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BELOW The Maremma, as seen from Populonia: the site of an Etruscan, Roman, and medieval citadel.



MAREMMA

“I ASKED THE GERMAN BOY ABOUT THE ETRUSCAN PLACES ALONG THE COAST: VOLCI, VETULONIA, POPULONIA. HIS ANSWER WAS ALWAYS THE SAME: “NOTHING! THERE IS NOTHING THERE.”

D. H. Lawrence, Etruscan Places, [1932]1986, p.115.

The first time I came to the Tuscan coastal village of Scarlino we ate porcupine for dinner. Only after I had eaten it did I realize to my horror what it was and my much missed friend, Riccardo Francovich, withdrew the ever-present pipe from his mouth and laughed heartily. (Today, thankfully porcupines are a protected species in Italy.) Riccardo was in a celebratory frame of mind. He had just found the first early medieval post-built dwellings in Tuscany. In the lea of Scarlino’s stout Pisan castle the rock-cut dwellings spoke to an entirely different Middle Ages, one that only archaeology might throw light upon.

Thirty-five years later I am part of a team giving this region a new archaeological direction. Not the Etruscans, as everyone asks me when I mention my days under the Tuscan sun. Our project is

in search of the Medieval renaissance of this region between the blissful Tyrrhenian bays and the dark chestnut forests on the first range of hills, the Colline Metallifere (see further information box). We are searching for what lies between, metaphorically speaking, the Etruscan (Roman and medieval) hilltop citadel of Populonia and the Siena-in-miniature, Massa Marittima.

These glorious places are connected by a shared saint, S. Cerbone, a 6th-century martyred bishop of Populonia. His remains, so one hypothesis proposes, were interred in a cult-church high above the sea at S. Quirico, near Populonia and then, through various moves, re-interred in the early 11th-century in the new cathedral at Massa Marittima. S. Cerbone would surely not complain. His bones occupied two extraordinary places. S. Quirico - site of a celebrated excavation by Giovanna Bianchi and Sauro Gelichi - commands a cliff-top bower, a stone’s throw from Populonia. Massa Marittima, meanwhile, is an unembellished gem of a cathedral that for a millennium has dominated one of Tuscany’s most refreshingly complete medieval piazzas. With such places in our midst, what’s not to like about this project?

We are about a third of the way through our EU grant. Many of our expectations have been upturned by the first results. This makes it all the more compelling as we plan our new excavations and research. With what we already know, Riccardo Francovich would surely have been thrilled. Sienese professor, Giovanna Bianchi and I have been able to bring the full armoury of modern archaeology to the investigation of a historic period in a place



LEFT A map showing the Colline Metallifere hills and the site of the excavations.

BELOW The project fits metaphorically between these two glorious settings: the Populonia citadel (here showing the Roman sanctuary, XXXX) and Masa Marittima (XXXX).

rich in documents. Let me offer a taster of what Giovanna and I are now thinking.

Mining the Maremma

Context matters. The Etruscans made the Maremma, mining its metals. These were exported through emporia like Populonia. In return came Mediterranean treasures from Sicily, Greece, or further afield that were traded down the inland river valleys into the heart of Tuscany. The Romans imposed their grid-iron mentality on this world. Coastal trading places now occupied every river mouth, like Portus Scabris at the mouth of our riverine corridor: the Pecora. More, the Romans drove north-south highways through the region, like the coastal Via Aurelia. Alongside it were hostleries, grand villas, villages, and feeder points for peasant communities working the interior and supporting an imperial market. Six centuries of economic ups and downs passed before complete collapse.

Why, of course, remains the million-dollar question, but the tons of potsherds rescued during the marina construction at Portus Scabris bear witness to colossal seaborne commerce that developed in the 1st-century AD and all but disappeared between the mid 6th and early 7th centuries. Thereafter, a sherd or two of early medieval pottery for each following century, identified by Trento university professor, Emanuele Vaccaro, as part of our project, emphatically – graphically – illustrates the nadir of Mediterranean coastal trade.

Western Tuscany like most of Italy was reduced to a primitivism that defies our notions of progress. The presence of the Church and written recollections of the past only serve to illustrate how a metaphorical ice age settled on the hitherto affluent consumer society. Tuscany was not alone, of course. All of Italy, including Rome itself, was reduced to a prehistoric condition. It only emerged in a new medieval guise, the basis of our Europe, four centuries later in the 11th century. ▶





LEFT & ABOVE The 11th-century cathedral dominates the medieval piazza at Massa Marittima and holds the relics of S. Cerbone.

