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Reading Urban Form

Alessandro Camiz, Martin Ebert, Giorgio Verdiani editors

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DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS IN THE ADRIATIC CITY OF PESCARA

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ABSTRACT

A comparison of several historical maps of the city of Pescara with a contemporary zenithal aerial photograph clearly highlights the differences between these distant in the time attestations. These differences arise from the transformations that have occurred in certain locations over the centuries, in relation to the rest of the urban territory. The city, with its distinctive elements, appears as a palimpsest, in which at times an original state has been overwritten by a new one. In other cases, however, clues or traces remain that facilitate understanding the past events that gave rise to the current urban configuration. This essay specifically addresses the interpretation of a key element of the Adriatic city of Pescara: the railway line that has influenced urban development since 1863. We pull over it with the original layout of the ancient fortified city, whose structure, completely different from the rest of the urban fabric, has shaped its historical image.

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Figure 1. Pescara, Aerial photograph, Department of Architecture, Pescara, 2010.

Between Perception and Representation

The city, defined as a "mobile" entity (Cacciari, 2004), constitutes the space in which multiple signs of a heterogeneous nature are deposited and stratified. "The 'Sign,' called *representamen* because it represents (stands for) something, its 'Object,'" states Farinelli (2009), constitutes the medium through which we approach reality in its various aspects. Some signs are directly perceptible through the use of urban spaces by walking the streets, others emerge from the observation of scenarios or events. Further signs manifest themselves under particular conditions, for example, by seeking out certain subjects or addressing specific themes, while still others can be deduced from reading representations or revealed by narratives.

This essay does not examine the direct perception of the city but rather its representation: on the one hand, the zenithal image obtained by the camera, and on the other, the geometric drawing as a planimetric rendering. Through the gaze and the imagination, it is possible to understand that urban phenomenon which preserves epistemological traces, morphological signs, and stratigraphic clues that allow us to hypothesize the implementation of previous design dynamics, which have determined a modification of the initial condition, leaving traces, sometimes clearly manifest and exhibited, other times almost imperceptible. It is the signs that, through their function of "referring to something other than themselves" (Gadamer 1983), draw attention and make present something that is not.

Taking a zenithal aerial photograph of the city of Pescara is instrumental in understanding its overall structure and settlement organization. Observing the urban fabric from above is the only approach to obtaining a comprehensive and objective view of the entire maritime city (Fig. 1).

The photographic image allows us to identify, overall, different configurations and geometries of a place where "different and distinct forms of urban life" have alternated (Cacciari, 2004). At a glance, two very strong features emerge in the image: the course of the Pescara River and the transversal railway line. Two urban grids are also evident: the first regular and linear, adjacent to the sea; the second, separated by the railway line, is rather chaotic towards the interior of the territory. Given the building density and the numerous elements present, what is unclear is the morphology of the territory, which can be deduced from the aforementioned two grids: one structure is flat, the other adapts to the contours of the hills.

