Sanctuary and Settlement: Archaeological Work at Poggio Colla (Vicchio di Mugello)

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The Etruscan settlement of Poggio Colla, about thirty-five kilometers northeast of Florence, has been excavated since 1995 by the Mugello Valley Archaeological Project (MVAP), a joint venture of Southern Methodist University and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology. The site, a rectangular acropolis at a height of 390 meters surrounded by fortification walls and a series of terraces, was inhabited from at least the 7th century until the first quarter of the 2nd century BC. The acropolis of Poggio Colla dominates the juncture of the Mugello basin and the Sieve River valley, a key route that connects the Arno river valley to northeastern passes of the Apennines that lead up to the Adriatic coast and to the plain of the Bolognese. This is a liminal region at the northeastern edge of Etruria that has been relatively ignored archaeologically.

The research design of the MVAP seeks to combine the traditional methodology of archaeological excavation of the major ceremonial and religious center of the region with a broader diachronic land-use survey. Additionally, localized survey, archaeometric prospection, and material-production studies have been used to supplement the evidence of excavation in order to reconstruct the cultural landscape of this specific site in the context of a discrete and well-defined intermontane valley system. Key questions pertain to the nature of the settlement itself as well as its relationship to the region. Is Poggio Colla a rural sanctuary surrounded by sporadic settlement, or is it a larger settlement of commercial as well as religious importance? How did the structure of the settlement change over a period of more than five hundred years, a period that spans most of Etruscan history? Since the entire site was destroyed, abandoned, and never rebuilt, we are afforded a rare opportunity to document the birth, growth, and death of an Etruscan community.
THE ACROPOLIS

Since 1995 the project has focused on the acropolis, the “poggio” itself, which is the dominant feature of the site. The acropolis is an artificially flattened plateau, ca. 35 by 85 meters, with a strikingly rectangular plan, girdled by fortification walls that were partially excavated (on the NE, E, and SE sides) by Nicosia. Three courses of dry-stone ashlars can still be seen on the south side. Some of the blocks are clearly reused from earlier constructions. The fortification wall probably dates to the later history of the site; the acropolis would thus have been transformed into a proper arx in the Hellenistic period.

The 24 trenches that have been excavated on the acropolis (fig.1) and its eastern terrace cover only a small percentage of the plateau, but the resulting picture is of a fortified and easily defensible area that was repeatedly terraced and altered from the 6th century BC onward. Succeeding building phases eradicated earlier structures and foundations, especially in the center of the hill, resulting in complicated and often shallow stratigraphy. Architectural elements were also re-used from period to period, making the reconstruction of the earliest structures difficult, as the architectural elements came to be scattered around the plateau, sometimes tossed into a foundation of a later building, sometimes re-used decoratively or structurally. At present we have identified at least three phases of construction on the acropolis proper (Phases I-III).
The two walls unearthed by Nicosia are the main feature of the north edge of the plateau (see fig. 1. H10 to H14). Each is comprised of rubble stone construction of Hellenistic date (Phase III). The walls are over a meter thick and only about a meter apart, too thick and close together to have supported a structure. The nature and placement of these irregularly constructed walls (they are over 45 meters in length and curve slightly to follow the contour of the edge of the plateau) suggest they are terracing walls. 

Many stone blocks from earlier structures are incorporated in the walls, or sometimes tossed in the earth fill on either side of them, including two sandstone column bases and numerous moulded podium blocks. Thus, in the Hellenistic period at least one large monumental building with dressed stone podium blocks and large Tuscan column bases was destroyed and dismantled, and the various pieces were used for the terracing walls, terracing fill, and fortification walls; other blocks seem to have been cut and reused for constructions of somewhat makeshift appearance, for instance the structure in G14 and G15 where five moulded podium blocks whose bottom edge has been crudely re-cut form the southern wall of the building (fig. 2). This structure also includes a reused large sandstone column base (the third found at the site) may been used as a support. The acropolis is thus characterized by shallow stratigraphy and closely overlapping phases of construction, along with monumental architecture that was dismantled and appropriated for later phases of construction. These conclusions accord with Nicosia’s findings; he excavated a series of moulded podium blocks (they were re-excavated by us in 1997 and removed to the Museo Beato Angelico in Vicchio) that seem to have been tossed down with the earth fill between the two north terracing walls.

