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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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5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study has been to present the available archaeological evidence for the Post-Archaic period of Satricum and to proceed from this evidence to some conclusions about the nature of the settlement during this era. The starting point was the fifth-century necropolis, discovered in the southwestern part of the settlement, just within its sixth-century boundaries, in 1980. As such the necropolis constituted a novelty in the archaeological picture of fifth-century Latium, where burial evidence had previously been conspicuously absent. The particular nature of the necropolis, combined with its location inside the former habitation area, has provoked a fundamental debate about its cultural identification which has thrown up two opposing positions. Either the burials were to be attributed to the Volscians, who are reported as having captured Satricum in 488; or they were to be attributed to the Latin community which had continued to occupy the settlement after it had supposedly fallen into decay in the early fifth century. Both interpretations are closely linked to the unstable political situation in the Latial region, which was characterised by many (historically recorded) military confrontations between Rome and the invading Central-Italian mountain peoples. The possibility that this situation is reflected in the archaeological evidence is not to be discarded.

In my analysis of Post-Archaic Satricum I have tried to address the issues raised by the changes observed in the archaeological record of the settlement. How do we interpret them and what implications can be drawn in the light of the historical background?

The archaeological discoveries of the past twenty years have demonstrated that the settlement of Satricum continued to exist throughout the Post-Archaic period. In fact, given the sheer volume of the discovered remains, the central argument of those who characterise this particular period as a Dark Age (*i.e.* the general absence of archaeological finds) seems to have fallen away, at least in the case of Satricum. Direct evidence for an uninterrupted occupation of the site is provided by the burial record, which has been documented in three different areas within the sixth-century settlement. In addition to the Southwest Necropolis, two more cemeteries from the same period have been brought to light, one on the acropolis itself and one on the north side of the settlement in the area known as the Poggio dei Cavallari.

Continuity of the settlement has further been demonstrated by the abundant artifactual evidence found both in closed stratigraphical contexts and dispersed in the lower settlement area. Building activity from this specific period has been attested to only a limited degree, but is represented by the remains of a long wall along the south side of Satricum's main road. The wall was part of an integral raising of the level of this road and also appears to have functioned as a retaining wall with a defensive function.

A direct link between the Archaic and the Post-Archaic periods is provided by the remains of a monumental road discovered and excavated in the lower settlement area, in the Poggio dei Cavallari. I have identified this road as the main thoroughfare of the town. It must have

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led up to the central sanctuary of Mater Matuta, in front of which identical remains were identified at the end of the nineteenth century. On the acropolis the road is generally referred to as the *Via Sacra*.

The road has been dated to the last quarter of the sixth century. It covered an earlier Archaic tract which appears to have been laid out in a wide natural depression.

The construction and monumental lay-out of the rebuilding of the road can be regarded as a major enterprise which fits well into the general picture of urban development throughout the settlement in the late sixth century. The road illustrates the high degree of organization and technical skill which had been achieved by this period, aspects of which are also encountered in the monumental construction of the Late-Archaic temple to which the road was presumably connected. Although it was seriously damaged (or even destroyed), probably not long after its construction, the road retained its function as main artery. This can be inferred from evidence of a restoration, during which the level was raised and new side walls were erected on the north. Hereafter, from the beginning of the fifth century, the road may also have served as a demarcation line between the habitation area and the area of the dead. A necropolis was laid out along its northern side.

A similar pattern has been observed in relation to the two other burial areas laid out in the settlement during this period: the small cemetery on the acropolis discovered along the west side of the *Via Sacra* and the large Southwest Necropolis. Apparently the infrastructural organization of the Archaic period was still in use during the fifth century. A similar scenario is presumed for the Archaic houses.

During the period represented by the three necropoleis, the town must have been inhabited by quite a large community. Although the total number of documented graves may seem not very high (c. 250 graves have been recorded in the whole town), this is probably only a fraction of the original total. None of the three necropoleis have been fully excavated or even been completely documented, while the dispersal of graves over a very large area north of the main road implies that here the original cemetery was extensive. A similar picture holds for the acropolis cemetery. Although any estimate of the number of inhabitants of fifth-century Satricum would be highly speculative, it must surely have been several orders of magnitude greater than the number of documented graves.

No actual dwellings have been found which can be associated with these cemeteries, but habitation can be inferred from the building debris and pottery remains encountered in a dump stratum used to raise the level of the road in the Poggio dei Cavallari somewhere in the fifth century. Based on the dates attributed to these finds, I have suggested that sixth-century structures, which probably occupied the adjacent area to the south, were still in use during the Post-Archaic period.

