A place for gods and men: Tor dei Pagà (Vione, Valle Camonica - Italy)

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Abstract
Since 2011, annual excavations, supported by the municipality of Vione (Valle Camonica, Italy), have helped reconstruct the history of the archaeological site known as Tor dei Pagà, located in upper Valle Camonica at 2250 m a.s.l. The site was used in two phases: during the Iron Age as a site for ritual fires (Brandopferplatz) and in the Late Middle Ages (13th/14th century) as a fortified refuge for men-at-arms. The reasons for its selection and later abandonment remain unclear. We seek answers through archaeological and bioarchaeological data.

Keywords
Brandopferplatz, Iron Age, fortification, later Middle Ages, bioarchaeology

Introduction

The research presented here aims not only to give an account of the results obtained so far in the archaeological excavation of the site of Tor dei Pagà – situated in the upper Valle Camonica (Italy) at an elevation between 2230 and 2250 m a.s.l. (Fig. 1) – but also to highlight the issues still to be resolved regarding a site that has revealed itself to be rather unusual, if not, indeed, unique, in the Alpine world.



Figure 1. Positioning of Tor dei Pagà site, area of Municipality of Vione, Province of Brescia, Italy (basemap: ESRI World Topo).

Preliminary investigations were conducted at the site in the 1970s. In 2011, the municipality of Vione (under the leadership of the mayor Mauro Testini) launched a new project, "Vione Archeologica". The research was undertaken in collaboration with Andrea Breda of the Soprintendenza Archeologica della Lombardia and Professor Marco Sannazaro of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

After twelve field seasons, many questions regarding the nature of the site and its toponym have been resolved, but some remain open: why was such an isolated and relatively hard-to-reach place chosen, far from inhabited areas? What led to its abandonment? These questions apply to both phases of occupation of the site.

(GB)

The geographical location of Tor dei Pagà and local traditions

The Tor dei Pagà site is located at an altitude of 2250 m a.s.l., approximately 1000 metres above the small village of Vione, a municipality (Comune) in the upper Valle Camonica – the valley runs into the Alps north of the cities of Brescia and Bergamo (Fig. 2).

The toponym can be traced back to local 17th century documents referring to the legendary passage of Charlemagne through Valle Camonica. Legend says that he defeated a group of pagans in the immediate area.



Figure 2. Panoramic overview of the site.

The earliest written reference to the site is found in a 17th century manuscript called "Fondamenti historiali del forte e antico castello di Vione", where a local version of the Charlemagne legend is recorded; the original author of this manuscript was probably the 16th century notary Bernardo Biancardi of Vione. The manuscript says that Charlemagne conducted an expedition into Valle Camonica to convert the natives to Christianity. He besieged the castle of Vione (nowadays no longer extant and only known from written sources) and, after its fall, the survivors told him that their lord, along with some troops, was still occupying a fortified position on Monte Blès. After a battle on the mountainside and the subjugation of this second position, the fortifications were destroyed with their remains left as a monument to the events (Biancardi 2022).

The legend of Charlemagne's expedition in Valle Camonica, a tale known in most of the valley (Azzoni and Albertoni 2012), is unsupported by any historical evidence and it probably recalls the donation – at the time of Charlemagne – of Valle Camonica to the Abbey of Tours (France). In the 8th and 9th centuries it is quite possible that the area was not fully Christianised and that the clash of armies recounted by the legend reflects the clash of cultures and beliefs – the old paganism and the new Christianity (Chiapparini 2021).

Biancardi's manuscript is the only known historical source that integrates the story of *Tor de' Pagà* (in his spelling) into the legend of Charlemagne. While the manuscript emphasises the

strength of the fortification and its resistance it seems to refer to only a single tower. It also records the first appearance of the toponym of the site, *Tor de' Pagà*. Other nearby places also bear toponyms related to the events narrated in the legend, such as *Segrà di Pagà* (Pagans' yard), *Funtanì di Pagà* (Pagans' spring), *Canalì de la Tor* (Tower gully) and others (Valente 2017).

(RV)

History of prior research

Other modern archaeological investigations in the municipality of Vione were carried out during the 1970s (Rossi 1991, n. 1774, n. 1775). In 1974, building work in the historic centre of Vione uncovered several tombs lined with stone slabs. Dino Marino Tognali, schoolmaster of the village, understood their importance: he gathered information and preserved several of the objects found in the tombs. Three finds, parts of funerary assemblages, survive to this day: a small iron knife found in the same tomb as a copper alloy "stirrup (or arched stirrup)" fibula, and a copper alloy circular "disc" fibula from a different tomb (Fig. 3). Both the form and the decoration of the two fibulae belong to local traditions. The "stirrup" fibula is usually, on the basis of the geographic distribution of finds, considered to be related to the area that nowadays overlaps with the Italian region of Trentino-Alto Adige. The "disc" fibula is of a type found throughout northeastern Italy, but both the style and technique of the Vione example suggest a local origin. The fibulae are dated to the 7th-8th centuries AD on the basis of comparisons with other similar examples (Sannazaro 2017a).

