A. Voorrips, S. H. Loving & H. Kamermans

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE AGRO PONTINO
(prov. of Latina, Italy)

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The Albert Egges van Giffen Institute for Pre- and Protohistory, University of Amsterdam is preparing an extensive archaeological survey program for the Agro Pontino. Preliminaries have been two small surveys in June 1979 and June 1980, and the collection of material in June 1981 for palynological studies in order to obtain ecological information. The analysis of this material is in progress. The ultimate planning of the survey will heavily rely on the results of a detailed soil survey by the laboratory for Physical Geography and Soil Sciences of the University of Amsterdam, which covered the major part of the Agro Pontino, and which was completed recently (Sevink et al., n.d.). Previous archaeological work in the area and the test surveys of 1979 and 1980 point to a constant inhabitation from the middle Palaeolithic onwards (i.e. Bietti, 1969; Blanc, 1935, 1939, 1953; Piperno 1976/77; Taschini 1972; Voorrips et al., n.d.).

The Agro Pontino is a coastal plain, about 60 km long and 15 km wide, between Rome and Naples. In the north and east it is surrounded by the Monti Lepini and the Monti Ausoni (Anti-Appennines), in the west by tuf-covered hills. The Agro Pontino's southern point is Monte Circeo, an isolated part of the Anti-Appennines. For the rest, the plain is engulfed by the Tyrrenian Sea. The Agro Pontino itself consists mainly of pleistocene and holocene sediments. An approximately 7 km wide graben, largely filled with peat, runs parallel to the mountains. During the soil survey it became clear that the area between the graben and the coast represents a complex of four, well-developed beach-ridge/lagoon formations, incidently disturbed by eolian deposits. These formations could be clearly distinguished by their soil development. Time can have been the only soil forming factor responsible for their different appearance. Altogether the Agro Pontino is well suited for a diachronic regional research project: it has well defined natural boundaries throughout its history; the soil survey's detailed physiographic information is available as well as detailed ecological information through pollen analysis; the area has been constantly inhabited since the Middle Palaeolithic.

Survey Methods

Three interrelated sets of decisions comprise the methods for a region's archaeological survey. On the highest level one needs to determine the sampling fraction and its distribution over the area. On the middle level the sizes and kinds of units to be surveyed need attention. On the lowest level consideration is due for the way in which a single unit is handled in the survey. Of course, decisions on each of these levels are not independent from one another, and where they primarily will follow from the aims and goals of the research, they will be determined for a large part by the practical possibilities and problems in a given area as well. For the Agro Pontino, eventually the sampling scheme will have to be systematic if not complete. During our preliminary work we concentrated on the coastal area. For units we mainly chose fields planted with peppers, eggplants and so on. All these crops are planted in rows, the soil
between the rows is kept free from weeds by repeated shallow ploughing, and the archaeological remains are clearly visible. A field was surveyed either by systematic transects or completely, the sampling fraction in the former case being between 20 and 50%. Repeated surveys have been carried out on a number of occasions. A first appraisal of the results of these repetitions seems to show that no significant differences are present between the separate collections.

Central Themes in the future survey program

1. The extension of our knowledge of the ecological situations and their constraints on the development of social systems, by means of palynological, pedological and geomorphological studies.
2. A detailed study of the archaeological evidence from West Central Italy.
3. A systematic survey of the Agro Pontino, in order to document the distribution and density of archaeological sites through time.
4. The construction of models for the evolutions in land use, technology, and social organization.
5. The testing of such models by means of additional surveys and — if necessary and possible — excavation.

REFERENCES


1. Calcareous mountains
2. Tuff-covered hills
3. Peat filled graben
4. Sandy-clayey marine terraces

Location of the Agro Pontino and physiographic map

Fig. 1. Map showing location of the Agro Pontino, Prov. of Latina, Italy and a detailed physiographic map of the region.