Exploring Etruscan enigmas on the Plain of Treasures

Nearly half a century after its chance discovery, the enormous Etruscan complex in the Tuscan hills remains a mystery. Lucy Shipley investigates the deep secrets of this obscure site.

The largest Etruscan building of its time in the Mediterranean was discovered because an archaeologist decided to break his journey for a bite to eat. It was the 1920s, and Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli was en route to Chiusi, an Etruscan settlement to the south-east, further on down the road. The young professor of Etruscan archaeology at the University of Pisa decided to stop off at the village of Murlo, once the summer refuge for the bishops of the great Medieval city of Siena, which lies 20km to the south in the heart of Tuscany. His meal was interrupted by a local farmer who, on hearing of his arrival, dashed in to show him a bronze helmet he had found in the fields nearby.

Intrigued, Bandinelli set up a few small trial trenches at the spot – called Poggio Aguzzo – and soon began uncovering evidence of a mid 7th-century BC necropolis.

Unlike the neighbouring Chiusi tombs typical of 7th-century Etruria, these were simple ditch burials, though still with accompanying grave goods. Bandinelli was sure there should be an associated settlement nearby, but his flourishing career, including his later appointment as Director of the Florence Museo Archeologico, interrupted his search. So for 40 years the area remained untouched – until a young archaeologist arrived from America, keen to explore the region’s Etruscan heritage.

When Kyle Meredith Phillips met Bandinelli, by then the grand old man of Etruscan archaeology, he told Phillips about the necropolis at Poggio Aguzzo. He suggested looking for the settlement, pointing him in the direction of the adjacent hill, Poggio Civitate, in an area known as Piano del Tesoro – the ‘plain of treasures’. Phillips began digging in 1966. However, what gradually emerged from the fine red soil was not a settlement, but evidence for a single complex of buildings – and on a truly huge scale.

Finding Poggio Civitate

Poggio Civitate sits on a hill enjoying views across the valley of the Ombrone River to the east, with the famous metal-bearing hills of the region to the west. The site has now been continuously excavated for almost 50 years, and has provided some
of the most intriguing and surprising discoveries of Etruscan archaeology. The latest technological innovations for archaeological investigation are revealing both the site’s dark secrets, and some exciting new features.

The original complex uncovered by Phillips during the late 1960s and early 1970s was constructed in the early 6th century BC, and formed a single structure, with four wings arranged around a central courtyard. The square building is huge in scale, with each wing measuring 60m in length. Its size came as a shock to the original excavation team: this building, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, was far larger than any other structure in the ancient Mediterranean at the time it was built. Built from stone and daub, each wing was crowned with a tiled roof, an architectural innovation for the period. The size of the building would have been impressive enough, but excavations show that the structures had been gorgeously decorated, with terracotta frieze plaques covering each wing. These portray four different scenes: a luxurious banquet, a procession, what appears to be a horse-race, and a series of seated figures.

In spite of all the wealth, power, and influence on display, and the energy expended on creating this structure, it was short-lived. The buildings were deliberately destroyed in the mid to late 6th century: the decorative terracottas were torn down and broken, and material from the site was buried in specially dug pits. The destruction was thorough – some deposits have been found more than a mile from the complex itself.

The deliberate obliteration of this monumental complex was not the first time that Poggio Civitate witnessed a dramatic incident of destruction. Further excavation during the 1970s to 1990s revealed an earlier complex, built on a similarly grand scale. Pottery imported from Greece found on the floor of these earlier structures dates them to the 7th century BC, and the presence of ornamental ivory plaques from inlaid furniture suggests these were residential buildings.

One structure was open-sided, and finds from within it were associated with a wide range of activities: the production of ceramics, terracotta, carved bone and ivory ornaments, bronze-casting, textile-working, and food-production. The presence of all these activities in a single space was strikingly unusual, and suggest that this building had been an all-purpose workshop – though, interestingly, no kiln has been found.

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turn of events given the number of activities taking place within that would have required the use of fire. Remarkably, on the day of the disaster, workers in the building had been laying out terracotta roofing tiles to dry, and ran over them as they escaped the blaze, leaving behind their footprints in the clay.