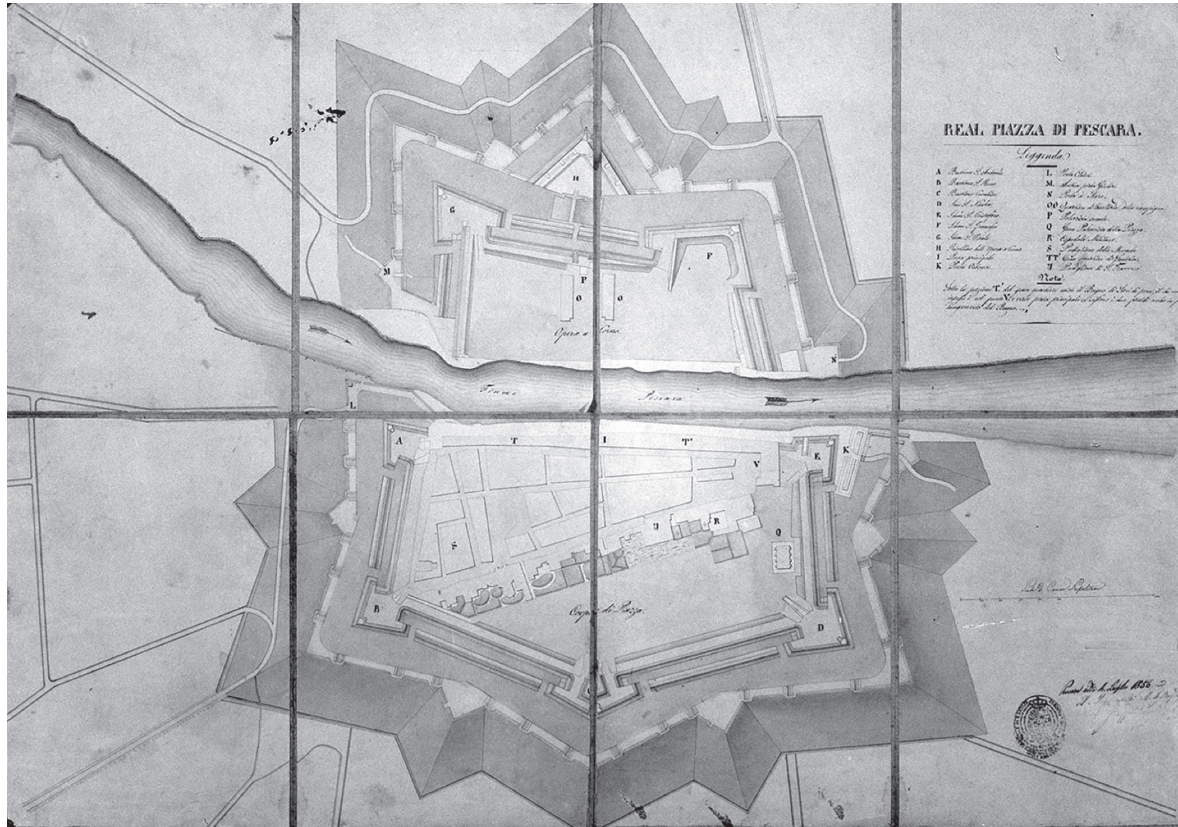
If we wanted to consider the three-dimensional conformation of the territory – but in this essay is not a relevant factor – we could read it on the aerial photogrammetric map, as a codified restitution of the real data. The usual cartographic translations of the territory, like portraits, simulate a zenithal aerial view two-dimensional of the places, allowing an interaction between the different parts simplified by the omission of distracting details. The scale of representation determines the level of recorded depth. The entirety of the subject and its overall physiognomy in zenithal representations are immediately perceived, including the distinctive characteristics and clues from which it is possible to deduce the existence of one or more transformative events. Therefore, as Gadamer (1983) states, "The image is not only an image or a copy, it belongs to the presence or the present remembrance of the represented", it constitutes its peculiarities and to a certain extent, its idealization.

In some cases, these distinctive features can appear as urban scars due to unresolved losses or deficiencies, which have evolved into actual scarifications of the urban fabric. To interpret the intrinsic meaning of these distinctive signs, it is essential to consult documentary sources, particularly the historical maps, which represent essential graphic evidence for recording the specific decisions and actions that influenced the city's evolution.

Characteristics of the City of Pescara

The significance of iconography—a study pioneered by Émile Mâle in the early twentieth century—led to the consideration of the subject's structure as an essential element in the examination of cartography. Cartography, as the culmination of specific objectives, is the starting point in the search for justifications based on concrete traces.

Regarding the latter, Umberto Eco (1975) specifies that: "In the recognition of clues, certain objects (or other types of



traces that are not footprints) left by the causal agent at the place of the effect are identified, so that from their *current* presence the past presence of the agent can be inferred.”

The place of the effect, for us the ancient city of Pescara in the Abruzzo region of Italy, is therefore the repository of signs, which, through careful observation and investigation, can presumably lead back to past situations. The clue therefore has factual value, expressed by the existence of elements placed before it—objects—as signals. Since they are indicative, they require verification or explicit recognition so that they do not remain presumptive.

Before proceeding with the analysis of some aspects of the city of Pescara, it is necessary to specify that the current urban configuration derives from the merger of two originally independent nuclei, which occurred in 1927 following the establishment of the Province of Pescara. The first nucleus, quite ancient, developed south of the river, and for three centuries, starting in the mid-sixteenth century, was enclosed within the fortress called Pescara (Pessolano, 2006) (Fig. 2). The second nucleus, located to the north, began its development in the mid-nineteenth century, with the arrival of the railway in 1836, and was known as Castellammare Adriatico as early as 1807 (Alici 1993). The demolition of the fortified walls, which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, almost completely erased its layout. In fact, no visible traces can be

Figure 2. Royal Fort of Pescara, 1856, Historical and Cultural Institute of the Corps of Genius in Rome.

detected in the aerial photograph, nor can reliable hypotheses be formulated without reference to historical maps.