Other clues about the nature of the earlier monumental structures on the acropolis can be found to the south and west of the terracing walls excavated by Nicosia. While our reconstruction will certainly have to change with further exploration, the main feature is a large rectangular structure, placed at the western end of the plateau, with a large open area to the east (fig. 1). The earliest preserved architecture (excluding some cuttings and possible post holes in the bedrock) is comprised of a foundation wall cut into the bedrock that runs from north to south (from G11 to F12 respectively). This foundation is made up of massive sandstone blocks anywhere from half to a full meter in length. The four blocks are set into a depression cut unto the native rock and surrounded by a dense clay-like packing, perhaps intended to level the uneven bedrock. This foundation, unlike every other architectural feature on the site, is oriented to the cardinal points rather than to the axes of the plateau. Its orientation on a north-south axis agrees with the typical layout of an Italic temple. The blocks are associated with a stratum of dark earth, so far found only on the northern edge of the plateau, which contains only Orientalizing and Archaic material. This stratum is especially rich in late Orientalizing bucchero of sometimes exceptional quality and unusual form. The repertoire includes both stamped and incised bucchero, northern Etruscan forms such as cups with openwork wing handles, or with local stamped decoration. This stratum is the only undisturbed stratum of early date on the acropolis and provides a 6th century BC date for the first construction phase at the site (Phase I).

While only one wall of the Phase I has been unearthed to date, there is far more
evidence for the next two phases of construction, for at some point between the end of the 5th and the 3rd century BC, a far grander building was constructed.\textsuperscript{13} The foundations of this structure are made of well-cut stone ashlers, much smaller than the blocks of the Phase I foundation, and while the entire perimeter of the building has not been excavated, enough has been unearthed to date to make the plan certain. This new building is aligned to the edges of the plateau rather than the cardinal points and is an 11 by 23 meter rectangle, set back on the western edge of the plateau with what may have been a large open plaza to the east.\textsuperscript{14} How long the Phase II structure persisted remains unclear, but it was destroyed and replaced by another monumental building of similar plan and orientation. The Phase III foundations are of an entirely different fabric, made of small irregular stones rather than the ashlers of the previous phases. On the north and west sides the Phase III foundations sit directly on top of the Phase II blocks, while on the south and east flanks the building was extended slightly.\textsuperscript{15} The orientation is also changed slightly, just a matter of a few degrees, but enough to suggest that the shift may have been intentional. The Phase III building is thus just slightly longer and wider than its predecessor.

Other changes were made in the third phase of the acropolis. Recent excavation suggests that there are other Phase III structures to the south of the large building (D8 and D11) and that the area to the west of the building (E-D7, and fig. 2) was turned into a series of spaces used to house large storage vessels, \textit{pithoi}, some of which have been found with carbonized grain still in them.\textsuperscript{16} To the north, in Phase III, were built the aforementioned east-west terracing walls; here north-south spur walls (H9 and H11) break the northern edge into a series of small compartments, which once again served as a storage area and granary (\textit{pithoi} were found here as well).\textsuperscript{17} The extensive Phase III building activity also included the peculiar NE building (G 14-15) with re-used podium blocks and Tuscan column base, mentioned above. Present evidence suggests that all this construction, in addition to the fortification walls, may not have taken place at the same time; there may indeed be two phases of construction within what we now call Phase III.

The first question that comes to mind is the function of the building. Given the placement of this structure on a dominating plateau (and the usual sacred nature of the Etruscan acropolis), the axial layout of the monumental building and its north-south orientation during the Phase I, the monumental podium blocks and sandstone bases, and an archaic female antefix found on the north edge of the plateau, we are quite confident in suggesting that the acropolis was indeed a sanctuary, perhaps dominated by a large temple. The finds from the structure are consistent with this conclusion: there is a surfeit of luxury goods that probably served as votives: fine bucchero of the Orientalizing and Archaic periods, figural bronzes and implements, Attic Red Figure pottery,\textsuperscript{18} fragments of wooden furniture and bronze vessels, imported Black Glaze, and, in the latest phase, numerous coins. Two bronze figures, one a bronze head of exceptional quality broken off from a figurine,\textsuperscript{19} and the other the upper part of a cut-out geometric figure, are clearly votives. Also, while it is dangerous to argue from negative evidence, it should be pointed out that there is little evidence for the mundane exigencies of daily life: very few faunal remains and virtually no tools or implements.

