

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# A Prospection-Led Archaeological Investigation of a Picenian and Roman Necropolis in Corinaldo (Marche, Italy)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an integrated archaeological and geophysical investigation conducted between 2018 and 2024 at the newly discovered Picenian and Roman necropolis of Contrada Nevola (Corinaldo, Marche, Central Italy), identified in the framework of development-led archaeology. The research strategy combined aerial photography, systematic field-walking, automatic resistivity profiling (ARP) and magnetometry, followed by targeted excavation guided by the outcomes of non-invasive surveys. The integrated analysis revealed a complex, multi-period funerary landscape, including four large Orientalising circular monuments dated to the late 7th century BCE and a later Roman cemetery (2nd–4th century CE) partially superimposed on the earlier structures. Geophysical data proved crucial for defining the geometry, state of preservation and internal organisation of the circular monuments associated with the Picenian phase, as well as for identifying focal anomalies interpreted as burial deposits and ritual features within a diachronic perspective. The complete excavation of one of the earliest monuments (Circle 2) in 2024 confirmed the predictive value of the geophysical surveys, leading to the discovery of an exceptionally rich Picenian princely tomb containing almost 200 artefacts, including a two-wheeled chariot, weapons, bronze vessels and imported objects. Ritual pits identified through geophysics and excavation indicate a prolonged ceremonial use of the enclosed space. This case study highlights the methodological potential of integrating remote sensing, geophysics and excavation in funerary contexts, demonstrating how non-invasive techniques can effectively guide excavation strategies and enhance archaeological interpretation.

## 1 | Introduction

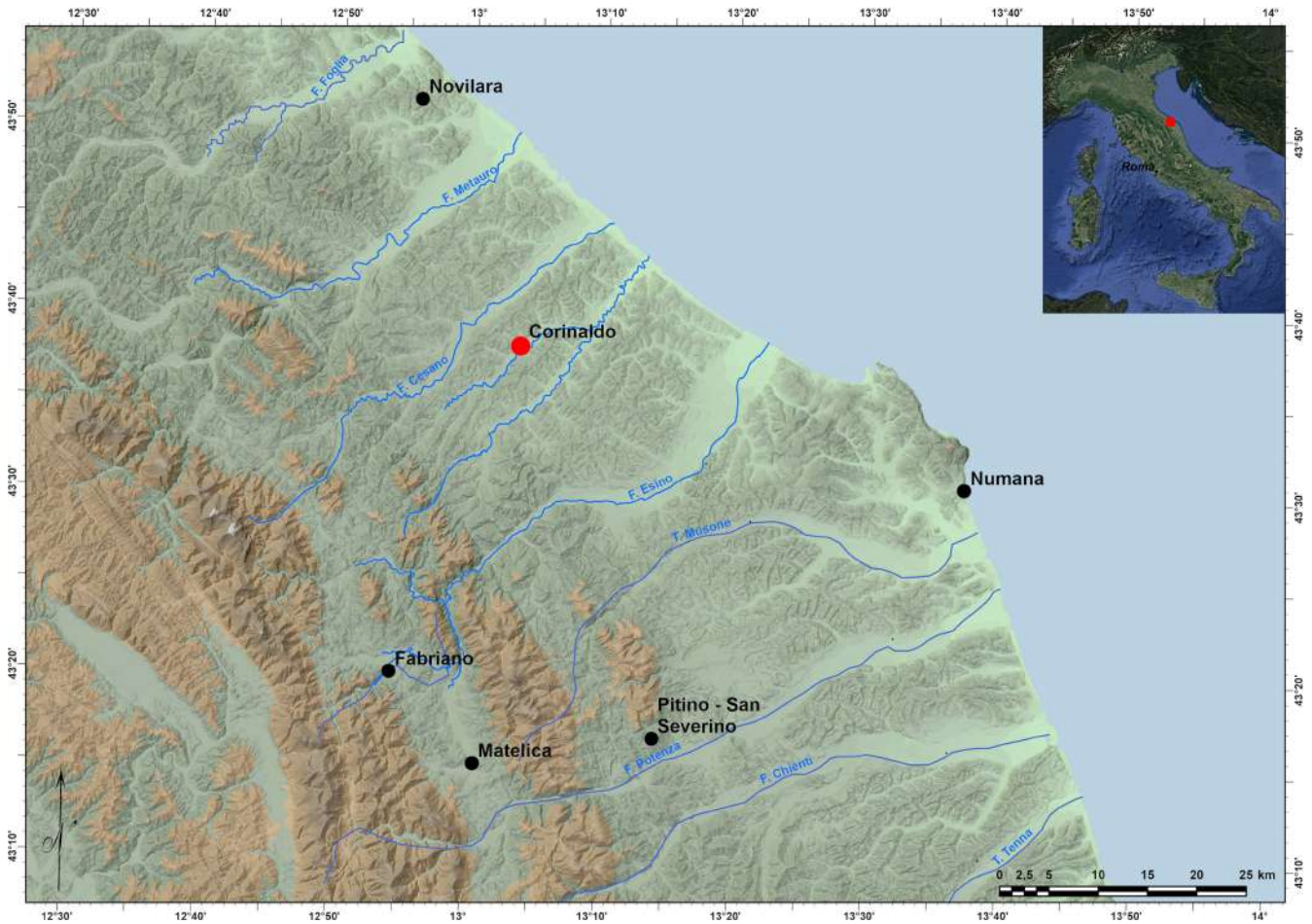
The archaeological landscape of pre-Roman Italy is characterised by a high degree of cultural and ethnic complexity, particularly in central Italy, where multiple communities coexisted and interacted throughout the Iron Age. Recent and authoritative synthesis works have highlighted how rigid territorial divisions based on later administrative frameworks, such as the Augustan regiones, often fail to capture the fluidity of settlement patterns and cultural identities in this period (Pallottino 1991;

Pesando 2005; Bradley et al. 2007; Farney and Bradley 2017; Maiuro 2024). This issue is especially evident along the central Adriatic façade, where the distribution and extent of Picenian communities remain the subject of ongoing debate (Boschi, Giorgi, and Vermeulen 2020).