This clarification allows us to look at representations of the city with greater awareness and directs attention towards specific areas.

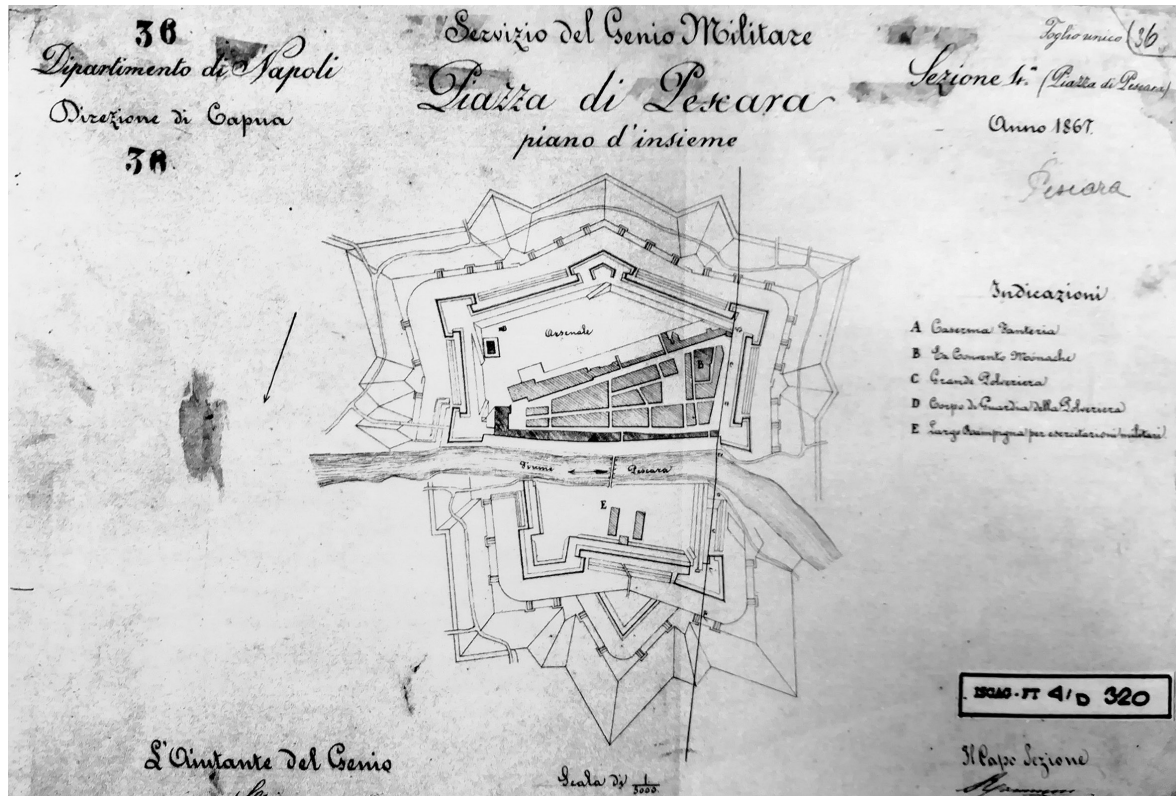
The aerial photograph of the Pescara territory is here intended as a graphic text to be analyzed, as it contains within itself a set of discrete units organized according to rules designed to produce a specific meaning. What emerges from this photograph, in the two paired urban fabrics, are two light patches adjacent to the railway line, almost like gashes. The one to the north seems to have erased part of the regular fabric, because it appears frayed. The other to the south seems to be wedged between the regular structure and an as yet undefined space to the west. Overall, a rather unified design is perceived between the urban fabric north and south of the river, as if the city had been designed and built in a single solution. Apparently, it presents an isomorphism found in other cities, but if one observes it carefully, excluding adaptations to environmental conformations, one notices singularities that Foucault (1993) called "proximate clues." These could be due to specific circumstances, not necessarily specific to the site, or to factual elements that influenced the action undertaken. They certainly express a link between the sign and the action that generated it.

