

2009

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Recommended Citation

Carroll, Andrew; Rodriguez, Andrea; and Tuck, Anthony (2009) "Light Framed Architecture at Poggio Civitate: A Comparison of Elite and Non-Elite Domiciles," *Rasenna: Journal of the Center for Etruscan Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/rasenna/vol2/iss1/4>

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Light Framed Architecture at Poggio Civitate: A Comparison of Elite and Non-Elite Domiciles

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Introduction

Poggio Civitate, an Etruscan site 25km south of the modern city of Siena, preserves some of the Etruscan world's earliest monumental architecture. In the second quarter of the 7th century BCE, inhabitants constructed a complex of socially related buildings on the hill's Piano del Tesoro plateau, an elite residence, an industrial center and a tripartite religious structure. Each of these structures was extremely large for the time and all displayed an ornately decorated terracotta roofing system that iconographically reflected the social and political concerns of the site's local aristocracy. Until recently, evidence for the domestic architecture of Poggio Civitate's non-elite population remained elusive. However, in 2007 and 2008, excavation revealed the presence of a hut situated on a terrace immediately south of Piano del Tesoro and added a significant new facet to our understanding of the social form and development of this early Etruscan site.

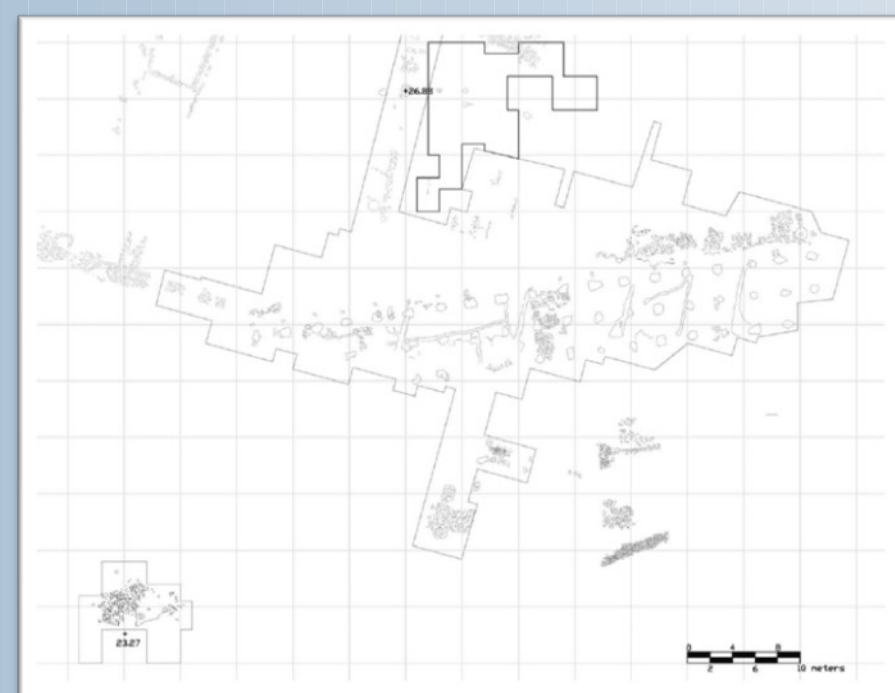


Poggio Civitate's 7th Century Complex

Architectural Form

The hut's floor was recessed in a manner similar to examples from sites further south, such as San Giovenale and in the Palatine Hill of Rome. In the example from Poggio Civitate, the underlying limestone bedrock was not conducive to easy excavation such as that of the above examples. Instead, the area of the hut's floor was excavated into the sterile soil to an approximate depth of a meter and a half to two meters below ground level. The large joists and posts were likely made from indigenous trees, such as Aleppo pine (*Pinus Halepensis*), Cork Oak (*Quercus Suber*), Prickly Juniper (*Juniperus Oxycedrus*) or Manna Ash (*Fraxinus Ornus*). The posts would be spaced at regular intervals around the depression; the exact form of which cannot be determined at this time.

The roof was probably constructed out of bundles of *Pragmites Australis*, the Common reed. Tightly lashed bundles of the reeds would have covered the roof beams at an angle of approximately 45 degrees, the optimum angle for water resistance. Although thatch is entirely organic, destruction due to fire would not have been a threat if constructed properly, which explains why, along with roofing tiles, a burn layer was not found. It is more likely that vermin infestation was the ultimate reason the structure's abandonment.



State plan showing relationship of CC7 Hut to OC2/Workshop



Aerial view of Hut's Remains

Chronology

At this time, the available evidence suggests the floor of the feature was intentionally excavated to a depth of approximately a meter and a half below ground level. When the structure was abandoned, the depressed area was filled with debris from the area. Within this fill, excavators recovered fragments of ceramic dateable to the years from the mid to late 7th century.

Although most dateable material from the occupation phase of the Orientalizing period complex on Piano del Tesoro can be placed around the end of the 7th century, some materials from the complex are directly comparable in both form and date to those recovered from the lens of the CC7 hut, whose abandonment is placed around the early 7th century. To judge by the accumulated debris from within the midden created following the abandonment of the hut, its occupation overlapped to some degree with that of the monumental, terracotta roofed structures higher on the plateau.



Stamped Bucchero Bowl (Second half 7th century BCE)



Bucchero Wing Handle (660-640 BCE)



Bucchero Hooded Handle (Second quarter 7th century BCE)

Observations



Reconstructed View of OC2/Workshop's Interior

The presence of this architectural feature on the southern terrace below Piano del Tesoro's Workshop structure might suggest that the hut served as a domestic space for laborers engaged in Poggio Civitate's industrial activity. If so, we would expect to see evidence for additional structures in the immediate vicinity. As yet, excavation has not revealed evidence for such buildings, but exploration of this area remains limited.

However, evidence for the chronological overlap between this hut and the buildings of Piano del Tesoro's 7th century BCE complex allows for a curious observation concerning the development of terracotta roofing systems in early Central Italy. Poggio Civitate's architecture of the social elite, with tiled, ornamental terracotta roofs, occupied the visible, high point on the hill. Buildings constructed according to the architectural vernacular of the Iron Age remained in use for a time, their traditional forms strengthens the technological novelty and distinctiveness of the monumental structures higher on the hill. The emergence of terracotta roofs, the significant architectural attenuation and opportunities for iconographic adornment reinforcing familial stature that they allowed, remained for a time another aspect of the aristocratic prerogative of Poggio Civitate's elite class. However, durability and practicality of such terracotta roofs clearly gave rise to their widespread adoption and use soon after their first emergence in the region.

Excavation

Excavation units CC7 and CC7Ext. revealed the presence of a distinct oval depression cut into surrounding sterile soil. The dimensions of this depression were 9 meters x 4 meters, roughly comparable in size to similarly preserved substructures of Iron Age domiciles from sites such as San Giovenale, Veii and Rome.

During the 2008 excavation, approximately 30% of the overall feature was excavated to the original floor level. This excavation revealed the presence of a post hole at the Southeast edge of the feature, confirming the use of light timber to assemble the huts infrastructure.

With the hut's abandonment, the exposed, recessed area of its floor appears to have been used as a disposal area for industrial waste associated with the manufacturing of Poggio Civitate's OC2/Workshop on the plateau immediately above the hut.



Reconstruction of Hut's Timber Frame



Reconstruction with Hut in Relation to OC2/Workshop



Reconstruction with Midden Following Abandonment

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The authors of this poster would like to acknowledge Evander Batson, of William and Mary, Michael Murphy and Aria Marco, of the Rhode Island School of Design for their illustrations and computer reconstructions.