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The Calore River: settlements and roads in Roman times

Giuseppina Renda[1]
University of Campania "L. Vanvitelli"

Pierfrancesco Izzo[2]
Independent Researcher

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of the territorial investigation of the lower valley of the Calore River, a tributary of the Volturno, providing contact to and from the hinterland. In the Roman period, this area was administered by the city of *Telesia*, in the municipality of S. Salvatore Telesino (BN). A large number of archaeological sites have been documented along the banks of the Calore River, related to this ancient town. The archaeological evidence increases especially in the Late Republican Period when the colony was founded. In fact, traces of centuriated systems are recognisable from this period. Along the terraces overlooking the river, we have identified tombs and rural settlements dating from the Late Republic to the 5th century AD. Scatters of materials provide evidence of small and medium-sized farms and large villas have also been identified, of which structures in *opus incertum* still remain. This sector is crossed by the *Via Latina*, from *Allifae* to *Beneventum*, which ran parallel to the course of the Calore River.

In the territory of Solopaca, on the left bank of the river, are a number of examples of rustic villas, often accompanied by *torcularia* for the production of wine and oil.

The mapping of the archaeological sites and finds along the river valley enable a fresh evaluation of the development of settlement and occupation within this area over time.

Keywords: *Ager Telesinus*, villas, *limitatio*, *Via Latina*, Solopaca, Calore River, *Samnium.*

1. Introduction

The *Ager Telesinus* (district of Benevento-Campania), in the south-east of the *Samnium*, is located along several routes that were important in the ancient age, primarily the *Via Latina*, and close to other Samnite towns (*Allifae*, *Caiatia*, *Cubulteria*, *Trebula*), to the Latin colony of *Beneventum* and not far from the most important centre in the region, *Capua* (Fig. 1). This area was even more important for communication to and from the Campania plain due to the presence of the river valleys of the Volturno, which crosses the mountains, and the Calore.

1. Department of Humanities and Cultural Heritage. E-mail: giuseppina.renda@unicampania.it
2. E-mail: pierfrancesco.izzo@gmail.com

The research presented in this paper was initiated in 2005 and is related to the Archaeological Map of the Campania project, designed and coordinated by Stefania Quilici Gigli (Quilici, Quilici Gigli, 2004-2021). A systematic and extensive survey and analysis of different sources (ancient and modern literary sources, archive documentation, finds stored in museums, epigraphy, remote sensing, LiDAR and aerial images) (see Quilici, Quilici Gigli, 2004, 63-76; Quilici Gigli, 2017, 97-98; Belvedere, 2017) have increased the archaeological datasets by approximately 71% (Quilici Gigli, 2017, 135). The data collected in the Guardia Sanframondi and San Lorenzello municipalities were unknown prior to this research project and have contributed towards a fresh understanding of the history of this area from the prehistoric periods through to the early medieval period (Renda, 2020, 123-124).

This article focuses on the lower Calore valley, one of the preferential routes for communications between the coast and the Apennine Mountains. The river has created a wide alluvial plain on its right bank and is bordered by hills on its left bank. The land overlooking the river and its surroundings comprises intensively cultivated vineyards that contain deposits of stones, silt and sand transported by the Calore River and the numerous streams that run longitudinally through the landscape. For this reason, in the territory of Guardia Sanframondi and San Lorenzello we have worked with the geomorphologists Paolo Magliulo (Department of Science and Technology - Unisannio) and Natalia Leone (CNR) to discover the complex dynamics and geomorphological and anthropic changes which have contributed to the formation of the modern landscape (Renda, 2020, 124-127; Leone, Magliulo, 2020). Overlaying the archaeological data on the geomorphological map shows that, in every age, the settlement occupied the top surfaces of the ancient alluvial terraces and crest of the hills, avoiding alluvial fans, landslides and recent alluvial terraces, which are flood-prone even today.

2. The Roman Period and the villas on the right bank of the Calore River

2.1. The villas

Several settlements characterised the sector overlooking the Calore River between prehistory and the archaic period, contrary to the trend recorded for the Samnite period, when small rural settlements were concentrated inland around the hill forts of the area (Renda, 2010b,

