

History and Archaeology: The Dilemma of Republican Rome

It is a fair proposition that the introduction of archaeological evidence into undergraduate courses in ancient Mediterranean history is intended to rise up against the “tyranny” of inadequate texts, primarily by offering students additional paths of inquiry into that history. It is also important, however, not to invest this class of evidence with the value of the “philosopher’s stone”, for history is, after all, fundamentally a process of inquiry.

To this end I am going to present three examples of recent applications of archaeological results to the investigation of issues in the history of the Roman republic, a history that remains complicated precisely because of the largely anachronistic treatments of them in the surviving primary sources. My intention is to illustrate the potential of non-literary evidence to get students thinking about other things than the resolution of the problems ostensibly being addressed. At the same time I want to discourage them from thinking that literary and archaeological evidence can easily be reconciled.

My first example is the pressures exerted on the borders and interior of southern Latium in the fifth century BCE by apparently inexhaustible numbers of an Italic people, the Volscians, whose provenance, organization and effective occupation of territory have long been *quaestiones vexatae*. Recent excavations carried out at Satricum by Dutch archaeologists, however, have apparently settled the question of the historical narratives about the Volscians disputed variously by scholars. Despite its importance, this evidence is probably still less well known than some other finds from the Satricum excavations, but it consists of a substantial cemetery of fifth century date, accompanied by no residential features, inserted within the fortified perimeter of the old sixth century town. This radical change in the pattern of occupation on the site and the uniformly unimpressive grave goods of the burials are consistent with the taking of Satricum by the Volscians and the end of urban life until its re-occupation by the Latins and Romans in the fourth century recorded in the sources.

But, in the words of Peggy Lee: is that all there is? Not at all because these same excavations have revealed far more to study than a Volscian cemetery. The Dutch have uncovered votive deposits related to the two early temples of sixth century date now known (one traditionally assigned to the cult of Mater Matuta), as well as deposits of later date that suggest the possibility of some continuity in cult practice in Satricum from the sixth to the fourth century BCE, despite the Volscians. That Satricum was Latin in its cultural formation and not simply reclaimed for it later, moreover, is indicated not only by the dedicatory inscription of a Publius Valerius of a date prior to rhotacism carved on a base utilized in a later restoration of the acropolis temple but also by a Latin graffito on a (secular) dolium assigned by its publisher to the mid-sixth century (A still earlier graffito is dated to the seventh century).

So what seem to me profitable research directions that students could pursue from here are the materials of votive religion, the emergence and uses of writing at this early date and the rise in Latium of cults that had an importance or exercised an appeal beyond the limits of a single city. These last two topics of course invite comparison with specimens of early writing and the history of the cult of Mater Matuta at Rome, but the thrust of such study rather leads one away from the Volscians to the evolution and consolidation of Latial culture instead. Let me remind you of what the archaeological sources alone have shown—that Latin culture was established in Satricum before and after the Volscians. The literary sources do not tell the whole story.

Interest in Latin culture has also been a significant factor in the archaeological exploration of Lavinium by the University of Rome where, beyond the early attention given to a possible cult site for Aeneas, the discovery of the impressive remains of 13 altars built and rebuilt from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE seemed to document the presence of a common sanctuary of the Latins. By extension this evidence lent support to the idea, present in the sources, that the Latin communities were also able to gather together to make common cause against external pressures as well. Less acceptable, however, is the idea also found there of Roman hegemony from an early date. But it is the interpretation of other material remains from the territory around Lavinium and Ardea that has attracted scholarly attention more recently.

Toward the end of the sixth century the character of burial practice can be seen to change: the deposition of impressive grave goods falls off markedly, even though chamber tombs of generous dimensions suitable for extended use become fairly common. Many would see this as a consequence of political change and social re-organization in Latium that may also be glimpsed in the regulation of luxury in funerary practice known from the Roman code of the Twelve Tables, although there is admittedly anachronism in the reference. The attention of the Latin communities, including that of the local aristocracies, it is argued, turns to public cult, in which there remains a place for display, as the dedication of Publius Valerius at Satricum may indicate, and as these later votive dedications at Lavinium certainly do.

What use can students make of these materials? Here I think it is the construction of the arguments, not the monuments that they need to examine. Should they be suspicious or not of the fact that the evidence is gathered piece meal from a number of sites in Latium? This is what I want my students to do—learn to evaluate arguments and the archaeological evidence on which they are based.

But at this point some of you will have a legitimate worry about access: can students really get at this stuff when so much of it is published in foreign tongues and unfamiliar formats? Yet this is a problem that all serious students of history in general have to confront with written sources as well, and it is here too that we need to be careful about the English texts—and especially the web sites—to which we refer them, for help; these do exist.

The votive deposits relating to cult at Lavinium, as well as can be determined at present, appear to end in the third century BCE, although there is other evidence for continuing religious activity. The date may serve to shift our focus more directly to Rome itself for the third and final example. The literary sources on Rome's early treaty relations with Carthage cannot be reconciled satisfactorily with one another—indeed some believe that Polybius perhaps cannot be reconciled with himself—but here again students should be guided to consider archaeological evidence that offers an explanation. We do have other means of documenting the increasingly more problematic relations between the two in the western Mediterranean in the course of the third century, and this is commerce. In this period one begins to see multiple sites of production and use of shipping amphorae of the so-called Greco-Italic type: Sicily, Calabria, Campania, coastal Latium, coastal central-southern Etruria, and probably Marseilles. The type reaches a standardized form, known as the Dressel 1 by the end of the century. Specimens are frequently stamped with a shift over time from Greek to Latin names with the Latin ones becoming dominant as well by the end of the century.

In terms of direct Roman participation in this commerce there is a marker in the shipping ballast in the form of a black gloss table ware with patterns of decorative stamps (*petites estampilles*), made in Rome during the first third of the century that is found as far west as Bursa/Carthage but not beyond, presumably in accord with treaty provisions. While it is not clear to what extent Carthage itself may have produced the Greco-Italic type, the Carthaginian sphere in north Africa continued to produce a variety of "Punic" shapes right down to the late republican period. The products shipped in Greco-Italic and Dressel 1 amphorae certainly include wine, processed fish and some cereals. More importantly, the movement toward standard capacities reveals a climate suited to commercial co-operation and competition in the western Mediterranean relevant to Romano-Carthaginian relations at the time, but which the sources present in terms of personalities bent on war. In this instance, the ceramic evidence can help our students to enlarge on the limited perspective of the sources and gain some sense of the increasing importance of economic exchange from Italy; for it carries on throughout the second century, even as one begins to worry from reading the sources that tributary rapaciousness was becoming the only Italian export.

In summary then: to use material evidence to supplement or correct that provided by conflicting or inconclusive written sources with limited perspectives seems to me a self-evident proposition for scholars and students alike. There are challenges to using it: one can never claim too much and there are times when its use seems to require a lot of hunting and translating to produce a small result, but this is the way of historical research. The desired results are not guaranteed, yet the inquiry is the adventure, and this too is characteristic of the historical enterprise overall, and I remain optimistic about the possibility of persuading students to join in the adventure.