Such evidence gives us a vivid and intimate vignette of life at Poggio Civitate, but many questions about the site remain unanswered. Why was such an enormous structure built here? And who lived in it? While archaeologists have speculated as to its purpose – a political meeting-place, a temple, or a palace – excavation director Anthony Tuck, from the University of Massachusetts, remains convinced that Poggio Civitate formed a luxurious elite residence. Therefore, recent work has focused on searching for evidence of a non-elite presence away from these central structures.

Where are the homes of the people who moulded the architectural terracottas, and who ran across the tiles to escape the burning workshop?

Houses and helicopters

The search for the supporting settlement for Poggio Civitate has been a long one, with exploratory trenches laid out across three areas surrounding Piano del Tesoro: Civitate A, B, and C. These trenches revealed unusual features, including a well dating to the Archaic period, and the remains of what was probably an early hut structure. However, in spite of scattered finds across the area indicative of activity during the period of occupation on the main plateau to the east, clear evidence for dwellings remained elusive. That is, until the 2012 field season. Excavations in an area directly adjacent to a Medieval road that cut across the hilltop began to reveal signs of intense industrial activity, with large numbers of bronze finds, and a great deal of slag emerging from the soil.

When these trenches were expanded, intriguing linear stone features appeared and the inscribed vessels found within it, suggest that this structure may have had a religious function.

All three of the buildings had terracotta roofs, and, like the later complex, were decorated with terracotta ornamentation. All were fated to be destroyed in the course of a catastrophic fire, a single blaze that occurred in the late 7th century. It seems that the conflagration started in the ‘workshop’ building – an unsurprising
flying, were developed and designed by Arch Aerial, an American company who wanted to produce a photographic drone that was both easy to use and affordable to manufacture. CEO Ryan Baker, who had worked at Poggio Civitate in the past, was anxious to test the drones at the site. The footage they took resulted in highly accurate aerial images of the excavation area, allowing clear analysis of the structures in the soil below.

Finds from the area suggested domestic occupation, with typical waste deposits – animal bones, broken ceramics, and fragments of terracotta tile – being uncovered on the external side of walls, suggestive of rubbish piled against the outside of a dwelling. The tiles were particularly intriguing as, though the larger elite complex nearby had a tiled roof, it seems less probable that these small structures would have done. Interior finds from what has been termed Structure 1 include large amounts of material associated with carving, including planed, cut, and carved pieces of antler, horn, and bone.

The variety and quantity of such finds suggests that the people who lived in this building were making these objects in their homes. While many of the artefacts were presumably destined for trade, or for the complex on Piano del Tesoro, there were still a number of semi-luxury goods that belonged within the structures, objects representing social status and which suggest that the inhabitants here were not necessarily a downtrodden group of workers exploited by their wealthy and powerful neighbours. More excavation is needed (and has been taking place since June this year) before making sweeping interpretative statements, but a meaningful parallel could be made with the (albeit much earlier) homes of Á

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Etruscans inhabited central Italy – an area that today comprises roughly Tuscany, Umbria, and parts of Emilia Romagna and Lazio – throughout much of the 1st millennium BC. While Greek authors, including Herodotus, relate tales of settlers from Turkey and the Near East founding the first Etruscan cities, the material culture tells a different story. Archaeological evidence, particularly from pottery styles and settlements, suggests that though the Etruscan culture, with its organised urban spaces and necropoleis, emerged by about the 8th century, it had evolved from thriving pre-Etruscan communities established in the region. Certainly, influences from the Near East do appear in the art of what is often termed the ‘Orientalising’ period (c.800-650BC), but it seems more probable that this was due to close trade-links, rather than direct migration.

The rich iron deposits in Tuscany’s hills made the Etruscans wealthy traders, allowing them access to exotic materials such as ostrich eggs, amber, and ivory. This wealth later saw the construction of elaborate tombs, sometimes decorated with remarkable paintings, and often containing pottery imported from Athens and the eastern Mediterranean.