Reading an Urban Element

Aerial photography has highlighted how the city constitutes a communicative environment that requires interpretation.

The foundational element of the city is the road, as Paul Vidal de La Blache stated in 1922: "La route s'imprime sur le sol; elle sème des germes de vie: maisons, hameaux, villages, villes." Obviously the concept of the road as a path is not limited exclusively to pedestrian and vehicular traffic, but also includes the railway network.

Without considering, for the moment, the presence of the river as a link between the coast and the inland areas, which has no influence on the regimentation of the land, the railway line built in 1863 (Fig. 3) seems to have acted as a guide in the development of the urban fabric, although its route was modified in 1988 starting from the central station. The new railway north of the river run for over thirty years through the territory, at the foot of the hills that reach Montesilvano, almost parallel to the coastline. It thus redefined a broad, long plain bordered to the east by the sea, where the constructions began and developed in the twentieth century, reaching a remarkable density by the 1960s.



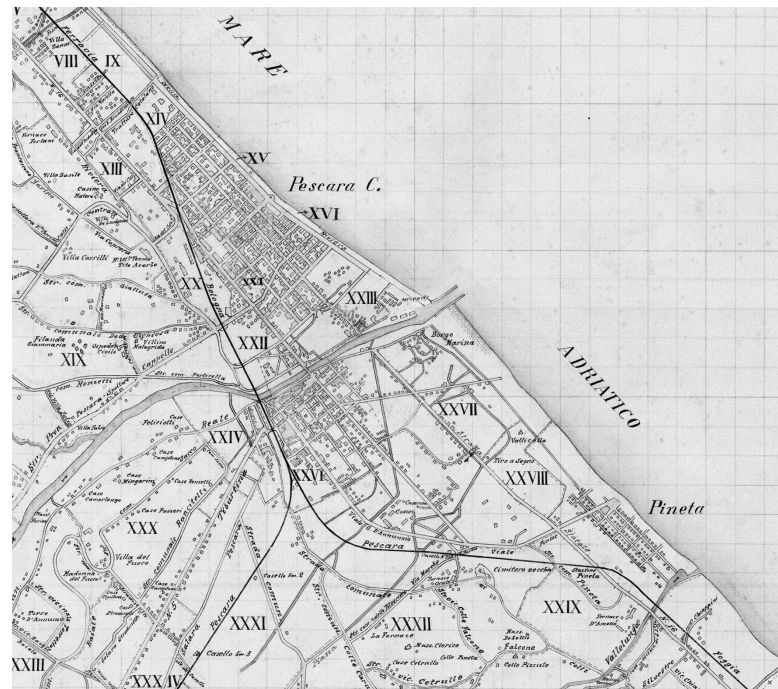
The stain on the railway line to the north is a clear indication of the change that occurred in 1988 and leads us to examine the previous situation. To understand this peculiarity, we must examine the cadastral map surveyed in 1936 (Fig. 4), which clearly shows a black line in that area with the word "Bologna" written on it. This is the railway line that curves to the south just beyond the river and then runs parallel to the sea towards the city of Foggia.

It is a distinctive sign whose strong intensity breaks the orthogonality of a harmonious fabric, almost breaking it down, altering its regularity, as if to regenerate it. There is a strong analogy between the reality of the road structure and its design on the map, a relationship of equality that underlies "the dynamics of a complex system in which the lines of the routes empty spaces intertwine to distribute the different solid elements of the territory" (Careri 2006).

At the beginning of the present century, when the densely built environment was freed from the encumbrance of the old railway, the latter remained a scar that has not yet healed, its long, indelible mark testify to the progress of rapid rail communications. Its permanence, imprinted in the urban fabric like a furrow, can only be a clue to the need for in-depth historical and urban planning research into the nineteenth-century design process, its underlying principles, the conditions that generated it, and its impact on urban development and the lives of residents.

Figure 3. Fort of Pescara, 1867, Historical and Cultural Institute of the Corps of Geni-us in Rome.

Figure 4. Cadastral Map, Union Plate, Pescara, 1936, Provincial Office – Territory of Pescara.



