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The impact of landscape and surface survey on the study of the Etruscans

by Simon Stoddart

1. INTRODUCTION

The standard external impression of the Etruscans (in common with the Ancient Egyptians) is one of a civilisation of art and cemeteries. Even though as early as 1848, George Dennis (and his companion Samuel Ainsley whose drawings are housed in the British Museum) drew attention to the importance of both City and Cemetery in the configuration of the Etruscan civilisation, work over the following century concentrated mainly on the cemetery component of that equation. In the 1950s, a critical breakthrough was made by the introduction of surface survey, primarily through the activities of the British School at Rome. However, it is only in the last decade that this initial momentum has been enhanced by a statistically significant number of Italian, Swedish and British surveys of urban territories, accompanied by Anglo-Italian re-analysis of the British School at Rome surveys themselves.

The precious objects that fill museums, including the British Museum, can now be balanced by a sense of the landscape and spatial context in which these finds were made. Indeed one of the distinguished keepers of the British Museum, the late Dr. Tim Potter, was instrumental in making precisely this linkage between art, artefact, context, excavation and original landscape fieldwork and I was happy to see this key linkage at the same European scale continued by his successor at the British Museum (at the time of original writing in 2002), although the 2003 reorganisation of the museum by the current director has now displaced my optimism. Most importantly, an increasing amount of survey information from Etruria is now in the public domain. The recent publication of excavations and surveys from the urban centres of the Etruscans and their immediate neighbours can now be integrated with information on their territories: e.g. Veii, Tarquinia, Tuscania, Cerveteri, Doganella, Nepi, Vulci, Chiusi, Murlo, and Gubbio. A new synthesis of the Etruscans can now be written.

It seems an appropriate moment to ask what are the consequences of the introduction of the landscape dimension into Etruscan research. Six areas will be briefly explored in
this paper. Firstly, there is the most obvious point that a landscape approach reaches the people without (textual) history. Secondly, the Etruscans can now be compared as a case of state formation not only with their Mediterranean neighbours with whom they were in interaction, but also with state formation in other parts of the world. Thirdly, the cultural succession of the Etruscans can now be understood both in terms of an identity related to material culture and in terms of an identity related to a sense of place. Fourthly, the full regional variability of the Etruscan experience and identity can be properly explored. Fifthly (but not exhaustively), the sophistication of new surveys, combined with sophisticated computerised techniques, will be able to investigate a new line in the micro-histories of local places. Finally, these new data allow an exciting new synthesis of the Etruscans to be written with information that is based on a uniquely rich combination of meaningful artefacts and nested scales of landscape context.

2. THE PEOPLE WITHOUT HISTORY

A history of a rich civilisation written from tombs is generally a history of the elite, of the powerful, of the literate. Access to formal burial was clearly a privilege restricted to the main descent groups of each Etruscan centre. The study of the rural landscape gives a complementary picture. There is the prehistoric version of Etruscan history avidly illustrated by Graeme Barker (1988), given demographic colour by systematic survey and explored by a limited number of rural excavations. The power of the elite can be measured against the occupation of the countryside, to understand the infrastructure which elite power exploited and developed.

COMPARATIVE STATE FORMATION

The recent research on landscape brings the study of the Etruscans into line with other key cases of state formation. Studies of the Greek world, for a long time, and the Iberian world, more recently, have benefited from this approach. On a broader scale, comparative spatial analyses can now be attempted, based on comparable criteria of regional scale, site size and density of landscape occupation. Landscape research adds a quantitative dimension to the strongly investigated qualitative dimension of Etruscan research. The Etruscans can be brought into the comparative frameworks which have been assembled over a long period for the Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian regions or, at an even greater level of generalisation, for the major civilisations of the world.

This comparative approach highlights the distinctive features of the Etruscans in terms of their urban organisation. Relative degrees of centralisation of population (using such techniques as rank size), distributions of rural population, distinctiveness of ritual and political boundaries, distribution of inscriptions and traded items set against that essential spatial background, give another measure of what makes Etruria.
THE DEFINITIONS OF CULTURAL SUCCESSION.

Pallottino (1975) always emphasised the local cultural continuity of the Etruscans. This was a pattern principally interpreted through funerary tradition. By the later 1980s, a series of chance finds, both funerary and settlement, had begun to demonstrate that most Etruscan cities had their origins in the Latest Bronze Age. In the last decade, city surveys, accompanied by the beginnings of systematic urban excavation have more convincingly shown the extent of that pre-urban history. However, as soon as general patterns of cultural succession became a new orthodoxy, fresh research at a new level of detail has begun to indicate the extent of regional variability of that history even among the densely packed assemblage of primate centres of South Etruria (di Gennaro pers. comm.). Some settlements were innovators. Others followed after some delay.

REGIONAL VARIABILITY.

Banti (1960) stressed the significant cultural identities of individual Etruscan cities in the 1960s. Again this was a pattern established on the basis of artistic research, drawn primarily from cemetery evidence. The recent addition of regional settlement histories adds a significant set of contrasts between the territories of these individual centres over time and space. The most striking contrast is between north and south Etruria (broadly defined by the boundary of the Albegna river valley). To the south, population (and power) was centralised into the major centres. To the north a more decentralised pattern operated. To the south, political boundaries (often regulated by ritual) were better defined. To the north, boundaries were more fluid and ritual less formalised. Within these sub-regions, individual cities and their territories developed distinctive microhistories of landscape, different ways of implementing strategies of landscape control, different temporalities, different identities of place.

POTENTIAL FOR SOPHISTICATED COMPUTERISED ANALYSIS OF MICRO-HISTORIES.

New techniques of computerised spatial analysis applied to old and new surveys alike are giving an extra dimension of detail to our understanding of the landscape. Work on the re-analysis of the South Etruria surveys is now nearing completion. This work has united the precision of new dating with the incisive qualities of Geographical Information Systems to understand the microhistories recorded by those first detailed surveys, both of the urban area of Veii and of its immediate hinterland. At the same time, some original survey areas are being reinvestigated to uncover missing elements and extra detail in the rural landscape. The Etruscan landscape is now studied at a range of scales from the household (still too rarely), the micro-region (increasingly), to the region (much more frequently).
CONCLUSION: THE NEW SYNTHESIS?

The landscape dimension to Etruscan research has opened up a range of new vistas that are complementary to the detailed knowledge of material culture. Syntheses of Etruscan civilisation have proliferated in the last twenty years, but none yet integrates the two powerful complementary directions of Etruscan research: the material culture and the landscape context. The analysis of material culture has continued to provide a rich output, but this work makes only a token acknowledgement of the landscape context. Studies of burial have been revolutionised, but the landscape context is but a small part of their investigation. Collaborations by prehistorians and classical archaeologists only make a partial treatment of this issue of integration. Syntheses which have made landscape a more central part of their study have, in some way, truncated the analysis by only dealing with part of the essential historical sequence (1200-500 BC) and part of the historical landscape. The key synthesis of Rendeli (1993), drawing, in part, on Stoddart (1987), employed some of the recent survey material, but covered only South Etruria and principally the later part of the sequence. Di Gennaro (1986) and Pacciarelli (2000) provide an important account, but never take the process through to the mature urban landscape, and are principally confined to a study of Southern Etruria. Cifani (2003) examines one core boundary area. The challenge is now to integrate the new approaches for the whole of Etruria (see Stoddart in press). Tomb groups are part of tombs, and tombs are in turn part of landscape. For this Etruscologist, landscape is everything!

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