The Materiality of the "Seigneurial Transformation"

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In this paper I offer some thoughts on Alessio Fiore's *The Seigneurial Transformation*[1] from an archaeological perspective. First, I examine how the book contributes to one of the most contentious issues in Italian archaeology, so-called *incastellamento*. Then, expanding on Fiore's argument that "material and archaeological evidence" reflects "the redefinition and reshaping of power practices,"[2] I elucidate the potential of archaeology to investigate the construction and negotiation of power during the seigneurial transformation. It will be shown that archaeological sources can provide further elements for understanding the social dynamics identified by Fiore in the texts, and that the combination of evidence makes it possible to build a strong multidisciplinary model for comprehending the historical period in question in the Italian peninsula.

According to Fiore, the years between the 1080 and the 1130 were crucial for the establishment of territorial lordship in the countryside of central and northern Italy. The crisis of central power and the civil war between the emperor and the papacy accelerated the seigneurial transformation, that is to say the process of entrenchment in the countryside of aristocratic families whereby

[1] Fiore, 2020.
[2] Fiore, 2020, p. 73.

they consolidated their landed properties, also acquiring public rights over the inhabitants.

To investigate this thesis, Fiore focusses chiefly on written sources, but he also devotes some pages to archaeological evidence, particularly castles and the changes in their material forms.[3] This is not surprising, for, as Giovanna Bianchi has underscored, castles and the development of territorial lordship in Italy are deeply intertwined. The emergence of castles in relationship with the fragmentation of power and the acquisition of juridical rights by local actors (aristocracy, religious institutions, communes) is known as *incastellamento* and it has been at the core of the debate in Italian medieval archaeology.[4]

The debate on *incastellamento* goes back to the publication of Pierre Toubert's study on the process of formation of castles in southern Lazio and Sabina.[5] To summarise Toubert's argument, castles were established in the tenth century on new sites, with profound consequences for the forms of rural settlement, which became more centralised as the population gathered in these newly founded places. Toubert's model began to be questioned particularly in the light of evidence collected from archaeological surveys and excavations (e.g., S. Maria in Civita, Vaccareccia, Scarlino, Montarrenti).[6] The data showed that the birth of nucleated settlements predated the emergence of the fortifications, and that the castles mentioned in the written sources arose on sites already inhabited during the Early Middle Ages. These sites underwent a number of socio-political transformations, reflected also in their material forms, before they started to turn into castles from the tenth century onwards. The scholarly discussion has clarified that not only is there no single model of *incastellamento*, but also that different phases can be recog-

[3] Fiore, 2020, pp. 58-67.
[4] For a summary of the debate, see Bianchi, 2014.
[5] Toubert, 1973.
[6] Hodges et al., 1980; Hodges, 1984; Francovich, Parenti, 1984; Francovich, 1985; Francovich, Hodges, 1990; Cantini 2003.

nised in the process. In earlier studies, scholars identified two main stages in the formation of castles: the first *incastellamento* took place around the tenth century and saw either new foundations or the fortification of pre-existent settlements. This phase corresponded to the end of Carolingian domination in Italy. The second *incastellamento*, instead, dated from between the mid-twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, when castles, newly founded, re-founded or enlarged, became bigger structures that attracted a large population, including people from smaller settlements.[7]

A significant amount of data from archaeological excavations and surveys in the past few decades has further refined this model. Recent studies have identified a new, crucial phase in the *incastellamento* process, placed at the turn of the eleventh century, between what we have just called first and second *incastellamento*.[8] As Fiore rightly points out, the use of stone in specific buildings within castles became more widespread in that period.[9] In particular, structures placed in prominent positions, possibly the residence of the élites, were constructed, displaying the lords' economic capacity. The appearance of these new structures has also been interpreted as a result of the movement of the élites from the cities to the countryside, which prompted a series of socio-economic changes in the territories involved.[10] Residing in the countryside, making this materially evident by building new structures within the castles, was undoubtedly part of the discourse of power that Fiore identifies as central in this phase. It was, in Fiore's words, "an integral part of the rural landscape and the grammar of rural power."[11]