In 1976, a survey was carried out and a test pit excavated – as far as we know the first such investigation – in the area of Tor dei Pagà by Luciano Viazzi and Ausilio Priuli (Priuli and Bertocchi 1982, 599-601). The survey produced an accurate map of the visible structures while the test pit – opened in an area briefly investigated by the Vione Archeologica project in 2014 – did not yield any relevant archaeological results.

In 1977, Mario Mirabella Roberti and his team from the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Trieste came to Vione and undertook further excavations in the area where the tombs had been found. These excavations yielded no new elements of funerary assemblages but were very important from the perspective of understanding the burials. Two tombs contained just a single skeleton each while the other two contained more than one individual. Mirabella Roberti found that the tombs were oriented E-W and lined with stone slabs – and that the reuse of tombs was frequent (Erspamer *et al.* 1978-1979; Mirabella Roberti 1987).

After this investigation, Mirabella Roberti and his team also carried out limited excavations at the Tor dei Pagà site. The test pit that they opened in the south-west corner of tower B reached a deposit of charcoal (presumably the protohistoric layers of the *Brandopferplatz*). Only a long iron blade and an iron belt buckle were found (both finds are now missing). From the area of structure E, a large ashlar block of white marble with a cross incised on it was recovered (at present on display in the local museum).

The team produced a site map that identifies structures using letters of the alphabet, a convention that we have followed (Bellandi 2017a) (Fig. 4).

(RV)



Figure 3. The early mediaeval grave goods from Vione: above left, "stirrup" fibula; above right, "disc" fibula; bottom center, iron knife.

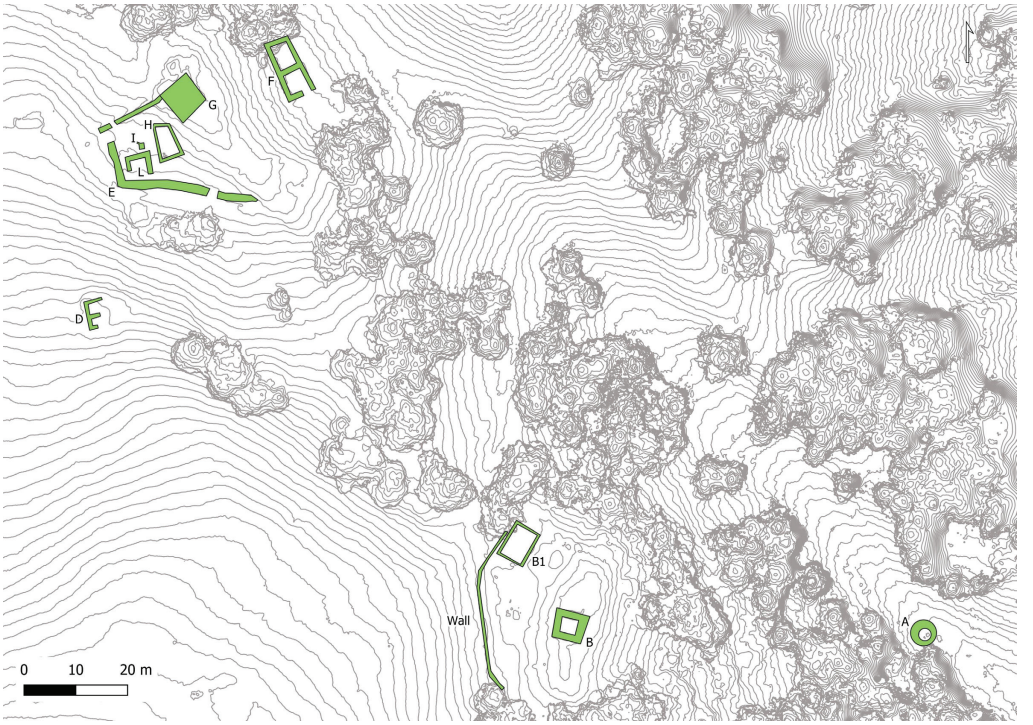


Figure 4. Site plan, letters refer to the identified structures (see text).

Chronological phases of the site

The Iron Age phase and material culture

Traces of an older, protohistoric, phase were identified below the walls and floor surfaces of one of the medieval towers (tower B) during the 2015 field season. Radiocarbon dating (Bassetti and Degasperi 2017) and typological comparisons of excavated finds (Bellandi 2017b; Marzatico 2017) date the older phase to between the 7th and 5th centuries BC.

The deposit consists of the remains of repeated episodes of burning at two distinct locations that were identified during the excavation. Charcoal, especially of spruce and larch, along with burned bone and cereals, was identified in the dark earth of the fire (Cesana 2017; Castiglioni and Cottini 2017).

Metal objects, often fragmentary and damaged by the fire, were also found: fibulae, double spirals and objects such as a rare *phalera* tip, apparently pertaining to armour (Fig. 5). Amongst the fragments of ceramic vessels, with finely smoothed surfaces, sometimes decorated with linear incisions or cord impressions, there are large and small mugs of a form that recalls those of nearby Trentino (reachable through the Tonale Pass and the Val di Sole), along with cups and bowls. All these materials had a ritual use: either as offerings in the fire or as libation vessels that were subsequently smashed (Fig. 6).

