2008

Review of Jon Berkin, The Orientalizing Bucchero from the Lower Building at Poggio Civitate (Murlo)

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Jon Berkin, *The Orientalizing Bucchero from the Lower Building at Poggio Civitate (Murlo).*

_The Archaeological Institute of America, Monographs New Series, Number 6 (published by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) 2003._

_Pp. 144, figs. 31, pls. 25. $45.00._

_by Nancy H. Ramage_

The new series of monographs published by the Archaeological Institute of America since the mid-1990s covers a wide variety of topics, ranging from architecture on the Athenian Acropolis, to the external relations of Early Iron Age Crete, to Egyptian boats. In this, the sixth volume of the series, Jon Berkin studies the later orientalizing buccero from “The Lower Building” at Poggio Civitate (Murlo). Presenting the material as a banquet service, he devotes attention to the history of each shape of pottery, and attempts to describe the finds in the context of Murlo itself, as well as other excavations in northern Etruria, considering both the chronology and development of shapes and decoration.

In his summary of the state of buccero studies at this time, set out in the introduction, Berkin gives a useful overview of earlier and more recent opinions on the techniques used to make this black pottery, as well as a summary of studies on the development of shapes. In the main body of the text, he first gives a general overview of the site of Poggio Civitate (ch. 1) and then presents what is known of the Lower Building, a large narrow rectangular structure that lies below the “Upper Building” that was built on top of it. Within the structure of the Lower Building were found all kinds of luxury goods, including fine imported pottery, gold and silver jewelry, objects of metal, amber, ivory, and other materials. The large number of buccero vessels here was mostly changed from black to brown and other colors by a large conflagration that must have destroyed the building and wreaked havoc on the objects found within. The subsequent construction of the Upper Building caused further disturbance to the stratigraphy.

The author first describes the finds other than buccero from the Lower Building (ch. 2), and then follows with a catalogue of all the buccero from there, by
type, giving comparanda from other sites in northern and southern Etruria (ch. 3). The
finds are of particular interest because they come from a domestic location, rare in buc-
chero studies; on the other hand, the pottery types are essentially the same from the
domestic and funerary contexts (p. 127).

A discussion of decoration appears in an independent chapter (ch. 4) that
requires one to flip back and forth, whether checking the decoration of pieces in the cat-
alogue or the object that hosts the decoration. This reader, anyway, found this division
inconvenient and frustrating. In the last chapter (ch. 5) the author draws conclusions and
discusses chronology, as well as the kinds of pottery found at a banquet, and he draws a
comparison of domestic with funerary deposits of buccchero. Concordances and a bibli-
ography complete the book. Unfortunately there is no index.

One of the intriguing aspects of this study is the likelihood, proposed by the
author, that the production of buccchero at Poggio Civitate was local. It’s a pity that this
hypothesis, supported by previous research by A. Tuck and others, wasn’t vigorously
pursued. The conclusion (p. 114) refers to an earlier petrographic analysis of pottery,
including buccchero, but unfortunately no record remains of where the tested buccchero
was found, and thus it is not clear whether any examples came from the Lower Building.
Would that new tests had been run! Furthermore, no local clay source that matches the
fabrics has yet been identified. On the other hand, Berkin argues for a local typology that
differs not only from that of southern Etruria, but also from other local towns in the
north, suggesting that numerous towns had their own small potteries with independent
shapes. This is an interesting idea that might have repaid a more thorough investigation,
and suggests a worthy line of inquiry for future investigation.

The very good drawings by G. Grentzenberg and S. Gleit Weinstein are supple-
mented by the fine photographs by Chris Williams. Errors are minor (but include a gar-
bled citing of the M. Aylwin Cotton Foundation, which helped to fund Berkin’s
research).

Unfortunately, the book reads too much like the dissertation from which it grew,
and should have been more fundamentally altered either by the author or the editors. For
instance, the word “majority” [of this or that] is found far too often in the text, and in
most cases should have been substituted by “most”. The book is also so heavily depend-
ent on previous sources that the prose, with in-text citations, is chopped up by constant
parenthetical references to the work of others, and the interruptions mar the flow of the
argument. Nevertheless, the publication of the material is valuable, and will surely be a
useful work for those studying the buccchero of northern Etruria as well as those attempt-
ing to grasp further the contributions from the site of Murlo.