Recent work has focused on the western end of the Phase II-III monumental
buildings because of illicit activity in this area in the spring of 2001 by “clandestini” who worked the plateau with metal detectors and dug a large pit in grid F8, roughly on the center axis of the Phase II-III buildings, about 5 meters from the western wall. Although authorities were alerted, the clandestini managed to escape, leaving behind a few of their finds at the edge of the trench: a sherd of red-figure pottery, a small undecorated cup, and a series of bronze casting remnants, “runners,” of various dimensions. That the clandestini may have escaped with something of more value has been made clear by subsequent excavation which established that the clandestini had in fact re-excavated an ancient pit, in which and around which were found hundreds of pieces of bronze. The area has not been completely excavated, so that a final tally is presently impossible, but the corpus includes mostly un-worked bronze pieces, many of them runners, some quite large, as well as numerous decorative attachments and coins. The location of this pit (in the center of the building under the packing of the phase III floor), the eclectic nature of the finds, and the absence of any evidence of metal working, suggests votive deposit during even a temple treasury.

Other evidence from the west end of the monumental building came to light at the very end of the building, just east of the western wall in grid F7, where another pit was excavated in 2001. This pit was placed up against the Phase II-III foundation and was covered over with a layer of tile and stone. Inside the pit, lying on its side, was a perfectly preserved bronze “Schnabelkanne” (fig. 3) and two bronze rings. The state of preservation of these finds and their placement near the foundations have led us to postulate that the vase is part of a foundation deposit associated with the Phase II construction of the monumental building.

A third and more dramatic deposit was found directly west of the west wall (fig. 1, E7), in one of the rooms to the west. Here there was yet another pit, this one dug through the destruction debris of the Phase III building and lined with tile. At the bottom of the pit was a small Black Glaze pitcher that contained exactly 100 silver Victoriati.
The exact number of coins and the context raises the question of whether this is a hoard or a votive deposit.

In addition to the possible dedicatory nature of these Victoriati, the evidence from this coin group, as well as from coins found around the pit in F8 and other areas of the acropolis, are our strongest evidence for the dating of the Phase III complex. Initial study of these coins shows that we have two distinct groups. The earlier group is made up of bronze coins with the head of Athena on the obverse and a rooster on the reverse, struck at Cales and other cities in northern Campania and southern Latium in the middle of the 3rd century BC, roughly contemporary with the First Punic War. The second group is made up of Roman coins, including the Victoriati, struck during or after the Second Punic war. These include numerous bronzes of various denominations, the study of which will provide us with a terminus post quem for the final phase of the site. At this juncture, we are postulating that the site was destroyed in the 1st quarter of the 2nd century BC, as a result of Roman pacification of the region associated with the road building.

**Explorations in the NW Terrace**

During the 1999 season, the day after a heavy rain, Andrea Santoni, head of the Vicchio Archaeological Group, discovered several well preserved fragments of Orientalizing stamped bucchero while leading a tour of the site. The area where the bucchero was found, below the arx on the NW slope of Poggio Colla, is along one of the logging paths that lead up to the site, at a place where the rain had caused substantial erosion. We speculated at the time that the heavy erosion had washed out a tomb, for this area is directly below an Orientalizing tumulus. In order to salvage the context, we placed a small trench in the area. Excavation that year, and during the 2000-2001 seasons, turned up other examples of late Orientalizing pottery but no evidence of a tomb (fig. 4). The ceramic finds included multiple examples of 7th and early 6th century bucchero, including a 7th century bucchero *askos* in the shape of a bird (fig. 5), indicating the presence of elite patrons during the earliest phase of the site. Yet the interpretation of this area is compli-
cated by the discovery of a quarried face of sandstone (fig. 4, center left) less than two meters from where the askos was found. Quarry marks on the stone were covered by the same deep stratum within the which the ceramics were excavated.

The evidence from this area remains inconclusive, but the nature of the material, found in a deep and heavily burned stratum, suggests that we may have discovered a habitation area instead of a necropolis. Exploration has been hampered by the deep strata on this NW slope.\textsuperscript{23} Nonetheless, the evidence is intriguing and invites speculation as to the function of this area during the earliest history of our site. It is an area that yields the seemingly odd combination of elite pottery in an ancient quarry. Could we have found a midden from a nearby seventh century habitation site? An archaeotopographic study by Dr. Mark Corney did note several terraces located just above our excavations on the NW slope. These terraces seem an ideal location for a small settlement as less than one hundred meters below it there is a natural spring, a possible water source in the Etruscan period.

