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Settlement Patterns and Rural Habitation in the Middle Cecina Valley Between the Hellenistic to Roman Age: The Case of Podere Cosciano

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The present contribution offers the first results of the archaeological investigations¹ carried out from 1999 to 2001 at Podere Cosciano (near Montegemoli, Pisa). The work was aimed at exploring a farmhouse site, as well as at gathering information about the chronology and typology of the local ceramic production, about local building techniques and ecology. The research is part of a project dealing with the “Archaeology of Volterra and its Territory,”² whose goals are the study of the population and of the economy of the Cecina Valley from antiquity to the middle ages, with particular emphasis on the Romanization phase.

Podere Cosciano is situated downhill from the medieval village of Montegemoli, on a high plateau of conglomerate rocks overlooking the Cecina alluvial plain (fig. 1). The soils around the site are reasonably stable and fertile, thus particularly favorable for human settlement. The site was first discovered in 1993, in the course of the Cecina Valley Survey. Two distinct artifacts scatters were identified, located on the two shoulders which characterize the slope. Off-site material was present around the site. The finds were mainly composed by tile fragments, but also black glaze pottery, African Red Slip, Arretine Ware, other fine wares, various coarse wares, amphorae and dolia. The good state of preservation of these finds suggested that the buried structures might also be well preserved too.

A detailed surface collection allowed the determination of the extension of the site (about 400 square metres) as well as its occupation span, between the Hellenistic and the Late Roman periods. On this basis, the site at Podere Cosciano was tentatively interpreted as a small farmhouse continuously occupied for a long period of time.

T H E R E S U L T S O F T H E E X C A V A T I O N

The stratigraphic investigation was preceded by an intensive survey and by a series of manual boreholes. The latter, carried out where the most of the ceramics and building materi-
...could not be precisely determined. However, the presence of layers in the N-E part containing large charcoal pieces and of a pit containing many dolium fragments suggests the existence of rooms with different functions (fig. 2, room 3).

The foundations of the walls are in dry-stone masonry, using undressed river boulders and large pieces of conglomerate rock, placed as headers on their most regular surface. Clay fills the interstices between the rocks, while no mortar is used. The upper portion of the walls was in all likelihood built of wattle-and-daub, as attested by several fragments of burnt clay bearing the impression of reed matting. No traces of doors have been found.

The roof of the house was probably timber-trussed and covered with tiles-of which a great amount has been found in the collapse levels-together with stones and ceramic debris. On the other hand, the absence of such materials from the collapse layers in rooms 1 and 2, suggests that these were roofed with perishable materials instead.

With the exception of room 1, the floors of the rooms are sunken, when compared to the foot of the walls (as already observed in the rural site of Podere San Mario) and were made of sandy clay mixed with gravel or, in the interior, beaten earth. Room 1 also contains a rectangular cistern located in its N-W part. It has the same alignment as the house and was clearly part of its structure. Its walls are built in an opus latericum using ordinary roof tiles bound with mortar, while the floor is a very thick opus signinum. In its N-W corner there is a small round depression, which probably had the function of gathering waste (fig. 3). This structure, a parallel of which is observed in Podere San Mario, was initially interpreted as a water cistern, but on the basis of recent parallels brought to light in Gaul, can be seen instead as a vat for grape pressing and fermentation.

Other
similar structures found in sites throughout the Tuscany and Umbria offer further comparanda in terms of size, typology and building techniques.

On the basis of the residual material found on the surface and in Late Roman levels the overall occupation span of the site can be dated between the 3rd century BC and the X century AD. The building technique employed in the vat could be dated to the 1st century AD.

