The Blacksmith of Fonteblanda. Artisan and Trading Activity in the Northern Tyrrhenian in the Sixth Century BC

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The inconclusive information available concerning the port area of Talamone, in the area between Fonteblanda and La Puntata (fig.1), derived mainly from acquisitions and finds in the 19th century, has now been clarified by surface artefact collection work carried out by the Soprintendenza Archeologica per la Toscana since 1987. This work has revealed a complex picture of a changing settlement pattern in the area corresponding to the south east corner of the vast coastal lagoon, shown on Renaissance and 19th century maps, that lay in this area until land drainage works in the late 1800s. In the final Bronze Age a vast settlement spread over the eastern slopes of Puntata. The archaic settlement, which finds indicate was only occupied for a brief period in the sixth century was soon replaced, again on the slopes of Puntata, by a settlement of the end of the sixth to the beginning of the fifth century whose presence has long been known since the finding of architectural terracottas from a temple in the 1930s. In the early Hellenistic period (late fourth century) the finds from the slope of Puntata, just below the ridge that dominates the wide bay of the sea, provide a plausible context for a monumental fountain uncovered by ground works in the early 1900’s. Subsequently a large Roman site, located close to the current railway station, inherited the role of the Etruscan settlement, and remained occupied until the beginning of the 6th century AD.

Between 1991 and 1997 three campaigns of excavation took place over a large area of the surface scatter of 6th-century material. Observation of the topography and examination of the aerial photography (fig. 2) indicate that this area lay on the southern shores of the lagoon at the point where a shallow tongue of water advanced inland towards the south for several hundreds of meters. Traces of this remain as silty deposits that give a marked black discoloration to the soil that is distinctly sterile. The position of the modern drainage channel that runs from north to south confirms the presence of a depression at the time the land was drained.

Following the inconclusive results of excavations in 1991-3 the campaign of 1997 enabled a coherent assessment of the structures that had come to light. A wide road paved with pebbles and chippings uncovered at the western limits of the excavation provided a
baseline for an orthogonal urban plan defined (in the area excavated) by two roads of beaten earth, that, with the passageway (S on fig. 3), divided the settlement into square blocks with constant dimensions of c.8.90m (30 feet) each side. The regular division by *plateia* and *stenopoi* that finds close parallels in the contemporary plans from Magna Graecia, contrasts with the variety of plans found in the individual buildings. These are constructed of pebbles or chips of stone bound with clay. Of the five excavated, only two could be easily reconciled with the classic Archaic Etruscan model - a longitudinal sequence of two or three rooms opening onto a courtyard. The remainder of the buildings followed different designs, that, as in the case of the block where there was abundant evidence of metal working, can be explained by the functional requirements of the buildings.

The trenches indicate that the life of the settlement was limited to a few decades. In the material from the foundation trenches, occupation and abandonment layers the only class of artifacts that demonstrates a typological development through time is the Etruscan amphoras, and these are numerically the most common in all the stratified deposits. In the foundation levels Etruscan amphoras of Py types 3 A-B are almost the only find, illustrating their abundance in this area. They are accompanied by rare table wares (bucchero and ‘Ionic’ cups) and cooking wares that suggest a date for the foundation around the year 570 BC. Type Py 4 (or 5, Gras EMD) amphoras along with a greater number of East-Greek or Punic amphoras, still associated with buccero and ‘Ionic’ cups, place the end of the settlement between the third quarter and the end of the sixth century. Environmental factors have been suggested as the reason for the abandonment of the settlement. Comparison with the ceramic evidence from shipwrecks places the
assemblage from the occupation of this settlement at Fonteblanda in the period between the shipwreck of Antibes and the wreck of Bon Porté.

The striking similarity between the assemblage from Fonteblanda and those from the ships originating in Etruria and wrecked on the French shores seems to provide conclusive evidence for the status of the site as an emporion. The area of Fonteblanda, thanks to the potential of the Lagoon, must have offered a safe haven for shipping at the point where the route to southern Gaul ceased coast-hugging and struck out into the deep sea. What is more, the lagoon also provided an outlet to the sea for the hinterland dotted with an articulated settlement pattern, now known not only from its tombs. This opened the Tyrrenhian markets to the agricultural resources — cereals and vines — of the Albegna Valley transported down the road that led from the Osa towards the ford of the Albegna at Marsiliana. The grand tumuli, crowded with zoomorphic statues in the area of San Donato near that road offered the passer-by (according to the East Greek or Anatolian model parodied by Hipponax) a landmark but would also have been a reminder of the social structure within which the emporion/epineion operated.