A similar hypothesis is here proposed for the habitation of the acropolis, the area often cited as evidence for the absence of any Post-Archaic settlement activity. Although stone foundations of many Archaic buildings were here encountered *in situ*, these appeared to lie immediately under the present surface. No original floor-levels were recorded. This suggests to me that these have been removed, probably when the top layers of the hill were levelled in modern times. All evidence of later periods would then have undoubtedly been destroyed at the same time. Nevertheless, the acropolis (like the Poggio dei Cavallari) has yielded an enormous quantity of artifacts dating from the Post-Archaic period (mainly domestic vessels and building debris), the bulk of which can be linked to a contemporary habitation of the hill. This material was found in a large deposit which was identified by the excavators as a

primary, open votive deposit. In my view, however, it should be regarded as an enormous dump of material which probably ended up there following a large-scale clean-up of the area. Given the date of two Roman coins found in one of the upper layers of the deposit, this may have happened some time after the middle of the third century.

In the case of the Southwest Necropolis, a habitation area is presumed to have existed on the adjacent hill in the Macchia Santa Lucia, where the remains of some buildings were uncovered at the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite the unmistakable continuity of the settlement during the fifth century, there is also a marked change in the pattern of occupation in the area of the sixth-century town. This is best illustrated by the selection of separate and dispersed areas for burial. This deliberate choice of new burial grounds (*i.e.* inside the Archaic city boundaries, and especially on the acropolis), plus the sudden reappearance of regularly furnished graves after an absence of more than a century, constitute the main evidence for concluding that a new population were living in Satricum and practising different customs.

A thorough analysis of the burials in the Southwest Necropolis has led to a deeper insight into both the social and the ethnic character of this community. Although some of the interpretations presented here are admittedly speculative (as is inevitable, given the absence of external parallels for the Satricum graves) the total sum of our observations presents a clear image of a well-organized group of people who had developed a fairly stable way of life.

Kinship must have been a determining factor in the lay-out of the necropolis. This conclusion is based on the spatial distribution of the graves, which reveals a pattern (especially in the central and southern parts of the cemetery) of small groups of intersecting graves, or pairs of graves, or multiple burials in single graves. Children seem to have occupied a special position. This is suggested by the care bestowed on their disposal (which is equal to that given to adults) and by the nature of their burial outfits. Some are comparatively rich in terms of the number of gifts, while in others symbolic offerings especially made for the burial are present in the grave. This treatment of children is remarkable and alien to previous Latial funerary practices.

The burials exhibit a striking uniformity and a relative modesty in outfit over the whole period in which the necropolis was in use. The few recorded differences between individual graves (such as varied numbers of grave goods) have here been explained in chronological terms, assuming some economic development over the course of the fifth century. This would have led to a certain level of prosperity, which in turn may have found its expression either in greater numbers of vessels in some graves and/or in occasional imports or 'expensive' gifts.

The topographical lay-out of the graves was probably also chronologically determined, in the sense that the highest part of the burial ground (in the northeast) was probably selected for the first graves. In time the lay-out of the necropolis then followed the slope down towards the south and southwest.

Thanks to the analysis of the skeletal remains from the graves, we have for the first time clear evidence of the subsistence economy of the Satricum community. It has been established that this was not based solely on agriculture, which would have provided a diet dominated

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by vegetables and cereals, but also incorporated forms of proteic production, such as breeding and stock-raising. The resulting balanced diet seems to be reflected in the fairly good state of health and the relative longevity of the people buried in the necropolis.

In other ways, too, the burial record provides evidence of quite a well-organized community, part of a society which was more complex than one would assume from the relative modesty of the burials. The main evidence for this complexity is an inscription referring to an official magistrate, an *aedilis*. The inscription not only implies that some people could read, but also that they were acquainted with the kind of official function inherent to an urban organization. It further implies a level of political organization within this particular community. The inscription, written in a non-Latin indigenous dialect, is also of fundamental importance for the ethnic identification of the Southwest Necropolis (see below).

Given the general absence of actual building remains (except for the white wall in the Poggio dei Cavallari) and the lack of archaeological evidence for the date of destruction of the last temple and its surrounding buildings, any suggestions regarding the nature of the settlement in this period must remain speculative. However, we can surely assume that the Post-Archaic settlement retained many of the urban features observed in the sixth-century. As has been shown, the road system remained in use and was probably kept in good repair during the long period represented by the burials laid out along the various roads. By extension, we can assume that similar care was bestowed on the rest of the buildings in the town. My own guess is that dwellings from the Archaic period probably remained inhabited, or were restored, by the population buried in the fifth-century graves. A similar hypothesis may be proposed for the public buildings. As far as the main sanctuary is concerned, any suggestion about its Post-Archaic existence must remain speculative, but some importance should be attributed to fragments of a Post-Archaic restoration of the terracotta decoration of the last temple. Nor should we ignore Livy's reference to the temple of Mater Matuta existing in 207.