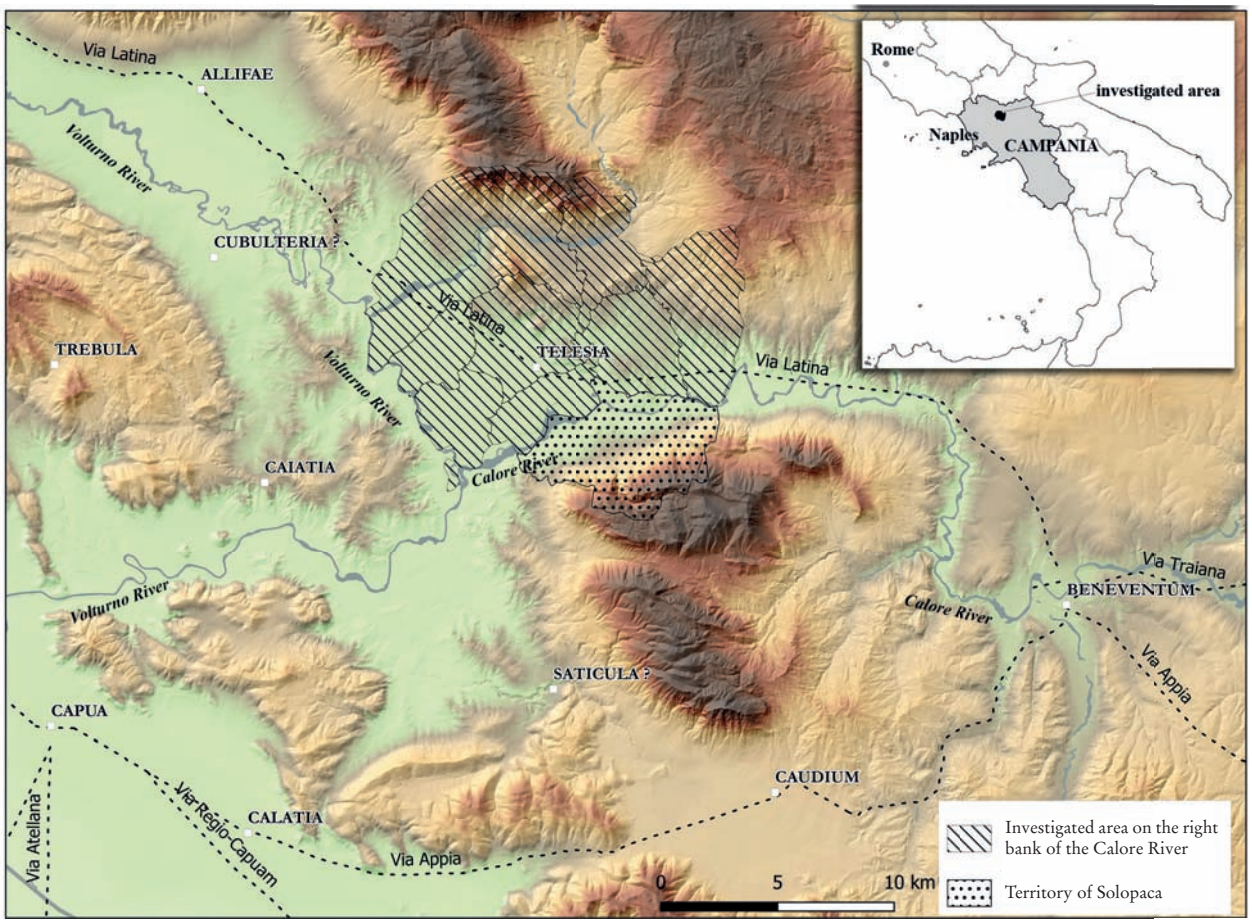

Figure 1. The area surveyed in the middle valley of the Volturno River (by G. Renda).

282-289; Renda, 2012, 200-201; Renda, 2020, 131-136).

Renewed archaeological evidence for activity in areas overlooking the river is detected from the second half of the 3rd century BC but this increase is recorded above all between the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st century BC. In this period, a lot of rural units appear in the countryside around the city of *Telesia* (Renda, 2010b, 289-300) (Fig. 2). This mirrors the magnificent fortified walls of *Telesia* in the same broad period (Quilici, 1966), in which inscriptions have been recorded preserved in the wall's towers (Gregori, Nonnis, 2013, no. 25-28; Buonocore, 2018, no. 6430, 6431, 2230, 2233, 2235). Architecturally, this wall system is characterised by circular arc walls alternately connected by rounded and polygonal towers.

On the right bank of the Calore River, settlement in the Late Republic is represented by small and medium-sized farms, as evidenced by scatters of materials, and villas, of which structures in *opus incertum* still remain.

Usually these buildings occupy elevated positions, with standing heights increased by the use of substructures and cryptoporticos, on which the upper structures were built. We can obtain information about the original appearance of the Late Republican villas in the *Ager Telesinus* from the remains of a large cryptoporticus incorporated within the modern structures of the Masseria delle Grotte (Castelvenere) (Fig. 3, A) (Renda, 2012, 158-171), at the top of an isolated hill and in the canonical location recommended by ancient agronomists (Cato, *De agri cultura*, I, 3; Varro, *Res Rusticae*, 1, 7, 1; Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 1, 2 and 1, 5). On the basis of the reconstruction, this villa was a single block building set on a cryptoporticus which included a reservoir with four branches. In this case the structure is smaller than monumental examples with the same arched

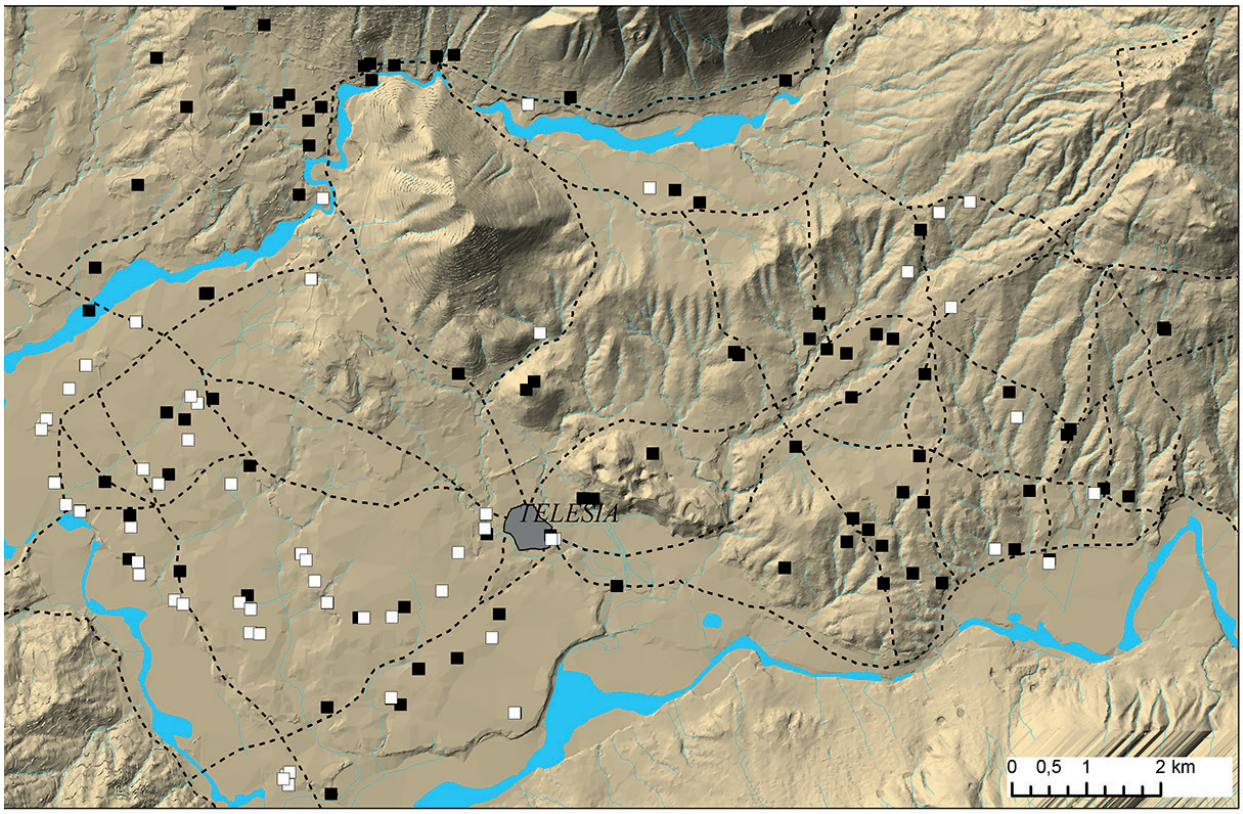

FIGURE 2. The archaeological rural settlements from the Late Republic to the Imperial Age (by G. Renda).