After the collapse of the main structure, which must have happened around the 5th c. AD, most of it is obliterated by a sequence of natural layers, which slope down from W to E and contain minimal amounts of artifacts. The subsequent occupation phase at the site, datable in the 6th c. AD, cannot be precisely reconstructed. Several large and flat-bottomed pits were dug in the N-E part of the building. Their fills contained some iron slag as well as pottery, which would suggest that some productive activities connected with the use of fire went on at the site. It is still unclear, however, whether such traces can be connected with a permanent occupation or simply with a temporary productive structure.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The results of the excavation at Podere Cosciano can best be interpreted in the broader context provided by the Cecina Valley Survey and by the site at Podere San Mario. In
the survey, over 500 sites were identified, belonging to a wide range of periods and located in a variety of environmental settings. These settlements can be grouped in a rather simple typology: farmhouses, villas and villages. In the middle valley, where Podere Cosciano is situated, about 150 sites were found, but none of them could be interpreted as a villa, while several villa sites were located on the coastal plain. Podere Cosciano thus conforms to the settlement type which prevails in the middle Cecina Valley between the Hellenistic and the Late Roman Age.

Taken together, the evidence collected at Podere Cosciano suggests a long-lived farmhouse where the main activities were connected with agriculture and wine production. This finds a close parallel in the site found at Podere San Mario, another small rural settlement situated on a fluvial terrace overlooking the Cecina. The main building at San Mario is similar in plan, also has sunken floors and an external room for winemaking, and it is also uninterrupted occupied between the 4th century BC and the 5th century AD (fig. 4). Thus the survey seems to prove a strong settlement continuity and homogeneity as the main character of the human landscape in this area between the Hellenistic and the Late Roman Age.

Other interesting information is being added to the picture by paleo-environmental studies, which are still in progress for Podere Cosciano, but have been completed for Podere San Mario. At this site, the cultivation of cereals, legumes and vines are attested as the main means of subsistence, together with the gathering of wild fruits in the nearby woods. A complementary role was performed by sheep-breeding for wool production, and cattle-breeding for plowing and cart-traction; while pigs were raised for meat and fat supply. Deer, hares and dormice were also hunted. These settlement could also rely on the proximity of water streams and woods, these latter providing not only food for the cattle, but also charcoal and timber, essential for the production of pottery and metallurgy. Podere Cosciano and Podere San Mario thus seem to provide an example of a balanced economic system, aiming at self-sufficiency. This may explain its permanence and continuity throughout the centuries, as these sites would be less affected by
macro-economic trends or by social and political changes at the global level.

The presence of luxury items, such as a small bronze figurine of a paternal deity (fig. 5), a carnelian cameo gem representing a head of Apollo crowned with laurels (fig. 6), a scarab, and a considerable number of coins, are further evidence that the inhabitants of these farms were not as poor as the building techniques and materials would seem to imply. Prestige items are, in fact, totally unexpected in such rural contexts, but their presence at both sites cannot be casual. They offer instead important insights into the social conditions of this period.

The spread in the middle Cecina Valley of settlements such as Podere Cosciano and Podere San Mario suggests the presence of a class of farmers working on small plots of land, perhaps not in a servile condition and sometimes enjoying a measure of wealth, even if we cannot determine their social and legal status with greater precision. Furthermore, these sites seem to indicate that the transition between the late Republic and the early Empire was not a particularly traumatic one, given their continuity and apparent prosperity. It could mean that the Etruscan social and productive structure, that had developed previously, was assimilated with little shock in the new Roman reality. From the historical point of view, this phenomenon can be connected with the role played by the local aristocracies in favoring the Romanization process, which is attested in Volterra where local aristocratic families are engaged in munificent building projects. In sum, Romanization does not seem to have deeply impacted the territorial organization in the middle Cecina Valley, nor to have involved the wholesale acquisition of new cultural elements that is often claimed for some nearby areas.

This is particularly well illustrated by the remarkable absence of villas, an important indicator in terms of economy, land exploitation and social structures. Villas have often been interpreted to mark, elsewhere in Central Tyrrenian Italy, a sharp break with pre-Roman population patterns. But in the Cecina Valley they are only present along the coastal plain (already in the Hellenistic Age), and then in much smaller numbers than in Southern Etruria.
It is probable that the middle Cecina Valley, not served by the lines of communication along the coast and the valleys of the Arno and Elsa, was generally unsuitable for the adoption of the villa system. The preservation of traditional ways of land exploitation was instead likely to be a more viable option, even for the Roman settlers that might have been introduced in the area. The deduction of a colony at Volterra, now positively attested by an inscription,\textsuperscript{16} did not apparently involve an influx of veterans in large numbers, as confirmed by the funerary evidence and in particular by the scarcity of funerary stelae.\textsuperscript{17} The local prosopography, in which Etruscan names are frequent, may offer further support to this reconstruction.\textsuperscript{18}

