, although Basile admits that the evidence is not always sufficient to advance firm conclusions (“Abbandoni, spoliazioni, distruzioni”, pp. 89–90, pp. 110–112, and pp. 127–128).

A final chapter 9 (“*L’ager Lucensis* dal II secolo a.C. alla fine del VI secolo d.C.: considerazioni conclusive”, pp. 145–154) offers an overview of the data presented in the preceding chapters (and adopts the same chronological sequencing set out in chapters 4–8) in the form of a thematic discussion of the evolution of Lucca and its territory from the middle Republic to the advent of the Lombards. There is a wider set of conclusions at pp. 153–154, which might usefully have been indicated by a subheading (as it is they look to be part of the summary of fifth and sixth-century developments). Casual readers of the volume whose chief interest lies in the urban history of ancient and late-antique Italy might want to begin with this chapter, although it is indisputably useful and instructive to have all the technical data and their analysis set out with such model clarity in the preceding chapters, not least because it offers an opportunity to scrutinise the basis for the broader conclusions.

Readers of this journal might find it helpful to have some aspects of these phases, particularly the later ones, discussed in a little more detail. In what follows, I add occasional footnotes to supplement Basile’s discussion or provide additional references.

Knowledge of the Republican phases of the *colonia* is sketchy for various reasons, including limited archaeological interventions in the historic centre where that material might be found, as well as continuous occupation of the

urban centre that makes these earliest levels difficult to identify (“Lucca non fu costruita in un giorno. Città e suburbio: considerazioni di sintesi”, pp. 43–44). By contrast, evidence from the plain points to a radical reconfiguration of the *ager* through centuriation and other measures, which, while they were undertaken for the more effective exploitation of local resources (“La pianura: considerazioni di sintesi”, pp. 49–51), had the effect of imposing Roman structures on the territory.⁴ The mountainous and hilly margins of the *ager* offer some opportunity to consider the integration of pre-existing populations into the new settlement, though the evidence remains somewhat ambiguous.

The end of the Republic was followed by a dynamic period in the city’s development as it received the settlement of Augustan veterans and increased evidence for the monumentalisation of public space, particularly around the forum; later in the first century CE came the construction of the amphitheatre still traceable in the oval Piazza Anfiteatro of the medieval and modern city (“Città e suburbio: considerazioni di sintesi”, pp. 69–72). As for the wider *ager*, evidence suggests this period saw similarly intense activity in the plain (“La pianura: considerazioni di sintesi”, pp. 79–81) and a comparable picture of intensive exploitation of local resources seems traceable in the hilly regions to the south (pp. 87–88). By contrast, the mountainous areas in the upper valley of the Auser/Serchio still do not provide clear evidence of extensive impact (“Il distretto collinare: considerazioni di sintesi”, pp. 83–85).

The evidence for the second and early third centuries indicates various types of change, some of which have been identified in earlier scholarship as signalling a decisive shift to “tarda romanità” (p. 94). Yet the materials assembled by Basile points to a more gradual transition, which does not necessarily align with the political transition to the late period. He shows that the evidence indicates changing uses of spaces both within Lucca and in its territory. Within the city, these changes point to a blurring of distinctions between previously discrete areas of activity (public/private and residential/industrial) (“Altre strutture”, pp. 96–97). This included in the early-third cen-

4 In the apt description of Nicholas Purcell, describing parallel efforts in the Po Valley, this represented “the reduplication and consolidation through repetition of the Roman social and political system”. N. Purcell: *The Creation of Provincial Landscape: The Roman Impact on Cisalpine Gaul*. In: T. Blagg/M. Millet (eds): *The Early Roman Empire in the West*. Oxford 1990, pp. 6–29 (quotation from p. 16).

tury the abandonment of a public building on the eastern side of the forum, perhaps a basilica, and the reuse of the space possibly for gardens (“Abbandoni, spoliazioni, distruzioni”, p. 94; “Dark layers: spazi aperti, aree ortive e discariche”, p. 94; “Città e suburbio: considerazioni di sintesi”, p. 97). Around the same time, evidence from the river plain seems to suggest the abandonment of some areas previously settled, though the evidence is patchy (“La pianura: considerazioni di sintesi”, pp. 102–103). A similar picture emerges from the more marginal zones: the uplands to the north continue to present uneven evidence, while the hilly areas around the Valdinievole seem to show signs of some contractions of settlement that earlier scholars treated as evidence of a social and economic crisis, although Basile notes that we should allow for the persistence of other activities, notably pastoralism, that are less easily traceable in the archaeological record (“Il distretto collinare: considerazioni di sintesi”, p. 108).

