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The life of a Roman colony in Northern Italy: Ethnobotanical information from archaeobotanical analysis

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ABSTRACT

Archaeobotanical analyses (mainly on seeds and fruits – over 1000 l of sieved material with unpublished data) from three urban sites (2nd cent. BC – 2nd cent. AD) provided interesting ethnobotanical information about a Roman colony, *Mutina* (Emilia-Romagna, Northern Italy), founded in 183 BC.

In this paper, comparisons are made between productive areas, landfills and one site that shows the evolution of a rich *domus*. The information obtained concerns the environment in which the town was born and developed, but especially plant-man relationships (food, crafts, green décor etc.) in a thriving Roman colony in Northern Italy.

A good example is provided by analyses carried out in a tank, where the recovery of some archaeozoological finds indicates that it was used for fish farming; this hypothesis is supported by some particular vegetal findings.

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1. Introduction and historical-archaeological background

At an archaeobotanical level, the Roman Age of the city of Modena (Emilia-Romagna, Northern Italy – Fig. 1) has been examined at ten urban sites, paying attention to environmental (e.g. Bosi et al., 2015a; Montecchi et al., in press) or ethnobotanical perspectives (e.g. Bosi et al., 2011a; Submitted for publication), in an attempt to give a general framework of the urban context between Roman Republic and Late Antiquity periods (e.g. Rinaldi et al., 2013; Mercuri et al., 2015; Bosi et al., 2015b). In these papers high levels of detail have been provided, thanks to the exceptional state of preservation of vegetal findings, as well as to the substantial quantity (e.g. more than 200,000 carpological records have been analysed for the Roman sites of Modena).

In particular, archaeobotanical analysis is fundamental for ethnobotanical reconstruction of the life of a Roman colony in Northern Italy. Italy is of particular interest as its ancient cultural

and crop traditions differ from region to region. Moreover, Roman literary sources describing the northern peninsula are few. That is why targeted palaeoethnobotanical research for the reconstruction of human-plant relationships in that territory are important (e.g. Bandini Mazzanti et al., 2014), regarding both cultivated or wild plants (Antolín et al., 2016). Information provided by these investigations can promote the cultural heritage of the *Mutina* area: the evolution of some typical crops and the history of their cultivation is part of the ethnic/cultural roots of the area. This paper concerns three urban sites of the city of Modena, with both published and unpublished data, of the Roman period (2nd cent. BC – 2nd cent. AD). Some archaeological sites have been selected rather than others of the same urban and peri-urban context because of the rich information that archaeobotanical analyses carried out on their materials has given about the relationship between plants and humans during the period here considered. On these three sites, other contexts of different periods are not taken into account, even when examined.

1.1. Mutina, Roman colony in Northern Italy

The great Roman colony of Modena, founded in 183 BC by approximately two thousand families, played a strategic role both on a commercial (for trade between central Italy and the

