



Katrine Louise Moore
traduzioni & web: traduzioni@katy.it



HISTORY

Ardelio Loppi



Vasanello claims location of Lake Vadimo



Detail of the *Patrimonium Sancti Petri in Tuscia* (Duchy of Rome) in the Gallery of Maps in the Vatican.

The inexorable decline of Etruscan power began in 474 BC with their defeat in Cumae by the Syracusans. Over the next two hundred years, the Etruscans were continually forced to defend themselves against the expansionist ambitions of Rome until they were eventually defeated in 309 BC in the famous battle of Lake Vadimo.

Several authoritative sources (such as Polybius, Livy, Seneca, Pliny the Elder, his nephew Pliny the Younger and Cassius Dio¹) mention this lake, where 22 years later the Romans fought another battle in 287 BC against a coalition of mostly Gallic Senones and Boii with just a few Etruscan/Faliscan troops. However none of these provide enough geographical details to locate the lake with any great certainty, though Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Cecilius Secundus) does describe the scene in his famous letter² that has led many to believe the lake lay in the area of what is today Bassano in Teverina. Indeed, not far from the Italian Air Force's "Mario Tirabucchi" base there is a small lake - or should we say a pool as it is only about 40 metres in diameter - that would appear to fit Pliny's description:

[...] *The ancestor of my wife (father-in-law, ed.) wanted me to go see his estates at Praedia Amerina (near modern Amelia, ed.). As I walked across them, I saw below me the lake called Vadimo, of which amazing things are said. I reached it. The lake is the shape of a wheel lying on the ground and is the same throughout: no creek, no obliqueness, but totally measured, equal and dug and cut as though by an artist. The colour is lighter than turquoise and darker than green: it smells of sulphur and the water tastes like medicine. But it emanates an energy that reinvigorates sore bodies. Although only a small body of water, it still suffers from the winds and swells during storms. This lake is not crossed by any ship (because it is sacred), but islands of grass all covered with reeds and rushes float upon it and other plants found in any fertile marshland grow along the banks of this lake. [...] The lake flows into a river, visible for a short stretch before it flows underground and hidden from view. [...]*

What mainly suggests that this description fits the pool in Bassano in Teverina is the fact that there is a bend in the River Tiber here (indeed there is a famous anecdote that down in Rome they knew they had won the battle when the bodies of countless enemies were carried down the river to the city³), which can be clearly seen from what are today the Amerini Hills and the fact that the typical smell of sulphurous waters hangs in the air ("it smells of



From top: layout, aerial view and detail of the pool in the Bassano in Teverina area.

¹ All these wrote a long time after the actual battle, given that Polybius was born in 200 BC, Livy in 59 BC, Pliny the Elder in 24 AD, Pliny the Younger in 61 AD and Dio Cassius in 150 AD.

² EPISTULAE, VIII.20.

³ Dio Cassius, referring to the battle of 287 BC.

sulphur and the water tastes like medicine”). However, the most important feature needed to decide the matter is missing: the water does not flow into a river anywhere (“*The lake flows into a river*”) and, even assuming that it did so in the past, that river could only be the Tiber ... but the River Tiber does not flow underground (“*visible for a short stretch before it flows underground and hidden from view*”).

Not to mention the fact that Pliny, the naturalist, would never have called the Tiber merely “a river”. Nevertheless, the Bassano pool is still popularly considered to be Lake Vadimo because it is the only body of water sufficiently close to the Tiber in the area today that, with a bit of imagination, could be called a lake. Until today, that is.

Indeed, just a dozen or so kilometres away in this part of the Ager Faliscus⁴ there was a real lake (i.e. “a large body of water”, according to the definition

given by any dictionary) in Pliny’s day: the (now dry) lake in Vasanello.

The existence of this lake is proven by several maps drawn by famous cartographers, two ancient legends, a fifteenth-century fresco and the by no means insignificant fact that the area surrounding a large basin near the town of Vasanello – the lower part of which has spontaneous vegetation typical of a lake – is still called *Poggio del Lago* (literally, knoll above the lake).

Here we should open an important parenthesis: in his letter Pliny describes the lake he came across while inspecting the possessions of his father-in-law at *Praedia Amerina*. The *eques* of Como, a certain Fabatus Calpurnius (a large landowner whose daughter Calpurnia became Pliny’s second wife), did indeed have a large estate near the *Castrum Amerinum*, and this, when we consult the *Tabula Peutingeriana*⁵, is - surprise, surprise - on the right



Above: detail of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* showing that the *Castello Amerino* was on the right bank of the River Tiber.



Right: detail of the *Map of Latium ex libris Trimalchionis* placing the *Castrum Amerinum* near Lake Vadimo and exactly where Vasanello sits today; the road crossing the area is the *Via Amerina*.

⁴ The area in central Italy from the plains above the Tiber Valley to the foot of the Cimino Hills in the West and down to (and past) modern Civita Castellana in the South.

