The via cassia was one of the main arteries connecting Rome to its northwest provinces. It crossed the rolling hills of Tuscany, passing by way of Siena, before veering towards the river Arno and then northwards. With the transformation of Rome into a holy city in medieval times, the Cassia became the Via Francigena (the Franks’ way), possibly the most important highway in Christendom. Along it, pilgrims and travelers toiled towards the eternal city. It is no coincidence, then, that as early as the 7th century, monasteries were established to support and, indeed, exploit this traffic.

Until recently these monastic houses were poorly known. Instead, archaeologists had concentrated upon understanding the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages from the standpoint of rural settlement, charting the beginnings of Tuscany’s iconic...
hilltop towns. But with new excavations beside the river Arno at San Genesio—where a monastic community has recently been excavated—and a comparable investigation beside the river Asso at Pava, the first evidence of the ecclesiastical world close to the Cassia has come to light. Additionally, 12th century monastic communities, like the abbey at Sant’Antimo, with its distinctive francophone Romanesque architecture, flourished close to this celebrated pilgrim route. During a survey of the territory of Montalcino, the discovery of a putative hilltop monastery at San Pietro d’Asso—a monastery founded, according to an 8th century source, by a mid-7th century Lombard king—appeared to be geographically at odds with these other monasteries and an altogether intriguing settlement. The Penn Museum excavation in July 2010, supported by the University of Siena and the Comune of Montalcino, set out to establish exactly what this hilltop site was.

**THE HILLTOP**

Sherds of early medieval pottery, including the distinctive green-glazed Forum Ware, were found close to a knoll at the north end of the hill, on which traces of a small mortared stone building were just visible above the surface. Were these elements of the early medieval monastery mentioned in an AD 714 dispute between the bishops of Arezzo and Siena? If so,
Clockwise, an aerial view of the farmhouse was photographed by a robot drone. Students Jennifer McAuley, James Macrae, and Caitlin Costello excavate one of four graves found in a small cemetery adjacent to the church, and one of the skeletons uncovered. The abbey of Sant’Antimo is shown on the right, with its borgo (village) Castelnuovo dell’Abate in the background. Part of a Romanesque church at the site (interior shown here) was used as a stable in modern times.
where were the potsherds belonging to later phases of settlements, leading up until the time San Pietro was taken over by neighboring Sant’Antimo in the late 12th century? Were other buildings—either post-built or of pisé (essentially clay walls), following the early medieval vernacular tradition—somehow concealed in the main body of the long narrow hilltop? Excavations on the knoll and on the main body of the hill soon revealed an entirely different story. Absolutely nothing was found in the main body of the hilltop. Only on the knoll was there any occupation, and this was not monastic in the strict sense. A tower with a north-south axis measuring 5.10 m by 3.56 m was built to a height of several courses, and then altered entirely. The second phase of the tower was exactly twice the size of the first, but like the first, it was aborted after reaching less than 0.6 m high. An unstratified silver denier found close by, minted by Conrad II of Germany (1027–1039), indicated that this foreclosure occurred early in the 11th century, a date confirmed by the sherds of cooking pots associated with the small builders’ yard on the south side of the tower. It soon became clear that the monastery of San Pietro d’Asso, ascribed to the 7th century Lombard King Aripert, was most definitely not located on the hilltop.

THE FARMHOUSE CHURCH

Occupying a terrace immediately below the hilltop, overlooking the flood plain of the river Asso, is an abandoned farmhouse. This 19th century building incorporated an earlier Romanesque church, the south aisle of which stands almost to eaves’ height; this was employed until recently as a stable. Clearance followed by limited excavations around the apsidal end of the building showed that in the Romanesque era the church had possessed three apses. The southern and central apses were of a distinctive Romanesque ashlar construction, while the earliest (pre-Romanesque) northern apse was constructed with roughhewn rubble, similar in many respects to the early chapel at nearby Sant’Antimo, and not unlike the construction of the hilltop tower. In front of this earliest apse was a simple cemetery where we uncovered four shallow graves. From unstratified levels in this area came an early medieval copper alloy tag, lending plausible weight to the proposition that the Romanesque church had an early medieval precursor. Surveys of the farmhouse revealed remains of other well-preserved buildings of the Romanesque era immediately south of the church, while the central nave, in a reduced form, was retained as a simple chapel that was used until comparatively recently. A geophysical survey of the terrace that the farmhouse occupies indicated the presence of major buildings, with some walls plainly evident. Traces of skeletal remains on the far northeast edge of the terrace also suggested the presence of a cemetery.