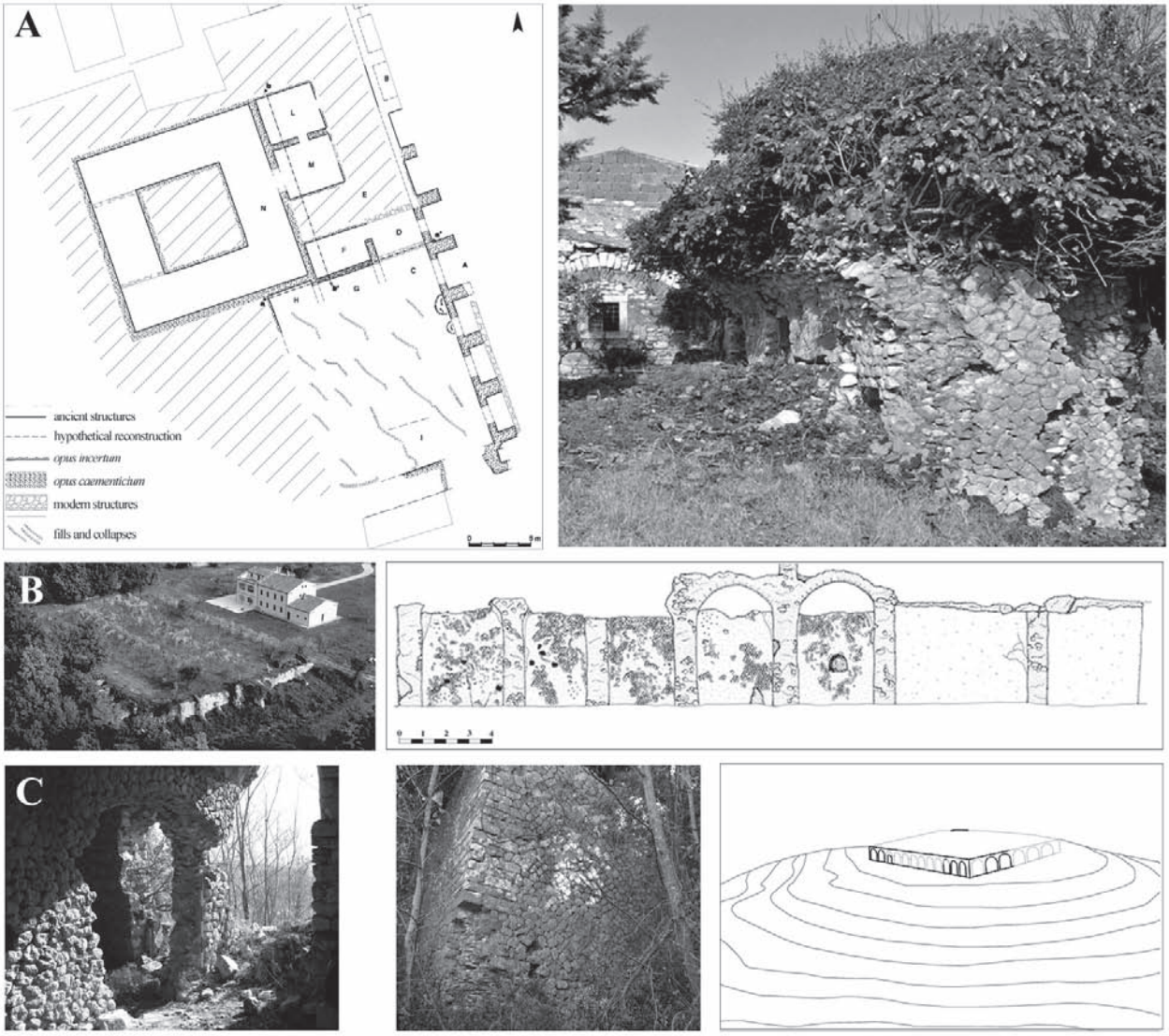

FIGURE 3. The villas and cryptoporticos in the *Ager Telesinus* and in the *Ager Allifanus*: A) the villa of Masseria delle Grotte (Castelvenere); B) the villa of S. Potito Sannitico in the *Ager Allifanus*; C) the remains on the hill of the Rocca of S. Salvatore Telesino (photos and diagrams by G. Renda).

prospect of the villas of the *Ager Allifanus* (Johannowsky, 1973, 150-151; Di Cosmo, 1990, 171-172, 184; Cera, Renda, 2006; Miele, 2006, 208-209) (Fig. 3, B) and of the remains incorporated in the medieval fortress of San Salvatore Telesino (Renda, 2010a, 243-258) (Fig. 3, C). The latter are perhaps what remains of the monumental terracing of a sanctuary, considering the size and topographical relationship with the underlying *Telesia* (Renda, 2010b, 295).

The dynamism of the area continued in the Imperial Age and Late Antiquity (Renda, 2010b, 298-300; Renda, 2012, 204-205; Renda, 2020, 138-139). Some small settlements disappeared but new ones emerged (Fig. 2), both farms and villas, some devoted to the production of wine or oil. Such production is evidenced by parts of *torcularia*, most of them incorporated in modern structures, as in the case of a villa in the territory of Guardia Sanframondi, while others have been found among the remains of rural buildings, in the villa on the western slopes of Monte Pugliano (S. Salvatore Telesino) (Renda, 2010a, 210-219; Renda, 2020, 52-63).

