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The cemetery at Osteria dell'Osa (Gabii): new light on early Latium

David Ridgway

ANNA MARIA BIETTI SESTIERI (ed.), *LA NECROPOLI LAZIALE DI OSTERIA DELL'OSA* (Quasar, Rome 1992). Three vols.: *Testo*: pp. 905. *Figure*: 623 figs. *Tavole*: 52 loose folding plates. ISBN 88-7140-060-7. Lit. 800,000.

ANNA MARIA BIETTI SESTIERI, *THE IRON AGE COMMUNITY OF OSTERIA DELL'OSA. A STUDY OF SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL TYRRHENIAN ITALY* (New Studies in Archaeology, Cambridge University Press 1992). Pp. xii + 271, 69 illustrations in text. ISBN 0 521 32628 1. £40.*

Introduction

To non-combatants, excavation is what archaeologists do. And when an ancient cemetery is involved, their task is clearly a simple one: graveyards are easy to understand, and therefore easy to publish. As I have tried to show on an earlier occasion in these pages, the true state of affairs is very different, and nowhere more so than in the case of Italian Iron Age cemeteries.¹ On the one hand, Italy has long had an enviable system of state institutions designed not only to ensure the most effective protection, retrieval and exhibition of archaeological material but also to smooth the passage of excavated information to the handsomely printed pages of dedicated periodical publications: *Monumenti Antichi*; *Notizie degli Scavi*; and now, for preliminary news, *Bollettino di Archeologia*. On the other hand, the road to definitive publication is more often than not blocked by insurmountable obstacles, real (natural) and artificial (man-made), of which by far the greatest derive from the human frailty of the excavators themselves, of their (public) employers, or of both. Thus the principal author of the investigation reviewed below observes pointedly that nearly all the physical analyses on which so many of her most important conclusions are based

... were made possible by the good will and commitment of specialists who are also my personal friends, with a minimum of support of any kind from the official bodies charged with investigation and guardianship. There is no rational scientific or economic explanation for the fact that in Italy, where the number of archaeological research projects and their costs are alike higher than those in any other European country, there is as yet no perception of the need for an efficient national organization of laboratories and scientific personnel for archaeology (*Necropoli* p.9).

These are harsh words, and all the more so since they are written by a distinguished senior functionary of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma. Nevertheless, in spite of the deficiencies to which she refers, I have no hesitation in affirming that the achievement signified by the two titles listed above is by far the most remarkable of its kind that I can remember. I know of no other major excavation, in Italy or anywhere else, that has been published, studied and synthesized (*Community*) so rapidly in such depth. Abroad no less than at home, there is food for thought in the fact that this massive project has been conducted from start to finish under the aegis of a local office of the Italian state antiquities service rather than under that of a lavishly funded and awesomely equipped research institute in a foreign university.

* The two books discussed here are cited in the text and notes as *Necropoli* and *Community*; *Tavole* refers to the plates vol. (folder) of the former.

1 D. Ridgway, "The Villanovan cemeteries of Bologna and Pontecagnano," *JRA* 7 (1994) 303-16 (much of the introductory matter in this item is relevant to the present review).