**THE HELLENISTIC HABITATION AND WORKSHOP IN THE PODERE FUNGHI**

Walking surveys during the spring of 1998 in the Podere Funghi--a field about 500 meters below and to the east of the acropolis of Poggio Colla--discovered large fragments of Hellenistic fine ware scattered within large areas of charcoal laden soil. The soil had been churned up by recent deep ploughing. The first two years of excavation in the Podere Funghi, initiated during the season of 1998, discovered a midden full of charcoal-rich soil, some animal bones, a wide variety of Hellenistic fine ware, and coarseware.\textsuperscript{24} Since 2000, excavations have focused on an area 50 meters downhill from the midden. This area has yielded the foundations of an Hellenistic habitation and workshop (fig. 6), complete with the footprints of at least 4 kilns. The teardrop shaped kilns, although damaged by the plough, preserve footprints where high heat marked the earth. (fig. 7) The number of kilns suggests that they were often dismantled, perhaps after just several firings, and then rebuilt. In every case, these kilns faced to the north, presumably to catch the updraft from valley. The focus of the ceramic production here was simple fine ware bowls—at least three different sizes have been identified.

The structure (fig. 6), which is still under excavation, and its finds suggest occupation during the 3rd century BC.\textsuperscript{25} The structure stood on rubble foundations similar in construction to those of the Phase III building on the acropolis. Although the foundations have been damaged by ploughing and erosion, enough remains to indicate at least a two room building, with what may have been a portico running along the western flank. The small southern room was likely the habitation area as it preserves a circular hearth and domestic coarse ware. At this time we can only speculate that the northern room, which is longer, may have been a work area. What is clear, however, is that this building, or this area, also had a earlier phase. Under the floor level of the northern room were large sections of pan tile used as floor packing. These tiles, and the charred earth into which they were packed, may actually represent destruction debris of a previous build-
Moreover, we have found evidence of a kiln underneath the southern foundation wall of the structure.

There is evidence that several buildings similar to the Podere Funghí structure dotted the hillsides below Poggio Colla. Survey has revealed other areas in the surrounding fields where ploughing has brought up both tile and Hellenistic ceramics. There also seem to have been other areas of ceramic production near the acropolis and in the surrounding fields. In addition to a kiln discovered near the acropolis by the Italian exca-
vations, an MVAP shovel test survey in 1999 discovered a kiln waster of five fused fineware vessels in a terraced area approximately 200 meters to the SW of the acropolis. Excavation for a methane pipe in a field adjacent to the Podere Funghi also found similar material in addition to large deposits of fine clay suitable for the fine-ware bowls produced in the Podere Funghi.

**ISSUES OF SANCTUARY AND SETTLEMENT**

Excavations at Poggio Colla are still at an early stage, and much excavation and survey remain to be done. In any case, the chronological limits of the settlement are clear, running from the mid 7th century to the first half of the 2nd century BC, providing an unusual opportunity for the study of a single site through most of Etruscan history. It is also clear that by the early 4th century BC there was a monumental structure on the sanctuary/acropolis and widely dispersed settlement in the terraces to the east and north. A crucial issue is the structure of the settlement and the relationship of this settlement to the sanctuary/acropolis. The Hellenistic phase preserves extensive evidence of habitation on the slopes below the acropolis. The settlement pattern for earlier periods is still to be determined, although the very preliminary results from the NW slope suggest a similar but less extensive area of habitation. The full nature of the sanctuary will need to be determined; in addition to sacred areas, the acropolis seems to have functioned as a granary and repository of wealth, suggesting that its role in the community may have encompassed more than just a ritual center.

Equally important is the role of this settlement/sanctuary on a broader scale. The material culture of the site points to the presence of wealthy elites from as early as the mid 7th century BC. It is worthwhile to consider the role of these elites within the political, economic, and religious landscape of the Mugello basin and Val di Sieve, as well as their connections to other centers in what Nicosia has called the “agro Fiorentino.”

During the Hellenistic period, as evidenced by ample deposits of clay and widely dispersed instances of kilns, the site may have been an area of significant ceramic production. If such a production center did exist, then we should also consider the implications of Poggio Colla’s seemingly dominant position along possible trades routes between Etruria and Gaul.

**figure 7 – The Podere Funghi, with kilns in the fireground.**
NOTES

1. We wish to thank Dr. Angelo Bottini, formerly the Superintendent for Tuscany, and Dr. Luca Fedeli, Archaeological Inspector for the Mugello, for their support. We are also grateful to the Vicchio Archaeological Group, especially Andrea Santoni, Honorary Inspector, and to the Comune of Vicchio (Alessandro Bolognesi, Mayor, and Claudio Martin, Cultural Assessor). We also wish to express our gratitude to Dean Carole Brandt, Meadows School of the Arts, SMU, and Dr. Richard Leventhal, the Charles K. Williams II Director, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology, for their support. Two reports have been published since the Etruscans Now conference: M.L. Thomas, “Excavations at Poggio Colla (Vicchio di Mugello) A Report of the 2000-2002 Seasons,” *EtrSt* 8 (2001) 119-130; and P.G. Warden and M.L. Thomas, A. Steiner, and G. Meyers, “Poggio Colla: A North Etruscan settlement of the 7th-2nd c. BC (1998-2004 excavations).” *JRA* 18 (2005) 252-266.