The later third century seems to usher in a period in which Lucca was more entwined with the ebb and flow of wider imperial affairs than at any time since the establishment of the Augustan veteran colony. As mentioned above, an important early discovery was the inscription recording the renovation of the city’s walls under Probus. Basile regards this as evidence for Lucca becoming a sort of bulwark for the northern defences of the city of Rome (“Le mura”, p. 109). Other imperial inscriptions from the reigns of Constantine and Julian found in the southern part of the city suggest it had become a locus for public activity and display (p. 113).⁵ Imperial interest in the city is implied also by its listing, at some point perhaps in the early-fifth century, as the site of an arms factory (*fabrica*) in the compendium known as the *Notitia Dignitatum* (occ. 9.29: “Aree produttive, commerciali e artigiane”, pp. 115–116). The south of the city was the location also for the site of Lucca’s first identifiable Christian building, which sits beneath the later medieval church of Santa Reparata. It is worth noting that a baptistery adjacent

5 It is a shame not to have a complete reference for the Constantinian inscription. It is CIL 11, 6670 = EDR103939 (with photographs) = EDCS-23200974. See also discussion in T. Grünwald: *Constantinus Maximus Augustus. Herrschaftspropaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung*. Stuttgart 1990 (Historia. Einzelschriften 64), pp. 117, 231 for this and similar inscriptions in Tuscia. Discussion at pp. 112–113 of the identity of the emperor in the Julianic inscription (CIL 11, 6669 = EDR103938 = EDCS-23200973) is rather long-winded, given that the formulae applied to him (e.g. *liberator orbis Romani* and *dominus noster*) make its fourth-century context plain.

to this church was built over a former bath complex (p. 114), perhaps taking advantage of pre-existing hydraulic works for the new structure. The church was decorated with a mosaic floor which preserves an inscription recording the donation of a certain square footage of the pavement, a practice found elsewhere in Italy, notably around the Adriatic.⁶ Overall, the period between the later-third and early-fifth centuries witnessed a more dramatic set of changes visible in Lucca's urban fabric than in the period circa 100–250. Beyond the city itself, land use in the plain perhaps continued as before, though the evidence is scarce; once again, evidence is scant for the mountains, but the southern hills seem to suggest a contraction of occupied areas. There is no evidence for large scale villas of the sort found elsewhere in Tuscia ("Il distretto collinare: considerazioni di sintesi", p. 126).

For the fifth and sixth centuries, the final phase considered by Basile, the evidence from both city and *ager* points to considerable change. The most notable change relates to the distribution of burials between the fifth century and the seventh (pp. 131–139). In the fifth century, these were still largely associated with extramural churches in the northern and eastern suburbs dedicated to, respectively, Saint Vincent of Zaragosa (now the church of San Frediano, named for the sixth-century Irish missionary who founded it) and Saints Gervasius and Protasius. But in the sixth and seventh centuries they are increasingly found within the walls, with a particular concentration around the ecclesiastical complex at Santa Reparata. In some cases, such burials perhaps point to the abandonment of relatively new structures: their presence in the baptistery could suggest that for some time, perhaps only briefly, it no longer functioned as such ("Edifici ecclesiastici", pp. 129–130). In the *ager*, similar trends of abandonment are visible in the plain, mountains, and hills (pp. 140–143).

The volume is completed by a bibliography (pp. 155–164). In what appears to be a common enough (if not wholly consistent) publication format of BAR, there is no index.⁷ This is surely a disadvantage (and not just for this

6 J.-P. Caillet: *L'évergétisme monumental chrétien en Italie et à ses marges. D'après l'épigraphie des pavements de mosaïque (IVe–VIIe s.)*. Rome 1993 (Collection de l'École française de Rome 175).