The recent relocation of the Northern railway line led to the construction of a new train station, set back approximately 150 metres from the previous 19th-century station. This resulted in a significant expansion of the space behind the old station due to the decommissioning of the entire railway infrastructure. The new central station building today overlooks a large, shapeless void, never recovered and never redefined in its functions, despite maintaining its central position within the consolidated urban fabric. Very little remains of the old square, as the two symmetrical wings of the edifice, typical of many Italian stations of the time, were removed from the original station. The presence of the two wings, along with other adjacent buildings, of which no trace remains, defined a gateway to the city, the dignity of which has now been undermined. The central body of the old two-storey building remains isolated, facing the road that runs in front of it, from which Corso Umberto I branches off, extending directly to the sea.

The original urban nucleus of Pescara

The syntax of Pescara's urban territory, characterized by the linearity and repetitiveness of its blocks, multiplied almost infinitely along the North-South trajectory, therefore presents exceptions: cuts, widenings, deviations, etc. From the blank aerial map of a vast and regular built environment, signs or references emerge, detaching themselves from the fabric with the intent of conveying meaning. These signs relate to natural phenomena and human interventions, devoid of semantic meaning or functional assignment, much less a specifically

semiotic role. However, as we have seen, they capture the eye because they interrupt or modify a normality in which they act as indicators of expressive unity.

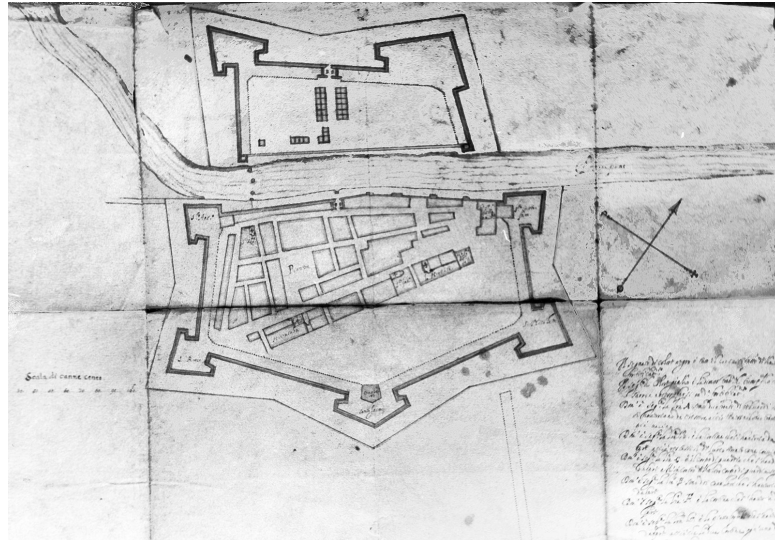
If we descend a little of altitude, or zoom in on the zenithal photo to more closely examine the two-dimensionality of the building fabric (Fig. 5), we notice a different road network between the extension north of the river and that to the south, evidence of a situation out of step with the rest. This difference, as we mentioned, is due to the past existence of two urban agglomerations that arose and developed independently of each other and at very different times. The river, in the middle, has strongly marked this separation. The only connecting element between the two linear, discontinuous urban fabric is State Road 16, almost parallel to the coastline: it crosses the river and then winds south through the D'Annunzio pine forest to reach Francavilla al Mare.

Near the bridge, it's easy to see a group of blocks whose overall shape resembles a narrow, elongated triangle, with one side adjoining the southern bank of the river near the mouth. An unusual street layout can be seen, with its trident-shaped arrangement, with the tip pointing toward the sea, seemingly unexplained. Here too, the clue can be clarified by historical cartography, specifically by sixteenth-century documentation and the three following centuries, which attest to the presence of the Pescara Fortress until the end of the nineteenth century. The well-known map by Carlo Gambacorta, Marquis of Celenza, drawn up in 1598 for inspection purposes (Fig. 6), shows a triangular urban nucleus within the pentagonal circle of bastioned walls. It's clearly evident that this shape is not consistent with that of the enclosure previous, which is quite regular and built in the first half of the sixteenth century based on ballistic principles. The building extends obliquely, almost



Figure 5. Pescara, Aerial photography, detail of the Historic Center, Department of Architecture, Pescara, 2010.

Figure 6. Carlo Gambacorta, Marquis of Celenza, Pescara, 1598, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



as if it were cutting the fortified area in two, creating a free space on the southeastern side.

