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ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTES

Charred plant remains of the Archaic period from the Forum and Palatine

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Introduction

Our understanding of the arable economy of the early centuries of Rome has been based largely on ancient literary sources to give an idea of the range of crops grown in the area and their possible uses. For Archaic Rome in particular, very little evidence from the physical remains of crops has been available, and this has limited any serious comparison between archaeological evidence and what the literary sources may suggest about the arable agriculture of the early city. Archaeobotanical evidence for the agricultural economy of Rome and its surrounds in the pre-urban period has largely depended upon the work of Hans Helbaek: in the 1950s and 1960s he carried out the study of plant remains recovered in three areas of the Forum (Helbaek 1953, 1956, 1960). His studies were limited, however, by the absence of systematic sampling strategies and particularly by inadequate retrieval methods. Flotation techniques were not employed, and this prevented the potential recovery of smaller plant items such as small cereal grains (e.g., millet) and crop by-products (e.g., chaff fragments and small weed seeds). This led to an incomplete picture of the range of crops used and also led to difficulties in the identification of cereal grains owing to the absence of chaff fragments.

Research subsequent to Helbaek's work has rectified this situation in part through the retrieval by flotation and the study of charred plant remains from Archaic deposits around S. Omobono (Costantini and Costantini-Biasini 1989; Colini 1977). Charred plant assemblages recovered in recent years from Archaic deposits in two areas of the Roman Forum and Palatine form the basis of the present paper, and they provide perhaps the best opportunity yet to investigate fully the range of plants that may have been cultivated, collected and used in the agricultural economy of pre-urban Rome. These plant remains were recovered by flotation and were collected using systematic sampling strategies. Work on the Palatine site included the first intensive sampling strategy undertaken in the Forum/Palatine area for the purpose of recovering environmental remains, with on-site processing that monitored the results and modified the sampling procedures as work progressed. Thus the plant remains from these two sites not only provide the data necessary for a more detailed study of arable agriculture in Archaic Rome than has been hitherto possible, but also provide a means of comparison both with the earlier archaeobotanical results and with the evidence of the ancient sources. In this way new information has been gained about the rôle and uses of the different cereals in pre-urban Rome.

The sites

The Via Sacra/ Atrium Vestae (Forum) excavations

Excavations were directed by R. T. Scott on behalf of the American Academy at Rome (Scott 1988, 1993, and forthcoming). Archaic deposits were excavated in the area of the Via Sacra in 1987 and in the adjacent Atrium Vestae in 1989. An interim note on the charred plant remains recovered from the Via Sacra was published (Giorgi 1988) and the results are integrated here. Both sites are located on the lower slopes of the Palatine Hill. The excavations produced evidence for a number of hut structures dating from the archaic period, later destroyed to make way for the buildings antedating the historical Regia, Via Sacra and Atrium Vestae. The archaic deposits from this site are provisionally dated to between the 8th and 6th c. B.C.

The Palatine excavations

The excavations on the Palatine were supervised by S. Pratt on behalf of P. Pensabene of the University of Rome (Pensabene *et al.* 1993, 1995). The site is located in the SW corner of the Palatine, on the possible site of the Temple of Victory. In 1986 rubbish deposits filling a large circular structure, interpreted as a possible silo, were excavated and found to contain charred plant remains, bone and pottery. Five principal fills were distinguished and the deposits provisionally dated to between the late 6th and early 5th c. B.C.