2.2. The centuriated systems of the *Ager Telesinus*

In addition to the archaeological evidence, traces of centuriated systems in the *Ager Telesinus* are also recognisable. The Besançon Group recognised two orthogonal grid systems (20 × 20 *actus*) based on the different orientation of the traces. The first is called *Telesia I* and the second *Telesia II*; this second centuriated system has been detected along the entire Volturno middle valley (Chouquer et alii, 1987, 152-192).

This analysis excludes the first *limitatio* (*Telesia* I) due to the scarcity of surviving evidence for this section. In addition, our comparison with the ancient cartography and analysis of the archive documentation have shown that many of the paths reported in this reconstruction were in fact developed in the modern era (Renda, 2010b, 306-308).

For the second grid, dated in the Triumvirate period, French scholars have found a few traces in the *Ager Telesinus* relating only to the *cardines*, oriented N 32° 15' E. After a review of satellite and aerial photos, further traces than those proposed by French scholars have been identified as part of this new research.

Furthermore, traces with the same orientation have been recognised in the territories of *Allifae* (Castagnoli, 1956, 376; Tagliamonte; Miele, 2002; Miele, 2006, 189-190; Soricelli, 2019, 379-380) and *Venafrum* (Cera, 2011, 158-172), enabling the reconstruction of a centuriated system with a format of 20×20 *actus* along the Volturno river (Fig. 4), as already proposed by the Besançon Group.

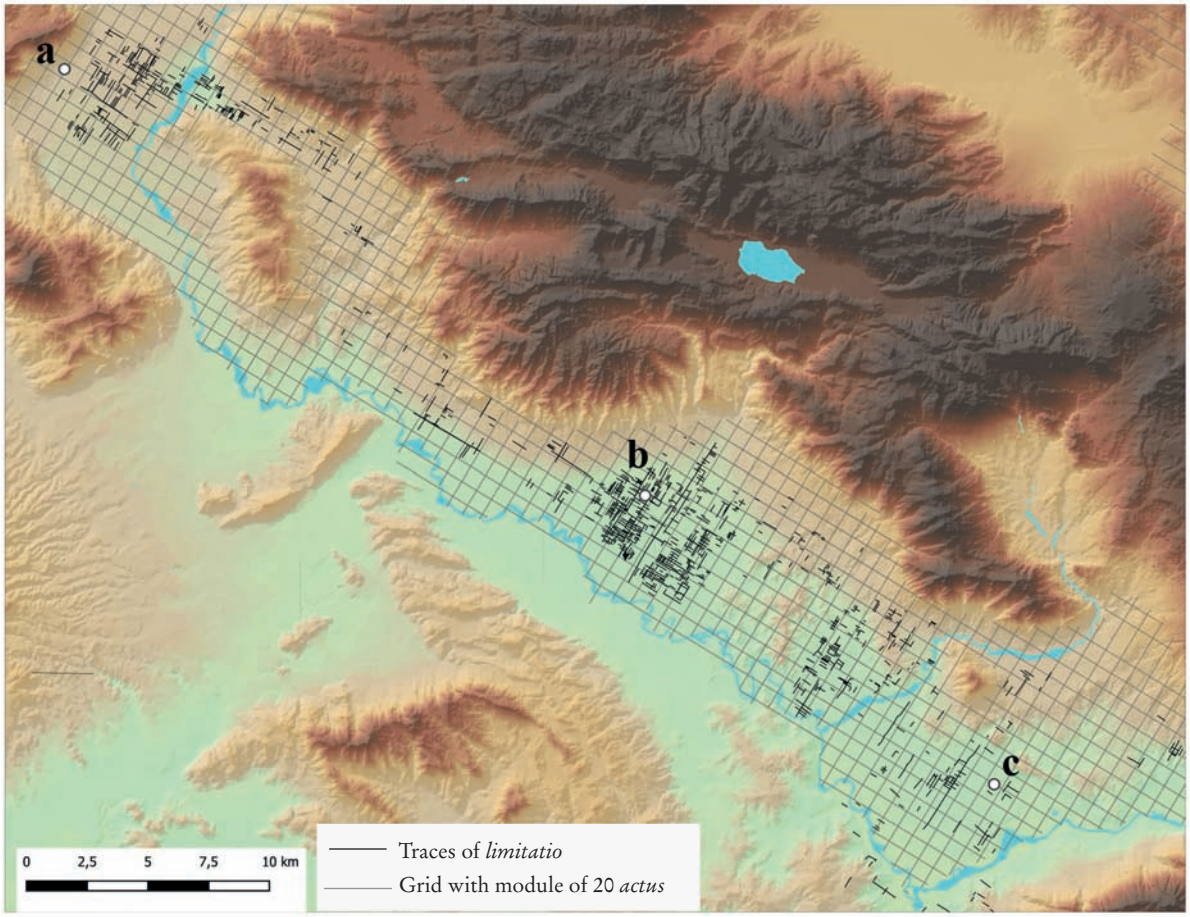

FIGURE 4. The centuriated system (module of 20 *actus*) in the territories of *Venafrum* (a), *Allifae* (b) and *Telesia* (c) (by G. Renda).

However, in the *Ager Telesinus*, satellite and aerial images have revealed traces of another centuriated system based on a format of 15 *actus* (Renda, 2010b, 306-308; Renda, 2012, 207-208; Renda, 2020, 143) (Fig. 5). These, with *cardines* oriented N 37° W, are evident in most of the plain of Marafi (Faicchio), along Titerno Creek. In this area the orientation of the roads, of the boundaries of fields and of some ditches still follow the same direction. The antiquity of this grid has been indicated by archaeological evidence from the Roman period along the axes recognised, as well as by the same orientation of the structures of a Roman villa in the eastern sector of the Marafi plain and of ancient water pipes.

Traces with a similar orientation have also been found in the territories of Puglianello, Amorosi, San Salvatore Telesino, Telese Terme, Castelvenere and San Lorenzello (Fig. 5). These are fragmentary and discontinuous but, in some cases, relate to important road systems, perhaps a continuation of ancient Roman roads.

The dating of these systems is much discussed. The *Liber Coloniarum* states "*Telesia, muro ducta colonia, a triumviris deducta*" (Chouquer et alii, 1987, 77) but we would argue that it's difficult to make a chronological proposal without datable evidence from stratigraphic excavations (Renda, 2010b, 306).

