

Roman 'backwater' bucked Empire's decline, archaeologists reveal

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View of the Interamna Lirenas excavation from above and from the North. Photograph taken in September 2023. The remains of the theater can be seen in the center, with the remains of the basilica behind it. Credit: Alessandro Launaro

A rare roofed theater, markets, warehouses, a river port and other startling discoveries made by a Cambridge-led team of archaeologists challenge major assumptions about the decline of Roman Italy.

New findings from Interamna Lirenas, traditionally written off as a failed backwater in Central Italy, change our understanding of Roman history, its excavators believe.

Their thirteen-year study—published today in the edited volume "Roman Urbanism in Italy"—shows that the town in Southern Lazio continued to thrive well into the 3rd century A.D., bucking what is normally considered Italy's general state of decline in this period.

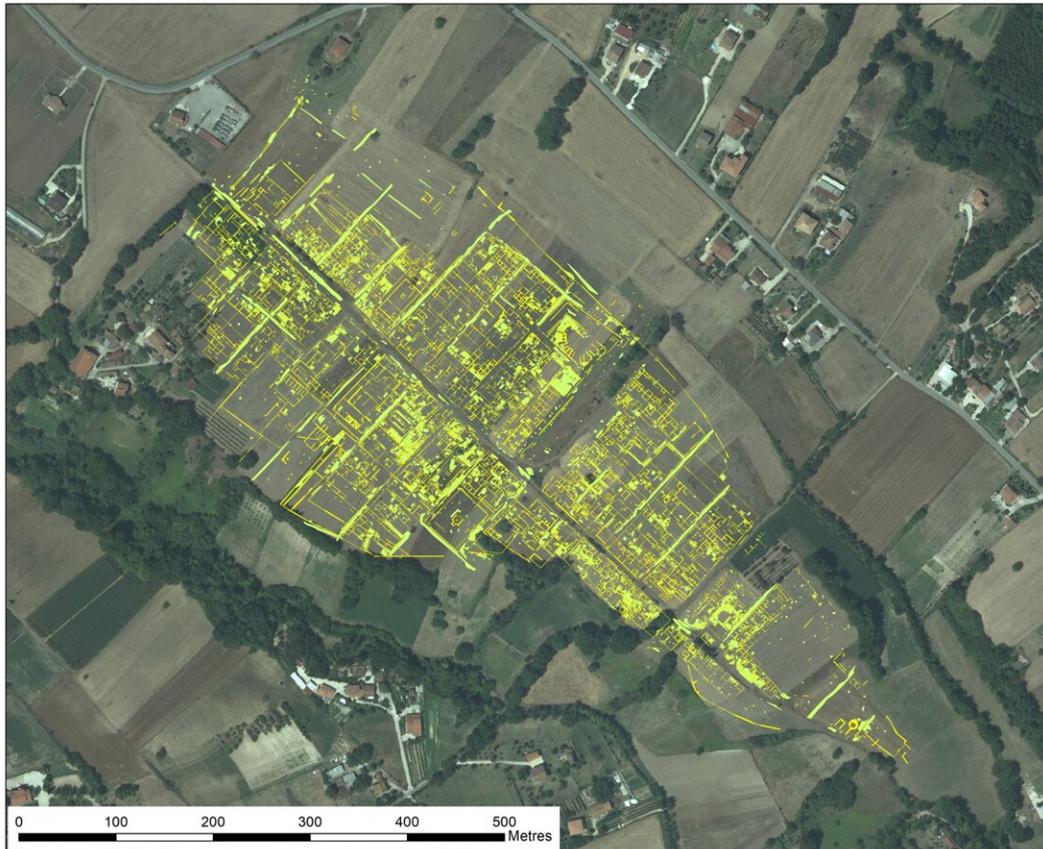
The team's pottery analysis indicates that the town's decline began around 300 years later than previously assumed, while a systematic geophysical survey has produced an astonishingly detailed image of the entire town's layout, highlighting a wide range of impressive urban features.

"We started with a site so unpromising that no one had ever tried to excavate it—that's very rare in Italy," said Dr. Alessandro Launaro, the study's author and Interamna Lirenas Project lead at the University of Cambridge's Classics Faculty.

"There was nothing on the surface, no visible evidence of buildings, just bits of broken pottery. But what we discovered wasn't a backwater, far from it. We found a thriving town adapting to every challenge thrown at it for 900 years. We're not saying that this town was special, it's far more exciting than that. We think many other average Roman towns in Italy were just as resilient. It's just that archaeologists have only recently begun to apply the right techniques and approaches to see this."

Because the site was mostly open fields, the archaeologists were able to

conduct a magnetic and ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey of around 60 acres. They also launched a series of targeted excavations around the [forum](#).