Traditionally, Picenian occupation has been associated with Regio V Picenum, encompassing southern Marche and parts of Abruzzo. However, archaeological evidence increasingly suggests that Picenian presence extended further north into areas

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**FIGURE 1** | Location of the Corinaldo site within Central Adriatic Italy, with the distribution of the main known Picenian necropolises in the Marche region.

later included in *Regio VI Umbria et Ager Gallicus*. Funerary contexts, in particular, have played a crucial role in defining Picenian cultural markers, as much of the available evidence derives from necropolises rather than settlements, many of which remain only partially published (Naso 2000; Colonna 2001; Silvestrini and Sabbatini 2008; Frapiccini and Naso 2022). From the Orientalising period onward, elite burials distinguished by monumental circular structures, chariots, weapons and imported objects reflect the emergence of aristocratic groups embedded within wider trans-Adriatic exchange networks (Colonna 1999; Riva and Vella 2006; Naso 2013).

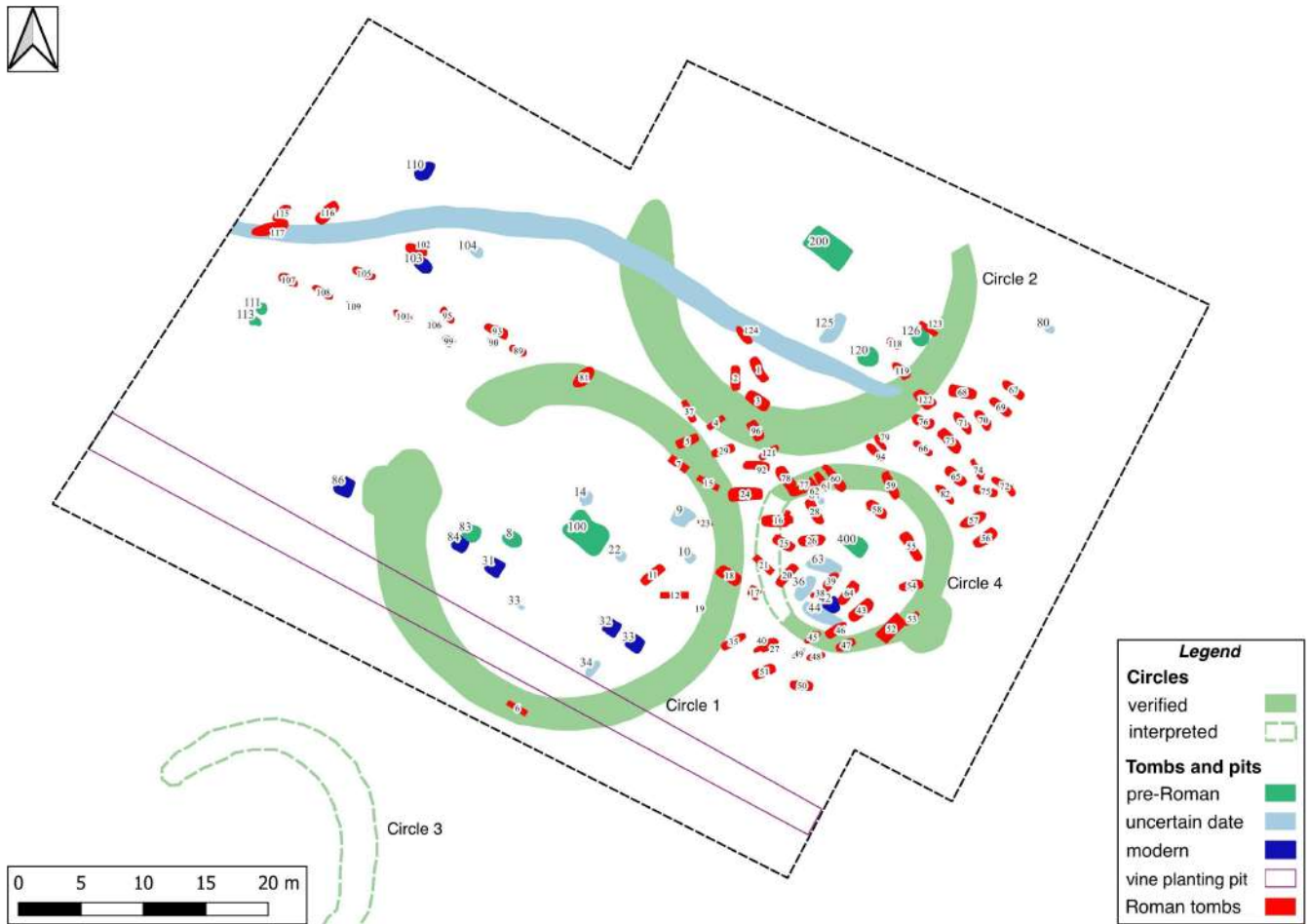
In recent years, systematic landscape-scale research in the northern Marche has significantly increased the available archaeological data, largely due to the application of non-invasive survey methods. Remote sensing and geophysical techniques have proven particularly effective in identifying previously unknown funerary and settlement contexts in areas long considered marginal or poorly documented (Boschi 2018; Boschi 2019; Boschi 2022a). Within this framework, the Nevola Valley represents a key case study, offering new insights into both Iron Age occupation and later Roman reuse of earlier funerary landscapes.