A class of metalworking artisans was embedded within the port activity and trading, over which the aristocracy represented by the tumuli of San Donato exercised a hegemonic control. Comprehensive evidence for their activities was found in the stratigraphic sequences of the “house of the blacksmith” (fig. 3).

**THE “HOUSE OF THE BLACKSMITH”**

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In the first phase of occupation of the Archaic settlement at Fonteblanda a furnace, in which iron originating from Elba was worked, occupied a central position in the network of roads and houses (fig. 3). Indeed, in this area, a deep trench in the interior of room O, yielded evidence of structures and artifacts relating to metallurgical activity in the stratigraphy below the level of the beaten earth floor. Both this floor, with the hearth in the centre of room O, and the wall that separated it from the next-door room N were actually built upon a substantial layer of iron slag, abundant ashes and charcoal. The deliberate accumulation of the residues of blacksmithing, characterized by frequent lumps of limestone, entirely covered an earlier floor level and abutted two parallel walls that closed the...
room to the northeast and southwest. Along the central axis between the walls lay a shallow rectangular depression cut into the sandy sub-soil forming a tank (2.55x1.60 m and 30-40cm deep). It too, was lined with small lumps of limestone just like the coeval pavement. (fig. 4)

Both the scientific analysis of the slag and the macroscopic appearance of some of it, provide unequivocal evidence for blacksmithing. The abundance of dendrites and wüstite in the slag is due to its rapid cooling during forging as opposed to cooling during smelting. The presence of some smithing hearth bottoms, that carry on the convex side the imprint of the bottom of the hearth, are clearly related to the working of a forge (Aranguren et al. 2004). Also part of the forge, or at least related to its functionality, are the tank and a well. The shallow basin in fact, once filled with water, could have both been used for washing ore, although there is no evidence for smelting at the site, but more likely it was used for quenching metal worked at the forge. The water would have been drawn from well L, which was just outside in stenopos Z which ran along the side of the room. A ring of large stones formed the well-head and the well itself was lined with stones (fig. 5).

The tank fell out of use and smithing ceased when the entire room was filled with slag and ashes. On top of this layer a dividing wall was built with a doorway and a new level of paving. The eastern part, room O, was open on one side to the stenopos, and roofed, like the room on the western side (room N), with canal and pan tiles, and in the centre lay a hearth, above where the tank had been.

The well, probably at the same time as the abandonment of the settlement, was deliberately, or rather ritually, closed. The well was filled with large pieces of ceramic, including dolia and amphoras and a large, ovoid serpentine cippus sealed it, perhaps acting like a horos-stone (fig. 6).

Etruscan, Punic and East-Greek finds form the fill of the well, and date the final phase of occupation to the second half of the 6th century. Amongst the finds were the

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neck of an Etruscan amphora, Type Py 5 (fig. 7) dating between the middle and the end of the sixth century (Py 1985, 81); a Punic amphora (fig. 8) with a cordoned rim and a slightly waisted body, Bartoloni type D, that appears in the mid-6th century; the base of an amphora with a cylindrical, hollow foot, probably produced at Chios and also dating to the second half of the 6th century.

Putting together the information now available concerning metalworking sites not only in the territory of Populonia but also in the wide coastal strip that extends to Scarlino, the complex at Fonteblanda, with its presence of specialized artisan activity in a settlement dedicated to port and trading activity, provides a precise archaeological parallel to the commercial network and iron-working described in detail by Diodorus, V, 13 in his excursus from his description of Elba.

The excavation of the metalworking area at Rondelli di Follonica (fig. 9) has been decisive in shedding light on the chronology of some aspects of the smelting of Elban iron. Although the results are provisional, the furnaces of Rondelli have been found to have been in use from the sixth through a large part of the 5th century. This puts back into the Archaic Period a system of smelting Elban iron that continued through into the Middle Ages.

