

# **CROSSING THE ALPS**

**EARLY URBANISM BETWEEN NORTHERN ITALY  
AND CENTRAL EUROPE (900-400 BC)**



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AND CENTRAL EUROPE (900-400 BC)**

**EDITED BY** LORENZO ZAMBONI, MANUEL FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ  
& CAROLA METZNER-NEBELSICK



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TRUST



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## Chapter 2

# Aspects of Urbanism in Later Bronze Age Northern Italy

Mark Pearce

*This paper asks the question whether towns may be said to be visible in the archaeological record of northern Italy before the Iron Age. It argues that we should not use the forms of urbanism of the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman cities as criteria for identifying towns, but that the medieval town is a better comparator as it shows many elements of similarity with Iron Age forms of urbanism in Europe. Having established a selection of possible criteria for the identification of a town, it is argued that Final Bronze Age-Early Iron Age Frattesina is a good candidate for a town, as are the Recent Bronze Age terramare of the Po plain. The preconception that there cannot be towns in Bronze Age northern Italy is 'primitivist' and hinders a dispassionate assessment of the evidence.*

*Keywords: Urbanism; Final Bronze Age; Recent Bronze Age; Frattesina; Terramare*

### 2.1 Introduction

In this paper I shall examine whether aspects of urbanism may be said to be visible in the archaeological record of northern Italy before the Iron Age. This will entail discussing precisely what we mean by the term urbanism and briefly reviewing part of the debate.

The conventional (and pessimistic) view is clearly expressed by Anthony Harding (2000, 71):

*“Some authors have considered that the trend towards clustered settlement, ... along with the creation of surrounding features (fences, palisades, ditches, ramparts) that marked the edge of the settlement, indicate that settlement in some parts of the Bronze Age can be called “urban” or at least “proto-urban”. ... Unfortunately there is little agreement on what constitutes a “town” as opposed to a “village”, other than that it should have certain administrative, political and commercial functions. Whether such functions could be identified archaeologically in a period prior to the use of writing is a moot point”.*

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In other words, in Harding's view there is no agreement as to the criteria for defining an urban settlement, and even if there was, it is unlikely that we could identify such a settlement in a period before writing.

In this paper I shall examine a range of criteria put forward for the recognition of urban settlements and show that towns can indeed be recognised in prehistory, despite the absence of written evidence for their status.

## 2.2 What do we mean by urbanism?

In order to answer this question, we need first to address three issues.

The first is one of terminology and is a source of confusion when working between languages. In English and French there are two words that are used to denote an ‘urban’ settlement, ‘town’ and ‘city’, ‘ville’ and ‘cité’, while other European languages have just one (Schledermann 1970, 115). So, for example, Italian uses *città* and German *stadt*, both of whose semantic field encompasses the two English terms. To avoid confusion, in this paper I shall talk about ‘towns’. The reasons for this choice will become clear as the discourse is developed.

The second problem relates to the history of our discipline. The classic definition of urbanism is that of Gordon Childe (1950), who in an incisive paper in the *Town Planning Review*, defined it in terms of the cities of the ancient Orient, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley, where the phenomenon first appeared, and Mesoamerica. Childe (1950, 9-16) used 10 descriptive traits to define a city:

1. Size and density;
2. Composition and function (cities have ‘full-time specialist craftsmen, transport workers, merchants, officials, and priests’);
3. The primary producers paid their surplus to the god or king;
4. Monumental buildings (which ‘also symbolize the concentration of the social surplus’);
5. Unequal distribution of social surplus;
6. Invention of writing;
7. The invention of ‘exact and predictive sciences – arithmetic, geometry and astronomy’;
8. Sophisticated art;
9. Long-distance trade;
10. ‘State organization ... based on residence rather than kinship’.

It will be immediately clear that there are a range of problems with Childe’s criteria. Firstly, they describe the very first towns to appear and are not universally applicable. Secondly, some of the aspects that Childe uses as a criterion for urbanism also occur in non-urban societies – e.g. there is already monumental architecture at Göbekli Tepe in the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Schmidt 2006). Finally, some of the criteria can only really be recognised where written sources are available, such as a state organisation based on kinship (criterion 10).