The context seems to fit well into the so-called Brandopferplatz type – Alpine cult sites characterised by ritual fires that developed between the Middle Bronze Age and the Iron Age and that, in many cases, continued in use into the Roman era.

Extensive archaeological investigations in Trentino, Alto Adige, North Tyrol and Southern Germany (for bibliographic references see Solano 2017) have improved the understanding of this sort of ancient cult site, clarifying ritual practices. However, given the wide variety of contexts, the nature of some sites and the quantity of offerings remain debated. A clear identification of the deities worshipped has not yet been achieved, but it has been hypothesized that these bonfires originated as rural cults linked to fertility, with sacrifices of domestic animals and agricultural products (Endrizzi *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, the nature of the objects found indicates, in some cases, a female connotation of the cult. In places such as Tor dei Pagà, on the other hand, a male character seems to prevail (Marzatico 2017; Bellandi 2017b).

Votive fires are found in different environments, from high mountains to natural terraces, and often included ritual structures such as altars and ceremonial spaces. The case of Tor dei Pagà clearly falls within the category of votive bonfires on high ground, but, unfortunately, the subsequent construction of the medieval tower on the rocky knoll where the votive bonfires were lit prevents us from detecting the presence of any Iron Age structures connected to the rites (altars, enclosures).

Furthermore, to date, we have no evidence of Iron Age settlements at the elevation of the Brandopferplatz – there are house sites closer to the valley floor, such as at località Desèrt but, at this point, we must conclude that the Tor dei Pagà site was visited strictly (and possibly just seasonally) for ritual purposes.



Figure 5. The material culture of the protohistoric phase: 1. Bronze serpentine arch fibula with fold-holding disk; 2. Bronze conical phalera tip; 3. Bronze eyelet strap; 4. Bronze spiral pendant; 5. Bronze double spiral pendant; 6. Metal sheets and various objects partially deformed by the heat of the fire (Photo by G. Vanoglio)



Figure 6. The material culture of the protohistoric phase: fragments of decorated handles of ceramic jugs (Photo by S. Fruet)

This particular manifestation of ritual activity at the site of Tor dei Pagà exhibits both differences from, and similarities to, other known Brandopferplätze. In terms of difference, the site has a relative lack of burned bone and the retrieved finds tend to be extremely fragmented. In terms of similarity: the ritual fires occurred repeatedly, bronze objects were offered to the flames, the site is at high elevation, is visually dominant and is visible from afar.

(GB)

The Late medieval phase and material culture

The occupation of the area during the late Middle Ages was much more complex and structured. Twelve years of archaeological investigations have made it possible to recognise a large fraction of the structures that make up the fortification of Tor dei Pagà (Bellandi *et al.* 2015; Bellandi *et al.* 2017). Today the site consists of a structural complex with at least two towers, one of which (G) is located at the highest point of a structure consisting of a polygonal external wall (E) and a series of internal buildings (H, I, and L) (Bellandi *et al.* 2017, 93-104). The other, called tower B, is located a short distance away (about 200 metres) along the rocky ridge descending from Cima Bles, and it too is surrounded by a wall, which encloses some rooms (Bellandi *et al.* 2017, 105-111) (Fig. 4). In particular, the excavation of area B1 allowed us to document a small space built partly with stone walls and partly from wood, most likely following the model of an Alpine house type known, in Iron Age contexts, as a Rhaetic house (Bellandi 2021, 218-219) (Fig. 7). We were able to determine the nature of the floor of the structure, which was made of compacted plant material. Further, excavation showed that the room B1 existed prior to a construction phase that we believe may relate to tower B. In fact, an area for the preparation of mortar (where a large concentration of lime was found) was identified overlying the Alpine-type house. The mortar was probably used in the construction or renovation of tower B wall structures (Bellandi 2021, 215-18) (Fig. 8). The reason for the presence of two towers and two very similar complexes so close to each other remains a topic of debate. It has been suggested – on the basis of GIS analyses implemented with a very high-resolution DSM created using a mapping UAV – that the second tower (B) was added to cover a tactical flaw in the location of the original complex: an area of non-visible "dead ground" to the west of the original structure, which could have opened the walls to a direct assault (Alexander 2017). Tower B, in this interpretation, would therefore have been built at a later time than tower G. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed not only by the excavation data for area B1, but also by the analyses of the mortars used in the two towers, which show a difference in the composition between those of tower B and tower G (Bugini and Folli 2017).

Dating of the finds recovered, including some coins (see *The coins*) and the radiocarbon analysis of samples taken from two larch beams (Martinelli and Pignatelli 2017), suggests that the fortification was built and used for a short period of time, between the end of the 13th century and the first decades of the 14th century. Finds (Fig. 9), including crossbow bolt points and arrowheads, suggest the presence of well-armed soldiers (Vignola 2017, 174-175; Bellandi 2021, 219). However, fragments of a glass "prunted beaker" (Uboldi 2017) and personal adornment – such as floral studs in silver-plated copper for a belt – suggest the presence of one or more people of a higher social status (Vignola 2017, 176-179). In addition, the discovery of two "vaghi" in glass paste made us wonder whether women were present at Tor dei Pagà and what their role might have been in such a fortified site (Bozzi 2017, 203-04).