⁵ The *Codex Vindobonensis*, better known as the *Tabula Peutingeriana* is kept in the National Library of Vienna (*Vindobona*) and is the only extant Roman road map (*Itineraria*), although this is a mediaeval copy dating back to the 12th Century. It shows the world as the Romans knew it, with their conquests. Only the far Western part of the Roman Empire is missing, i.e. most of Britannia and the Iberian Peninsula, which would have been found in the original, but already lost by the time the mediaeval copy was made. The *Tabula* was rediscovered in 1507 by Konrad Celtes, the librarian of the Emperor Maximilian I, though where exactly is not known. It gets its present name from its second owner, Konrad Peutinger, the chancellor of Augsburg.



Above: layout of Poggio del Lago.

Right: view of the old basin.

bank of the River Tiber and not, as we would say today, on the left bank.

Furthermore, it is almost certain that the ancient *Castrum Amerinum* coincides precisely with the location of Vasanello⁶, and just as two plus two sometimes makes four, the secret will be revealed when Vasanello is finally agreed to be the site of *Castrum Peutingeriana*. Put very simply, if Fabatus Calpurnius' estate at *Praedia Amerina* was in Vasanello, then we need to recognise the fact that, in the past, the area called "the Amerini Hills" meant not just those currently known as such on the left bank of the Tiber, but also those on the right bank. As a result, the lake described by Pliny as Lake Vadimo in the letter to his friend Gallus is no longer inconsistent with that of Vasanello. As for the



sulphurous waters ("it smells of sulphur and the water tastes like medicine"), it would come as no surprise that, in a volcanic area like ours, the lake in Vasanello was fed by a sulphurous spring.

These clues, plus others described in detail below, are such that there can no longer be any doubt that there was once a lake in Vasanello. Further considerations and important circumstantial

⁶ One school of thought prefers the site of Palazzolo, 2 km from Vasanello, where the last Etruscan king, Elbius, is said to have died during the Battle of 287 BC: the closeness of these two sites does not, however, invalidate the argument made here.

evidence linked to the stream that “flows underground”, support the theory that it was this body of water, and not that in Bassano, that was described by Pliny in his letter as Lake Vadimo.

Several authoritative sources help us disprove the argument for Bassano: the *Onomastico Romano Dizionario Galesino* (Galesino’s Dictionary of Roman Namedays, which defines the Vasanello lake as Lacus Vadimonis); the great Dominican scholar and thinker Leandro Alberti (1550, who in his *Storia d’Italia – History of Italy* – writes: “[...] the lake of Bassanello, which I think is Lake Vadimo, lies in the beautiful valley three miles from Orta, but close to the Tiber”); the erudite Father Filippo Ferrari (1627, who in his *Compendio dei Santi d’Italia – Compendium of the Saints of Italy* – locates the site of the martyrdom of the patron saint of Vasanello, St. Lanno, “*apud Vadimonis lacum Bassanelli juxta oppidum*” – at Lake Vadimo near the settlement of Vasanello); the Master-General of the Friars Minor Conventual, Father Vincenzo Coronelli, in his *Biblioteca Universale* (Universal Library, 1706, stating the same); Abramo Botolonio (“*apud Vadimonis Lacum in terra Bassanelli*”); the prelate Giusto Fontanini (1708, saying the same in his *De Antiquibus Hortae – Of Old Orte Things* – on the basis of the authoritative hagiographic studies by the Jesuit Bollandists).

Then there is the fundamental *Atti del martirio del glorioso San Lanno* (Acts of Martyrdom of the Glorious Saint Lanno – 1794), by the cleric Don Ermenegildo Costanzi of Vasanello, who devotes much space to the subject several times and with absolute conviction. In short, it is very comforting to find that there are many scholars supporting the Vasanello Theory: the author of this article has simply put together a series of factors that, as we will see, form a theory based on fact.

First, let us consider things from the point of view of military strategy: never fight a more numerous and better organised enemy in the open. The Romans, just a few years before the Battle of Vadimo had, in 343 BC, defeated the forty thousand strong Samnite army despite their apparent numerical inferiority. Rome was a formidable war machine, one that the Etruscans could not afford to face head on, having already lost many men after two years of constant fighting⁷. Yet, as we have seen, according to the supporters of the Bassano Theory, the battle took place in the middle of the Tiber Valley: in which case either the leader of the Etruscans was a fool or the dynamics of the battle need to be reconsidered. For example, it is possible that the battle began in an inaccessible area – ideal for guerrilla warfare – and then ended near the River Tiber with the rout of the

Etruscans⁸. Hence the area known as *Campo morto* in the immediate vicinity of Vasanello⁹ – where many bones could still be found sticking up out of the ground until the mid 1900s – becomes of crucial importance in establishing where the two armies actually clashed. Coincidentally, the vast depression whose banks have always been called *Poggio del Lago* lies just a few hundred metres from *Campo morto*.

But where has all that water gone?