The third issue is one that particularly affects scholars working in Europe, and especially in the Mediterranean. Rather paradoxically, we might term it the ‘teleological premise’. Put simply, Mediterranean archaeologists tend to see the classical Greek *poleis*, or the cities of Etruria or Rome, as the outcome of the process of urbanism. They

therefore *implicitly* tend to use features of those ‘cities’ to identify urbanism. This tendency is perhaps heightened by the sense of inferiority that some prehistorians perceive *vis à vis* their classical archaeologist colleagues, which leads them to unconscious bias in favour of classical models. But the Mediterranean cities, like those of the ancient Orient, are arguably just one type of city, just one outcome of urbanism. It is in order to avoid this teleological premise that in this paper I have chosen to avoid the use of the word ‘city’, which carries the baggage of the Mediterranean cities of the classical world.

I would argue that neither the Mediterranean cities nor the Oriental models adduced by Childe are useful to understand the towns of northern Italy and central Europe. It is in fact more helpful to reflect on the development of *medieval* European towns. This is not a new idea, indeed nearly 50 years ago John Alexander (1972, 848) pointed out that: “*In many ways the Medieval towns of central and north-western Europe with their emphasis on ... commercial and political functions ... seem to resemble their prehistoric predecessors more than their Imperial ones. In a number of specialized fields, e.g. architecture, religion, art history, social organisation, the reappearance or, in the west, reintroduction of prehistoric traits has been increasingly recognized by medieval historians. It may be of value to consider medieval urban development as derived in some part at least from an indigenous urban tradition which was developing in prehistoric times and which reappeared in the west after the Roman interlude*”.

In other words, and turning Alexander’s argument on its head, if we look at the form and functions of medieval towns, we may gain insight into prehistoric urbanism.

## 2.3 The medieval town

In his 1967 monograph, *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siècle*,<sup>1</sup> Fernand Braudel offers general considerations on the nature of medieval towns in Europe. The first point which he makes is that towns are not necessarily only defined by their size: there can in fact be extensive villages that are bigger than some towns (Braudel 1976, 54).

The statistics that Braudel (1967, 370-371) reports are quite surprising. Before 1500, 90-95% of western European towns had fewer than 2,000 inhabitants<sup>2</sup> and the average population of the 3,000 German ‘cities’ was no more than 400. Looking at colonial British North America, town size

1 Translated into English in 1973 as *Capitalism and material life, 1400-1800*; chapter 8 was slightly abridged and republished as a stand-alone essay, entitled ‘Pre-modern towns’, in 1976. A later substantial revision of the monograph, *Les Structures du Quotidien: Le Possible et L’Impossible*, was published in 1979 and translated into English in 1981.

2 This statistic is omitted from the revised version (1979; 1981) of Braudel’s book.

in 1700 was: Boston 7,000; Philadelphia 4,000; Newport 2,600; Charlestown 1,100; New York 3,900. This observation is quite important, as size seems to be a recurring criterion for the archaeological definition of towns (it is Childe's first criterion, as we have seen) and I wonder what an archaeologist would make of such small settlements, if he didn't already 'know' (from written sources, one would imagine) that they were 'towns'.

Secondly, Braudel (1967, 372-373) notes that the town is part of a settlement hierarchy – it exists as a town in relation to lesser settlements. Towns detach the secondary sectors of the economy from the primary, agricultural, sector, but inhabitants of towns may continue to farm the surrounding land.

Thirdly, there is constant immigration to towns because they are perceived to offer more freedom and higher rates of pay, but also because of their high mortality rates (Braudel 1967, 374-376).

Fourthly, Braudel (1967, 376) notes that nearly all towns from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century AD had walls (apart from in the British Isles). He argues that in a very real sense, as well as their practical purpose for defence, walls define the town. Indeed, Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* (1690, vol. 3, no page numbers) defines a town (*ville*) as the "*habitation d'un peuple assez nombreux, qui est ordinairement fermée de murailles*" ("*home of a large number of people which is normally enclosed by walls*").<sup>3</sup>

Fifthly, Braudel also discusses whether deliberate town planning can be said to be a criterion defining a town, and notes that: "*Deux civilisations seulement ont fabriqué en grand la ville enchevêtrée et irrégulière: l'Islam ... et l'Occident moyenâgeux*" ("*only two civilisations built confused and irregular towns on a large scale: Islam ... and the West in the middle Ages*"; Braudel 1967, 380; 1976, 62).

Finally, it is worth noting another important criterion that Braudel adduces for urban status. As he writes: "*Mais toute ville, quelle qu'elle soit, est d'abord un marché. Qu'il manque, la ville est impensable*" ("*every town, wherever it may be, is first and foremost a market. If there is no market, a town is inconceivable*"; Braudel 1967, 385; 1976, 65), though he accepts that in medieval Europe you could also have a market without a town.