2. Pioneer work was done in this region by Francesco Nicosia who excavated at Poggio Colla from 1968-1972, for which see Curri 1976, with previous bibliography. We are grateful to Dr. Nicosia for his encouragement. More recently there has been excavation at the nearby sites of Frascole and San Piero a Sieve. De Marinis, 1988; De Marinis and L. Fedeli, 1989; and SPS. For Frascole: Nicosia et al. 1991.

3. The land-use survey of the Mugello basin has been undertaken by Dr. David Romano (University of Pennsylvania) and Dr. Umberto Moscatelli (Università di Macerata).

4. Resistivity, magnetometry, and radar prospection studies have been carried out by Dr. Dario Monna and Dr. Ivo Brunner of CNR, the National Research Center of Italy, as well as by Prof. Frank Vento, Clarion University. Ceramics analysis and production studies have also been undertaken: J. Winkler and R. Tykot, “Provenance of Etruscan Pottery from Poggio Colla, Italy: A Chemical Characterization Study,” AIA Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, 2002. Samples for archaeomagnetic dating of the kilns in the Podere Funghi were taken in the summer of 2002 and will be studied by Prof. Robert Sternberg and Justin Gosses, Franklin and Marshall University. Palaeobotanical analysis was performed by Sarah Kupperberg, University of Pennsylvania (infra. n. 16).

5. The most recent publication on the current excavations is Warden and Thomas 2000, 111-122, with previous bibliography. Also useful is P.G. Warden et. al. 1999, 231-246.

6. Further to the NE are other walled terraces.

7. The moulded blocks are being studied by Dr. Lucy Shoe Meritt and Prof. Ingrid Edlund-Berry, The University of Texas at Austin.

8. Warden et al. 1999, fig. 5.

9. The tops of the blocks measure .40x.50, .45x1.00, .28x.67, and .45x.65 m. Their height is as yet undetermined. See Warden et al. 1999, 239, fig. 9.


13. The date of the construction of the Phase II complex remains an open question. We have previously postulated a date at the end of the fifth century (Warden et al. 1999, 47) but the evidence is still inconclusive.
14. Although further excavation is needed in order to interpret the function of this side of the hill, initial soundings to the east of the plateau have found little evidence of structures.
15. For a photograph of the Phase II and III side walls side-by-side: Warden et al. 1999, fig. 15. The three phases superimposed at the north-east corner: Ibid., fig. 14. The superimposed walls on the north flank: Warden and Thomas 2000, fig. 3.
16. Paleobotanical results are discussed in Warden et al. 1999, 243. The evidence for this western area is still inconclusive for Phase II.
17. For the pithoi in the compartments on the north slope: Warden et al. 1999, fig. 19.
20. In addition to Cales, such coins were struck at Teanum, Aquinum, Suessa, Caiatia, and possibly Telessia. Crawford 1985, 47-48.
21. One of these, found in 1999, has been published: Thomas 2000, 113-118.
22. Thomas 2000, 115-116. The destruction of Poggio Colla seems to be coeval with the destruction of sites to the north, on the other side of the Apennines, such as Monte Bibele. See Gottarelli 1989, 33-35.
23. We believe that, with the exception of the area cut by the road, the deep stratigraphy will protect this area for future study. Since we have prioritized the excavation and publication of the acropolis and the Podere Funghi, the decision was made after the 2001 season to suspend excavation on the NW slope until the completion of the other areas.
24. Warden et al. 1999, fig. 20; Warden and Thomas 2000, figs. 13-14.
25. We assume that the destruction of this building occurred during the same episode that destroyed the Phase III complex on the acropolis. We hope that comparative archaeomagnetic dating (see supra no. 4) between the two areas will help clarify this issue.
26. The tiles are being studied by Dr. Patricia Lulof, University of Amsterdam.
27. The issue of the cultural geography of the region and the role of Fiesole in the changing patterns of urbanization from the Archaic to Hellenistic periods was presented by P.G. Warden, “Excavations at the Etruscan Site of Poggio Colla: Fiesole and the Cultural Geography of the Mugello Valley,” in Experientia Docet, a symposium in honor of Lucy Shoe Meritt, The University of Texas at Austin, Texas, 1996.
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