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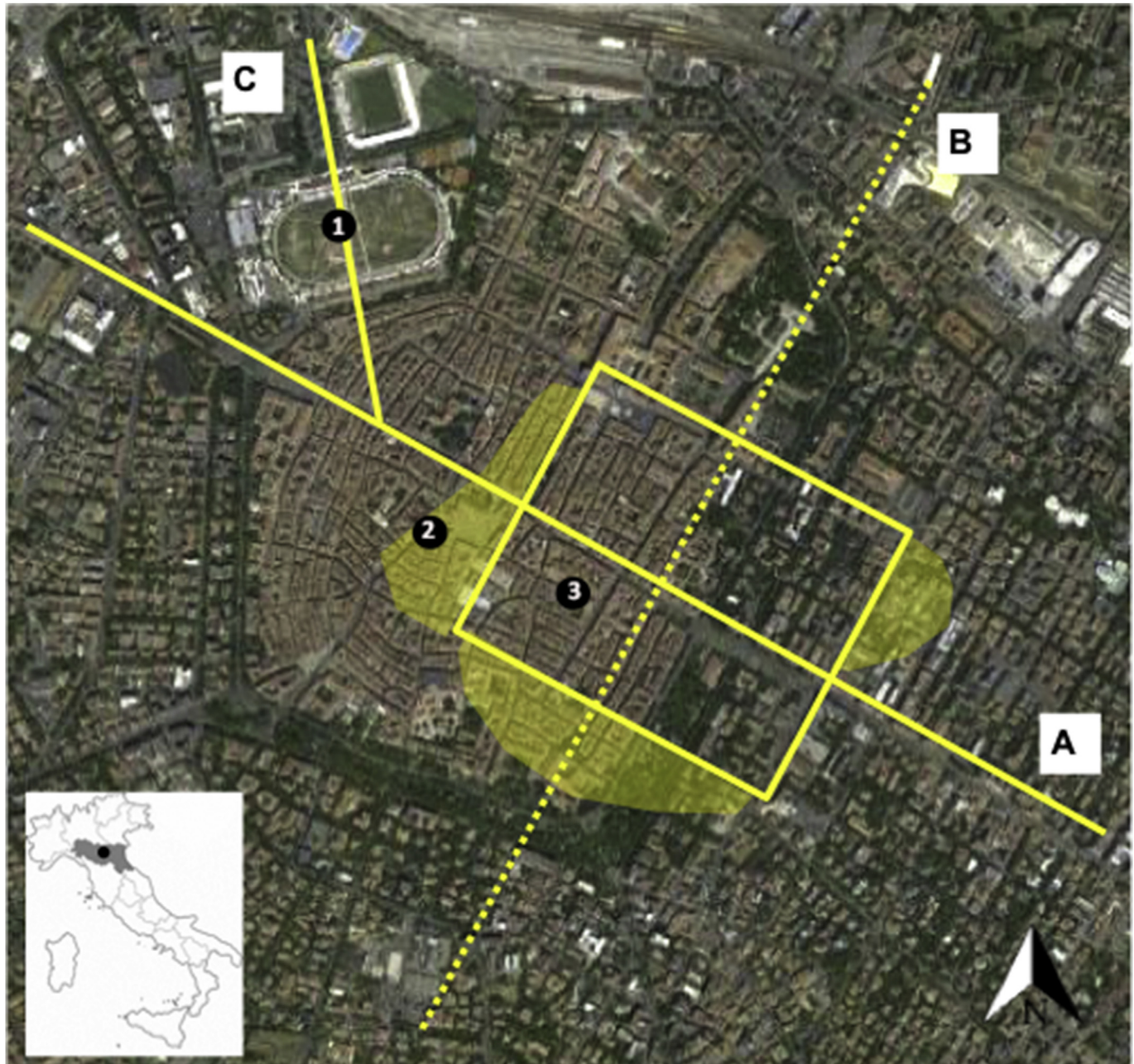


Fig. 1. Location of Modena (Emilia Romagna, Northern Italy) and the three sites studied in this paper (Site 1, 2 and 3). It shows the boundaries of the city during the Republican period and its expansions of Imperial Age (A. via *Æmilia*; B. road axis north-west to Mantua; C. *cardo maximus*) (from Labate et al., 2010 modified).

northern provinces) and military basis (as a line of defence of the northern frontiers).

From the start, *Mutina* was distinguished from other cities of the Italian peninsula for its high economic condition, due to the growth of a prosperous economy, based both on agriculture or farming and manufacturing (bricks, lanterns, fabrics, ...), that gave rise to a varied mid-to upper class of merchants and craftsmen, well documented in local epigraphy. Furthermore, in many classical Authors there are several references to this prosperity which had spread since the founding of the city (e.g. Livius, Cicero, Pomponius Mela) or accurate notes on the good quality of the agricultural and artisan production of Modena (e.g., Varro, Strabo, Columella, Pliny – Calzolari, 2008).

1.2. Sites

The three sites currently considered are included in the urban area of Modena; sites 2 and 3 are in the historic centre, while site 1 is located near the northwest side of the city (Fig. 1). In the Roman Age, in the chronological range considered, Site 3 was already included in the perimeter of *Mutina*, Site 2 was absorbed by urban expansion during the Roman imperial period, while Site 1 remained on the periphery of the colony (Malnati et al., 2009 – Fig. 2).

Site 1 – “Novi Sad” area: 1st cent. BC – 2nd cent. AD; suburb (basin, tub and landfill). The area investigated is 24,000 m² wide and about 8 m deep. The excavation brought to light evidence from

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