Another approach to the definition of a medieval town, in this case in Great Britain, was offered by Carolyn Heighway (ed., 1972, 2), who defined as a town those settlements that fulfilled more than one of the following criteria, while accepting that this low bar did not necessarily prove their urban status (indeed, Biddle [1976, 100] commented that "*a place needs to fulfil not less than three or four of these criteria to merit serious consideration as a town*"):

1. Urban defences (walls or bank and ditch, with or without wooden defences);
2. A deliberately planned street lay-out, perhaps with 'provision for a market place';
3. Presence of a market (which is described as 'perhaps the only indispensable criterion');
4. Presence of a mint;
5. Legal recognition;
6. Position – 'a central position in a network of communications may be a clue to its importance';
7. '[A] high density and size of population compared with surrounding places'
8. A diversified economic base, 'a concentration of crafts in one area, and evidence of long-distance trade'
9. '[S]urviving houses will be urban rather than rural in form';
10. Social differentiation, '[a] town should contain a wide range of social classes';
11. 'The presence of a complex religious organisation';
12. Judicial centre.

When these criteria were developed, there was no assumption of continuity between Roman towns and early medieval ones in Britain (Biddle 1976, 103), even when they occupied the same site, so they avoid the baggage of the Roman model of a town. It is therefore my contention that these considerations are useful in assessing whether prehistoric settlements may be identified as early towns.

## 2.4 Bronze Age urbanism: Frattesina

Having established that medieval towns did not look like a classical Greek *polis*, or the cities of Etruria or Rome, we can look at Bronze Age settlements free from and unencumbered by the 'teleological premise'.

The most obvious candidate for the status of a town in later Bronze Age northern Italy is Frattesina (Fratta Polesine RO); there is a vast literature on this important Final Bronze Age and Early Iron Age site, but most recently, see Bietti Sestieri *et al.* (eds.) 2019. Situated along a branch of the Po, the settlement was laid out along a main canal with perpendicular minor canals. It was a major node in a commercial network linking the Baltic and the Levant, trading amber, southeast Alpine copper, ivory, and ostrich eggshell. It used a weighing system linked to the Levantine shekel. It was not only an *entrepôt*, it was also a major industrial centre: as well as antler working and glass production, exotic raw materials (the Baltic amber and the north African and/or Levantine elephant ivory and ostrich eggshell) were imported to be worked at Frattesina – *i.e.* value was added at the site. Bronze artefacts were produced on an industrial scale: at least 100 moulds and 4 founder's hoards are known. The settlement was ruled by a small group whose prerogative was to bear a sword, sometimes with gold rivets. Analysis of the grave goods

3 This seems to be a cross-cultural definition, for example in first millennium BC Zhou dynasty China, the same character was used to denote both city and wall (Wheatley 1970, 170).

from burials at the Le Narde cemetery suggests that there were five socio-economic strata, in a pyramidal structure from poorest to richest (Cardarelli *et al.* 2015, 441-443, fig.5), though reconstructing its precise social make-up is complicated by a ritual prohibition on depositing weapons in male graves (Bietti Sestieri 2019a, 11), which applies to all but the sword-bearers.

So, was Frattesina a town? Certainly it fulfils a number of the criteria posited by Heighway (ed., 1972, 2) for the identification of a town in medieval Great Britain: having evidence for town planning (criterion 2), being laid out along artificial canals; a central position in a trade network (criterion 6); a diversified economy with a concentration of craft activities and participation in long-distance trade (criterion 8); it shows evidence for social differentiation among the people living at the settlement (criterion 10). There is no evidence for defensive structures (criterion 1; cf. Bellintani *et al.* 2019) and it is debatable whether its relatively large size (10 ha; Baldo *et al.* 2018) constitutes sufficient evidence for urban status (criterion 7), as there are larger contemporary settlements like Villamarzana (RO; which Bietti Sestieri [2019a, 10] prefers to see as the central place in the polity), but certainly the surface scatter of archaeological material at Frattesina suggests that it was *densely* inhabited. Finally, whether or not it had a market-place as such, it functioned as a market (criterion 3), trading goods circulating from the Baltic to the East Mediterranean, which as we have seen is perhaps the most important criterion of all (Heighway, ed., 1972, 2).

## 2.5 The *terramare*

If we assume that Frattesina meets the criteria for a town, the question arises as to whether there are any other settlements in Bronze Age northern Italy which might also be identified as towns. The *terramare* of the Middle and Recent Bronze Age central Po plain are without doubt the best candidates. In this section I shall therefore examine whether they too can be said to meet the criteria. I shall first concentrate on the Recent Bronze Age polity of the Valli Grandi Veronesi, centred on the site of Fondo Paviani (Legnago VR), which survives the collapse of the *terramare* system at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC.