2.3. The *Via Latina*

Some rural settlements overlook an important road, the *Via Latina*, parallel to the right bank of the Calore River, joining *Allifae* with *Beneventum*

FIGURE 5. The centuriated system (module of 15 *actus*) in the *Ager Telesinus* (by G. Renda).

(Fig. 1 and 6). This route, at least for the period of Late Antiquity, is outlined in the *Itinerarium Antonini*, in the segments *A Terracina Benevento* (*It. Anton*., 121, 8-12; 122, 1-3) and *Praenestina. Ab Vrbe Benevento* (*It. Anton*., 304, 3).

The arrangement of archaeological evidence has enabled the reconstruction of the route, which is mostly the same as the modern road (Renda, 2010b, 300-303; Renda, 2012, 204; Renda, 2016; Renda, 2020, 139-140). In the investigated area, the route, skirting the amphitheatre, entered *Telesia* from the north-west gate and exited from the south-east gate. After crossing the necropolis to the south of the town, it went through the foothills overlooking the Calore River. The fragmentary altar recovered in the locality of Starze (municipality of Guardia Sanframondi) (Fig. 6, A) must have belonged to one of the many graves along the road. Its appearance was not dissimilar from other great roads of the Roman world, with buildings, funerary monuments and tombs along the way that often mark the boundaries, as attested by the *Lex de sepulchris*, of the Tiberian age (Lachmann, 1848, 271.1). Modern toponymy testifies the passage of the ancient road via the toponyms "Taverna" and "Santa Maria la Strada", near the Calore River, which must have been one of the cornerstones of the area. This is where the road to *Beneventum* met the Calore River and one of the routes coming from the mountains (Fig. 6, C). Behind the church and convent of Santa Maria la Strada, next to the ruins of a medieval bridge, there are structures and fictile materials belonging to a villa, perhaps with a quay on the Calore River given its proximity to the watercourse (Autieri, 2017, 37-38). The *lapis pedicinus* re-used in the facade of the church, part of a Roman press, might attest to one of the productive activities of the settlement. The discovery of a funerary altar (Fig. 6, C), in a neighbouring vineyard, dated the 2nd century AD, and the presence of other tombs suggest there was a small necropolis, perhaps connected to the villa. The inscription on the altar mentions a *Q. Tettaeus* and its proximity to the villa suggests it was owned by this *gens*, also referred to in another inscription recovered still further west (Renda, 2019, 231-236) (Fig. 6, B).

In the area around *Telesia*, a minor pathway must have separated from the *Via Latina*, crossing the Calore River and reaching its left bank, to serve the rural buildings in the territory of Solopaca. It's possible that the crossing point was in the sector marked by the 19th-century river port, as testified in the cartography of this time and by the modern bridges, in a sector geologically more stable than the area immediately to the west, where some water-rich valleys converged.

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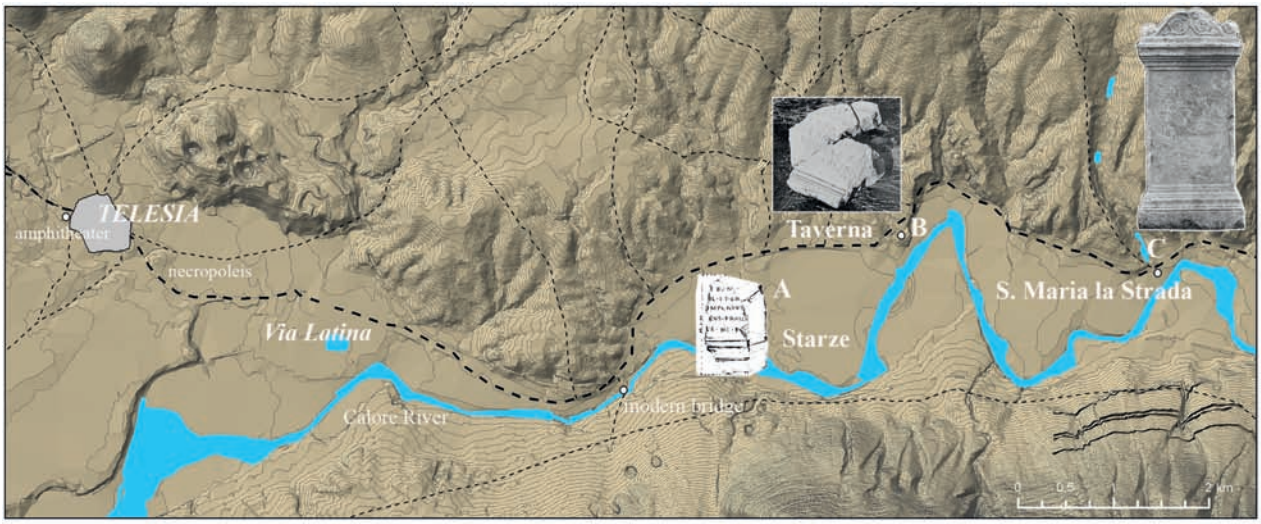

FIGURE 6. The lower valley of the Calore River: road directions (dotted line), epigraphic (A-C) and archaeological evidence (by G. Renda).

3. The left bank of the Calore River and the area of Solopaca

3.1. The territory and its geomorphology

The municipality of Solopaca extends to the slopes of Mount Taburno, on the left bank of the Calore River (Fig. 1). Unlike the terraces on the hydrographic right bank of the Calore (Leone, Magliulo, 2020), the area of Solopaca is composed of a wide aggradation belt in the foothills, consisting mainly of coalescing bodies of alluvial fans and slope deposits (Leone, 2015-2016, 106). Four generations of conoids have been identified, formed over the Laiano system between the Middle and Upper Pleistocene, apart from the fourth most recent generation dating back to the Holocene (Amato et alii, 2018, 2470-2471). Complex dynamics and geomorphological and anthropic changes have contributed to the formation of the modern landscape in the area of Solopaca. Preliminary research suggests that the archaeological data and Roman archaeological remains occupy, on the geomorphological map, the top surfaces of ancient, cemented crests of conoids (I and II generation) and ancient alluvial terraces (Campanian Ignimbrite), avoiding alluvial fans, landslides and recent alluvial terraces which are flood-prone even today. In any case, some cores carried out on IV generation fans have highlighted the presence of archaeological elements of uncertain chronology, although this generation can even be considered as still active since some of the recent bodies reactivated during the floods affecting the Calore valley in October 2015 (Leone, 2015-2016, 116).