Since 2018, an integrated archaeological investigation has been conducted at Contrada Nevola (Corinaldo) (Figure 1),

initially prompted by development-led archaeology procedures (Boschi 2020a, 2020b; Boschi, Venanzoni, et al. 2020; Boschi et al. 2022). The site consists of an extensive multi-period necropolis, including at least four large circular monuments dated to the Orientalising period and a Roman cemetery partially superimposed on the earlier structures (Figure 2). Preliminary non-invasive surveys revealed the geometry, preservation state and internal anomalies of the monuments, providing the basis for a targeted excavation strategy. The exceptional discovery in 2024 of a princely tomb within Circle 2 offers a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness and interpretative value of an integrated prospection-led approach.

### 1.1 | Research Aim

The primary aim of this paper is to evaluate the contribution of integrated non-invasive methods—specifically aerial photography, systematic field-walking, automatic resistivity profiling (ARP) and magnetometry—to the identification, characterisation and interpretation of a complex funerary landscape. Rather than presenting excavation as an isolated research outcome, this study emphasises the role of geophysical and remote sensing data in guiding excavation strategies and refining archaeological hypotheses.



**FIGURE 2** | Excavation plan of the Corinaldo necropolis (updated to 2024).

More specifically, the work addresses the following research questions:

1. How did the combined use of aerial imagery, geophysical surveys and surface reconnaissance contribute to the detection and spatial definition of the Picenian necropolis at Contrada Nevola?
2. To what extent did geophysical anomalies inform the selection, positioning and scope of excavation areas, particularly in the case of Circle 2?
3. How did excavation results validate, refine or challenge the interpretations derived from non-invasive surveys?
4. What methodological insights can be drawn from this case study for the application of integrated prospection strategies in comparable funerary contexts?

By addressing these questions, the paper aims to demonstrate the methodological potential of integrating non-invasive prospection techniques with targeted excavation, highlighting their predictive value and their role in enhancing archaeological interpretation within development-led research frameworks.

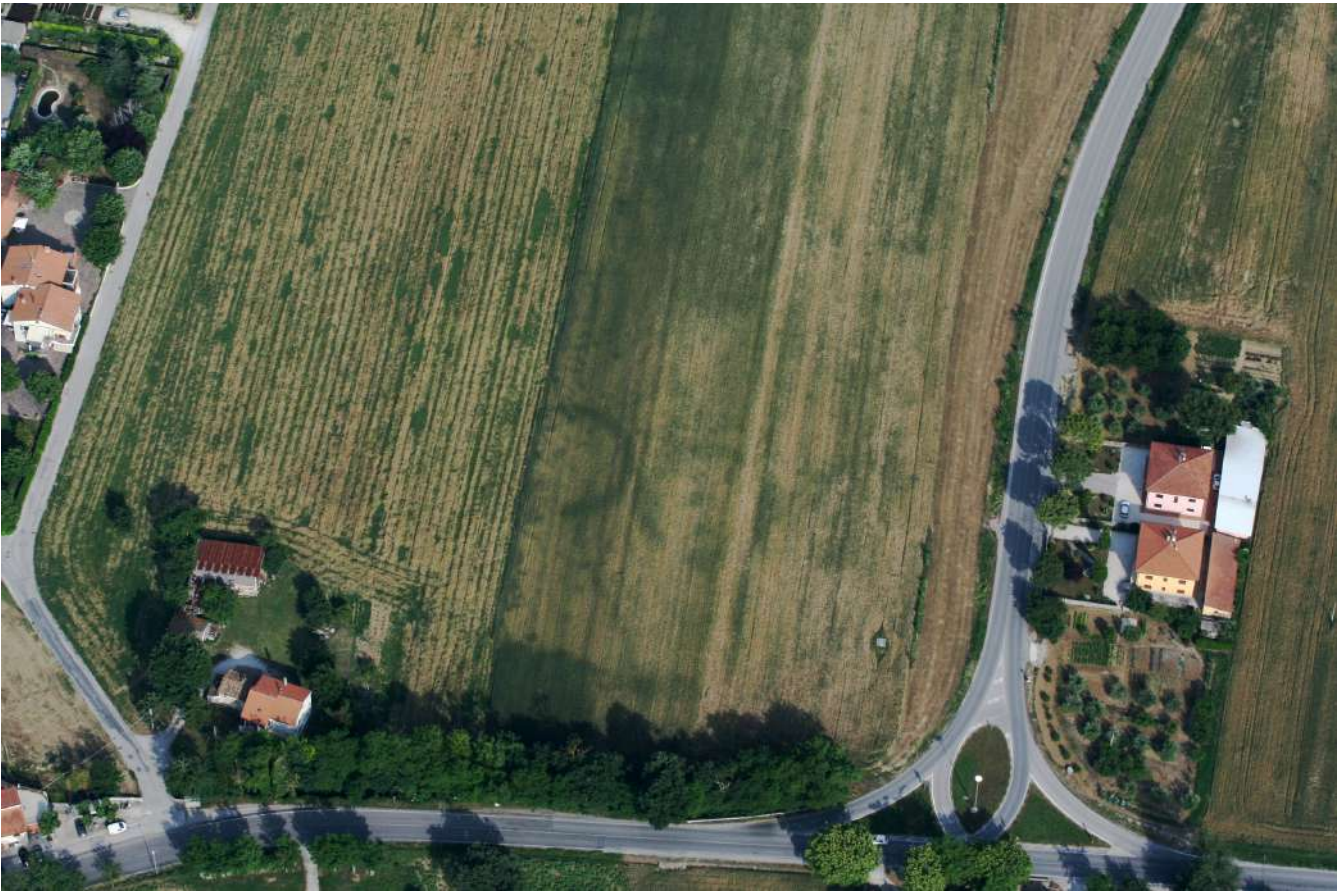
## 2 | Methods

The investigation at the Picenian necropolis of Contrada Nevola (Corinaldo, Marche, Italy) was designed as a multi-stage, integrated research strategy combining non-invasive survey techniques with targeted excavation. The workflow followed a progressive sequence of data acquisition and interpretation, in which each methodological step informed subsequent stages of investigation.

