

Aesthetic Qualities and Fragments of History in the Tiburtine Landscape (Italy). Places of the ‘Sacred’ and Ancient Itineraries

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Abstract

The study concerned the Tiburtine territory of eastern Lazio, and in particular the area of the pass between the valleys crossed by the rivers Empiglione and Giovenzano, the two left tributaries of the Aniene. The geomorphological aspect of a territory, a natural quality, can activate a visual attraction capable of arousing the genesis of ‘added values’ (symbolic, religious ...) in some environmental contexts, charging them with further qualities that, absorbed into the culture, contribute to the aesthetic experience that takes place in them. Starting from these considerations, those peculiarities that have contributed in history to the characterization of the landscape context around the area under study were identified. Through ancient sources, material traces, the perception of places, the relationships between natural elements and anthropic traces, two ancient routes of particular importance have been identified, one on the ridge and the other halfway up the eastern slope of the Prenestini Mountains overlooking the Giovenzano valley, which have contributed to the definition of the peculiarities of the contemporary landscape, for conservation but also as support for a possible cultural enhancement, inherent in the project.

Keywords: landscape; territory; ancient itineraries; conservation

1. Introduction

The area under study is located in eastern Lazio, in the Tivoli area, at the meeting point between the valleys of the Empiglione and Giovenzano rivers, the two tributaries of the Aniene before Tivoli. This area (Figs. 1 & 2) has been the crossroads of transhumance routes since prehistoric times along the east-west axes (attributable to the route of the current Via Empolitana) and north-south, from the upper Aniene valley to today's Palestrina (Sciarretta, 2013); this latter route partly coincides with the *Praeneste-Treblis-Carsulis* route indicated in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, the ancient map in which

the main public communication routes of the Roman Empire are represented (Mari, 1993; Mari, 2021; Scotoni, 2008).

Even after the Roman conquest of the territory east of Tivoli, the pass between the aforementioned valleys, the so-called Passo della Fortuna, maintained a strategic role for road control, at least until the 15th-16th century (Montanari, 2025).

In fact, there are numerous traces of structures dating back to the time span between the pre-Roman era and the late medieval period still present in the territory.

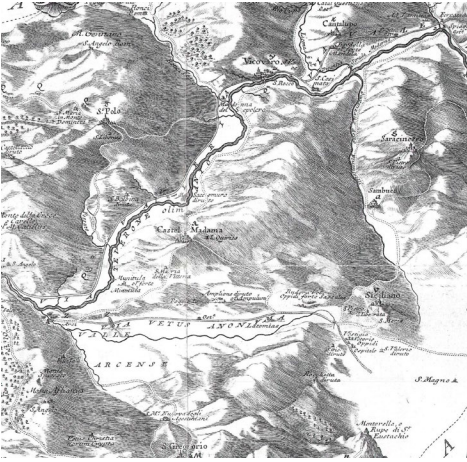


Fig. 1 – *Diocesi Agri Tiburtini Topographia*, detail (Diego de Revillas, 1739).

The importance of this geographical position is also demonstrated by the discovery in 1948, near the same pass, of the remains of the ancient *Trebula Suffenas*, the location remembered by the Latin poet Marcus Valerius Martialis (*Epigrammaton*, V, 71), a Roman municipality at least since the 1st century BC, which extends along the eastern slope of Monte Spina Santa, a massif of the Prenestini mountain chain (Sciarretta, 1974; Id. 2013). Recent studies and morphological analyses of the territory around the Passo della Fortuna suggest that the archaic *oppidum* (active from the 5th-4th century BC), abandoned after the Roman conquest, must have arisen on the height of the hill facing the slope on which the Trebulan archaeological site develops, in the place where the current town of Ciciliano is located (Mari, 2023; Id., 2015), divided into two contiguous plateaus at about 600 meters above sea level. From this position, in fact, there is a wide view of both the Empiglione and Giovenzano valleys; furthermore, the polygonal substructures of the steep access road that starts from the pass and climbs up to the top of the hill are evident, in addition to the wall traces of the terraces attributable to fortified enclosures along the slope (Mari, 2024).