Figure 7. The area B1 under excavation in 2019.



Figure 8. Area B1: the phase interpreted as construction site



Figure 9. The material culture: 1. Copper alloy lyre buckle; 2. Iron D-buckle; 3-4. Circular buckles in copper and iron alloy; 5. Silver alloy floral applique; 6. Glass-paste bead; 7. Bone die; 8. Iron furniture key; 9-12. Iron crossbow bolt projectile points; 13-14: Iron arrowheads (Photo by F. Airoldi).

But, so far, a female presence is not supported by any other finds. The discovery of an iron furniture key is also very interesting. It was made by hot forging from a sheet of iron – a simple and ancient technique commonly used in the making of hollow-shafted Late medieval keys, especially those of smaller or medium dimension (Ferrari 2017). Linked to the world of games and entertainment at this high-altitude site are some little bone dice found in both Structure E and tower B (Bozzi 2017, 201-203; Bellandi 2021, 219, 221). In most medieval excavations – including Tor dei Pagà – various types of nails form the most numerous class of metal finds (Vignola 2017, 182; Bellandi 2021, 220). Other than the common forms - with sub-circular heads and square cross-section used in light carpentry - we found several specialised types. For example, there are nails for shoeing horses with a pyramidal head and a rectangular base that suits the form of the horseshoe and creates a base that provides better grip on slippery surfaces. An interesting group of larger, headless, nails suggests the presence of timber floors and partitions within structures – such nails are well suited to their construction.

An oddity of the Tor dei Pagà excavations is the absence of ceramics or soapstone objects. Such objects would be associated with a fundamental activity: food production and consumption. While the lack of plates for food consumption can be explained by the still widespread use of wooden trenchers in medieval times, we are forced to hypothesise the use of metal pans for food production. This theory is supported by a hook – almost certainly used with a pot (Vignola 2017, 183). The function of two fragments of metal sheet is less certain, a larger perforated piece of iron and a smaller piece of copper alloy: perhaps they were components of braziers or other heating devices. More interesting is another metal sheet in which holes have been cold-worked with the clear intention of creating a surface that could function as a grater (Vignola 2017, 183-84).

That the inhabitants of the site enjoyed a good and varied diet is demonstrated by thousands of fragments of animal bones and botanical macro-remains (Fig. 10). Fresh meat was guaranteed by the presence of livestock: sheep (*Ovis aries* L.), goats (*Capra hircus* L.), cattle (*Bos taurus* L.), pigs (*Sus* cf. *domesticus* L.), chickens (*Gallus gallus* L.), and other poultry. Most likely, ovicaprids and poultry were raised on-site while pig and cattle meat were brought up from the valley floor; a contribution was also provided, to a limited extent, by game (Bellandi and Cesana 2014; Cesana 2017; Bellandi 2021, 220-21). Of interest is the presence of a bone from the paw of a brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) – perhaps a hunting trophy (Sannazaro 2017b, 253-255). In fact, the presence of bears in the Vione area is noted in documents relating to the rights in Upper Valle Camonica of the Bishop of Brescia. Sources from the 13th century state that if the men of Incudine caught a bear in the area of Vezza they must set aside a thigh, the paws, the entrails and the right shoulder for the Bishop's court. They were also required to report the presence of the nests of goshawk, sparrowhawk and falcon (Cesana 2017, 221-22). The consumption of barley and rye (used in the preparation of breads, flatbreads or semolina), legumes (peas and field beans), walnuts and hazelnuts, perhaps chestnuts, is also evident (see section *The local environment and its exploitation*). Eggs, milk and, probably, dairy products, of which the cheese grater is indirect evidence, complete the picture of available resources.

(CB)



Figure 10. Some fragments of animal bones found at Tor dei Pagà.

The coins

During the excavations conducted at Tor dei Pagà between 2011 and 2024, nine coins were recovered. These finds emerged from both of the main areas investigated over the years: three specimens were recovered from Structure E, while the remaining six were discovered in tower B. The most significant insight derived from the numismatic evidence concerns the chronological framework. As we will see, all nine coins were minted between the second half of the 13th century and the early 14th century, a period that likely corresponds to the occupation phase of the fortified structures at Tor dei Pagà.

The coins from Structure E (Table 1) are the subject of a previous study (Bona 2017). On the surface of Room H, a *denaro imperiale mezzano* issued by the municipality of Cremona was discovered, dating to the second half of the 13th century (1254/6 - c. 1300). Meanwhile, the occupation layers that accumulated during the use of the external space I yielded a *denaro piccolo* from the municipality of Padua, whose production spans a broad chronological range from the mid-13th century to the early decades of the following century (1260/71–1318), as well as an additional *denaro piccolo* issued by Patriarch Raimondo della Torre of Aquileia (1277–1281).

Specimen	Mint	Chronology	Place of discovery	Bibliography
Denaro imperiale mezzano	Cremona	1254/6-c. 1300	Room H	*MEC* 12, p. 379
Denaro piccolo	Padova	1260/71(?)-1318	Space I	*MEC* 12, n. 910
Denaro piccolo of Raimondo della Torre	Aquileia	1277-1281	Space I	*MEC* 12, n. 855

Table 1. Coins from Structure E.