It is most likely that this was a Romanesque monastic church that owed its origins to an early medieval foundation. The rich architecture in the surviving details reflects the wealth of connections and support such a pilgrimage church might have enjoyed before its star was eclipsed by its neighbor, Sant’Antimo.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This season established that the monastery of San Pietro d’Asso occupied a terrace close to the river, not unlike the broadly contemporary churches at Pava and Sant’Antimo. Unlike Pava, it outlasted the early Middle Ages and thrived into the 12th century, before being subsumed under Sant’Antimo. Like Sant’Antimo it embarked upon establishing its own borgo or village, with a fortified tower—the quintessential hallmark of new towns at this time. But unlike Castelnuovo dell’Abate, above Sant’Antimo, which thrives today, the castle above San Pietro d’Asso was never finished. Why this was the case, as the monastery was on the eve of its zenith in the Romanesque era, remains intriguing and unknown. This unexpected story will compel us to look more closely at the overall history of ecclesiastical power alongside the Via Cassia, and of course sets the scene for exploring what the first monastery at San Pietro d’Asso looked like.

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Led by Richard Hodges, Stefano Campana, and Michelle Hobart, 14 undergraduates joined the excavations at San Pietro d’Asso in July 2010. Two of these students reflect on their experiences in field school and time spent in the Italian countryside.

Our adventures began the moment our plane touched down on Italian soil. Getting to Rome was only the first step—we soon realized that many roads do not have names, and our trip quickly turned into a navigational nightmare. One of many close calls occurred when the stick shift broke in our van, causing it to roll down a steep hill towards a sharp drop-off. Thankfully, we all made it unscathed to Montalcino, the picturesque hilltop town we would be calling home for the next month.

Any fears we had about living in Italy swiftly dissolved as we drove through the medieval town: worn cobblestones lined the winding streets, flowers and vines hung from brightly painted windowsills, and the central bell tower rose into the sky. The view from the town into the Tuscan countryside below was beyond stunning, with endless green and gold hills that seemed to ebb and flow like the sea. As we settled into our accommodations at the local elementary school, we soon realized that our living situation would not be as wondrous as the rest of our surroundings. We slept on cots in classrooms, shared a single mirror, and had to trek down the street wrapped tightly in our towels to gain access to the communal showers. Yet without the luxury of privacy, we quickly became friends, and unanimously agreed that the charm and history of Montalcino more than made up for any passing discomfort.

Every morning we stumbled from our cots at dawn to the local café, hoping that a frothy cappuccino and warm cornetto (Italian croissant) would fortify us for a day of digging. We spent each day at San Pietro d’Asso hard at work;
the group was divided between the medieval church and the hilltop, where we unearthed a monastic watchtower from the same period. Following a delicious lunch of fruit, Italian bread, and prosciutto at the site, we were ready to venture back to Montalcino and looked forward to the prospect of a shower and an afternoon siesta.

After a hard day of digging, we would explore the town: the piazza, the cafés, the gelaterias, and the shop windows brimming with bottles of Brunello wine. We came to know the town’s elderly gentlemen who would chat on park benches while their wives aired laundry from open windows. We practiced our Italian with the locals who worked in the shops and restaurants, and even learned how to prepare a traditional Italian meal from our cooks at the school. The smell of fresh pasta, smoky prosciutto, and Tuscan wine seemed to swirl through the air. Even though we were often caught up in the hectic atmosphere of the dig, somewhere along the way we learned to slow down and enjoy the simple pleasure found in new friends, good food, and great wine. We expected to work hard and learn about medieval churches. However, we never anticipated just how much we would learn about the vibrant Tuscan culture.

**Adrianna de Svastich and Jennifer McAuley excavated at San Pietro d’Asso during the summer of 2010. They are undergraduates in the School of Arts & Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania.**