3.2. Ancient roads and archaeological remains in the territory of Solopaca

Solopaca was an important hub between the areas of *Telesia* and *Caudium-Beneventum*, especially as a crossing point of the river (Renda, 2010b, 303). This is also evident in the toponyms indicated by 19th-century maps held by the Military Geographical Institute as well as the historical bridges across the Calore River. From this passage, parallel to the left bank of the Calore, a secondary path probably branched off towards the east and reached *Beneventum*, crossing the Jenga valley, as well as intercepting the mountain paths leading to Taburno-Camposauro (Renda, 2010b, 303). Continuing towards the west, it headed towards the settlements in *Santianni-Staglio*, until re-joining the roads from *Telesia* to *Capua* and the modern Sant'Agata dei Goti (Caiazza, 2010, 92).

Several elements testify to the importance of this route. In the locality of *Bolla*, 1.3 km from the modern Maria Cristina bridge, there is a monumental tomb (Fig. 7), heavily damaged and stripped of its vestments but one can still distinguish the quadrangular base and a circular upper plane that tends to taper towards the top. The structure is preserved for approx. 4.5 m of its height, of which 1.50 m approx. is taken up by the rectangular base, the sides of which are about 3 m long; the current diameter of the cusp is about 2.5 m to the base. Access to the inner chamber is on the south side through an arched entrance. The room still has its vaulted roof intact, while on the north side there's a small niche. Of the structure only the *opus caementicium* nucleus remains, composed of several fragments of tile, bricks and abundant flakes of limestone and splinters of yellow tuff. The *opus latericium* that covered the inner wall of the burial chamber has been preserved and is still distinguishable for about 50 cm. Over the quadrangular base is a truncated conical plateau, 30 cm thick, connecting with a cusp, still standing for 2.7 m. In the locality of *Bosco S. Stefano*, near the monumental tomb, a funerary epigraph has been found of *C. Acellius*, *mercator suarius*, suggesting it might be this person's tomb (Caiazza, 2010, 20). The funerary monument is reminiscent of mausoleums with a parallelepiped podium (the sepulchral base), on which a tapered cylindrical cusp is set, datable between the 1st century BC and 1st century AD. This is a well-known typology, widespread in Campania, used as a status symbol for the emerging classes (Carfora, 2013, 114). The funerary monument, therefore, was located along a secondary path that connected the left bank of the Calore River with *Beneventum*. Not far from the mausoleum, about 600 m to the south-east, a small cistern has been found, probably connected to a villa. It's possible the funerary monument was connected

to the villa in *Bolla*, as confirmed by various other cases of a villa-funerary monument connection, located along roads in a clearly visible position (Carfora, 2013, 116).

As regards agricultural exploitation during the late Republican period, the most evident archaeological traces were found following surface surveys (Mezzazappa, 2007-2008). Several rustic villas have been active in the localities of *Fetente*, *Cese-Bolla* and *Campaminico* since the late Republican era, with long settlement continuity (Fig. 7), some testified by cisterns. Until a few decades ago, another cistern in *opus caementicium*, now destroyed (Mezzazappa, 2007-2008, 131), was present in the *Cersole-Staglio* zone. Remains attributable to a villa are present in *Casa delle Fate* (Fig. 7), close to the mountain slopes, where structures with facing in *opus incertum* have been preserved. This villa, from surveys in the late 1980s, has provided fragments of *dolia*, three *lapides pedicini* and various ceramic fragments dating from the 2nd century BC up to the 5th century AD, probably when it was abandoned (D'Onofrio *et alii*, 1994, 65-66).

Among the water infrastructures in the area is a large, vaulted cistern covered by a vineyard and shrubs, in *opus caementicium* with a waterproof plaster coating, which occupies the southern limit of a terrace in the western part of the Solopaca area (near the route leading to *Capua*), in *Santianni-Staglio* (Fig. 7). The cistern was supplied by the waters that flowed from the slopes behind (suggested by the presence of two holes along the south wall), especially because the area is rich in natural springs, such as the *Fontana dei Monaci* and *Fontana Santianni*, not so far from the cistern. It's mostly filled with soil, well preserved if we exclude the collapse of the western portion (approx. 5 m): with two naves, although only the southern one remains visible, while the northern nave is covered by