Specimen	Mint	Chronology	Place of discovery	Bibliography
Denaro imperiale mezzano	Cremona	1254/6-c. 1300	Room B1	*MEC* 12, p. 379
Denaro scodellato	Mantova	1257 – c. 1276	Room B1	*MEC* 12, nn. 484-485
Grosso aquilino of Mainardo II and Alberto II	Merano	1259-1274/5	Tower B	*MEC* 12, n. 960
Denaro piccolo of Lorenzo Tiepolo	Venezia	1268-1275	Room B1	*MEC* 12, nn. 1055-1056
Denaro piccolo	Trento	1269?-1310	Room B1	*MEC* 12, p. 610
Denaro piccolo of Giovanni Dandolo	Venezia	1280-1289	Room B1	*MEC* 12, n. 1071

Table 2. Coins from Tower B.

Turning to the area of tower B (Table 2), only a *grosso aquilino* issued by Mainardo II and Alberto II (1259-1274/5) – the highest-value coin among those recovered – was found in the collapse layers that accumulated south of the rise on which the tower itself had been built. The remaining five coins were recovered from the dirt floor of Room B1. These include another *mezzano* from Cremona, belonging to the same issue as the specimen found in Room H; a *denaro scodellato* from the Comune of Mantova, precisely datable to the third quarter of the 13th century (1257 – c. 1276); two *denari piccoli* in the names of the Venetian doges Lorenzo Tiepolo (1268-1275) and Giovanni Dandolo (1280-1289); and an additional *denaro piccolo* issued by the bishops of Trento, assignable to a period spanning from the late 13th to the early 14th century (1269–1310).

A comprehensive view of the numismatic finds allows for several key observations. First, with the exception of the *grosso*, nearly all the coins belong to the lower denominations of the circulation pool and represent the smallest values minted during this period. Their common use in daily transactions suggests that they were likely lost by people frequenting the site, perhaps in the context of betting in games of chance. Given their limited purchasing power, these coins were probably not actively sought after by their owners once misplaced. Indeed, their extremely small size (11-15 mm in diameter) and minimal weight (0.06-0.36 g) could have easily led to accidental losses. Notably, in almost all cases, they were discovered near fireplaces, where the accumulation of ash and refuse, combined with frequent foot

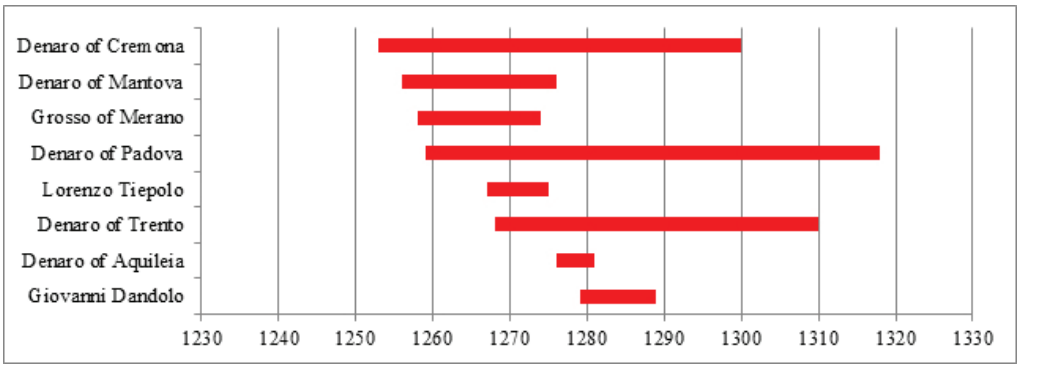


Figure 11. Issue periods of the coins found at Tor dei Pagà.

traffic for various activities, would have created ideal conditions for small objects like coins to disappear from view and remain unrecovered. The presence of the *grosso* poses a more complex interpretative challenge. Significantly larger (20 mm; 1.52 g) and of greater value, it is less easily classified among those coins accidentally lost. Unfortunately, its discovery in a collapse layer, disconnected from its original context, prevents any definitive conclusions regarding its deposition.

However, as mentioned, the most significant aspect of the numismatic finds concerns their chronology. There is no difference between the coins recovered from Structure E and those found near tower B, either in chronological or typological terms. This is confirmed by the presence of a *mezzano* from Cremona, belonging to the same issue, in both areas. Second, all the issue chronologies appear to converge within a timeframe from the late 13th to the early 14th century (Fig. 11). The two latest precisely datable coins are the *denaro* of Patriarch Raimondo della Torre (1277–1281) and that of Doge Giovanni Dandolo (1280–1289), both minted between the 1270s and 1280s. The issue periods of some other series, such as the *denari* from Cremona (1254/6–1300), Trento (1269–1310), and Padua (1260/71–1318), extend into the early 14th century. However, these coins have an uncertain chronological definition, as they are anonymous and can only be broadly attributed to the period in which the respective issuing authorities – whether municipal or episcopal – held the *ius cudendi*. The low or even absent levels of wear observed on all specimens strongly suggest that the coins discovered at Tor dei Pagà remained in circulation for a relatively short time before becoming part of the archaeological record. The chronological hypothesis is further supported by the assemblage of associated artefacts (metal and glass objects), which, despite their typically broader chronological range, also seem datable to the 13th-14th century (Vignola 2017; Ferrari 2017; Uboldi 2017).