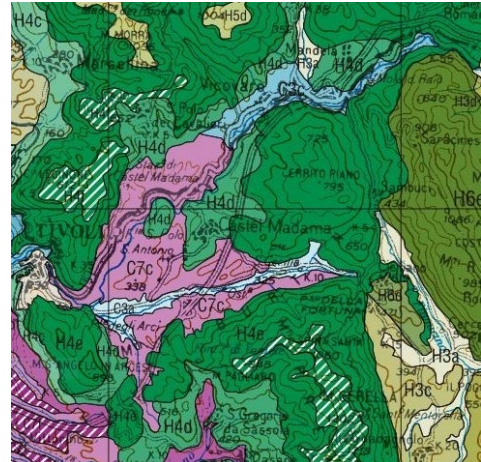


Fig. 2 – *Pedology of the Empiglione and Giovenzano valleys*, detail (Carta dei suoli del Lazio, 2019).

2. Characteristics of the territory and landscape

The mountain system that overlooks the Giovenzano valley, in front of the twin hill on which the town of Ciciliano stands and which delimits its south-western visual horizon, is the eastern side of the Prenestini Mountains. This mountain range, with a north-south orientation between the Aniene and Sacco basins, constitutes part of the Lazio pre-Appennines. From a geomorphological point of view, its walls are formed by alternating calcareous-marly and limestone (*Carta dei suoli del Lazio*, 2019), with a slope from very steep to steep, the lower part of the slopes is mainly made up of sandstone-clayey layers partially covered by groundwater debris, while the valley bottoms are made up of fluvial-alluvial sediments (Fig. 2). The low degree of soil permeability, due to the marls, guarantees a dense surface hydrography. The effect of this abundance of water is evident from the lush vegetation.

The peaks reach high altitudes, although lower than the neighboring mountain ranges of eastern Lazio: Mount Spina Santa, the northern head of the Prenestini, reaches 1060 meters above sea level, Guadagnolo, at the opposite end of the

ridge, is at 1218 meters above sea level. The petrographic composition of the soils on the eastern slope of the Prenestini Mountains - consisting of alternating calcareous layers and marly layers - in which various springs emerge, has determined on the one hand the torrential character of the watercourses (precisely due to the presence of marls) and on the other the formation of rocky calcareous emergencies. Today these are largely hidden by the rich spontaneous vegetation, but are documented in photographic images from the end of the last century.

The geomorphological aspect of a territory can activate a visual attraction, at least initially linked only to the natural qualities, for those elements that characterize the landscape; interest that in past eras has favored the genesis of added values, such as symbolic, spiritual, religious, historical of some environmental contexts, charging them with further qualities that, absorbed into the culture of those same places, contribute to the aesthetic experience that takes place in them. Among these undoubtedly falls the rocky spur of Mentorella, which emerges from the profile of Mount Guadagnolo, southern offshoot of the Prenestini mountains, on the eastern side to define its profile. On the limestone cliff overlooking the Giovenzano valley, at over a thousand meters above sea level, stands the Sanctuary of the Madonna Madre delle Grazie, one of the oldest Marian sanctuaries in Europe. Its foundation dates back to the legend of Sant'Eustachio, a Roman tribune (1st-2nd century AD). The place is also linked to the figure of San Benedetto da Norcia, who retired here to live as a hermit before going to Subiaco (Cascioli, 1901).