Interpretation of geophysical survey results showing underground traces of Interamna Lirenas in the context of the wider landscape today. Credit: Alessandro Launaro

Pottery proves resilience

Until recently, archaeologists have tended to focus on evidence of higher status imported pottery rather than on the kind of plain commonware

pottery used for cooking. The study of commonware has advanced over the last 20 years but Launaro's team made it specifically central to their investigation.

Forty years ago, Canadian archaeologists studied the distribution of fineware and amphorae potsherds in the ploughsoil above Interamna Lirenas and concluded that the town's occupation peaked in the late 2nd to early 1st centuries B.C. (at around 74 acres), before shrinking to around 25 acres by the 1st century A.D.

But Launaro and his colleagues mapped the town's development using a far larger and more reliable body of excavated evidence, tens of thousands of pieces of commonware pottery. This showed that the town actually resisted decline until the later part of the 3rd century A.D., around 300 years later than previously assumed. At its peak, the town would have housed around 2000 people.

Launaro said, "Based on the relative lack of imported pottery, archaeologists have assumed that Interamna Lirenas was a declining backwater. We now know that wasn't the case."

Julius Caesar

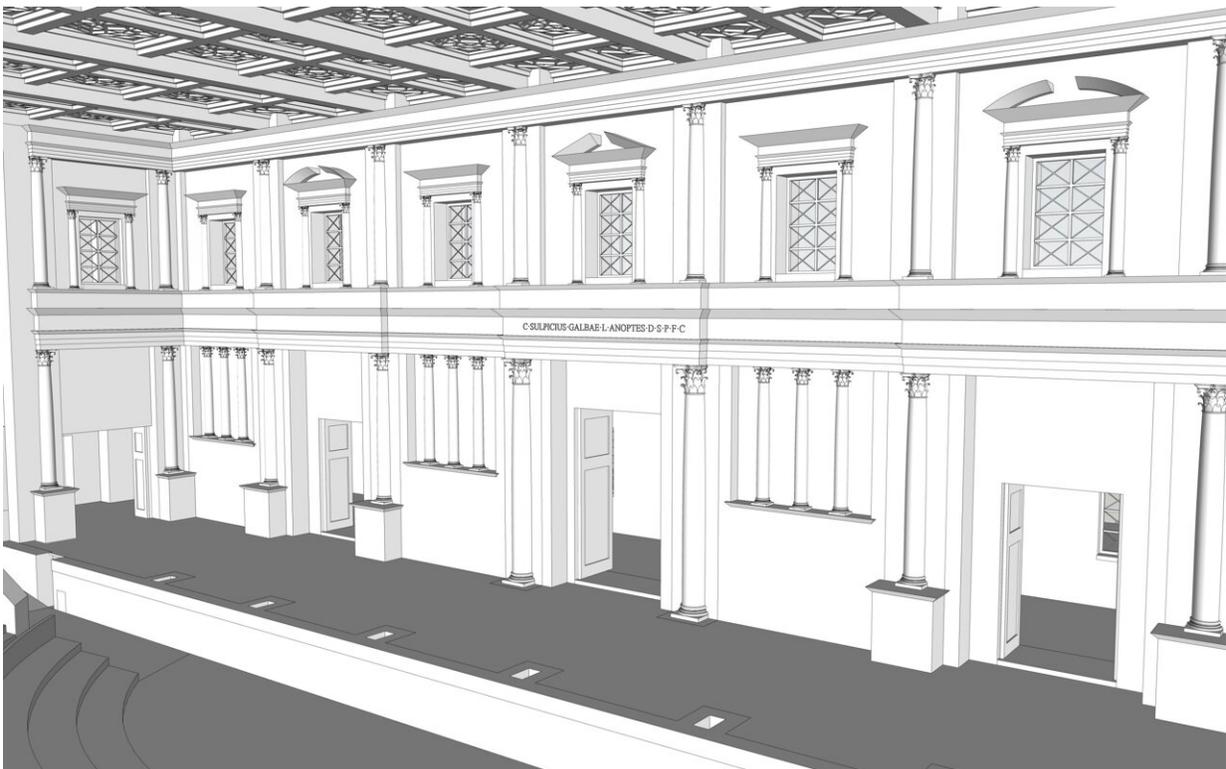
The team's re-appraisal of an inscription found in the nineteenth century (now lost) confirms that Interamna Lirenas gained the patronage of Julius Caesar in 46 B.C., but Dr. Launaro argues that this did not make it exceptional or explain the town's long-term success. Rather the archaeologists' findings help to explain why the town would have appealed to Caesar.

Launaro, a Fellow of Gonville & Caius College, said, "Interamna Lirenas was strategically located between a river and a major road, and it was a thriving node in the regional urban network. It would have been valuable

to Julius Caesar as he sought to consolidate support across Italy during the civil wars."

"This town continually played its cards right, it was always forging relations with communities between Rome and southern Italy while thriving as a trading hub."

While we currently only know of three other towns to share this privilege, almost certainly there were more.



