



Ventotene: One of the Most Beautiful Southern Pontine Islands

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Abstract

Since a couple of years Pontine Islands are investigated by the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici del Lazio (Superintendency for Archaeological Heritage of Latium). These investigations are part of a protection program, in which data and elaborations deriving from various subjects, all focused on the definition of sea-ground and coast characteristics, as well as of meteorological parameters are integrated. These data, although partially referred to the present situation, allow the reconstruction of steps of the paleo-geographic and paleo-environmental evolution.

Further, considering also other variables like the region's geological history, the variation of sea-level and climate it is possible to follow an evolving natural scenario. Starting from this the archaeological study, with all its various aspects, is developed completing the general description of historical events and, if possible, of single episodes.

Ventotene

The Island's geographic position and its geo-morphological structure favoured, since prehistoric times, discontinuous settlement related to the Island's natural resources and to its strategic function as a place for landing, supply and control of the Tirrenian routes.

The first evidence of anthropic attendance is dated to the Neolithic period (V-IV millennium B.C.) when obsidian, coming from Palmarolo, were traded.

Evidences for a second settling period were found and dated to the median Bronze Age (XVI-XII century B.C), when increasing peopling, also on coasts and Islands of Latium's territory occurred. These settlements are probably related to specialized and seasonal forms of resource exploitation, in particular hunting and fishing. Between the VIII and the VII century B.C. a colonial Greek presence, coming from the near Ischia-Pitheculosa is ipotized; they exploited the Island for coastal shipping and supply along the routes which linked Sardinia with the Etruscan-Latium coast: the old name Pandataria, indicated for Ventotene in descriptors' sources and probably referring to the fertility and the abundance of the Island's resources should be linked to the Greek attendance of the Island. Among the Island's resources also the abundance of the avian fauna should be cited; a well-known food resource in Antique times, indicated by Varrone (*De re rustica* I, 8 and III, 5), and in the Middle Age, ascertained by numerous documental evidences which regard the rights on the *Calae Coturnicariae* (hunting areas).

In this period the Islands assume a well defined political-commercial function, related to the control of middle-Tirrenian routes. In fact, Livio states an Volscian occupation of the Pontine Islands that can be dated between the V and the IV century B.C. aiming at the strategic control of the Islands as landing places and which refer to the wider context of the relations between Rome and Carthagen.

During the second Sannitian war, contemporarily with the foundation of the colony of Saticula, Sessa Aurunca and Interamnia Lirenas, Rome becomes interested in the Pontine Islands substituting the Volsci by founding the Colony Pontiae. The Islands become one of the maritime

bases of the first Roman Military fleet, which will assault the Carthagian harbours in Corsica and Sardinia. The military and strategic importance of the Islands is enhanced again in 209 B.C. during the second Punian war, when the faithful colony supports the Roman request for further aid.

It can be assumed that this military function of the Pontine Islands is maintained until the Triumvirate Age, in particular against the fleet of Sesto Pompeo in the third quarter of the I. century B.C.

Along with the birth of the principality a housing use starts. The construction of the big and luxurious maritime residences characterises the transformation of the Pontine Islands which became an exclusive Imperial property.

Important technical constructions such as aqueducts, cisterns and tunnels can be related to the particular interest in the Island first for military and then for housing reasons; further the direct involvement of military craftsman and architects, specialized in the construction of these works), was ipotized and could have favoured the integration of the Islands in the public Imperial domain.

Ventotene was then destined to host exilians of Imperial rank. Iulia was the first person to inaugurate these house arrests, in fact, we know from descriptor sources that in 2 B.C. the daughter of Augustus was relegated on the Island because she violated the *lex Iulia de pudicitia* issued by Augustus in 18 B.C. This episode, together with those of other personages which followed during the I century A.C. describe a particular scenario in which the political elite of the years between the Roman Republic and the Empire had the lawful possession of the Islands. From Strabone (V, 3,6) for instance we learn that Ponza and Pandataria were small Islands with lots of beautiful houses, which indicate the presence of aristocrats on the Islands. However, at least during the last years of the Roman Republic to the first years of the Empire Ventotene was exploited for the cultivation of grape, besides the difficulties due to the windy climate (VARRONE, *De re rustica* I,8,5).

Finally, the reputation of Ventotene is due to the “Manifesto di Ventotene”, written in 1941 by Spinelli and Rossi, which is a fundamental document signing the guidelines of what will be the paper of fundamental rights of the European Union.



Fig. 1: The Roman harbour of Ventotene