A 16th-century map preserved at the Historical and Cultural Institute of the Corps of Genius in Rome provides the explanation (Fig. 7). The schematic drawing shows the new bastion system (here reversed compared to the previous one) which incorporates the pre-existing trapezoidal wall with numerous square towers. The interior of this turreted defense is an empty space, but if we insert the buildings reproduced in one of the nineteenth-century maps, we find a perfect fit, indicative of precise measurements. The same comparison between the zenithal aerial photo and the nineteenth-century maps, through the transparent overlay, reveals that most of the buildings fit together, starting from the long the barracks block near the river.

From excavations conducted and documented in the 1990s by the Superintendency of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Abruzzo in Chieti, a segment of a Roman-era paved road emerged in an almost central part of the barracks damaged by the bombings of 1944. The pre-existing urban structures constitute the ancient center of Pescara called Ostia Aterni and date back to the period between the 1st century BC and the 3rd century AD, as argued by Andrea Staffa (1991), while the internal turreted wall dates back to the 13th century.

But what created the system's distinctive triangular shape? The answer comes from looking at the ancient road system, determined by the confluence of the valley floor route, close to the river, and the Via Claudia Valeria coming from the southeast, at the point where it crossed the coastal Via Flaminia Adriatica. As recorded in 1808 in Plate 4 of the Geographical Atlas of the Kingdom of Naples compiled by Antonio Rizzi-

Zannoni, both came from Rome, but one provided access to Naples, while the Flaminia connected Rimini transversally to Brindisi (Fig. 8-9).

Conclusions

According to Bernardo Secchi (2005), "we can only understand reality through its representations," in which urban peculiarities and transformations within their context are manifested as if reflected in a mirror. This means having on one side the concrete object and on the other its simulacrum, which are not perfectly superimposable and of different nature. The latter—whether a map or an aerial photograph—represents the other city, corresponding to what can be transposed from above, with all its formal characteristics, into signs on a paper medium that limits its information. The territory and the city, as Franco Farinelli (2007) argues, represent what remains once they have been entrusted to cartographic representation. If what has been said appears limited to representations—airial photography and maps—it is necessary to clarify that our study was not confined to the mere topographical dimension of the city. Rather, we pursued a critical analysis of its urban structure and related elements, evaluated at different scales and in relation to each other. The investigation also took into consideration the perception of places, as a confirmation of what is recorded in each representation, integrating it with the

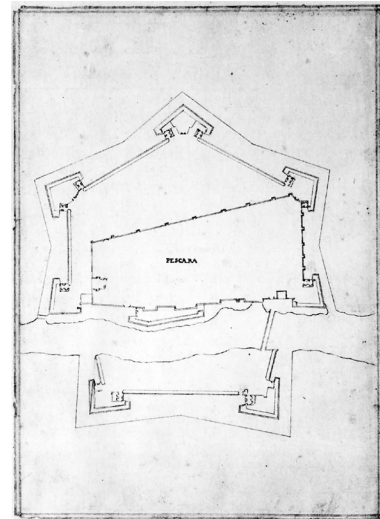


Figure 7. Pescara, (sec. XVI), Historical and Cultural Institute of the Corps of Genius in Rome.

Figure 8. G. Antonio Rizzi-Zannoni, excerpt from plate 4, *Atlante geografico del Regno di Napoli*, 1994 -1801.

