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Satricum in the Post-Archaic Period. A Case study of the Interpretation of Archaeological Remains as Indicators of Ethno-Cultural Identity

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 1980 a necropolis was discovered at the village of Borgo Le Ferriere, which is situated c. 60 km south of Rome and generally accepted as the site of the ancient settlement of Satricum. It was excavated between 1980-1987 and more than two hundred inhumation graves dating to the fifth century were brought to light. The results were published in 1992.¹

The Southwest Necropolis, as it is now called, has since aroused great interest. It is the first organized burial ground from fifth-century Latium to be found with regularly furnished graves. Prior to its discovery there had been a striking absence of formal cemeteries from the sixth and fifth centuries in this region. This was in marked contrast to the rich burial record of the preceding centuries, which are characterised by large cemeteries, often with richly furnished graves. Various explanations have been proposed for this remarkable lack of burial evidence.²

The fifth-century graves in Satricum, which so far have no parallels elsewhere, have been attributed to the Volscians. These were an indigenous people from Central-Italy, known primarily from the literary sources. Here they are frequently depicted as a quarrelsome mountain tribe, one of the participants in a general invasion by Central Italian mountain peoples of the coastal plains along the Tyrrhenian Sea. From the early fifth century, when they succeed in occupying the southern part of Latium, the Volscians feature prominently in the historical sources, remaining a constant nuisance to Rome for the next hundred and fifty years. Ancient Satricum, lying in the heart of the war zone and reportedly captured by the Volscians in 488, is one of the towns most likely to reveal evidence of their presence. With the discovery of the Southwest Necropolis this supposition appears to be confirmed, but fundamental disagreements about the implications of the find have yet to be resolved. They will form one of the main themes of this book.

The discovery of the Southwest Necropolis in Satricum has given a new impulse to the study of the rather obscure fifth century, which some have described as the 'Dark Age' in Latial archaeology due to the general scarcity of archaeological remains.³ In 1987 this period was the subject of a colloquium organized by the French School in Rome, entitled: *Crise e transformation des sociétés archaïques de L'Italie antique au Ve siècle av. J.-C.*⁴ In his contribution ('Roma, I Volsci e il Lazio antico') Filippo Coarelli characterised the period as "*uno dei periodi più oscuri della storia dell'Italia antica*" and suggested that the only way to achieve a better understanding of it was by systematic archaeological research, especially in Latium.⁵

¹ Gnade 1992a.

² See below, Ch. 3.3.1.

³ Coarelli 1990, 135; Attema 1993, 227-229.

⁴ The colloquium was published in 1990 (*Crise et transformation* 1990).

⁵ Coarelli 1990, 135.

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Coarelli's proposal has proved to be sound, at least in the case of Satricum. In the thirteen years that have since elapsed, intensive and systematic archaeological research in Satricum has yielded enough finds from this period to create a break in the archaeological impasse. These finds and their interpretation form the basis of the present study. They offer convincing evidence for the continuity of the settlement, which has become an important issue in the study of the site ever since the discovery of the fifth century graves.

It is commonly assumed that the settlements in southern Latium underwent major changes around the turn of the sixth century. The assumption is based, amongst other things, on a remarkable shift in the archaeological record of the main Archaic centres, characterised by the sudden absence or marked reduction of archaeological data. This lacuna in the archaeological record covers a period of approximately one and a half centuries and is generally seen as closely linked to the military activity described in historiography.

The archaeological lacuna has recently been confirmed on a regional scale by a systematic field survey, conducted in the southern part of present-day Lazio,⁶ which yielded remarkably few finds that could be dated to the fifth and early fourth centuries. Whenever finds were attested to this period they were dispersed, in striking contrast to the dense distribution of finds from the previous period. The hypothesis which has developed from this disparity is that the Archaic nucleated settlements in southern Latium came to an abrupt end sometime during the late sixth century and were subsequently abandoned. The population was assumed to have dispersed within the region and to have survived in small settlements or isolated farmsteads. The changes observed in the archaeological record have then been explained in terms of a general and severe economic decline in the region, which in turn is linked to the earliest phases of Roman territorial expansion.⁷ Moreover, these changes are seen in conjunction with the main military and political events recorded by the ancient historians, such as the Volscian wars and the establishment of the early Roman colonies. This accumulation of events is seen as having had a disastrous effect on the existing Archaic settlements.

From this perspective, the period in which the changes took place is portrayed as one of transition from Latin protohistory to Roman history - a period of roughly one and a half centuries which sees the disintegration of Archaic society and its gradual replacement by a new society defined according to a Roman model. In order to underline its transitional character, the period has been labelled 'Post-Archaic'.⁸

It has been suggested that the settlement of Satricum, in spite of its rich and fundamentally different archaeological record, underwent a similar or even more radical change at the beginning of the fifth century than that experienced in the rest of the region.⁹ This view leans heavily on differences observed in the use of specific areas of the sixth-century settlement. One example is the fact that a burial ground is laid out within the sixth-century perimeter of the town. Another is the striking absence of structures

⁶ The survey was carried out between 1987 and 1993, in the transitional area between the Monti Lepini and the Pontine region, north of the Via Appia. The selected archaeological sites were Norba, Cori, Sezze, Sermoneta (Contrada Casali), Caracupa/Valvisciolo and Cisterna. The results have been published in Attema 1993.

⁷ See Attema 1993, 17-18, 212.

⁸ See Attema 1993, 91. I follow Attema in the denomination of this particular period as Post-Archaic, with an initial date of 500/480: *i.e.* the date of construction of the last monumental temple, generally referred to as Temple II or the Late-Archaic temple.