Furthermore, the building technique employed at Podere Cosciano and Podere San Mario shows that some typical Roman elements had not been adopted—such as the use of mortar, floor revetments or wall plaster—which are attested elsewhere in Etruria, even in low-status buildings.\textsuperscript{19}

Podere Cosciano and Podere San Mario, with their similarities in plan, building techniques and way of life, seem to represent a significant sample of the rural habitation in the territory of Volterra between the Hellenistic and the Late Roman periods. When they will be fully placed in the wider context of the survey results, an interesting and unusual picture of a very specific human landscape may emerge.

NOTES

I wish to express all my gratitude to Nicola Terrenato for putting me in charge of the work in the field, and for his help in the post-excavation work. Special thanks are due to Giulio Ciamprichini for his precious advice and suggestions on a draft of the present paper.

1. The excavation project was carried out with the collaboration of the Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici della Toscana, and directed by Nicola Terrenato and myself. Anna Gallone and Cristina Taddei served as supervisors and many students from Italian and foreign universities gave a precious contribution. Cristina Taddei, together with Simonetta Lupi, Daniele Arduini and Hilary W. Smith, supervised the study of the ceramic materials. Laura Motta followed the paleo-environmental work. The investigation has been possible thanks to the financial contribution from the Center for Field Research-Earthwatch and to the collaboration and support from the City Council of Pomarance, particularly from its mayor Graziano Pacini, and to the people of San Dalmazio who helped us with many practical problems.

2. The project began in 1987 under the direction of Andrea Carandini, Edina Regoli and Nicola Terrenato, and was promoted by the Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici della Toscana, the Tuscany Regional Government, the Provinces of Pisa and Livorno, the City Councils of Volterra, Pomarance and Rosignano Marittimo (particularly the Archeological Museum), the Comunità Montana “Alta Val di Cecina,” and the Department of Archaeological Sciences at the University of Pisa, the Department of
Classics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

3. See Motta et al. 1993, 111.


5. Ciampoltrini 2001, 164-65, figs. 2-4, and relevant references.

6. AA.VV. 1983, in particular site n. 20, 110-111, fig. 27.

7. Among these materials are worth mentioning: a fragment of a scarab, an element of the harness decorated with colored vitreous paste inlays and a tongue in the shape of a phal- lus and a metal furniture trimming with a felid’s head. All these materials will soon be published by the Author.


9. The scarcity of doliā fragments might mean a local production, and the use of wooden casks for the storage of wine. On this subject, see the relevant parallel of the Giardino Vecchio farm, in the Ager Cosanus, where the N-W set of rooms was used for pressing, fermenting and storing wine. In particular, room 20 contains a sunken dolium for the storage of must. (see Carandini 1985, 106, pict. 113-14.) In similar Gaulish contexts, the number of dolia is in any case small, between 3 and 10 (see Brun and Laubheimer 2001, 75).


12. A study on this is in preparation by the Author.

13. For a detailed analysis of the historical and literary sources for the Caecinae family and its role in the reorganization of the territory during the Augustan Age, see Hohtī 1975, 405-433; Torelli 1982, 281-285.


17. In Central and Southern Etruria, stelae were largely widespread particularly in the cities more directly involved in the colonial reorganization of Augustan Age, and they are closely associated with the existence and success of a new entrepreneurial class of freed-men. The lack of steles in the territory of Volterra can be interpreted as a clear evidence of the continuity of the great families of Etruscan origin, Ciampoltrini 1982, 2-12. See also the persistence of Etruscan traditional iconography in architectural decorations carved in local workshops, even if the latter were clearly in contact with the contemporary styles prevailing in the capital, Ciampoltrini 1991, 329-336.


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