The research was initiated through aerial reconnaissance, followed by systematic field-walking and geophysical surveys. The results of these non-invasive methods were used to define the spatial extent, internal organisation and preservation state of the archaeological features and to identify areas of high archaeological potential. On this basis, excavation areas were selected and excavation strategies defined. Excavation results were subsequently compared with the non-invasive datasets to assess the correspondence between predicted and observed archaeological features.

### 2.1 | Aerial Surveys

The site was first identified through oblique aerial photography acquired during dedicated reconnaissance flights conducted



**FIGURE 3** | Oblique aerial photograph from aerial survey showing circular cropmarks.

using a light aircraft. Aerial images were collected under favourable cropmark conditions and revealed the presence of large circular anomalies corresponding to ring-ditch monuments (Figure 3). These data provided the initial indication of a previously unknown funerary complex and guided the planning of subsequent ground-based investigations.

## 2.2 | Field-Walking Survey

Systematic field-walking surveys were carried out across the fluvial terrace hosting the necropolis. Surveyors were organised in parallel transects with an average spacing of approximately 2m, ensuring homogeneous coverage of the investigated area. Surface materials were recorded and collected selectively, with particular attention paid to diagnostic artefacts. The field-walking survey primarily identified dispersed Roman-period materials, including tile fragments associated with later burials, while providing limited surface evidence for the earlier Picenian phase.

## 2.3 | Automatic Resistivity Profiling (ARP)

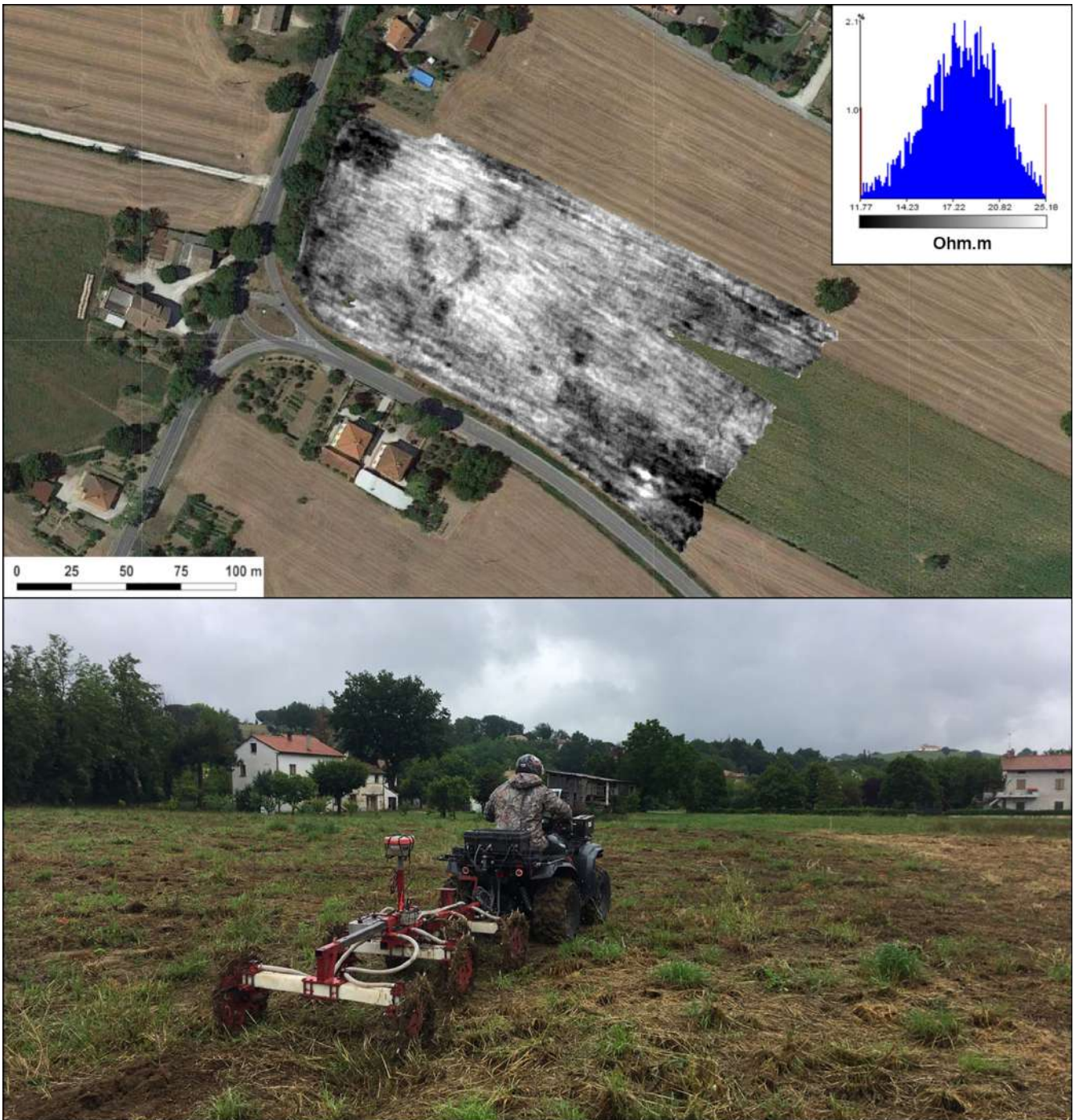
Electrical resistivity data were acquired using the Automatic Resistivity Profiling (ARP) system, a multi-electrode, vehicle-towed platform designed for rapid and extensive mapping of apparent soil resistivity (Dabas 2009). The survey was conducted in collaboration with Geocarta Inc. (Paris, France) and covered the entire area of archaeological potential (Figure 4).