It may be useful to begin by examining the historical relationship between Frattesina and the Valli Grandi Veronesi polity. Broadly expressed, there are two views. For Anna Maria Bietti Sestieri (*e.g.* 1997, though her later position is more nuanced: 2019a; 2019b), Frattesina, as a projection northwards from Protovillanovan Etruria, represents an entirely new phenomenon in the Po delta area that was stimulated by eastern traders, whilst the alternative viewpoint was developed by Armando De Guio (1991, 175-176, fig. 12; 2000, 306-308, fig. 21; De Guio *et al.* 2015, 315-316). He suggests that there is a progressive shift of socio-political power from the area around Lake Garda

(Early Bronze Age), to the middle Veronese plain (Middle Bronze Age) and then to the Valli Grandi Veronesi (Middle-Recent Bronze Age), and thence in the Final Bronze Age to Frattesina at the apex of the delta area; this political and economic shift seems to be motivated by the desire to control the supply of southeast Alpine copper (De Guio *et al.* 2015, 315; cf. De Guio 2000, 308). Thus, Frattesina is the successor to the role of the Valli Grandi Veronesi polity.

At the central place in the Valli Grandi Veronesi polity, Fondo Paviani (Legnago VR; most recently Cupitò *et al.* 2015a), lead isotope work has shown that all seven artefacts analysed are compatible with southeast Alpine copper ore (Cupitò *et al.* 2015b, 842-844 figs 6 and 7; Vicenzutto *et al.* 2015, 835-838), which would tend to support the importance of the copper trade. The presence of Italo-Mycenaean pottery at various sites in the polity, but particularly at Fondo Paviani (Bettelli *et al.* 2015), certainly prefigures the role of Frattesina, and the control of the copper trade and trade with the East Mediterranean may go some way to explaining Fondo Paviani's resistance to the collapse of the *terramare* system.

However, if we are to assess whether the *terramare* of the Valli Grandi Veronesi polity are towns, it is perhaps best to consider Castello del Tartaro (Cerea VR), which, like the other *terramare* in the Valli Grandi Veronesi polity, is surrounded by a bank and ditch. The team led by De Guio have, on the basis of remote sensing and targeted fieldwork, reconstructed a complex system of roads and irrigation ditches surrounding the *terramara* (Balista and De Guio 1997; De Guio *et al.* 2015). Vicenzutto (2017, database site 51) calculates that it took between 869 (equivalent to 3 m<sup>3</sup> moved per person per day) and 1303 (2 m<sup>3</sup> per person per day) days work to dig the defensive ditch surrounding Castello del Tartaro, and this does not include the labour for the diversion of the natural watercourse and the laying out of the fields and their irrigation ditches.

Vicenzutto (2017, fig. 49) estimates a population of c. 3000 individuals at Castello del Tartaro and more than 3500 for Fondo Paviani in the Recent Bronze Age, while strontium and oxygen isotope data from burials at Scalvinetto (a cemetery of 705 excavated graves [Cavazzuti *et al.* 2015, 793] which relates to Fondo Paviani) suggest that 28 out of 60 (47%) individuals examined were not indigenous, with some individuals originating from a distance of over 50 km from Fondo Paviani (Cavazzuti *et al.* 2019, 33-34); the locally made Italo-Mycenaean pottery also likely documents immigrant potters (Bettelli *et al.* 2015, 385).

We have therefore useful data to ask whether the *terramare* of the Valli Grandi Veronesi were towns. I shall start by examining the fit to Heighway's (ed., 1972, 2) criteria for the identification of a town in medieval Great Britain. The *terramare* are defended by banks and ditches (criterion 1) and Fondo Paviani, at least, has 'a central position in a network of communications' within its polity

(criterion 6). Vicenzutto's population estimates suggest a high and dense population at the larger sites (criterion 7) and the Italo-Mycenaean pottery and alpine copper attest to a diversified economy with long-distance trade (criterion 8); indeed, we could convincingly argue that Fondo Paviani at least functioned as a market (criterion 3; cf. Bettelli *et al.* 2015, 385). Finally, we may note that Fondo Paviani fits two of the features identified by Braudel as denoting towns: it is at the centre of a settlement hierarchy (Braudel 1976, 55-57) and is characterised by immigration from surrounding areas (Braudel 1976, 58-59).