Tracing this grand narrative on the ground in the Maremma we are learning to identify historical nuances. Our project follows the story of the Pecora river. Today, being managed by multiple sluices, you barely notice this stream as it wends its way through the undulating country towards the Colline Metallifere. Until the modern era its hill waters entered the Tyrrhenian sea in a lagoon tucked behind Portus Scabris, overlooked by the hilltop village of Scarlino. Our geomorphologist, Pierluigi Pierrucini, professor at Siena University, has yet to understand the lagoonal history, but has opened a fascinating window on the Pecora's Medieval transformation. Collaborating with the palynologist and carbon expert, Gaetano di Pasquale, professor from Naples university, the valley is surrendering some long-held secrets.

To cut a long story short, Pierluigi is confident the river was first managed in the later 1st millennium AD. A slew of radiocarbon dates indicates this probably happened in the 10th century. The winter and spring rains were canalized in parts and guided around the touchstone site of Vetricella (more about this place in a moment). As this happened, the first notable pollen signatures of chestnut and olives occur. Who would have thought it? Olives, in particular, are not eternal on the plain below Massa Marittima, but introduced in the 10th century. Chestnuts – today the staple of the Colline Metallifere – a dark forest canopy for pigs and wild boar – were also introduced for their flour (from conkers) and the marvellous flexibility of the timber.

Questions galore now strike us. Why were these crops introduced at this time? Where did they come from? Olive groves outlived antiquity in Apulia and along the Adriatic Sea coast; chestnuts were important to the eastern Byzantine economy. Were foreign agronomists guiding the hand of the parvenu lords re-colonizing the Maremma with fortified hilltop villages?

Talismanic tower

The archaeological touchstone in the Pecora corridor is Vetricella. Its history is bound up with all aspects of the project. Giovanna and I first visited in September 2007 when Lorenzo Marasco was putting a trial trench into this low mound marginally elevated above the deep furrows of endless acres of ploughing. Egged on by me, Lorenzo interpreted it as one of the earliest castles in Italy.

Vetricella stands out like a searchlight on the air photographs of this lost lagoonal landscape. Three concentric circles and the shadow of a small rectangular square building resembling a bull's

eye of sorts made this an obvious target for excavation. No less remarkable were the associated metal-smelting waste, potsherds, iron objects, and silver coins in the plough-soil. Plainly this was a fortified 9th- to 11th-century settlement on the eastern edge of an embayment extending to the Mediterranean. It was an obvious focus for our project.

The first major season of excavations led by Lorenzo and a small army from Siena university upended the earlier interpretation. Vetricella is now even more interesting a site and certain to be one of those archaeological places that defines a region.

We uncovered most of the inner ditched area, and some swathes of the areas within the outer two concentric circles. Our interim interpretation (because there is a long way to go) is that the earliest site dates from the 7th to 9th centuries. Besides potsherds, the presence of simple Lombard jewellery suggests it was a small settlement located close to the point where the Via Aurelia passed the lagoon. Future excavations will determine how it all began. Could it have been a minor aristocratic estate centre, for example? This might explain why later in the 9th century three concentric ditches were excavated at 15, 30, and 45 metres from a central compass point. Inside the ditches was a small post-built tower. The physiognomy of this new place was monumental by the standards



LEFT An Etruscan statue from Vetricella.



ABOVE Bullseye? When seen from above prior to excavations commencing, the archaeological site on this low mound is marked by a series of concentric circles (XXXX). A possible parallel is provided by this double-ditched Ottonian proto-motte at Rhade-Dorsten in the Rhineland, Germany (XXXX).



of the time. Its form and construction resemble late Carolingian castles in the Rhineland. In this case, though, the central tower seems as though it was no more than a treasure-house, not the lustrous home of some aristocrat. Only closer dating with radiocarbon and coins will pinpoint its architect and proprietors. Was it the Aldobrandeschi family, the power-house behind much of western Tuscan history in this era or the King of Italy (Hugh of Provence), known to have had property close by in AD 937?

The third phase was a variation of the second. The ditches were filled and replaced by fortifications; the tower was remodelled as a mortared structure. Lastly, post-dating this 10th-century establishment was an ephemeral afterlife of timber structures and accompanying iron-working hearths. Seven hundred iron tools have so far been found. Somewhat oddly these appear to belong to this otherwise anonymous early 11th-century place. Could the tools be earlier? Excavations in 2017 will try to determine this. The collection includes over 50 short-bladed paring knives as well as blanks. The sheer quantity of iron suggests Vettricella was in receipt of iron from either the iron adits on the island of Elba or the newly reopened mines of the Colline Metalifere or, indeed, both. Why here? This has yet to be explained. Were these makeshift forges serving the newly statuted constellation of hilltop villages hereabouts or making consignments to ship to embryonic towns like Pisa? Judging from the discarded metal, some event evidently overtook the smiths, bringing a sudden end to the iron-working and with it four centuries of occupation.