This is where the Abbot Ermenegildo Costanzi comes to our aid: in his *Atti del martirio del glorioso San Lanno* (1794), he writes: “[...] his martyrdom followed¹⁰ in Bassanello¹¹ near Lake Vadimo, in the site where the chapel of his martyrdom is venerated [...]” Costanzi said he learnt this from the erudite Father Filippo Ferrari (in his *Compendio dei Santi d’Italia*: “*Passus est apud Vadimonis lacum Bassanelli juxta oppidum*” – 1627) and then extrapolated it from the acts of martyrdom of St. Lanno described in a sixteenth-century manuscript, the *Fabrica Hortana*, written by the prelate and historian Lando Leoncini of Orte (1548-1634). In addition to the literary sources mentioned here, there is further authoritative evidence that the lake was found here: the painted map of Etruria in the Gallery of Maps in the Vatican¹², the perhaps even more important map by the great seventeenth-century cartographer Matthew Seutter and those by Cornelius di Guglielmo and A. Barbey (right).

Considerable circumstantial evidence can then be found in the fresco (late 15th Century) in the aedicula of the little church of Santa Maria delle Grazie: behind the Madonna and Child is a lake! Like a snap-shot of a feature of the landscape, one that was so important that the anonymous painter decided to use it as the background to his sacred subjects in the foreground.

But should this be considered definitive proof that Lake Vadimo was in Vasanello? This we cannot claim with total certainty (let others disprove it), but

⁸ The chronicles speak of a single battle during the course of the two years of conflict. There can be no doubt that the Etruscans must have resorted to guerrilla warfare, unable to face the Roman army in an open battle.

⁹ Less than 9 km from the Tiber as the crow flies.

¹⁰ Of Saint Lanno, the patron saint of Vasanello.

¹¹ Vasanello was known as Bassanello until 1949.

¹² The Gallery takes its name from the maps of Italian regions and the possessions of the Church that Pope Gregory XIII Boncompagni (1572-1585) had painted on the walls between 1580-83. These form one of the most important documents of early modern cartography. Ignazio Danti (whose name appears in a cartouche on the side of the Map of Salento), the predecessor of Galileo Galilei as Professor of Mathematics at Florence and a famed mapmaker, was responsible for preparing the cartoons, which were then turned into frescos by numerous painters coordinated by Cesare Nebbia and Girolamo Muziano.

⁷ The war that culminated in the battle of 309 BC had started in 311 BC when the troops of the Roman consul Quintus Fabius Maximus Rullianus first entered the Cimini forests.



Maps of: Vatican Museum



Matteo Seuttero



A. Barbey



Cornelio Di Guglielmo



Fresco from inside the aedicula of the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie (Vasanello): the lake can be seen in the background (left).

what we can swear to is that there was a somewhat large lake in the area until at least the Renaissance period.

In this connection, we can quote a symbolic passage from Pliny's letter: "[...] *This lake is not crossed by any ship (because it is sacred)* [...]." As already mentioned, the Bassano Teverina pool has a diameter of just forty metres, so how could one even consider sailing on it? Maybe it got smaller over the years? Impossible: the pool is practically on a level with the Tiber and so any major rise in the water level would create the largest basin in Italy since it would imply the flooding of the entire Tiber Valley¹³. And certainly, if such an event had happened in the past, there we would be point in racking our brains here, as there would be plenty of evidence. Ergo: the Bassano pool was never much larger than it is today and Lake Vasanello, as shown by the ancient maps, from the view of the landscape behind the Madonna in the fresco and the size of its basin at its lowest draught level (c. 260 x 170 metres)¹⁴, was certainly navigable in Roman times. In short, this was a real lake and not, as in the case of the "puddle" in Bassano, a mere marshy extension of the Tiber that nobody - least of Pliny - would ever call a lake.

¹³ Aerial photogrammetric photo, page 43

¹⁴ Aerial photogrammetric photo, next page

But what about Pliny's description of the river flowing from the lake disappearing underground? How does this fit the lake in Vasanello? This is what Costanzi wrote: "[...] *the site of the famous Lake Vadimo, which today is called Prata del Lago (meadow of the lake, ed.), since, the lake waters having been diverted by tunnels that still remain, the bed of that lake now forms a green meadow [...]*." In other words, the lake, fed by no major springs, has simply dried up over the centuries, mainly (we can assume) due to irrigation of the fields nearby. Indeed the roaring waters of the lake disappeared underground through a tunnel in the *Cunicchio*¹⁵ district of Vasanello, south of *Poggio del Lago*, after running along canals for about two hundred metres. Hence an occasional visitor such as Pliny could not otherwise have written: "*The lake flows into a river, visible for a short stretch before it flows underground and hidden from view.*"

The canal still exists today, acting as a drainage canal for *Poggio del Lago*¹⁶ (now just a few metres wide, but perhaps more than ten metres wide in the past). The same applies to the tunnel (170 x 70 cm) ending about thirty metres further on in a ditch that collects water from the *Aliano* creek. This effluent has a "notable" bed and high banks that are absolutely

¹⁵ Local dialect for "tunnel".

¹⁶ Graph and aerial photogrammetric photo, next page

