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he first time I came to the Tuscan coastal village of Scarlino we ate porcupine for dinner. Only after I had eaten it did I realize to my horror what it was and my much missed friend, Riccardo Francovich, withdrew the ever-present pipe from his mouth and laughed heartily. (Today, thankfully porcupines are a protected species in Italy.) Riccardo was in a celebratory frame of mind. He had just found the first early medieval post-built dwellings in Tuscany. In the lea of Scarlino's stout Pisan castle the rock-cut dwellings spoke to an entirely different Middle Ages, one that only archaeology might throw light upon.

Thirty-five years later I am part of a team giving this region a new archaeological direction. Not the Etruscans, as everyone asks me when I mention my days under the Tuscan sun. Our project is



of the time. Its form and construction resemble late Carolingian castles in the Rhineland. In this case, though, the central tower seems as though it was no more than a treasure-house, not the lustrous home of some aristocrat. Only closer dating with radiocarbon and coins will pinpoint its architect and proprietors. Was it the Aldobrandeschi family, the power-house behind much of western Tuscan history in this era or the King of Italy (Hugh of Provence), known to have had property close by in AD 937?

The third phase was a variation of the second. The ditches were filled and replaced by fortifications; the tower was remodelled as a mortared structure. Lastly, post-dating this 10th-century establishment was an ephemeral afterlife of timber structures and accompanying iron-working hearths. Seven hundred iron tools have so far been found. Somewhat oddly these appear to belong to this otherwise anonymous early 11th-century place. Could the tools be earlier? Excavations in 2017 will try to determine this. The collection includes over 50 short-bladed paring knives as well as blanks. The sheer quantity of iron suggests Vetricella was in receipt of iron from either the iron adits on the island of Elba or the newly reopened mines of the Colline Metallifere or, indeed, both. Why here? This has yet to be explained. Were these makeshift forges serving the newly statuted constellation of hilltop villages hereabouts or making consignments to ship to embryonic towns like Pisa? Judging from the discarded metal, some event evidently overtook the smiths, bringing a sudden end to the iron-working and with it four centuries of occupation.

Into this mix we have an intriguing body of other finds. The ceramics are prodigious in number but mostly storage vessels as opposed to fine tablewares. On this evidence the dining culture in the dinky tower was hardly aristocratic. And

yet the animal bones tell a different story. Piglets in notable numbers as well as lagoon birds and chicken were consumed. Vetricella's inhabitants' culinary preferences differed significantly from those of the neighbouring villages. Lastly, the stand-out discovery is an assemblage of 16 silver coins dating from c.900 to c.1025. To find one coin is exceptional in this era when Italy was a non-monetized economy. To find so many coins beggars belief. Do they belong to a hoard? Are they indices of the economic power of Vetricella in its second, third, and fourth phases?

Perhaps the most notable finds consist of tell-tale metal-working debris, or rather their rarity in the excavation. Crucibles number two or three in total, and indubitable evidence of working minerals within the ditched enclosures has eluded us. Above all this implies the purposes of this extraordinary place await discovery somewhere in the fields between the tower and the lagoon. Intensive geophysical surveys of these fields is now

scheduled before a new dig resumes.

What sort of metal is the big question? Was proximity to iron sources the reason for powerfully enclosing the earlier site with the triple rings in the later 9th century? Or, was the small tower a safe-house for rare metals such as copper, lead, or even miniscule amounts of silver from reopened Etruscan adits in places like Cugnano in the neighbouring hills?

To answer this question the Florence university professor, Marco Benvenuto has embarked on a metallurgical analysis of Vetricella's silver coins as well as other similar coins from Tuscany's museums. Working with the numismatist, Alessia Rovelli, both conclude on the evidence so far that the silver in the coins was either from a mix of stored sources or the Harz mountains in central Germany. Rare, perhaps, but these silver coins symbolized German authority in the region. By contrast, Colline Metallifere silver, it seems so far, is elusive until the later 12th century when places like Massa Marittima boasted their own moneyers working with local metals.

Clearly, then, after the 7th century western Tuscany scarcely engaged with the Mediterranean and the cosmopolitan world of Arab and Byzantine merchants. Stronger connections existed on 'paper' at least, if episodically, with the political forces of Germany and southern France. The post-millennial rise of new towns like Massa Marittima occurred hard on the heels of new fortified villages (with numerous cereal storage pits) in these metal-bearing hills like Cugnano and Rocchette Pannocchieschi, as well as villages like Scarlino. Coincidentally or not, the disappearance of Vetricella is the hallmark of a new Mediterranean age. By AD 1100 if not before, Pisan merchants were nosing their way along the coast and introducing traded glazed pots, some from Fustât (Egypt) and Palermo, to the Pecora valley and its hill country. From that moment onwards accelerated economic growth revolutionized the region best known for its Renaissance affluence.

Our talismanic site of Vetricella belongs to the lost epoch when Tuscany was a backwater and any renaissance was a pipe-dream. Given Tuscany's international standing today it is hard to countenance. Yet the peculiar characteristics of this place coming to light in our excavations are hugely enhanced by the new vegetational and sedimentological history of the Pecora corridor. With the river managed, presumably new fields and terraces

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facilitated new crops and timber. Now, we have to connect all these different elements. Above all, we have to situate Vetricella in the textual accounts pinpointing estate histories to work out who exactly were the agents of western Tuscany's transformational change. Mediterraneanism will have to be weighed up against the interests of German emperors and their devolved impact in this region.

One thing is certain, the history of the Maremma at its most obscure is about to take a new turn. Riccardo Francovich who pioneered this adventure, puffing deeply on his pipe, would have been mightily excited. □



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