From the Passo della Fortuna, and from the archaeological site of *Trebula Suffenas*, a wide view opens up over the Giovenzano valley, bordered to the east by the Prenestine ridge that ends with the peak of Mentorella (Fig. 4). Along

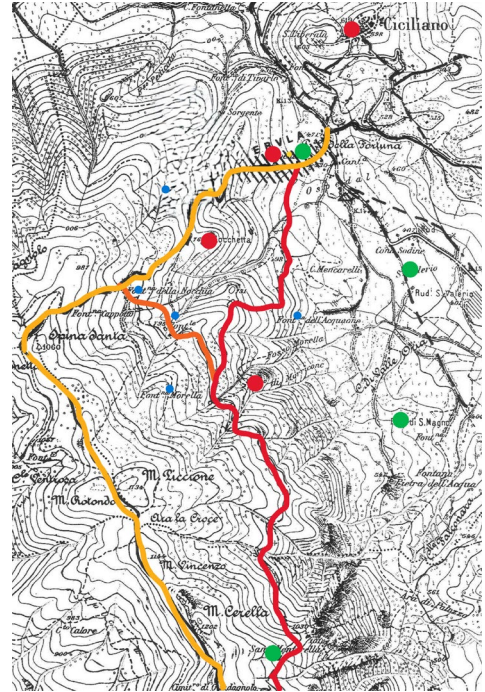


Fig. 3 – The itineraries from Passo della Fortuna to Mentorella (Montanari, 2025, on cartography by Sciarretta, 2013).

this line, two isolated spurs (today largely covered by thick woodland) protrude just above the half-coast of the slope at a ‘visually’ intermediate distance along the Passo della Fortuna-Mentorella visual axis. On these rocky outcrops, starting from the 10th century and at later times, two defensive structures were built that can be placed in the broader program of control and defense of the Giovenzano valley, carried out in the context of the territorial disputes between the Subiaco Abbey and the Diocese of Tivoli (Montanari, 2025). These military structures are the Rocca d'Elci (Travaini, 1979; Annoscia, 2012) built on a limestone outcrop at an altitude of 761 metres above sea level, in close relation with the underlying rural settlement of *Civitas Noe*, mentioned in the *Regesto della Chiesa di Tivoli* in the year 978 (Bruzza 1880), which probably occupied the ancient structures of *Trebula*

Suffenas (Minorenti, 2014), and the *Castrum Morellae* located at approximately 700 metres above sea level on a hill characterised by three very rugged rocky buttresses, ‘i tre murruni’ in the local dialect (Sciarretta, 1997). From the remains of the fortified structures organized on several terraces, today in ruins, it was possible to ascertain how in both cases there was technical care in following the morphology and the differences in altitude of the land in the construction of the structures themselves. The construction wisdom in the grafting between the outcropping rocks and the stone walls, which characterizes the wall facings, making them appear as the natural extension of the rocky spurs, belongs to a long-standing tradition.

In the area under study, in fact, examples can be found starting from the pre-Roman era – such as the enclosures of the terraces along the slopes of the Ciciliano hill, mentioned above, and the road

substructure works on the eastern side of Roccasecca – as well as the structures of the fortification on outcropping rocky banks of Ciciliano itself, but also around the area of the Passo della Fortuna. In this tradition, the ‘factual’ memory handed down over the centuries is the fruit of experience that becomes ‘knowledge’ and defines a taste, a doing (not only mechanical) also aimed at the search for aesthetic qualities.

The rocky outcrops on the eastern side of the Prenestini, along the visual finish line from Passo to Mentorella, therefore constitute a characterizing element of the territory from a naturalistic, geomorphological, but also historical and cultural point of view.

The architectural emergencies that connect with them amplify their distinctive character and document the process of transformation of the landscape, favoring a reading in a diachronic sense.



Fig. 4 – View of the Giovenzano valley from one of the terraces of the archaeological site of Trebula Suffenas. On the right, the eastern slope of the Prenestini Mountains with Mentorella (Montanari, 2024).



Fig. 5 – First section of the ‘pilgrims’ path’ after the Passo della Fortuna. On the right the eastern slope of the Prenestini mountains and the peak of Mentorella, on the left the Giovenzano valley (Private collection, mid-20th century).