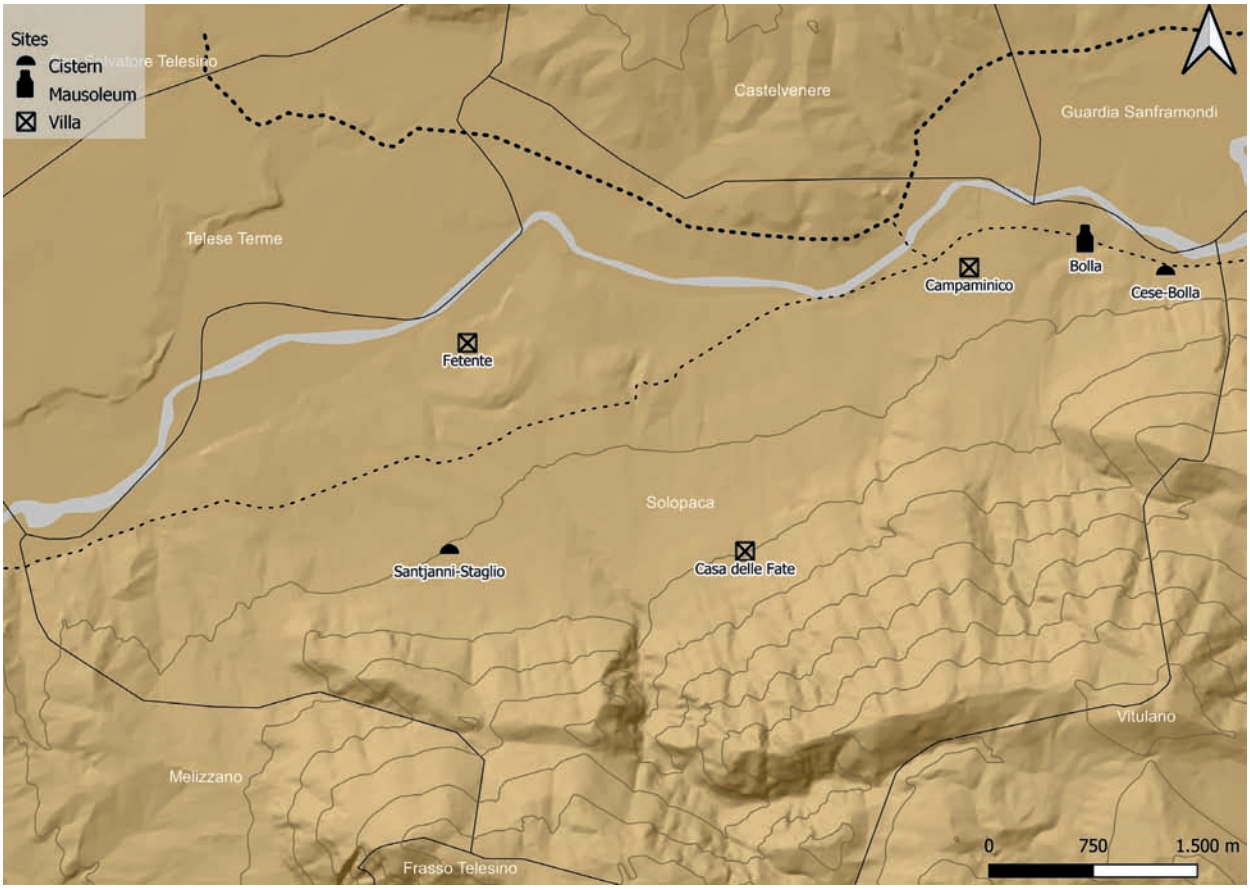

FIGURE 7. Archaeological evidence analysed in the municipality of Solopaca.

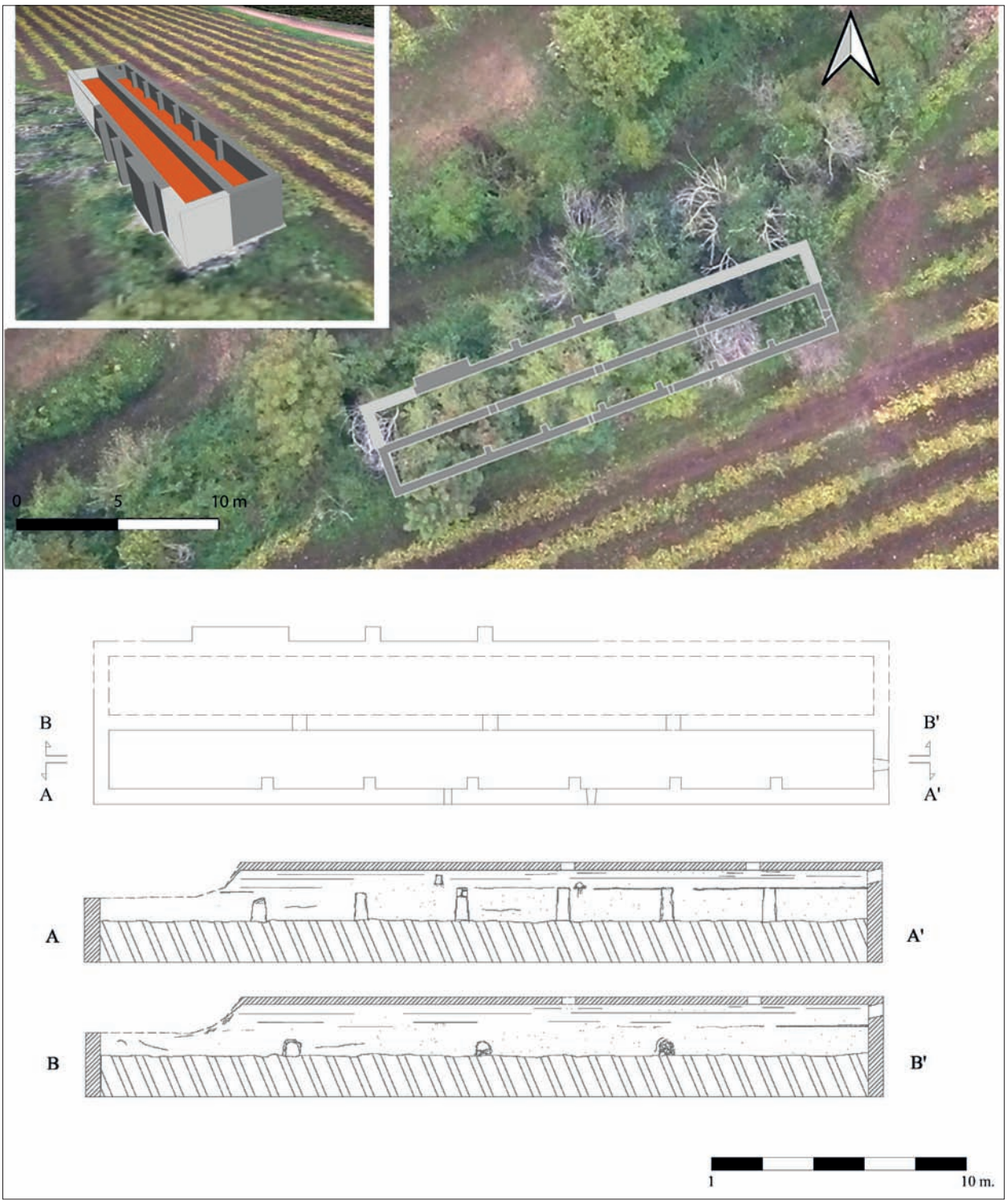

FIGURE 8. The cistern in *Santianni-Staglio*. Plan, relief, and 3D model with reconstructive hypothesis (in light grey) of the remains of the Roman cistern in the *Santianni-Staglio* (Solopaca) (photos and diagrams P. Izzo).