The ARP system was equipped with a multi-depth electrode configuration, allowing the simultaneous acquisition of resistivity measurements at three nominal investigation depths. Under the local pedological and hydrological conditions, these corresponded approximately to depth intervals centred at 0.5, 1.0 and 1.5–2.0m below ground level. Data were acquired continuously along parallel transects, resulting in an average spatial sampling density of approximately one measurement every 0.20 m along-track and an inter-profile spacing of 0.50 m, equivalent to a resolution of c. 30.000 measurements per hectare.

The system was equipped with a digital encoder and DGPS positioning, ensuring accurate spatial georeferencing of the dataset. Data processing and visualisation were carried out using proprietary software provided by Geocarta Inc., including interpolation, gridding and standard filtering routines. Resistivity values were visualised as greyscale and colour-scaled raster maps, where low-resistivity anomalies were interpreted as features associated with anthropogenic fills, such as ditches and pits, characterised by increased moisture retention.

## 2.4 | Magnetic Survey

Magnetic data were collected using a GEM Systems GSMP-35 potassium gradiometer operated in vertical gradient configuration by the University of Bologna (Figure 5). This configuration enhances sensitivity to shallow subsurface features

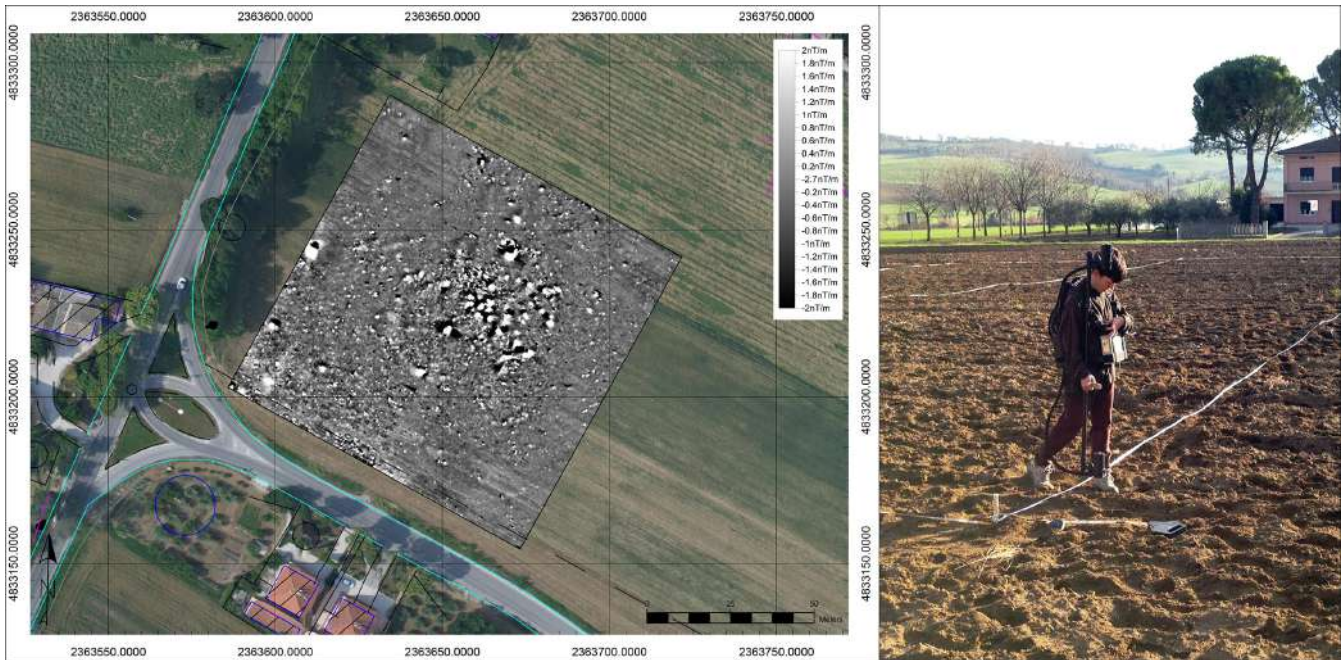


**FIGURE 4** | Resistivity surveys with ARP technology. In collaboration with Geocarta Inc. Paris.

and reduces the influence of regional magnetic variations (Boschi 2020c).

The magnetic survey was conducted over a regular grid covering a part of the general area investigated by the resistivity survey. Data were acquired along parallel profiles oriented south–north, with an inter-profile spacing of 0.50 m. To minimise heading effects and directional noise, all profiles were measured in a single direction of travel, at the expense of acquisition speed but with improved data consistency. Sampling along profiles was continuous, resulting in a dense dataset suitable for high-resolution mapping of magnetic anomalies.

Standard data processing procedures were applied, including despiking to remove surface ferrous noise and interpolation for raster visualisation. Magnetic gradient values were initially recorded with a full dynamic range (up to  $\pm 40$  nT/m), while visualisation scales were adjusted during interpretation to enhance the visibility of weak magnetic anomalies interpreted as archaeological features. Without anticipating the excavation results discussed in the following sections, the stratigraphic investigation suggests that the effective detection depth of the magnetic survey was limited to the upper 1–1.5 m of the subsurface, although, as is well known, this depends on the size of the buried targets, contrasts in magnetic



**FIGURE 5** | Geomagnetic surveys with GEM Systems GSMP-35 potassium gradiometer (University of Bologna).

susceptibility and the concentration of ferromagnetic materials (Aspinall et al. 2009).

