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# Cosa in the empire: the unmaking of a Roman town

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Thanks to the work of Frank Brown, Cosa is one of the better-known Roman towns. Our knowledge of it, however, remains very partial. This is due, on the one hand, to the delay in the publication of final volumes,<sup>1</sup> on the other, to Brown's particular interests. The priorities in the first campaigns were quite naturally the plan, architecture, and history of the republican *colonia*. The imperial period was not ignored, but it remained a secondary interest. Altogether the forum publication devotes 11 pages to the imperial period, concluding with Rutilius Namatianus' statement that Cosa was desolate because the people had died of a plague of rats. It is suggested that the Augustan refoundation gave way in the 4th c. to an estate centre, or *latifundium* overseen by a *magister*.<sup>2</sup> Here a long devotion to Bacchic cults was succeeded by, or cohabited with, a Christian church. Buttrey's study of the coins seems at first sight to confirm the picture. Although there is substantial continuity, coins became more rare after the 3rd c. and ceased altogether with Zeno (474-491). Thus Buttrey wrote: "[The coins] have built up a picture of a community continuously in existence but failing to share in the growth and prosperity which other cities of the empire enjoyed, which indeed were the marks of the empire itself".<sup>3</sup>

One goal of recent excavations at Cosa has been to review the evidence for the imperial period, and to understand in detail the history of its occupation and the size of the settlement in each successive century. This is particularly worthwhile because the urban history can now be placed in the context of that of the territory and surrounding areas.<sup>4</sup> The main questions are economic: what was the effect on the town of the disappearance of the small farms in its territory? What was the relationship between villas such as Settefinestre<sup>5</sup> and the old urban centre? The rhythms of the slow disintegration of rural occupation have been studied and discussed: it is now time to return to the town.

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- 1 Note however that F. E. Brown, E. H. Richardson, L. Richardson jr., *Cosa III. The buildings of the Forum* (MAAR 37, 1993); V. J. Bruno and R. T. Scott, *Cosa IV. The houses* (MAAR 38, 1993); and C. R. Fitch and N. W. Goldman, *Cosa. The lamps* (MAAR 39, 1994), have now been published. The excavations were sponsored by the American Academy and the British School at Rome, with support from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Craven Committee of Oxford University. I am grateful to J. Connors, R. T. Scott, and M. Bell III for their generous encouragement, to the Soprintendenza Archeologica della Toscana, Dr Francesco Nicosia, and the inspectors for the site, Giulio Ciampoltrini and Gabriella Poggese, and to the Cosa team for producing the information, particularly William Bowden, Teresa Clay, Joanna Hambly, Michelle Hobart, Nicholas Churchill, Adam Rabinowitz, Miranda Richardson, Matilda Webb and Andrew Wixom. I am grateful to the last-named for figures 1-4 and 6, which are based on outlines made using the Geographic Information System 'Idrisi' (Clark University).
  - 2 Brown, Richardson and Richardson (supra n.1) 247; J. Collins-Clinton, *A late antique shrine of Liber Pater at Cosa* (Leiden 1977).
  - 3 T. V. Buttrey, "The coins" in MAAR 34 (1980) 17-153, at p.34.
  - 4 S. Dyson, "Settlement patterns in the Ager Cosanus, the Wesleyan University survey," *JFA* 5.3 (1978) 251-68; F. Cambi and E. Fentress, "Villas to castles: first millennium A.D. demography in the Albegna valley," in K. Randsborg (ed.), *The birth of Europe* (AnalRom Suppl. 16, 1989) 174-86; I. Attolini *et al.*, "Political geography and productive geography between the valleys of the Albegna and the Fiora in northern Etruria," in G. Barker and J. Lloyd (edd.), *Roman landscapes* (London 1991) 135-41; G. Ciampoltrini and P. Rendini, "L'agro cosano fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo: segnalazioni e contributi," *ArchMed* 15 (1988) 519-34.
  - 5 A. Carandini (ed.), *Settefinestre: una villa schiavistica nell'Etruria romana* (Modena 1985).