From this brief summary one can see that the argument proposed by Fiore, who identifies a significant break between the end of the eleventh and the twelfth century, is in line with the latest de-

[7] Bianchi, 2014.
[8] Bianchi 2014, pp. 165-6; Carocci 2018, p. 525.
[9] Fiore, 2020, pp. 58-9.
[10] Bianchi, 2014, p. 168.
[11] Fiore, 2020, p. 59.

velopments in the archaeological debate on the *incastellamento*. In the same vein, a dialogue between the disciplines will enrich our understanding of the power discourse that is at core of the second part of Fiore's discussion. An examination of the archaeological evidence in this perspective is a line of enquiry whose importance scholars have propounded in recent years[12] in view of the highly symbolic value of castles, a point also mentioned in Fiore's book.[13]

Thus, in the rest of this paper I discuss some categories of material evidence that could provide interesting information on the social dynamic in central and northern Italy during the development of territorial lordship. It is necessary to bear in mind that it is not always possible to date the archaeological record as precisely as the written sources, so some of the examples offered have a longer chronological span than that proposed by Fiore. However, they all make clear how much information might be extracted from the material evidence. Hopefully, with the progress of research and with more sophisticated dating techniques, other cases will come to light, allowing the picture to be fleshed out.

Having established that the emergence of stone buildings in castles is probably the most visible material change in this period, useful information could certainly come from the study of the building techniques. Scholars have argued, for example, that leaving walls built of well-squared stones uncovered was a choice intended to display the power of the lords: since squaring a stone took around six or seven hours, it was worth showing that the wall was built with a time-consuming technique requiring a significant amount of labour.[14] The capacity of the lords to dispose of human and economic resources did not only became visible to the inhabitants of the castle and its surroundings during the construction of walls, towers and palaces; it then remained imprinted in the landscape.

A similar observation has been made for the castles controlled

[12] For example, Carocci 2010, p. 260; Augenti 2018, pp. 31-2.
[13] Fiore 2020, pp. 64-5; also Wickham 1998.
[14] Bianchi, Fichera, Paris, 2009, pp. 415-416.

by the city of Genoa from the mid-twelfth century: walls were built with squared quarried stones, implying substantial effort and expense for their transportation and placement. This technique was consistently used both in castles and in the new boroughs founded by the city in what has been called "'political' use of architecture."[15]

The political meanings expressed through architecture are also treated in a study by Federico Zoni on the building techniques used for medieval houses in the Apennines of Reggio Emilia (eleventh-fourteenth centuries).[16] Zoni hypothesises that the same group of workmen operated between Tuscany and Emilia, in the territory of the Marca di Tuscia, under the Canossa family. The communality of knowledge and technique observed in this area is connected with the families that linked themselves with the Canossa also making use of these type of building techniques.[17] Moreover, Zoni argues that the buildings dating to between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, erected by local workmen, recall the forms of the royal or imperial palaces of the tenth and eleventh centuries.[18] This can be explained as reflecting the will of a group of families to project their power in opposition to the ascendant political influence of the cities.

In some instances, the placement of structures within the landscape can be significant as well. The case of the towers in Valle d'Aosta is particularly revealing. There, in the eleventh century, small landowners built quadrangular towers on vast agricultural lands obtained from works of tillage and landscape reorganisation. With these structures they wanted to visually mark their possessions and their effort to create and manage cultivable lands. As Cortelazzo observes, "Landmarks appear in the landscape as fortified and cultivated places, producing psychological comfort and signs of spatial orientation."[19]

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[15] Cagnana et al., 2010, p. 41 (my translation).
[16] Zoni, 2019.
[17] Zoni, 2019, pp. 169-172.
[18] Zoni, 2019, pp. 177-8.
[19] Cortellazzo, 2018, p. 298 (my translation).

At the site of Rocca San Silvestro (Campiglia Marittima), first occupied between the tenth and eleventh centuries, new building techniques have been identified and dated to between the late eleventh and the early twelfth century.[20] These are probably evidence of non-local masons, as they have also been found in other religious and non-religious buildings of the area. The activity of these workers at the site has been linked with the presence of new lords who invested in improving some structures within the castle (the tower, the church, part of the walls, the palace and one of the houses). Through this intervention they could demonstrate their economic capacity, their ability to employ specialised workmen, while giving a visual signal of their new presence in the settlement.