The mines of Elba, between the 6th and the 5th century, provided the raw material that was refined at a series of small and medium sized facilities, only a few of which were located in the prime metallurgical city of Populonia. Instead they were located in such a way as to take advantage of the natural resources, above all firewood and particularly the prized tree-heather (Aranguren et al. 2004), not only on the island but also on a wide tract of the coast of Etruria between the Piombino promontory and Punta Ala where the coastal lagoons offered many landing-places. The battery of furnaces at Rondelli correspond perfectly to the philotechnoi kaminoi of Diodorus, where the minute fragments into which the iron ore had been reduced, were ‘burnt’ producing a semi-worked metal in the form of sponges (megaloi spongoi) that were reduced to a useful shape, eis megethe symmetra.
Then, still according to Diodorus, the *emporoi* acquired the semi-worked sponges and transported them to Dicearchia (Pozzuoli), and from there to the emporia where using quantities of ‘*chalkeis*’ (the meaning is not clear) transformed them into manufactured items (*siderou plasmata pantodapa*), above all agricultural items. The examination and observation of the ‘sponges’ from Rondelli and Fonteblanda, has established that the iron was semi-processed and traded in the form of sponges, just like those that would have been produced in the furnaces at Rondelli. And so, since there is no doubt that the settlement at Fonteblanda was an *emporion*, the system described by Diodorus would seem to tally perfectly with the evidence from the “house of the blacksmith.”

The identification of the date at which the production and trading cycle of Elban iron, described by Diodorus (or better his source), was active has not been established. The reference to Dicearchia-Pozzuoli as ‘amongst other *emporia*’ has tended to favor a date in the late Republican period, which is known for the dominant role of merchants who bought up Elban iron to achieve a monopolistic position, and also for the organization of ‘mass manufacture’ that completed the production process.\(^{12}\) However, the metallurgical activity in Hellenistic Populonia, not only smelting, but also manufacturing, made abundantly clear by the representations on its bronze coinage of tongs and blacksmith’s hammers and also the frequently cited list of contributions made by Etruscan
cities to the African expedition of Scipio (Livy 28, 45) tend to exclude the possibility that the system described by Diodorus was operating in the fourth and third centuries. It is also worth noting that the ‘amazement’ of Diodorus’ source at the philotechnoi kaminoi and the attention paid to the smelting technique, almost as if it were a novelty, is considerably more plausible for the Archaic Period than for the Hellenistic Period. A similar suggestion has been put forward recently by Zecchini who has proposed, with persuasive arguments, that Diodorus’ source, whether direct or indirect, should be placed in the sixth century.13

Of course the combination of evidence from Rondelli and Fonteblanda does not necessarily exclude other possibilities: if it does suggest that the cycle of Diodorus was operating in the first half of the sixth century, it does not exclude the possibility that this optimal organization of natural resources and the organization of manufacture in the ‘chalkeis’ operated through the greater part of the Archaic and the Hellenistic periods. The reference to Dicearchia, founded by Samian refugees c.530 BC14 provides a terminus post quem that does not exclude the possibility that the new foundation was fitted into a pre-existing mercantile system and intended to enhance a network of already established emporia. If Dicearchia was, as Strabo (5, 4.6) reminds us, the epimeion of Cumae, the prolific contacts between the Etruscans of the coastal cities and Cumae - or at least some part of Cumaeen society - which can be discerned, in outline, from the complex politics of Aristodemos, could help to better understand the role of the Samian foundation in the decades between the sixth and the fifth centuries. Perhaps at the end of the sixth century the Samians simply took over the role the Phocaeans played until a few years earlier and acquired a hegemonistic interest in the exchange of Elban minerals, substituting the Phocaean vessels with Samian vessels crewed by archers, as on the ship that impressed the contemporary Micali painter and was painted on a hydria in the British Museum.15 Later on, with the demise of Aristodemos and the battle of Cumae in 474 BC, this could explain the crucial interest of the Syracusans in taking over control of the Elban mineral trade from the Samians.

NOTES

1. For the bibliography on Talamone see the forthcoming volume of the Bibliografia topografica della colonizzazione greca in Italia e nelle isole tirreniche.
For this area see Dallai 2000.

Corretti-Taddei 2001, 257ff.

Zecchini 2001, 126ff

The sources are analyzed by Adinolfi 1977.

B 60; e.g. Civiltà degli Etruschi 1985, 217, 8.4; illustrated on 231.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