soil and shrubs with a part of the collapsed vault still perceptible to the east. Along its north external side, three preserved buttresses can be identified, used to keep the structure stable. The southern nave is 2.3 m wide and 30 m long, with an east-west orientation. Along the northern side (thickness 60 cm), are three holes (diameter 30 cm) arranged at a regular distance (7 m) and connected to the other nave. Along the southern side are two small openings for water to flow out and six internal semi-pillars (approx. 50×40 cm) arranged at a regular distance of approx. 3.5 m. A 3D model of the cistern was created using the QGis tool "QGis 2threejs", extruding the polygonal shapefiles derived from a direct survey in the field (Fig. 8). This 3D model can help us understand the dimensions of the Roman cistern, even though it's almost completely covered by soil and dense vegetation. Furthermore, field surveys near this structure have identified numerous pottery and tile sherds, unfortunately mostly not diagnostic due to the continuous working of the land for agricultural purposes. The area of pottery sherds extends over about 1.7 h, in a north-south direction, on three terraces in succession, bordered by walls of uncertain age for the first two, and by the substructures of the cistern in the case of the third, most southern terrace. The few diagnostic pottery sherds identified suggest a chronological occupation of the area until the 2nd-3rd century AD.

Cisterns with one or more naves with semi-pillars and buttresses are present from the 1st century BC (De Franceschini, 2005, 308-309). An example is the large cistern of *Madonna degli Angeli* in Bellona (district of Caserta) (Renda, Salerno, 2014, 82-83) (Fig. 9).

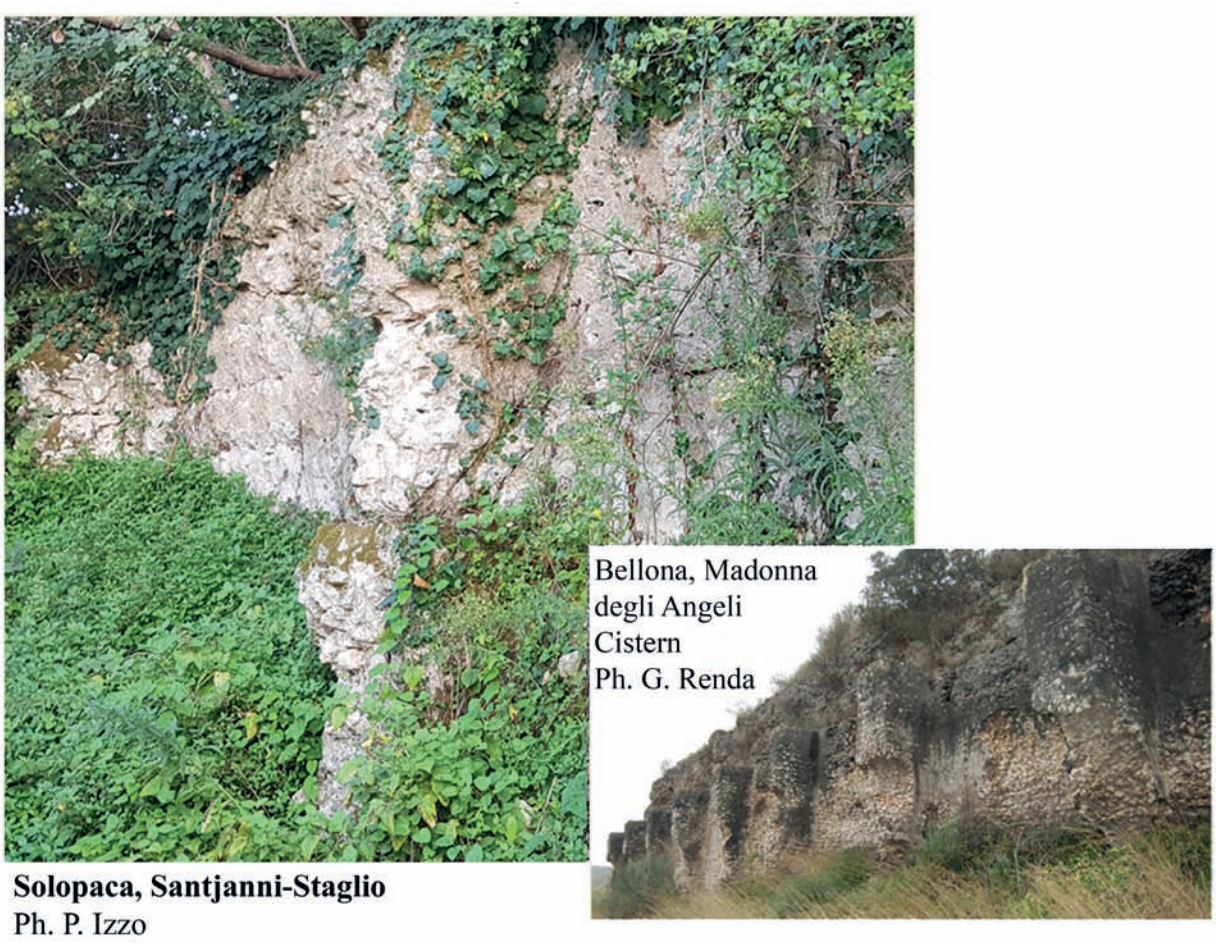

FIGURE 9. Solopaca and Bellona: comparison of the Roman cisterns (by P. Izzo).

3.3. Closing remarks on the preliminary survey in the territory of Solopaca

Although research in the Solopaca territory is still in its early stages, the numerous archaeological finds indicate the importance of the left bank of the Calore River, both for reaching major locations such as *Capua*, *Saticula* and *Beneventum* and also for agricultural production, probably to serve the *Telesia* area (visible from the cistern in *Santianni*, as shown by the analysis carried out with QGis, about 4 km away as the crow flies). GIS tools can help us to analyse more thoroughly the archaeological presence in the territory. The terraces around the structure have provided a range of pottery sherds although these have unfortunately been fragmented by continuous agricultural work. The aforementioned *lapides pedicini* from the *Campaminico*, *Casa delle Fate* and *Santianni-Staglio* districts belonging to ancient presses (D'Onofrio *et alii*, 1994) attest to the agricultural importance of the territory of Solopaca and its production of wine, an activity that continues to this day.

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