The well-known example of Rocca San Silvestro also allows us to consider the organisation of spaces within fortified settlements, another possible source of evidence bearing on discourses of power and strategies to display and reinforce social distinctions. In the highest part of the settlement there was the aristocratic residence, a tower and a wall. The same area also contained a tank, open spaces and some buildings, perhaps for the lord's dependants. A chapel, associated with the burial ground of the community, was placed immediately below the seigneurial area and just above the borough, creating a connection between the two socially distinct spaces. The village was then laid out on a series of terraces and included pre-planned housing lots. Interestingly, the metalworking activities took place both outside the castle walls (production of iron) and within them (copper, lead and probably silver); these areas appear to have been under the direct control of the lord.[21]

As the case of Rocca San Silvestro demonstrates, the relationship between fortified sites and religious buildings is another important avenue of research. Nicola Mancassola has recently argued that the placement of churches and chapels was influenced by the process of *incastellamento* and that their presence within or, alternatively, out-

[20] Bianchi, 1996, pp. 59-62.
[21] Francovich, 1991; Gelichi, 2005, pp. 147-51.

side castles may be taken as evidence of different relationships between the lord and his subjects.[22] A church within the fortified space could point to stronger power in the hands of the lord than would be indicated by a religious building outside the walls. Certainly, access to the church and the visual perception in relationship to the other structures of the castles must have been powerful tools in the hands of the lord to highlight connections, establish privileges, and display his role in managing the religious life of the community. However, the scenarios are varied: there are cases of private chapels used only by the dominant family, there are religious buildings for the entire community, and there are mixed solutions. For example, at Carpineti (Reggio Emilia) a private chapel was built near the palace between the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century, while a larger building, for the wider community, was placed outside the walls.[23]

Mancassola not only highlights the variety of cases, but also shows how they could change over time within the same site. One of the examples he proposes is Montemassi (Grosseto), where the strong correlation between discourses of power and the manipulation of symbolic space emerges very clearly. At Montemassi, between the end of the eleventh and the twelfth century, an isolated chapel was built and enclosed, replacing an earlier church where people from the wider community were buried. Thereafter, while burials in the seigneurial area were restricted, a new cemetery was built outside the walls for the rest of the community.[24]

This example brings us to funerary data, a promising source of evidence for studying the dynamics of power during the seigneurial transformation because the funeral was a moment for negotiating identity and social relationship, and the characteristics of the burial – its placement, its structure, its content – could be highly symbolic. Moreover, the study of skeletal remains can afford insights into the

[22] Mancassola 2018.
[23] Mancassola 2018, pp. 137.
[24] Mancassola, 2018, pp. 136-37.

life of the medieval inhabitants of the Italian countryside, their occupations, their lifestyle and, by extension, their position in society.[25] For example, the cemetery of the castle of Monte Croce (Florence) has been recognised as the burial place for the dominant family and its followers.[26] Thirty-five sub-adults and thirty-six adults have been recovered from graves built of stone, some of them containing multiple inhumations. Analysis of the skeletons has yielded two results. First, the bones of the lower limbs of some of the male individuals show features that are compatible with "knight syndrome," suggesting that most of the men buried in the cemetery were used to riding horses. Second, the signs that the muscles left on the bones of the male upper bodies point towards a habitual practice of handling weapons. Evidence of possible injuries from weapons have also been recognised.[27]

It is likely that these men were of the class that Fiore sees as essential to creating and maintaining the power of the lords within a society that had become highly militarised.[28] They were "a specific class possessing military capacities (but also, more generally, a capacity for social control) that would identify itself with the lord and share his view of social and power relations."[29] The military mounted expeditions; the acts of violence, together with the privileges that this class of men enjoyed (such as concession of properties, exception from levies including the corveés due to the lord from the rest of the population) were essential to the construction of their identities as lords' followers and to strengthen their relationships. From the material evidence we can infer that the existence of a specific, privileged area for their burial might also have been a strategy to forge and perpetuate bonds among these individuals while underscoring their separation from the rest of the community.