The distinctive character of the places also appears in the *Diocesis Agri Tiburtini Topographia*, the map of the Aniene valley drawn up by Diego de Revillas in 1739 (Fig. 1). This is the first scientific territorial representation recorded with the triangulation system. In this ‘graphic mediation’ of perceived reality, the topographer, in addition to the geographical position of the natural elements and the anthropic transformations of the territory, also reports those qualities inherent in the places themselves, which contribute to characterizing the landscape, such as the Passo della Fortuna-Mentorella direction.

3. The itineraries from Passo della Fortuna to Mentorella

The Fortuna pass, located at about 480 meters above sea level, is delimited by the western side of the Ciciliano hill and the eastern side of Mount Spina Santa, a northern offshoot of the Prenestini. At this point the Via Empolitana,

coming from the Empiglione valley, at the end of a steep climb enters the southern stretch of the Giovenzano valley, and then continues downhill towards the wide flat area between the Prenestini and the Ruffi mountains.

The toponym Passo della Fortuna, with which the site is still identified, could derive from the presence in ancient times of a temple dedicated to the goddess Fortuna, as several scholars hypothesize (Ceccarelli & Marroni, 2011), or from the fact that the road that exited the pass, in a southerly direction, led to the sanctuary of *Fortuna Primigenia* of *Praeneste* (Sciarretta, 2013).

From a geomorphological point of view, the pass, in addition to being a place of transit, is also characterized as a privileged rest area along the route. At the highest point, on the eastern side of the road, there is a structure with clear signs of transformation, now in ruins. In the past it must have served as a support for travellers and

pilgrims. The site is in fact also called *Ostaria* or *Hostaria* and it is likely that in ancient times the area was occupied by a post station, later adapted to an inn during the Middle Ages (Minorenti, 2014).

In front of the *Ostaria*, on the opposite side of the road, there is a large flat area in which there is a fountain with a drinking trough. In this area, in recent times, a restaurant structure has been built (to testify to the permanence of the hospitality character of the place). Along the plateau, also on the left side, there are the church of Santa Maria Maddalena and the *Hospitale*.

These structures, commonly believed to be from the 15th century (Persili, 1995; Minorenti, 2014), show evident transformations that can be dated to later periods, up to the most recent interventions of the second half of the 20th century. However, a careful observation suggests that their construction is much older, at least as far as the original layout is concerned. It can be assumed that the church and the hospital - not built at the same time - had, from the very beginning (certainly the hospital), the function of 'support structures' and assistance for pilgrims heading towards the medieval hermitage of Mentorella. The main routes that connected the Passo della Fortuna to Mentorella, still partially recognisable, were already two in ancient times: the road called Cerretana, which adapts to the natural roughness and runs halfway up the eastern slope of Palestrina; the road called San Giovanni, which at the height of the archaeological site of *Trebula Suffenas*, went up Mount Spina Santa to reach the ridge of the Prenestini mountains, a very ancient route.

4. Conclusions. Landscape perception: aesthetic identity of places

The ancient road "so-called Cerretana" (Fig. 3, red itinerary), essentially coincides with the 'hiking' route of the 'pilgrims' path'. The latter, however, to meet the modern needs of tourism sensitive to the naturalistic-cultural peculiarities

of the territory, includes a series of branches along the route that allow you to admire particularly characteristic sites, such as springs, streams, but also rich in history such as the ruins of the fortified systems mentioned above. Privileged panoramic points are also indicated from which to contemplate the underlying Giovenzano valley.