There remains the question of the ethnic identification of Post-Archaic Satricum. In my view, most of the arguments justify the attribution of the graves to the Volscians. There is no doubt whatsoever that they populated the region in the fifth and early fourth centuries and must, therefore, have lived in Satricum. As argued above, the deliberate decision to bury the dead within the former urban area, especially on the acropolis, while the former Iron Age burial mounds were still clearly visible, is a strong argument for seeing the burials as evidence of a new ethnic group.

Another argument supporting a Volscian identification is the apparent renaming of the town (from Suessa Pometia to Satricum) in the early fifth century. This theory is based on the disappearance of Suessa Pometia from the historical record without any reference to its destruction (the final reference to the town is in 495). This occurs at almost the same moment that Satricum appears on the scene, as one of the towns captured by the Volscians in 488. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest the existence of another Satricum, situated in the middle Liris valley. The re-use of the name would imply a conscious connection with the ancestral homeland.

Certain burial gifts, such as the bucchero kantharoi with double-reeded handles, have also been classified in terms of ancestral links. This type of vessel, which is characteristic of the necropolis, is alien to the Latial repertoire and finds its most notable parallels in the inland

area. Presumably the vessel possessed an intrinsic ancestral significance.

An additional piece of evidence supporting a Volscian identification for the Southwest Necropolis is the inscription on the lead axe-head, mentioned above. The combination of the non-Latin language and the personal character of the object make this a real marker of non-Latin, probably Volscian, identity.

Perhaps the most convincing link with the inland area is provided by a body of material discovered in the town of Frosinone. The original burial context of these finds, as well as their strong resemblance to finds from the Southwest Necropolis, point to a high degree of cultural and ethnic similarity between the inhabitants of the two towns. The town of Frosinone, with its location on the ancient routes used by indigenous groups from the Apennine interior, is one of the places in which the Volscians are likely to have settled on their long journey from their homelands to the coastal plains.

Although any literal correspondence between the archaeological and historical records may be regarded as virtually impossible, there is nevertheless a remarkable coincidence between the two sets of evidence as regards Satricum. This is first apparent in the late sixth and early fifth centuries when Rome's attention was focussed on the *ager Pomptinus* and its capital Suessa Pometia. Whether or not Satricum is identical with Suessa Pometia, both towns must have been located in southern Latium. It follows that the archaeological record of Satricum should reveal traces of destruction related to the military activity in the region. A compelling example, which has been discussed in this study, is the damage to (or destruction of) Satricum's main road. Although the exact moment of events (involving a large conflagration) could not be established, there is strong evidence to suggest that they happened towards the end of the sixth century or at the beginning of the fifth, probably shortly after the road's construction. Although the argument is not without flaws, the situation is strikingly reminiscent of the annalistic account of events which eventually lead to Suessa Pometia's capture, either in 503/502 or 495. Given the archaeological evidence for the restoration of the road which is presented here, the year 488 can also be considered a possible candidate.

There are also remarkable coincidences to note with regard to the Post-Archaic period. After Satricum's historical capture by Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus and his Volscians in 488, the settlement seems to have enjoyed a quieter spell. In fact, for nearly a century the written sources do not report any military activity in relation to the town. It is not unlikely that the Volscian community in Satricum developed a stable and relatively peaceful existence during this period. This situation seems to be reflected in the burial evidence, which covers a continuous period of approximately one century without any obvious changes in the basic funerary ritual. This stability must have changed dramatically from the early fourth century onwards, when Satricum was again in the front line of various military encounters and reportedly changed hands several times. It seems likely that the unstable situation led to a disruption in normal burial practices. The necropoleis, at any rate, are no longer used after the early fourth century and the population associated with the burials becomes archaeologically invisible. Taken together, these final two instances of correspondence between the archaeological evidence and the historical account add weight to the already strong case for a Volscian identification of fifth century Satricum.

We will conclude by stating that the legendary Volscians, who despite playing a major role in the drama of Rome's early struggle for hegemony have remained almost archaeologically invisible, have been finally rediscovered in ancient Satricum. Their traditional 'barbarian'

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image, as related by Livy, is in no way confirmed by the archaeological record, which if anything points in the opposite direction. Within the scientific debate on ethno-cultural interpretation of material culture, Satricum in the Post-Archaic period emerges as a valuable case-study in the relationship between archaeological remains and the historical record.