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[25] On the interpretation of funerary evidence see, for example, Parker Pearson, 1999; Harke 1997.
[26] Giusiani et al. 2019; for an overview of the site, see Francovich et al., 2003.
[27] Giusiani et al., 2019.
[28] Fiore, 2020, pp. 75-87; 242.
[29] Fiore, 2020, p. 77.

In addition to the study of human bones, a systematic analysis of the archaeozoological evidence can provide information on the social transformations that occurred in the Middle Ages, as Fiore himself remarks.[30] In particular, the examination of a number of animal bones assemblages discovered during the excavations of Tuscan castles by researchers from the University of Siena shed light on economic aspects, diet and practices of social distinction through differential access to the resources.[31] For example, the distribution of animal bones in the different huts of the early medieval site of Poggio Imperiale (Poggibonsi) suggests differences in the types and cuts of meat eaten by the inhabitants. Researchers concluded that "meat would have had a socially distinctive value, as it was used by the lord to show off his condition and his control over individual subjects."[32] Similarly, in the ninth/tenth century and the eleventh century, at Miranduolo (Chiusdino), differences in the consumption of meat between the highest part and the rest of the settlement have been explained as signs of social differences.[33]

The castle of Miranduolo has also produced a significant increase in the evidence bearing on hunting in the period between the end of the tenth and the first half of the twelfth century. This phenomenon, accompanied by profound changes in the settlement pattern, may have been linked to the affirmation of the territorial lordship of the Gherardeschi family.[34]

Faunal remains linked to hunting have been recovered from other Tuscan sites belonging to different chronological periods, usually corresponding to the phases in which the first stone fortifications were erected (e.g., Montarrenti, Campiglia Marittima, Rocchette Pannocchieschi). A similar development is also found in northern Italian sites, such as San Michele di Trino (Vercelli), where

[30] Fiore, 2020, p. 94 and note 85.
[31] Valenti and Salvadori 2007.
[32] Valenti and Salvadori, 2007, p. 180.
[33] Salvadori, 2008, pp. 369-70.
[34] Salvadori, 2008, pp. 352-56.

the majority of the remains of wild species date from the eleventh century, in a village of huts organised around a quadrangular stone building.[35] These data on wild species are important when we consider the development of hunting as an aristocratic activity: hunting, formerly a right of the whole rural community (and, as such, a vital part of its subsistence economy), gradually became a privilege of a restricted group that used it to establish and reinforce social distinctions by excluding the lower strata of population.[36] Further, if we imagine that the lord hunted together with his followers, it can be argued that hunting was also an important occasion for forging and strengthening bonds through gestures and rituals.

To conclude, Alessio Fiore's volume is an important contribution to the study of the Italian countryside in the Central Middle Ages. It provides a detailed and cogently argued analysis of the period between the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth century, bringing new ideas to bear on a change that has also been recently identified by archaeologists. In addition, Fiore's deep analysis of the grammar of power during the seigneurial transformation is a spur to evaluating the material evidence that contributed to these discourses and their informative potentials. As much as these dynamics emerge from the written sources, we must not forget that people interacted and constructed their social relationship within the material world. Castles, churches, cities, lands were the stages upon which these discourses took place, becoming actors themselves in the process. Accordingly, I have suggested some possible paths of research that could be pursued further with more systematic studies and the emergence of new archaeological data. The results of such investigations could then be combined with the historical evidence: the few examples I have offered complement and enrich Fiore's argument, showing how the power discourse was articulated through a variety of means beyond the rhetoric of the texts. The study of the Italian countryside in the Middle Ages and of the

[35] Valenti and Salvadori, 2007, p. 185; Salvadori, 2008, pp. 353-356.
[36] Salvadori, 2008, p. 353 with bibliography.

development of the territorial lordship has shown the value of putting together historical and archaeological evidence to obtain a nuanced picture. Fiore's "The Seigneurial Transformation" is a valuable step in this direction.

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