The Via Cerretana begins on the left, just before the archaeological site of *Trebula Suffenas* the route runs downhill and runs along the bottom of the valley on the Prenestino side (Fig. 5) where, across an ancient bridge (Minorenti, 2014), it passes the 'Fosso della Mola della Rocchetta', the stream fed by high altitude springs (the tourist route at this point indicates an off-piste to admire a very suggestive karst waterfall and, at a much higher altitude, the remains of the Rocca d'Elci). The ancient itinerary continues uphill following the roughness of the terrain until it reaches the half-coast near a spring, the Fonte della Morella, a sacred place for popular tradition. At this point there is also the confluence of a path that comes from the Spina Santa side (Fig. 3, orange itinerary), which branches off from the itinerary called San Giovanni, which will be discussed later, at an altitude of over 800 meters above sea level, in correspondence with another important source (which was decisive for the development of the settlements downstream). It is possible to hypothesize that the column "*que stat su fonte ilicis iuxta viam deinde in montem qui vocatur vulturella*", or the boundary stone, as it could be understood (or even the milestone, but further investigation would be needed), near the '*fonte ilicis*' along the road to Mentorella, which is referred to in the Diploma of Otto I (*Regesto Sublacense*, document of 11 January 967), was to be found, halfway up the hill, near the confluence of the two paths. The two itineraries meet at the height of Fonte Morella which in ancient times was called Fonte d'Elci (Minorenti, 2014), a name which also extended to the surrounding area (Montanari, 2025).

Here the historical-naturalistic itinerary suggests an alternative path to admire some karst waterfalls and the ruins of the *Castrum Morellae*. The ancient route continues halfway up the hill and, climbing in altitude, before reaching the Sanctuary of Mentorella, it crosses wooded areas, grazing areas and finally dirt plains used in the past for threshing wheat, where, legend has it, the conversion of Sant'Eustachio apparently took place (Minorenti, 2014).

The itinerary called San Giovanni (Fig. 4, yellow itinerary) takes its name from the abbey church of the same name that during the Middle Ages occupied some structures of the ancient Trebula, in an area not far from the Fosso della Mola, downstream from Rocca d'Elci and near the settlement of Civitas Noe. The church is mentioned in the Privilege of John XVIII with which the properties of the Abbey of Subiaco are confirmed (*Regesto Sublacense*, document X, 21 July 1005). Its construction could therefore be placed within the context of the agrarian reorganization and control of the territory started by the Subiaco Monastery between the 10th and 13th centuries (Montanari, 2025).

The ancient route approaches with steep hairpin bends the isolated promontory on which the ruins of the Rocca d'Elci (the *Rocchetta*) stand. In the area of the fortified structure a large stone block from Trebula was found (Sciarretta, 1997). This suggests that the route was intended to ensure the transport of materials by pack animals. Continuing uphill, after the spring from which the route that runs halfway up the hill branches off, the path must have continued to the summit of Spina Santa and from there continue along the ridge to Monte Piccione (1130 m), Monte Cerello (1202 m) until reaching Mentorella (coinciding with the Spina Santa-Guadagnolo naturalistic-cultural tourist itinerary). The ancient stretch of the Passo della Fortuna-Spina Santa is now cut in several places by a new forest road built in the last century (passable up to the high-altitude fountain), which has caused the loss of the 'sense

of continuity' of the original route. This must have been part of an older transhumance route that connected the Empolitana valley to the Prenestine area via ridge paths.

The visual relationship between the Passo della Fortuna and the rocky spur of Mentorella, along the axis defined by the eastern slope of the Prenestine mountains, as has been possible to observe, has always activated in the populations that in the various historical periods have occupied the area around the pass, or that have passed through it, a process of recognition of the same as distinctive 'places' of the landscape. They have therefore assumed an identity value (specific to 'those places' that participate in the definition of 'that landscape'), in which spirituality and the sense of the sacred (first pagan and then Christian), have always coexisted with tangible and natural elements; in a subtle bond that blends immateriality and materiality and that persists, albeit varied, even in contemporary experience. It will then be a question of formulating protection programs and possible intervention proposals, aimed at respecting the balance achieved between the different factors that contribute to the perception of the landscape.

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