## 2.5 | Chronology of Surveys and Environmental Conditions

The non-invasive surveys were conducted during multiple field campaigns between 2009 and 2020, preceding and accompanying the excavation activities initiated in 2018. Throughout this period, the area remained under continuous agricultural use, primarily subject to ploughing and crop rotation but without major earth-moving operations or significant geomorphological changes.

The stratigraphic consistency observed during excavation confirms that post-depositional disturbances were largely confined to the plough soil. Consequently, the geophysical datasets acquired in different years are considered comparable and representative of the preserved archaeological record. Variations in environmental conditions, such as soil moisture related to seasonal precipitation, were taken into account during data interpretation but did not compromise the identification of major subsurface features.

## 2.6 | Integration of Geophysical Data and Excavation Planning

The integration of aerial photography, field-walking data and geophysical surveys was achieved through spatial correlation and comparative analysis of anomalies. Circular features initially detected as cropmarks were systematically cross-validated against resistivity and magnetic datasets to assess their geometry, continuity and state of preservation.

Within Circle 2, a pronounced magnetic anomaly characterised by high gradient values and a pseudo-rectangular shape was identified near the geometric centre of the monument. On the basis of its intensity, shape, size and spatial coherence in relation to the annular ditch, it was interpreted as the main core of the funerary monument, namely the primary burial and was selected as the first target of the excavation.

Additional magnetic anomalies of smaller intensity and size—some of them extremely faint—were also identified within the enclosed area and interpreted as possible further features, although their precise characterisation remained difficult. The predominantly positive magnetic values, albeit only slightly contrasting, suggested the presence of pits filled, at least, with more organic and less compact soil. It is worth noting that, with the exception of the large circular feature corresponding to the delimiting ditch, the other features distributed within the enclosed area were identified almost exclusively through geomagnetic data, while showing little or no correspondence in the resistivity maps. Therefore, despite some interpretative uncertainties, the excavation was planned with the expectation of investigating a previously unknown and extraordinary funerary context which, with a high degree of probability, could preserve an exceptional material record—not only in terms of quantity and quality but also in its archaeological significance. This assessment was based on the scarce attestations of this category of monumental funerary structures in the northern Marche and on the need to deepen knowledge and understanding of their constitutive and organisational elements.

Taking advantage of the favourable public acquisition of the entire area, the decision was made to undertake an extensive excavation, also in order to establish a direct framework of comparison and feedback with the results of the non-invasive surveys.



**FIGURE 6** | The area of excavation 2024: cropmarks on the aerial photo and results of the archaeological exploration.

### 3 | Results

#### 3.1 | Results of Non-Invasive Investigations

The combined application of aerial photography, field-walking, electrical resistivity and magnetic surveys allowed a detailed characterisation of the funerary landscape at Contrada Nevola prior to excavation. Aerial imagery revealed the presence of large circular cropmarks corresponding to ring-ditch monuments, although only the two largest features were consistently visible under favourable conditions.

Field-walking surveys provided limited evidence for the pre-Roman phase, yielding mainly Roman-period materials such as tile fragments associated with later burials. This contrast highlights the restricted visibility of the Picenian funerary features at the surface and confirms the necessity of subsurface prospection techniques for their identification.

Electrical resistivity mapping using the ARP system revealed a more complex funerary layout, identifying at least three circular anomalies characterised by low-resistivity fills consistent with annular ditches. The resistivity data allowed precise measurement of monument diameters, ranging between approximately 15 and 30m and showed variations in preservation related to modern agricultural disturbance. In the case of Circle 2, the resistivity maps suggested an interruption in the annular ditch in the north-western sector, interpreted as a possible entrance feature.

Magnetic survey results complemented the resistivity data by highlighting discrete, high-intensity magnetic anomalies within the circular enclosures. In Circle 2, a strong dipolar magnetic anomaly located near the geometric centre of the monument

was identified, with values reaching up to  $\pm 40$  nT/m. Additional smaller magnetic anomalies were detected within the enclosed area and along the western perimeter of the circle, the latter corresponding to Roman-period burials brought to light during excavation.

#### 3.2 | Results of Excavation: Circle 2

Excavation conducted in 2024 fully exposed the area corresponding to Circle 2, confirming the general geometry and preservation state predicted by the non-invasive surveys (Figure 6). The annular ditch was found to be partially truncated in the eastern sector due to modern land modification, while the north-western interruption observed in the resistivity data corresponded to a functional access point to the interior of the monument (Figure 7).

Near the geometric centre of the circle, excavation revealed a large, pseudo-rectangular pit (T200), measuring approximately  $3.7 \times 2.0$  m and preserved to a maximum depth of 0.40 m. The pit contained over 200 artefacts made of impasto ceramic, bronze and iron (Figure 8). The assemblage included a two-wheeled chariot, weapons, bronze vessels, imported ceramics and other high-status objects, confirming the interpretation of the central magnetic anomaly as a rich grave-goods deposit (Figure 9).

Two additional pits were identified within the enclosed area. These features contained animal bones, pottery fragments, flint splinters and traces of combustion, consistent with repeated ritual activities (Figure 10). Along the western perimeter of the monument, eight Roman-period burials were documented, corresponding spatially to magnetic anomalies detected during the geophysical survey.