Into this mix we have an intriguing body of other finds. The ceramics are prodigious in number but mostly storage vessels as opposed to fine tablewares. On this evidence the dining culture in the dinky tower was hardly aristocratic. And

yet the animal bones tell a different story. Piglets in notable numbers as well as lagoon birds and chicken were consumed. Vettricella's inhabitants' culinary preferences differed significantly from those of the neighbouring villages. Lastly, the stand-out discovery is an assemblage of 16 silver coins dating from c.900 to c.1025. To find one coin is exceptional in this era when Italy was a non-monetized economy. To find so many coins beggars belief. Do they belong to a hoard? Are they indices of the economic power of Vettricella in its second, third, and fourth phases?

Testing Vettricella's metal

Perhaps the most notable finds consist of tell-tale metal-working debris, or rather their rarity in the excavation. Crucibles number two or three in total, and indubitable evidence of working minerals within the ditched enclosures has eluded us. Above all this implies the purposes of this extraordinary place await discovery somewhere in the fields between the tower and the lagoon. Intensive geophysical surveys of these fields is now ▶

BELOW A drone photograph of the 2016 excavations showing the three concentric ditches and the robbed footprint of a small tower (to the right, marked by five standing people).





scheduled before a new dig resumes.

What sort of metal is the big question? Was proximity to iron sources the reason for powerfully enclosing the earlier site with the triple rings in the later 9th century? Or, was the small tower a safe-house for rare metals such as copper, lead, or even miniscule amounts of silver from reopened Etruscan adits in places like Cugnano in the neighbouring hills?

To answer this question the Florence university professor, Marco Benvenuto has embarked on a metallurgical analysis of Vetricella's silver coins as well as other similar coins from Tuscany's museums. Working with the numismatist, Alessia Rovelli, both conclude on the evidence so far that the silver in the coins was either from a mix of stored sources or the Harz mountains in central Germany. Rare, perhaps, but these silver coins symbolized German authority in the region. By contrast, Colline Metallifere silver, it seems so far, is elusive until the later 12th century when places like Massa Marittima boasted their own moneyers working with local metals.

Clearly, then, after the 7th century western Tuscany scarcely engaged with the Mediterranean and the cosmopolitan world of Arab and Byzantine merchants. Stronger connections existed on 'paper' at least, if episodically, with the political forces of Germany and southern France. The post-millennial rise of new towns like Massa Marittima occurred hard on the heels of new fortified villages (with numerous cereal storage pits) in these metal-bearing hills like Cugnano and Rocchette Pannocchieschi, as well as villages like Scarlino. Coincidentally or not, the disappearance of Vetricella is the hallmark of a new Mediterranean age. By AD 1100 if not before, Pisan merchants were nosing their way along the coast and introducing traded glazed pots, some from Fustât (Egypt) and Palermo, to the Pecora valley and its hill country. From that moment onwards accelerated economic growth revolutionized the region best known for its Renaissance affluence.

Our talismanic site of Vetricella belongs to the lost epoch when Tuscany was a backwater and any renaissance was a pipe-dream. Given Tuscany's international standing today it is hard to countenance. Yet the peculiar characteristics of this place coming to light in our excavations are hugely enhanced by the new vegetational and sedimentological history of the Pecora corridor. With the river managed, presumably new fields and terraces

ABOVE The robber trenches of the central tower at Vetricella.

BELOW Pierluigi Pierrucini, Emanuele Vaccaro and Giovanna Bianchi discuss Vetricella's pottery

facilitated new crops and timber. Now, we have to connect all these different elements. Above all, we have to situate Vetricella in the textual accounts pinpointing estate histories to work out who exactly were the agents of western Tuscany's transformational change. Mediterraneanism will have to be weighed up against the interests of German emperors and their devolved impact in this region.

One thing is certain, the history of the Maremma at its most obscure is about to take a new turn. Riccardo Francovich who pioneered this adventure, puffing deeply on his pipe, would have been mightily excited. ■



FURTHER INFORMATION

The ERC nEU-Med (no.670792) research project (2015-20) is entitled: 'Origins of a new economic union (7th to 12th centuries): resources, landscapes and political strategies in a Mediterranean region' and is based in the University of Siena.