A final consideration concerns the geographical origin of the specimens, which covers a remarkably broad range of locations belonging to different monetary areas of the 13th century (*MEC* 12, pp. 22-24). Six coins come from the Venetian area, two from the Milanese area, and there is even one from the Aquileian area. Such "mixed" attestations clearly illustrate the site's borderland location: in the 13th century, the Tonale Pass marked the boundary between the Venetian and Milanese monetary areas.

(AB)

The local environment and its exploitation in the Iron Age and Late medieval period

As illustrated in the previous sections, the site of Tor dei Pagà, situated in the upper Valle Camonica at an elevation of 2250 m a.s.l., was frequented during two distinct phases: the first in the Iron Age when it was a site for ritual fires (Brandopferplatz) and the second in the Late Middle Ages when the site became a fortified refuge for men-at-arms. Some interesting contexts were identified for sample collection and archaeobotanical analyses. The washing and initial screening of the samples were done on site. The analyses were carried out by Elisabetta Castiglioni and Michela Cottini (Castiglioni *et al.* 2017). The analyses of samples from the more recently excavated archaeological contexts are still ongoing.

The anthracological remains from the Late Middle Ages allowed us to reconstruct the natural environment and to infer how firewood was collected and stored. Conifers were dominant. *Picea abies* is the dominant species and was used as firewood. *Larix decidua* is present in large pieces, probably having been used to make shelters or planks. The presence of *Pinus cembra* is rare.

In Structure E (Areas H and I) there are large pieces of anthracological remains, rarely from branches. In Area B1 there were medium/small branches, while larger sized pieces (large branches/trunks) are few. The high frequency of reaction wood indicates that the wood was not particularly selected for burning. The wood has a minimal ring width (0.4 mm), so it was probably cut on site, at an altitude with a short growing season. The modest level of attacks by fungi and insects indicates that the wood was not collected from the ground. The absence of vitrified fabrics and cracks is typical of dried wood.

In the hearth in Structure E we find *Calluna vulgaris*, *Arctostaphylos* sp. and other *Ericaceae*, collected in the summer season as indicated by the complete development of the last annual ring. Pinecones and brachyblasts of *Larix decidua* were probably used as fire starters.

In structure E an unburned piece of *Larix decidua* was preserved, which could have survived, intact, in the mortar or as a major component of a larger partially-burnt beam: the charred outer layer would have protected the unconsumed inner portion. A piece of mortar in Area B1 with traces of a carved wooden element may suggest a slatted ceiling or a plank laid as part of the preparation of mortar.

Palynological analyses[1] are currently being carried out on four samples of mortar and lime taken during the 2015 and 2018 excavation field seasons. This type of analysis on mortars and plasters can provide interesting information about aspects of the vegetation linked to the site (Langgut *et al.* 2013; Tirelli *et al.* 2023). The results to date are positive: despite the nature of the material, all four samples provided statistically valid pollen spectra. The pollen shows a somewhat mediocre state of preservation and low concentrations, but the floristic list is quite broad, with almost a hundred taxa represented. The mortar and the lime, when they were still fresh, therefore functioned as a "trap" for pollen, thereby not only recording signs of vegetation around the site but also from surrounding lower hilly areas. Anthropogenic activities at the site do not seem to have left particular traces, while evidence of the surrounding vegetation

[1] Laboratorio di Palinologia e Paleobotanica dell'Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia (Marta Mazzanti, Paola Torri, Giovanna Bosi).

is obvious, and very similar to that of today: coniferous forests, alder groves in the wettest areas, grasslands and moorland. There are also clear signs of crops, presumably from lower elevations: cereals, including rye, and, possibly, hemp, as well as the presence, more or less abundant, of fruit trees such as chestnut and walnut, along with grapevine.

The few carpological remains are very useful to better understand the vegetal food resources available in the local context in the Late Middle Ages. Generally, in high altitude contexts - frequented usually only in the summer season - the consumption of vegetables is very low, because the diet is mainly based on milk and dairy products and on the consumption of meat (slaughtered livestock, sometimes wild game meat), often accompanied by "bread", usually baked in villages and transported to the site. *Vicia faba* seeds may have been used for the preparation of soups or as an accompaniment to meat. The most numerous remains are those arising from so-called "food preparations", small charred lumps with caryopsis remains that can document the preparation of soups (with cereals and legumes) or can come from "bread" or similar products.