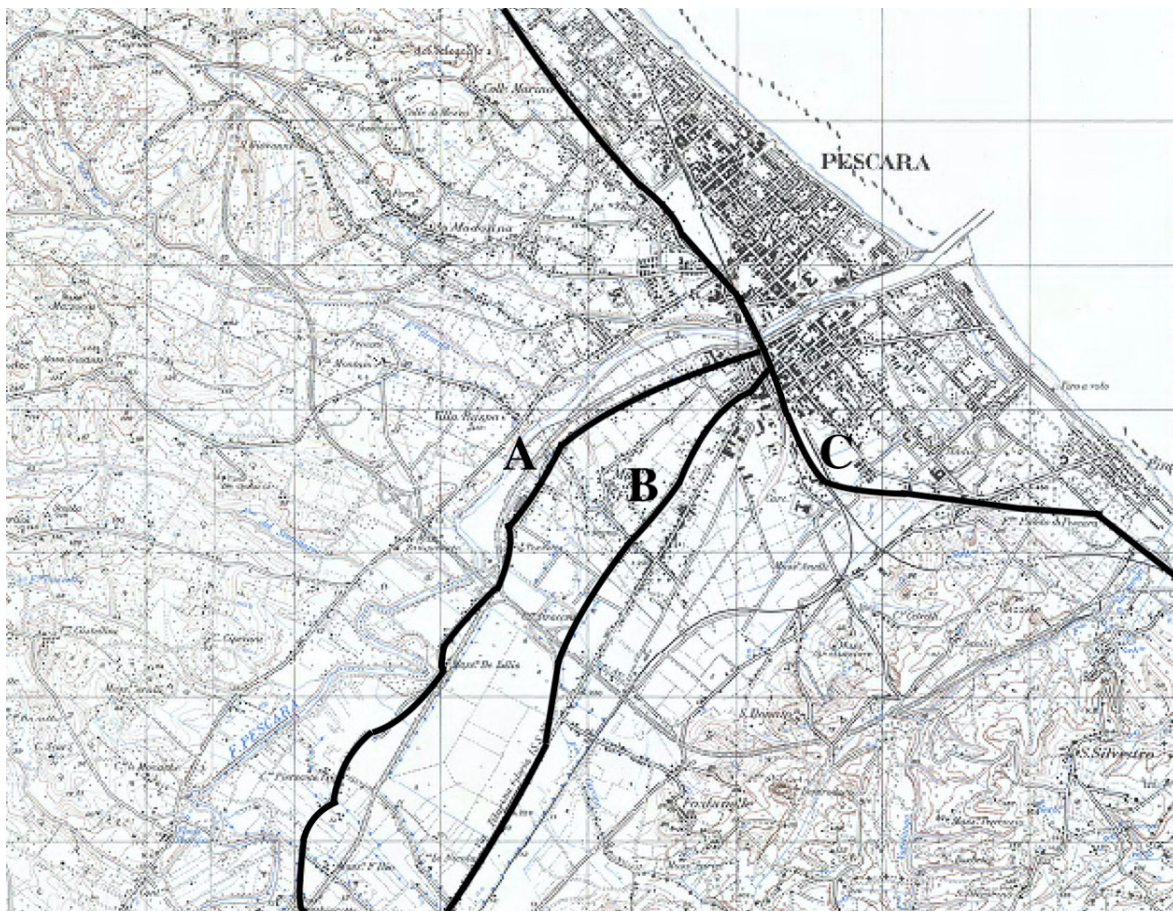


extensive recent and archival documentation, as well as with the narratives and research carried out, in order to obtain a more complete and exhaustive picture.

The coexistence of signs, understood as mutually supported elements within a sort of iconic architecture, whose meaning is not always explicit, reveals a potential and an intrinsic interiority connected to other clues, just as a fraction represents part of a whole. The clue, as a symptom of suspicion, suggests something only by virtue of the context in which it is placed, which can be found in the image itself. Its decipherment, as we have seen, can only occur by maintaining the connection with its context; otherwise, isolating the clue would be ineffective. It clearly follows that the aggregate of signs relies on the perceptual apparatus as a natural means of communication, taking the form of directly detectable objective data. This process therefore involves an archaeological and philological operation, a methodical excavation through fragile documents from which it is possible to extract significant results aimed at promoting an updating of the city's historical narrative.

Historical maps, considered milestones in the richness of representations, contribute help mark the time of topographic

Figure 9. Historical roads: A, valley road; B, Via Claudia Valeria 48-49 A.D.; C, Via Flaminia. I.G.M, base, scale 1:50,000.



recording. While configuring themselves as models, they highlight numerous aspects while neglecting others, thus limiting the complexity of the transmission of reality, and maintaining that "no side of the thing is revealed without actively concealing the others" (Merleau-Ponty 1967). In relation to the physicality of the environmental context, these maps exhibit a sort of atrophy: the multiplicity of clues filters the representation similarly to a sieve that excludes inconsistent elements. In many cases, as Massimo Quaini (1991) observes, the materiality of the situation is reconstructed and replaced by the map itself, influencing our perception of what exists. However, this apparent discontinuity of clues actually supports the continuity of the historical narrative, considering that change constitutes the only form of permanence.

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