**FIGURE 7** | Aerial view of Circle 2 during the 2024 excavation campaign.



**FIGURE 8** | Overview of the grave goods pit (T200) found inside Circle 2.

#### 4 | Discussion

The excavation of Circle 2 offered a direct opportunity to evaluate the accuracy and predictive value of the non-invasive survey results. Its extensive investigation revealed a strong correspondence between the geophysical anomalies and the features identified during the dig. The geometry, diameter and partial preservation of the annular ditch closely matched the resistivity anomaly detected in the survey, particularly in terms of its spatial extent and the width of the ditch. The central burial pit directly confirmed the interpretation of the high-intensity magnetic anomaly as relating to a rich assemblage of grave goods, including several prestigious metal objects (Figure 11). In this

regard, the magnetic response generated by the buried objects is particularly noteworthy, despite the corrosion and mineralization undergone by the ancient metal alloys and the abundant presence of impasto ceramic vessels. Presumably, the shallow depth of the archaeological deposits relative to the ground surface and the magnetic sensors, together with the mass of the collected material, facilitated the instrumental detection. Objects containing iron components undoubtedly contributed to the high overall magnetic intensity of the anomaly, even more so than bronze artefacts.

The identification of ritual pits within the enclosed area further confirms that geophysical anomalies of lower intensity, initially



**FIGURE 9** | Bronze helmet uncovered during excavation, part of the grave goods.



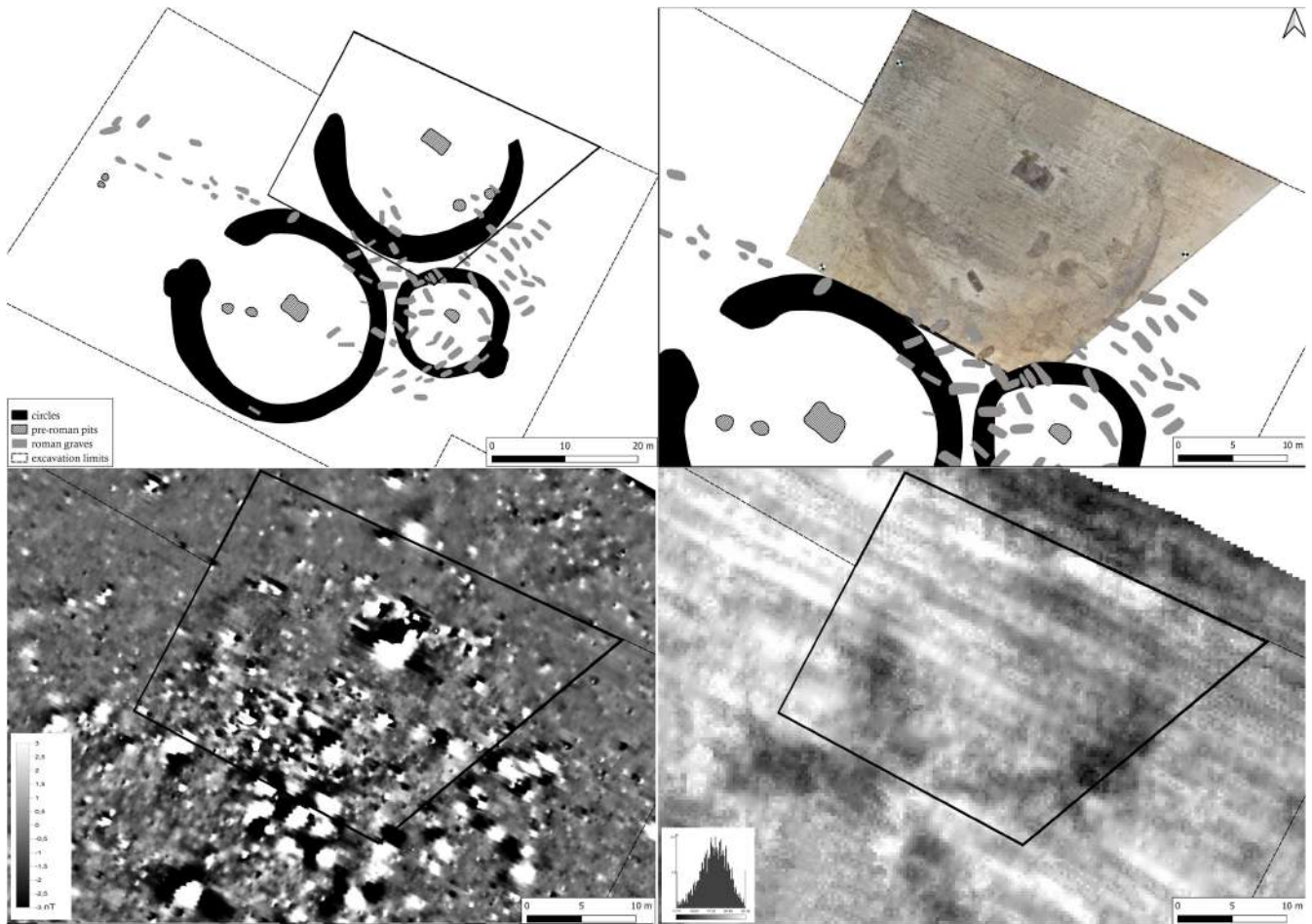
**FIGURE 10** | One of the ritual pits identified inside Circle 2 through magnetic survey, containing animal bones, pottery fragments and traces of combustion.

interpreted as secondary features, reflected specific aspects of the site's original configuration and its earliest phases of use. Similarly, the detection of Roman-period burials along the western perimeter of the monument demonstrates the effectiveness of magnetic prospection in locating tile-built tombs rich in fired materials and in anticipating their spatial distribution.