In the anthracological remains of the Iron Age ritual fires beneath tower B, conifers are dominant (*Picea abies, Larix decidua, Pinus cembra, Pinus sylvestris/mugo*), in medium to large pieces, including branches with a diameter of 5 cm. The wide ring growth of *Picea abies* indicates trees that were at the edge of the forest or a little isolated. Also in the Iron Age ritual fires, the modest level of attacks by fungi and insects indicates that the wood was not collected from the ground. The absence of both vitrified fabrics and cracking supports the interpretation that the wood was dried. The presence of small pieces, twigs and small branches of *Ericaceae* (including *Kalmia procumbens* and *Rhododendron ferrugineum/hirsutum*) and *Salix* sp. indicates their use as fire starters or maybe for some other ritual practices.

Today's natural environment is very similar to that of the Iron Age, with a coniferous forest up to 2100-2200 m a.s.l. with *Picea abies, Larix decidua* and more rarely *Pinus cembra*, and, at higher altitudes, the presence of *Ericaceae* shrub formations dominated by *Kalmia procumbens*. The remains of "food preparations" made from whole wheat flour, small burnt fragments with the remains of caryopsis and grain tegument are what remains of the ritual offerings of the Iron Age Brandopferplatz.

(DF)

The choice of location and the reasons for abandonment

While it has not proved difficult to reconstruct the chronology of the Tor dei Pagà site (see previous sections on Iron Age, Late medieval and numismatic findings), it is far from easy to understand why the site was constructed and frequented, especially in the Late medieval period.
It seems likely that geography and topography were fundamental factors.

The dominant position of the site means that the towers could definitely have performed a control function: but what were they controlling? Why was the complex built at such an altitude, far above the valley floor and the villages? Environmental reconstruction (see section *The local environment and its exploitation in the Iron Age and Late medieval period*) suggests a world not so different from that of today, with thick snow cover in winter and the consequent risk of

avalanches. Surely this must have been a very inhospitable place to pass the winter - perhaps even completely inaccessible.

However, a possible reason for choosing this place to build a military fortification (its character being evident from the archaeological data; see section *The Late medieval phase and material culture*) comes from the historical context in which it was built.

The chronological data available seem to indicate that a rather short time passed between the construction of the complex and its abandonment: a span of a few decades between the end of the 13th and early 14th centuries. Tor dei Pagà was built and used during a particularly significant and troubled period in the history of Valle Camonica, fairly well-documented in surviving written sources. Between the 13th and 14th centuries, the attempts of the Comune of Brescia to establish and maintain effective political and economic control of the territory were opposed by local feudal lords and rural Comunes, while external powers exploited the conflicts and agitated within the territory to their advantage. In 1287, to weaken its adversaries, the Comune of Brescia prohibited the importation of salt into Valle Camonica: an indispensable resource for many productive and economic activities in the valley, from the treatment of meat to the processing of cheese. This caused an immediate and violent reaction on the part of the local noble families of the Ghibelline faction (Brescia was predominantly Guelph in its sympathies), led by the Federici family. The text of the "Statutes against the rebels of the Camonica Valley", promulgated by the Comune of Brescia on 28 October 1288, has been preserved. It lists in detail the names of what it termed "bandits" along with the bounties for their capture, and offers a reward to those who collaborate in the conquest or destruction of their castles. Among these, it is intriguing to us that those "*fortilicias nuper factas per inimicos Vallis Camonice in territoriis de Dalegno et de Vezia*" ("fortifications recently built by the enemies of the Camonica Valley in the territories of Dalegno and Vezza") are mentioned, where both the geographical area and the chronology of the fortifications cited seem to correspond to the case of Tor dei Pagà (Sannazaro 2016; Sannazaro 2017b).

Nevertheless, some questions posed by Tor dei Pagà remain unanswered at this time: we are unable to understand whether the fortified structures arose in response to a specific and limited military need linked to the revolt of the late 13th century or to its aftermath, or whether they, rather, reflect a need to control local natural resources and were intended to express in concrete form the assertion of seigniorial power.

If, in the late Middle Ages, the choice of location was influenced by the need for defence and control, a different motivation must be sought for the protohistoric era. Was the choice of an elevated location perhaps determined by the need for visibility (Bassetti and Degasperi 2017)? An issue concerns how visible the fires lit on the rocky knoll would have been from sites lower down in the valley. Further, where were those lower-elevation sites? We know directly of very few houses contemporary with the Brandopferplatz – can we hypothesise that current villages represent a continuity of protohistoric settlement patterns?

If we submit Tor dei Pagà to a GIS intervisibility analysis, we discover that the site is barely visible from the valley floor. This conclusion is reinforced if we consider specifically the case of the protohistoric house (6th/5th centuries BC) found at the site of Desèrt, at the entrance to the Val d'Avio on the opposite side of the valley (Poggiani Keller 2009) (Fig. 12). The choice