An artist's impression of the interior of the Interamna Lirenas theater from the seating area, showing the scaena, the facade of the stage. Credit: Alessandro Launaro

River port

The team's GPR survey near the River Liri revealed the presence of a large (40m x 12m) warehouse, a temple and a bath complex.

The researchers are confident that these structures all served a river port between the late 1st century B.C. and the 4th century A.D.

"River ports didn't just need warehouses," Launaro said. "People spent a lot of time working and resting in the vicinity so they needed all kinds of amenities, just like the ones we found here."

The River Liri was undoubtedly navigable because the Emperor Claudius planned to make it even more so by diverting the waters of a lake into it.

Launaro said, "This river port enabled Interamna Lirenas to profit from trade between Aquinum and Casinum, key centers to the north, and Minturnae and the Tyrrhenian coast to the southeast. It would have been crucial to the town's success."

The now wooded area under which the piers of the river port might still survive is not currently accessible so cannot be excavated for now.

Theater

The archaeologists discovered that the sector immediately to the north of the town's forum underwent significant redevelopment in the late 1st century B.C.



Drone view of the excavation of the two footpaths lining the street separating the basilica (top) from the theater (bottom) at Interamna Lirenas. Credit: Alessandro Launaro

Along the northwestern side of the town, the archaeologists discovered the remains of a roofed theater which would have towered over an open terrace. The theater (around 45 m x 26 m) would have been big enough to seat 1,500 people.

Roofed theaters are quite rare in Roman Italy and represent a significant upgrade on open-air structures, acoustically, architecturally and financially. The theater boasted diverse marbles imported from across

the central and eastern Mediterranean.

Launaro said, "The fact that this town went for a roofed theater, such a refined building, does not fit with a backwater in decline. This theater was a major status symbol. It displayed the town's wealth, power and ambition."

The archaeologists found evidence of the theater undergoing improvements, including to the stage's architectural background. They also found an inscription bearing the name "Anoptes," a wealthy freedman of the Sulpicii Galbae, a powerful family which likely had trade links to Interamna Lirenas. The theater's construction likely benefited from the generosity of Anoptes.

At a time when Roman Italy may have struggled, Interamna Lirenas's theater was still in operation. An inscription stating that M. Sentius Crispinus was honored with a bisellium (a double seat) at some point between the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. has indeed been linked with this theater.

Launaro said, "The assumed lack of a theater here was taken as evidence of the town's decline. At nearby Roman towns, archaeologists saw the remains of theaters sticking out of the ground. The remains of Interamna Lirenas' amazing theater was there all along, just completely buried."

Bath time

The town boasted an impressive three bath complexes.

The larger of these (c. 2,400 m²), located not far from the forum, featured a sizable swimming pool surrounded by a portico. An inscription tells us that the portico was a gift from M. Sentius Crispinus at some point in the 3rd–4th centuries A.D.



The remains of the theater (bottom) and basilica (top) of Interamna Lirenas, seen from above. Credit: Alessandro Launaro

Another inscription reveals that in A.D. 408 another member of the family, M. Sentius Redemptus, saved the same baths from "collapsing" and kept them in operation with his benefactions.

This provides important evidence that even when Italy's decline was in full swing, Interamna Lirenas "continued to exist as a civic center of some relevance."

Housing

One of the most striking aspects of the town is the density of its occupation. 190 of the town's houses (84%) were small (under 500 m²), interspersed with 25 larger houses (500–1,000 m²) and just 5 dwellings over 1,000 m².

Much like Pompeii and Herculaneum, Interamna Lirenas offers no sign of zoning or separation by social status.

Trade

The team identified nineteen sizable "courtyard buildings," mostly located at a distance from the forum, which they believe may have served as indoor market buildings (macella), guildhouses (scholae), apartment blocks and, above all public warehouses (horrea).

This impressive infrastructure suggests that the town was a significant trade hub in service to larger centers including Aquinum and Casinum. This is supported by surviving lists showing that Interamna Lirenas hosted two different markets.

The archaeologists found a large open space (over 1 acre) to the southeast of the town which they believe served as a sheep and cattle market. Interamna Lirenas likely played a key role in the region's thriving wool trade.



A plan of Interamna Lirenas showing the distribution of different types of buildings. Credit: Alessandro Launaro

The archaeologists did not find a layer of ash or any other evidence to suggest that the town was violently destroyed.

Launaro argues that inhabitants probably deserted the town amid growing insecurity but before the Lombard invasion of the late 6th century A.D., because they knew they were on a direct route that marauding armies were bound to use.

Modern residents of Pignataro Interamna, the nearest town to the site, have taken Interamna Lirenas's revised history to heart.

Launaro said, "This community has been inspired by this story of reinvention and resilience. They've even renamed the local café after the Sundial we discovered."

More information: A. Launaro, "Interamna Lirenas: how special?" in A. Launaro (ed.), *Roman Urbanism in Italy: Recent Discoveries and New Directions* (Oxford, 2023)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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