In the Archaic period, c.650-500 BC, Etruscan influence was at its peak, stretching from Naples to Venice; but during the Classical period (c.500-300 BC), following the defeat of the city of Veii in 398 BC by the emerging power of Rome, Etruscan dominance declined. However, many Romans, including the emperor Claudius, remained fascinated by its culture, and happily absorbed both its values and members of its elite.
Egyptian workers from Tell el-Amarna – the dwellings of skilled and valued craftspeople.

It seems that there were two series of structures, one earlier than the other. The earlier structures were curvilinear, while the later were rectilinear, suggesting a change in building styles when the second phase of occupation was begun.

This occurred in the late 7th century BC, a typological date provided by an almost complete vessel found in situ on the floor surface of one of the structures. The date suggests that the later buildings were constructed around the same time as the Piano del Tesoro complex was so comprehensively gutted by fire – though there is no sign as yet that the blaze spread to this area. More excavation is needed to
ascertain the exact relationship between the two phases of occupation, and it is hoped that further evidence for the date of the earlier structure will emerge as investigations continue. We still do not know the purpose of Poggio Civitate, but the supporting settlement provides further evidence that rather than being an isolated anomaly, the site formed part of a living community that was focused on craft and construction.

Perhaps one of the most important advances in archaeological techniques is the growing field of osteoarchaeology. Anthony Tuck explains that, in the past, if bone was collected on a site such as Poggio Civitate, it would be simply counted and stored. He adds: ‘It was only a few years ago that we began asking osteologists to train the field staff to recognise and track diagnostic bones at the time of excavation.’

As a result, emerging analysis of bone material from Poggio Civitate revealed a remarkable amount of information about ancient diet, ritual behaviour associated with sacrifice, and even the aristocratic practice of hunting high-status animals. Moreover, careful reanalysis of bone collected over the five decades of work at the site has revealed another curious feature of life at Poggio Civitate – and one that to modern minds, perhaps, is rather disturbing.

**Dark secrets revealed**

Infant mortality was high in Antiquity, yet, curiously, no infant remains are found in Etruscan cemeteries. At Poggio Civitate, osteoarchaeologists have identified a large number of babies’ remains, whose bodies appear to have been simply thrown away with the rubbish. ‘We have 26 specimens thus far, and more are turning up nearly every day,’ says Anthony. One theory is that babies who did not survive the first few weeks of life were buried beneath the floors of domestic space. But there is little evidence of this here. Anthony explains: ‘We’ve now excavated a number of domestic spaces, and have yet to find any indication of any formal treatment of any infant. Instead, the bones are found in and among refuse areas, places where we see a lot of animal debris as well.’

This does not necessarily mean that the babies were casually thrown away. ‘The most we can say right now,’ says Anthony, ‘is that we see no evidence of any ritual behaviour connected with these children.’

Of course, the skeletal remains may come from disturbed burials. However, again, Anthony’s team has found no evidence of any burials at all. ‘We’ve excavated houses and we’re obviously sensitive to the possibility that we would find burials beneath floor levels. But as yet we’ve found no sign of intentional deposition of perinatal humans beneath our floors. The evidence we currently have suggests these remains weren’t afforded any observable treatment that we might describe as a burial. These babies appear to have been discarded along with other forms of debris.’

But if this is so, why? Possibilities abound but hard evidence remains scarce. The status of a child’s parents may play a role in the treatment of a deceased infant. Similarly, social practices linked to naming and maturation could mean that, when an infant died, it was simply not recognised as fully a person, and thus not treated as one at burial.

As with so many aspects of Poggio Civitate, excavation here has raised as many fascinating, thorny questions as it has provided answers. We look forward to discovering what future seasons reveal.

**MORE TO EXPLORE**

The 2014 season is ongoing, investigating the potential settlement area, while the post-excavation team will continue their investigations of historic faunal remains, reconstructing the osteoarchaeological profile of the site – and looking for further evidence of unconventional infant burials.

If you would like to examine artefacts from the site for yourself, the excavation archive is available free online at: poggiocivitate.classics.umass.edu/index.asp

**SOURCE**

Dr Lucy Shipley is a specialist in Etruscan archaeology. Follow her on Twitter: @lshipley805. She would like to thank Anthony Tuck for his generous assistance in the preparation of this article.