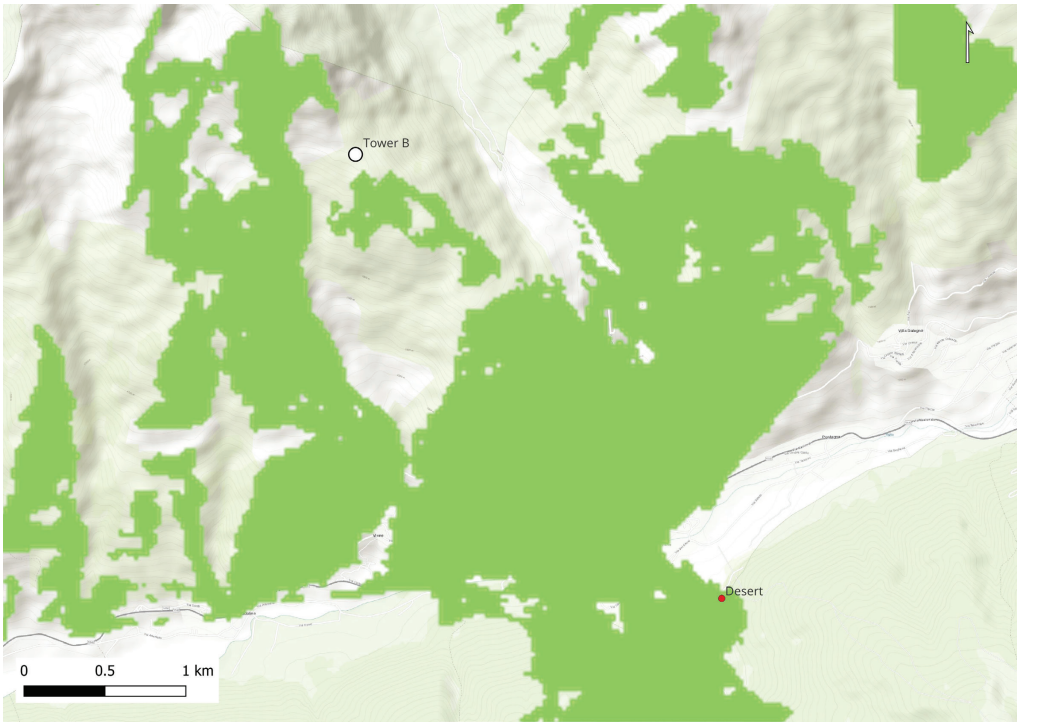


Figure 12. Viewshed analysis: GIS intervisibility analysis between the Brandopferplatz of Tor dei Pagà and the protohistoric settlement named Desèrt (Temù, Valle Camonica). The Brandopferplatz of Tor dei Pagà is excluded from the visible area from the Desèrt settlement (basemap: ESRI World Topo).

of Tor dei Pagà for a Brandopferplatz would seem to exclude the reason of visibility from the valley floor (and from the villages?). We cannot rule out, however, that the visibility sought may reside in intervisibility with other Iron Age cult sites at a similar elevation. Another probable votive pyre was situated above Edolo, at Dos Toricla, a site which is also at high altitude (although at a lower elevation than Tor dei Pagà), with characteristics potentially (it has not yet been subjected to archaeological investigation) similar to those of Tor dei Pagà. Pending further analysis at these sites, this hypothesis remains viable.

Even more complex is the question of the dedicatee of the cult: in the cases of many Alpine votive pyres, in addition to their elevated position, the sites are often linked to the presence of water (springs, lakes, rivers), or to "cavities", such as caves and ravines. Both of these elements are present around the site of Tor dei Pagà. Of particular interest is the presence in the ancient toponymy of the area of a "funtanì di pagà" ("spring of the pagans") (Gallina and Tognali 2014), which reinforces the idea that water – or an associated deity – may have been an object of worship.

Finally, the remote and difficult-to-access position is consistent with the identification of the site as a local Iron Age sanctuary and almost certainly limited frequentation to seasonal visits (Solano 2017). This is in contrast to the status of a supra-regional sanctuary, where devotees

from even quite distant places converged: in Valle Camonica examples of such ceremonial centres include Cemmo - Pian delle Greppe, Capo di Ponte - le Sante, and Breno - Spinera.

(GB)

Conclusion

While the archaeological research at Tor dei Pagà has provided valuable insights into its historical significance, many questions still remain unanswered.

Among the important discoveries of the project have been the dating of the site to the late Middle Ages rather than the era of Charlemagne, and a new understanding of the meaning of the toponym Tor dei Pagà.

The toponym, which probably originated in the late Middle Ages, does not refer to the defeat or elimination of the pagans during the Christianisation of Valle Camonica, despite the beliefs of the 17th century writers who linked the site to Charlemagne. Rather, it refers to the tower, now bearing this name, which was built in the Middle Ages over an ancient non-Christian place of worship.

But it remains difficult to clarify the reasons for the choice of the site. The site's isolated and elevated location, inhospitable due to harsh winters and avalanche risks, raises questions about the motivations behind its construction and abandonment, particularly in the medieval phase. Historical sources suggest that the fortification may have been linked to territorial conflicts and struggles for political control in Valle Camonica, but its precise purpose is still debated.

Similarly, the Iron Age phase of the site, associated with the lighting of ritual fires (Brandopferplatz), presents uncertainties regarding its function and symbolic meaning. While visibility is often considered a key factor in the choice of location for Alpine ritual sites, the visibility analysis of Tor dei Pagà suggests the need for a different explanation.

The site's role in both periods remains enigmatic, warranting further investigation through archaeological and historical analysis. Future research may help to clarify the reasons behind its selection, use, and eventual abandonment.

(GB)

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