

Graduate Student Research: Sustainability in the Aniene Valley

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Jonah Bibo outside Old Main

This past summer, second-year master's student Jonah Bibo travelled to Subiaco, Italy to conduct research for his thesis, an environmental history of the Aniene Valley. Now back home in Logan, Utah, Jonah describes how he arrived at his research topic, the highs and the lows of the trip, and the importance of spending time in the space he writes about.

My project is an environmental history of the Aniene Valley to the east of Rome. Ultimately, I am tracking gradual change over time, from the classical era (Roman Empire) to the medieval period (as late as the 15th century). Specifically, I study the effect of the environment on the formation of smaller villages throughout the Italian countryside, as well as the changes that monasticism and rural life brought to the landscape. In the Aniene valley, I question whether the region shifted from a place of exportation in the classical era to one of self-sustainability in the medieval era as it was further developed.

I am very curious about what makes a society "sustainable" in terms of resources. My search for cases of resource management actually started in the North African provinces, before moving into smaller towns on the Italian peninsula. But, as so often happens, the lack of sources for anything but Rome pulled me to the city itself, and I began studying Roman aqueducts and classical writings surrounding them.

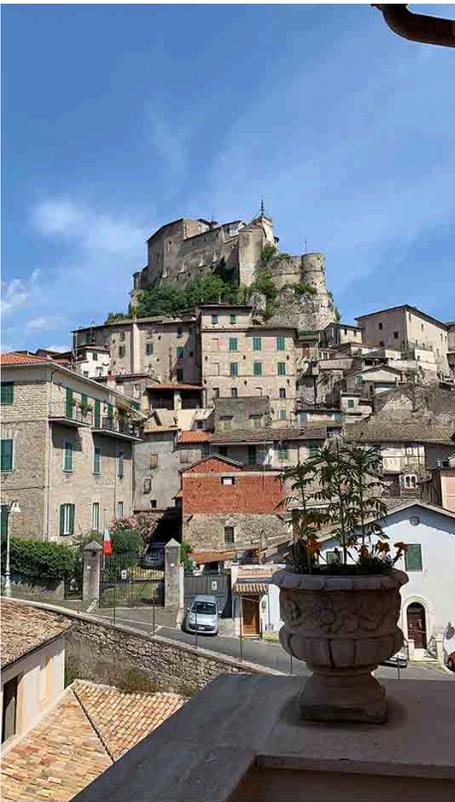
Once I settled on Rome and aqueducts as a focus, Dr. Conte and I wondered what the landscape looked like at the source of these aqueducts in the Aniene valley. This led me to the village of Subiaco, which was the location of Emperor Nero's villa during his reign. It was also the site of Benedict of Nursia's retreat, during which he wrote the Rule of St. Benedict, which defined western monasticism throughout Europe. It seemed to me ironic that in Benedict's efforts to escape Roman excess, he settled above the villa of one of Rome's most excessive emperors.



The Aniene Valley, with the Monastery of St. Scholastica (foreground) and the town of Subiaco (background)

With funding from the history department, I traveled to Subiaco this summer, a town of about 8,000 people, and stayed in a hotel at the top of Subiaco's main road, right in the shadow of the Rocca Abbaziale, a medieval fortress. I was there to gather primary sources for my research and to come to know Subiaco as a *space*, by which I mean I wanted to better understand the town culturally and environmentally. Subiaco is at the bottom of a river valley. The Monastery of St. Scholastica, where the archives are housed, is at the top of a nearby mountain. The first thing I had to do was figure out the best way to get to the top of the mountain. Luckily, for the last two weeks there was a free tourist shuttle that transported me up there, but the first week the journey was done by city bus and by foot. Once I was in the archive, my day typically consisted of going through their indexes and requesting anything that looked remotely relevant to my project. This included land grants, sales, leases, wills, registers, and crop yields. Because of the brevity of my stay (just three weeks), I did very little deep reading of these sources. Instead, I tried to collect as much as possible. However, I did have a big breakthrough when I realized how I wanted to structure the thesis based on the types of documents I was able to gather in the archives.

Because of the heat wave that was happening while I was there, the archive was only open until 1 p.m., so I largely had the rest of the day to myself. No bus operated in the afternoon, so every day my post-archive activity was the hour-long hike back down to the town. Needless to say, I got my steps in, but if it weren't for what at first seemed like an inconvenience, I would not have acquainted myself with the environment around the monastery. I don't think it would be possible to do the environmental history of this place justice without having visited and walked its paths and alleyways. Doing so allowed me to put myself into the work in a more personal way. Now when I read that "the monks struggled to bring water to the monastery since the path to the river was steep and pained them," I can sympathize!



*Rocca Abbaziale,
the medieval fortress at the center of Subiaco*