7 I sampled tables of contents on the publisher's website alongside some volumes in my own collection, such as J. D. Gunn (ed.): *The Years without Summer. Tracing A.D. 536 and its Aftermath*. Oxford 2000 (BAR International Series S872); and C. La Serra: *La Calabria dalla Tarda Antichità al Medioevo. Ricostruzione del paesag-*

volume). I was fortunate enough, in preparing this review, to have access to the volume both in print and in ebook formats. The latter I accessed on Android devices via the publisher's app, but it had no obvious search facility that might compensate for the absence of an index. That said, the careful structure that Basile has imposed on his material, using the same territorial and comparable thematic divisions into sections and subsections across each of his historical chapters, means that it is not difficult for readers to locate material should they wish to engage in diachronic analyses of individual themes or places. In addition, I found the ebook version useful, not least because I felt it offered somewhat clearer versions of the images than in the print edition. The small print of some of the labels on diagrams makes them difficult to read in hard copy (e.g. figs 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, and 6.9), and being able to zoom in and enlarge them in the ebook is useful, even if there is some loss of clarity and definition. Some of the images with their many shades of grey are rather murky and difficult to make out clearly in the printed version, particularly those in chapter 3 showing ancient river channels and areas prone to flooding (esp. fig. 3.2 on p. 21). The two-column format of the main text preferred by BAR Publishing, however, is easier to navigate in hard copy than it is on the screen of a tablet (never mind on a handy phone).

A few other aspects of the publication call for brief comment. There is a certain amount of repetition across the volume, notably between the overview in chapter 9 and the individual topographical syntheses in chapters 4–8; in addition, the inscription of Probus is set out twice (pp. 5, 109). In that connection, while it is useful to have the texts of inscriptions set out (pp. 5, 35, 57, 109, 112, and 114), their presentation is rather inconsistent, not least in terms of printing the letter V/U. As well as missing an index, I also wondered if some version of the descriptive catalogue of sites available among the Open Access downloads for the volume (see note 1) could have been printed also in the volume as an appendix: while this would have no doubt increased the length of the volume by some margin, it surely would make

gio rurale dell'Altopiano del Poro, Vibo Valentia. Oxford 2021 (BAR International Series S3048). Yet some recent volumes do appear to have indices, e.g. A. Dodson: *Duke Alexander and His Sarcophagi. The 10th Duke of Hamilton and the Egyptian Stone Anthropoid Sarcophagi of Pabasa and Irtyeru*. Oxford 2025 (BAR International Series S3240); and N. Bakirtzis: *Architecture and Sacred Landscape in Byzantium. Making Prodromos Monastery on Mount Menoikeion*. Oxford 2025 (BAR International Series S3250).

consultation of the dataset easier as well as helping readers to make sense of the ID numbers used throughout the text of the volume and its maps.

Some of the questions posed by this study, particularly its emphasis on examining human activity in (and interactivity with) a landscape across the *longue durée*, is reminiscent of the classic studies of peoples and their environments in the works of Fernand Braudel. His famous metaphor that the individual events of human history (*histoire événementielle*) are like fireflies burning briefly against the darkness of a surrounding forest is evoked early on (p. 1).⁸ But Basile notes that any interpretation needs to go beyond noting the presence or absence of archaeological evidence for human activity, since apparent absences may be explicable by a lack of research to identify presences. Such observations are typical of the rigour and insight that Basile displays everywhere in this volume. In it he has provided a model of how archaeological datasets might be deployed to write meaningful histories of ancient cities and their territories. It would be not just interesting to attempt such histories for other centres; it could be instructive too. A recent collective volume on the fate of Italy during and after the Romano-Gothic wars of the sixth century has indicated that different parts of the peninsula weathered those upheavals in divergent ways,⁹ and it seems to me that Basile's work provides a useful framework for tracing and quantifying such experiences in the archaeological record.

8 Basile cites the Italian edition of notes from Braudel's lectures from his time as a wartime prisoner (F. Braudel: *Storia, misura del mondo*. Bologna 1998 [Intersezioni 187]). These have recently been republished in a new French edition, F. Braudel: *L'histoire, mesure du monde. Conférences de la captivité*. Paris 2025 (54 Poche), with accompanying interpretative essays by global historians Christian Grataloup and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. For their context, see H. Caygill: Braudel's Prison Notebooks. In: *History Workshop Journal* 57, 2004, pp. 151–160. The firefly metaphor is perhaps most easily accessible to anglophones in F. Braudel: *On History*. Translated by S. Matthews. Chicago/London 1980, pp. 10–11.

9 H. Dey/F. Oppedisano (eds.): *Justinian's Legacy. The Last War of Roman Italy. L'eredità di Giustiniano. L'ultima guerra dell'Italia romana*. Rome/Bristol, CT 2024 (Saggi di Storia Antica 45).

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Mark Humphries: Rezension zu: Salvatore Basile: Lucca Romana e Tardoantica. Analisi spaziali e modelli computazionali per lo studio dei paesaggi urbani e rurali. Oxford: BAR Publishing 2023 (BAR International Series S3152). In: Plekos 28, 2026, S. 149–159 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2026/r-basile.pdf>).

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