⁹ See for instance Maaskant-Kleibrink 1992, 36-37; Attema 1993, 226, 227-229.

datable to the Post-Archaic period which is observed on the acropolis. The conclusion drawn is that the town was abandoned somewhere at the beginning of the fifth century. The barely completed Late-Archaic temple and surrounding structures on the acropolis are held to have been destroyed and never rebuilt. According to this view, some religious activity may have continued (the ruined sanctuary supposedly still frequented by pilgrims) but the former nucleated settlement would have been replaced by a small settlement of simple peasants with their own burial ground. These peasants are assumed to have lived on the periphery of the former settlement area and to have been economically dependent on religious activity related to the sanctuaries via the production of votive objects.¹⁰

This image of Post-Archaic Satricum is, in my view, far too simple. Without doubt, the town did suffer from the effects of the general economic decline in Latium. And, of course, this would have had socio-economic consequences which, to some extent, might account for changes noted in the archaeological record. But the rich and varied nature of this record in Post-Archaic Satricum demands a much broader approach, one which is also willing to examine the various aspects of continuity and discontinuity from an ethno-historical perspective. In what follows, I will be arguing that changes in the archaeological record of Satricum actually point to a cultural break with the previous period and as such testify to a shift on an ethno-cultural level. A revision of our image of Post-Archaic Satricum based on all the available data, both archaeological and historical, is therefore required.

Studies concerning the Volscians are thin on the ground, no doubt because of the scarcity of available material. This mainly consists of literary references. The main synthesis of the subject is by G. Radke, published in 1961.¹¹ His work is widely considered to be a thorough and valuable survey of the ancient literary data and of the archaeological evidence available at that time. A. Alföldi, in his important *Early Rome and the Latins*, examines the annalistic references to the many Roman-Volscian encounters and evaluates their historical credibility from a hyper-critical standpoint.¹² In the light of the discovery of the Southwest Necropolis at Satricum, Coarelli re-examines the arrival of the Volscians in southern Latium, their possible place of origin and the impact of their presence on the economic, social and political situation in the Pomptine plain.¹³ In 1992, as a direct result of the 'discovery' of the Volscians in Satricum, the annual congress of Latial Archaeology adopted the Volscians as its theme. Their case was re-evaluated from three different points of view: historical, epigraphical and archaeological.¹⁴

Most studies, however different their line of approach, place the decisive moment in the Volscian appearance in the Pomptine plain not earlier than the 490's, rejecting annalistic references to earlier contacts between Romans and Volscians as unreliable.¹⁵ Moreover, there seems to be general acceptance of the traditional image of the Volscians as a

¹⁰ Attema *et al.* 1992, 75-86; *idem* 1993, 227; Nijboer *et al.* 1995, 1-38; most recently, Kleibrink 1997, 147-151.

¹¹ Radke 1961, in *RE*, cc. 773-827. Cf. also Manni 1939.

¹² Alföldi 1965, 365-377.

¹³ Coarelli 1990, 135-154.

¹⁴ *I Volsci* 1992.

¹⁵ An exception is D. Musti who argues for an earlier Volscian presence in the Pomptine region (see his contribution to the Latial conference on the Volscians, Musti 1992, and below Ch. 4).

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quarrelsome mountain tribe (or a bunch of barbarian highland brigands) whose main occupation was making predatory raids upon settlements in the plain. I will examine both these assumptions (esp. in Ch. 3.3 and 4), and will attempt, in the light of the new discoveries in Satricum, to revise some of the stereotypical views of the Volscians which have long been accorded almost the status of fact.

Since the publication of the Southwest Necropolis, further research and excavations conducted in various parts of the urban settlement have brought to light many archaeological finds dating to the Post-Archaic period. These finds show an intrinsic coherence comparable to that of the preceding periods.

Three areas of the settlement are important to the study of Post-Archaic Satricum. In the first of these, the acropolis, a large deposit of artifacts covering a period of at least three centuries (from the beginning of the fifth to the late third century) provides a presumably sacral continuity (Ch. 3.1.1). In the fifth century, alongside its sacral function, the acropolis is also used as a burial place (Ch. 3.1.2). The second area is the Poggio dei Cavallari, situated in the lower settlement, to the northwest of the acropolis (Ch. 3.2). This has yielded the remains of a monumental road dating from the Late-Archaic period, which covers the remains of an earlier Archaic road. Several strata dating to the fifth and fourth centuries have been recorded on top of the road. The material recovered from these strata attests to two phases of restoration, as well as to the continued habitation of the site throughout the entire period. A series of graves dating to the fifth century has also been discovered to the north of the road. The third area is the southwest corner of the settlement, which contains the Southwest Necropolis. This comprises more than 200 graves, dating to the fifth and early fourth centuries (Ch. 3.3). The discussion of these three areas is supplemented by data deriving from the 1907-1910 excavations which have only recently been published.¹⁶ Post-Archaic buildings are, as yet, absent from the archaeological record. However, domestic activities can be inferred from ceramics collected over the entire settlement area.

Interrelated study of the various phenomena outlined above will deepen our understanding of developments in the occupation pattern of Satricum during the Post-Archaic period. In the process we will establish that the town of Satricum continued to exist in the fifth and fourth centuries, albeit with some significant changes.

I will also attempt to establish the nature of the community that populated Satricum in this period by relating the archaeological remains to the historical data (Ch. 4). Whilst aware of the dangers implicit in such an approach, I am convinced that the case of Satricum supplies the ingredients necessary for testing (and possibly reconsidering) current views regarding the interpretation of archeological data in relation to historical sources. The exceptional correspondence between the archaeological and the historical records of fifth- and fourth-century Satricum is something which should not be neglected. On the contrary, its potential should be explored to the full.

¹⁶ Ginge 1996.