The combined evidence from geophysical surveys and excavation now allows an accurate and plausible reconstruction of the original layout of the Picene funerary monument. The presence of an entrance in the ring ditch and the identification of several ritual pits indicate that the interior of the circle was accessible and likely used repeatedly. Rather than being a sealed funerary

space, the monument functioned as a ceremonial arena in which ritual activities were performed over an extended period.

The absence of human remains within the burial pit is a recurring feature in Orientalising Picene contexts. Numerous cases documented in the literature explain this phenomenon in relation to a funerary arrangement in which the body was placed above the grave goods pit or rather separated from it but still set on a surface structure that did not survive postdepositional processes and modern agricultural activities (Finocchi et al. 2017; Boschi 2022b). Nevertheless, despite this absence, the nature and richness of the grave goods allow the burial to be interpreted as commemorating an elite male individual, likely a leader of



**FIGURE 11** | Before and after excavation (2024 campaign). Top left: overall plan of the necropolis with the 2024 excavation area indicated. Top right: aerial view of the excavation. Bottom left: comparison with the results of the geomagnetic survey (potassium gradiometer, University of Bologna). Bottom right: comparison with the results of the electrical resistivity survey (ARP system, Geocarta Inc.).

the local community, for whom a monumentally marked space charged with ideological significance was dedicated.

From a methodological perspective, this case study demonstrates the advantages of an integrated, prospection-led research strategy in funerary contexts characterised by low surface visibility. Its contribution becomes even more significant when considering the exceptional nature and high potential of the buried archaeological record. Only the prior awareness gained through the combined application of different prospection methods made it possible to fully understand the complexity of the necropolis: its extent, the number and topographic organisation of monuments and burial structures, the chronological range of use and the nature of the preserved materials.

The resulting assessment therefore supported the adoption of a programmatic approach to excavation planning, capable of anticipating logistical requirements, ensuring appropriate measures for site protection and conservation and involving the most suitable team of specialists to conduct the investigation within a defined timeframe and projected budget.

Given the poor surface visibility of the site, it should be emphasised that the complete and reliable body of information that

guided the excavation was obtained only through the integration of different methods. Aerial photography enabled the initial identification of the site but revealed only two of the Picene circles. Resistivity mapping defined the number and geometry of the earlier circular monuments, while magnetic prospection made it possible to identify features rich in fired and metallic materials, in the case of the Picene princely tombs and to recognise the presence of Roman-period burials as well. For a long time, surface surveys had yielded mainly materials indicating a Roman-period cemetery, with only scarce evidence for the Picene phase. In short, had the investigation relied on a single method, the overall picture would very likely have been missed and the correct archaeological interpretation of the context would consequently have been compromised.

The strong correspondence between predicted and excavated features confirms the reliability of this approach and highlights its potential for guiding excavation strategies within development-led archaeology frameworks, where informed decision-making and site preservation are critical concerns.

Beyond methodological considerations, the last discovery of the princely tomb within Circle 2 has significant implications for understanding Picenian social organisation and territorial extent in northern Marche. The monumentality of the

funerary structure and the richness of the assemblage indicate the presence of an aristocratic elite integrated within wider trans-Adriatic exchange networks.

The later reuse of the site during the Roman period further suggests a long-term recognition of the symbolic value of the funerary landscape. The spatial respect shown towards the earlier monuments implies an intentional engagement with pre-existing memory, reinforcing the interpretation of the necropolis as a persistent locus of cultural significance.

## 5 | Conclusion

The integrated investigation conducted at the necropolis of Contrada Nevola (Corinaldo) demonstrates the effectiveness of a prospection-led archaeological strategy combining aerial photography, systematic fieldwalking, geophysical surveys and targeted excavation. Over the course of an eight-year research programme, non-invasive methods proved fundamental not only for the initial discovery of the site but also for defining its spatial organisation, preservation state and archaeological potential prior to excavation.

The excavation of Circle 2, following the investigation of two other funerary monuments at the site, confirmed the predictive value of geophysical data, particularly in identifying annular ditches, entrance features, burial deposits and ritual structures. The strong correspondence between geophysical anomalies and excavated features highlights the reliability of integrating electrical resistivity and magnetic surveys in funerary contexts characterised by low surface visibility. This approach allowed excavation to be conducted in a hypothesis-driven manner, optimising resources and minimising unnecessary disturbance.

From an archaeological perspective, the discovery of a new previously unknown princely tomb within a monumental circular enclosure provides new evidence for the presence of Picenian elites in the northern Marche region during the Orientalising period. The richness of the assemblage and the organisation of the funerary space support the interpretation of an aristocratic social structure connected to wider trans-Adriatic exchange networks. The later Roman reuse of the necropolis, respecting the earlier monuments, further underscores the long-term symbolic significance of the site and the intentional preservation of cultural memory (Van Dick and Alcock 2003).

More broadly, this case study illustrates the methodological advantages of integrated non-invasive prospection within development-led archaeology. The continuous feedback between survey and excavation offers a robust framework for future research and heritage management, particularly in complex multi-period landscapes where preservation and informed decision-making are essential. The validity of this approach in the early identification and characterisation of this type of context and archaeological target opens new perspectives for landscape-scale research in the region, which in recent years has been the focus of systematic territorial investigations (Boschi 2022a). By relying on the same integration of sources and methods, ongoing research is currently identifying

additional contexts within this territorial district that display similar characteristics, so far detected only through remote and proximal sensing techniques (Boschi et al. 2024). The interpretative model developed through the investigations at Corinaldo therefore becomes replicable, making it possible to preliminarily assess recently identified sites of comparable nature and to characterise them in terms of their state of preservation and material potential. This offers clear advantages both for their possible future investigation and for the requirements of heritage protection and conservation.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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