This fit to the criteria for the identification of a town may seem surprising, especially to those whose primitivism leads them to doubt *a priori* that such a complex socio-economic structure could exist in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. The *terramare* of the Valli Grandi Veronesi do not of course look anything like the classical *polis*, but as we have seen, that is not the point.

If we accept the foregoing identification of the Recent Bronze Age *terramare* of the Valli Grandi Veronesi as towns, then we must ask whether the Middle and Recent Bronze Age *terramare* of the central Po plain to the south of the Po may also be identified as urban. Before turning our attention to this question, it is worth noting that it is widely accepted that the complex social organisation of the Valli Grandi Veronesi polity, as demonstrated by its earthworks, roads, and irrigation system, with attendant issues of land-rights and their management, would have required central co-ordination, and De Guio *et al.* (2015, 314-315) argue convincingly that it was a simple chiefdom society (cf. Vicenzutto 2017, 240). However, this socio-political reconstruction is not accepted by many as applying to the *terramare* heartland. Thus Andrea Cardarelli (2010, 454) prefers to see these banked and ditched settlements as “a cohesive, isonomic organism, whose social constituents are highly integrated within the community” with infrastructure works “presumably carried out by obtaining community consent”. He accepts that an elite did exist and is documented in the funerary evidence, but it “probably ... [consisted of] outstanding personages from the various kinship groupings into which the village community was subdivided” (Cardarelli 2010, 454). Although Cardarelli (*ibid.*) accepts that “this picture changes substantially in political terms between the ... [Middle Bronze 3] and the ... [Recent Bronze 1] (1450-1250 BC), when evidence suggests a more hierarchically oriented territorial organisation”, he argues that “this did not, however, have a far-reaching impact on the production system and the social structure...”. While this (primitivist) argument does not affect the question as to whether the *terramare* meet the criteria to be identified as towns, it is relevant because the more simple the social organisation of a settlement, the less likely it is to have achieved the complexity of a town.

The *terramare* of the central Po plain consist of a network of more than 60 banked and ditched settlements, mostly south of the Po. In the Middle Bronze Age their density reached one site per 25 km<sup>2</sup>. In their early phases the *terramare* are usually no bigger than 2 ha, but the Recent Bronze Age sees many sites abandoned and others reach considerable dimensions: for example Santa Rosa di Poviglio (RE) goes from 1 ha to 7 ha, Case del Lago (Campegine RE) reaches 22.5 ha, and the outer enclosure at Case Cocconi (Campegine RE) is 60 ha in extent (Bernabò Brea *et al.* 1997; Pearce 1998). Perhaps the best known *terramara* is Santa Rosa di Poviglio (Bernabò Brea and Cremaschi 1997).

Was Santa Rosa di Poviglio a town? Using again Heighway's (ed., 1972, 2) criteria for the identification of a town in medieval Great Britain, we may note that the *terramara* is (as is usual) defended by a bank and ditch (criterion 1) and has a planned lay-out of streets with modular houses (criteria 2 and 9); the houses are tightly packed, indicating a dense population (criterion 7). In the Recent Bronze Age the *terramara piccola* becomes a highly fortified keep, arguably the residence of an elite (which might meet criterion 10); certainly it could be classed as monumental architecture (Childe's [1950] criterion 4). More generally, in the Recent Bronze Age some *terramare* attain a role as central places (Cardarelli 2010, 451) (criterion 6) and the presence of weights (tied to east Mediterranean weighing systems: Cardarelli *et al.* 1997; 2004) is a strong index of market functions (criterion 3). Again, it would seem that although the *terramare* are clearly not classical *poleis*, they meet many of the criteria that are used to denote a medieval town.

We might further argue that the banked and ditched settlements of the Friuli plain, a similar network of defended settlements in a densely settled landscape (Borgna *et al.* 2018a; 2018b), also meet such criteria.

## 2.6 Conclusions

Looked at from the perspective of classical Greek *poleis*, or Etruscan cities, or Rome, it would be difficult to argue for urbanism in later Bronze Age northern Italy. However, if we escape the teleological premise and accept that there was a different type of indigenous European urbanism, much more similar to medieval towns, that was supplanted during the Iron Age by the classical, Mediterranean model, then we can certainly identify towns by comparison with medieval models, as early as the later Bronze Age, if not before.

It is my contention that we must abandon the 'primitivist' preconception that there cannot be towns in Bronze Age northern Italy. Braudel (1967, 370; 1976, 53) wrote that “... où qu'elle soit, une ville est une ville” (“...a town is a town wherever it is”), but I would argue that “a town is a town whenever it is”!



## Acknowledgements

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