

Amiternum and the upper Aterno valley: a Sabine-Roman town and its territory

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The Roman town of *Amiternum*, c.90 km northeast of Rome in the heart of the Abruzzo, has, since 2006, been the subject of an urban research project led by the Institute of Archaeology of Cologne University. *Amiternum* lies in the original homeland of the Sabines, who came under Roman rule at the beginning of the 3rd c. B.C. During the subsequent process of Romanisation *Amiternum* developed into a significant regional centre, which controlled the upper Aterno valley and its important communication routes. From the time of the Late Republic this area was the end-point of a major transhumance route, apparently attaining great prosperity because of its vital rôle in the production of livestock and wool. A wealthy upper class with a remarkably close relationship to the Roman senatorial aristocracy developed at an early date. The site is known for its well-preserved amphitheatre, but despite excavations in the 19th and early 20th c. the settlement structure and developmental history of *Amiternum* and its territories have received much less attention.

Over the course of four summer seasons between 2006 and 2009 a topographic survey and geoarchaeological analysis were carried out, visible structures (the amphitheatre and theatre) investigated and historical documents studied. Systematic geophysical prospection was conducted, which largely revealed the extent and structure of the settlement. Subsequent stratigraphic excavation yielded further information about several major structures, including a large *domus* south of the theatre, a basilica adjacent to the forum, and a sanctuary. A surprising picture has emerged from this study: although *Amiternum* apparently had a highly developed urban infrastructure, only a small number of houses, mostly very rich *domus*, have been observed. It seems that *Amiternum* was not a conventional Roman town, but rather a major regional centre for a population that lived scattered in neighbouring *vici* and *villae*. Is this pattern a reflection of specifically Sabine settlement traditions?

General topography (M.H.)

The upper valley of the Aterno river is bordered on the northeast by the steep mountain ranges of the Gran Sasso d'Italia (2914 m) and on the southwest by Monte Sirente (2349 m) (fig. 1). In antiquity the valley was divided among clusters of settlements, the northernmost of which had *Amiternum* at its centre. The town controlled a territory of c.50 km² extending over a roughly triangular area between the modern towns of Pizzoli, L'Aquila and Civitatomassa. The valley floor, which lies at an average elevation of 650 m asl, is fertile agricultural land, the productivity of which is limited only by the harsh climatic conditions. It is surrounded by mountains, drained by small side valleys, and overlooked by steep slopes which have been adapted in places for agriculture by the construction of terraces, most of which have now reverted to woodland. Within the territory of *Amiternum* were independent settlements, the most significant of which was the *vicus* of *Foruli* (modern Civitatomassa) to the southwest. Other *vici*, at Preturo, Coppito, Cavallari and Pettino (*Pitinum*), lie mostly buried beneath modern settlements. It appears that in Roman times the valley was densely settled with farms and villas.