

URBS, OPPIDUM, CASTELLUM, VICUS.
SETTLEMENT DIFFERENTIATION
AND LANDSCAPE NOMENCLATURE IN ETRURIA

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A SURVEY of the sites within Etruscan territories reveals a range of settlement types ranging from large, urban centers to small, fortified towns to undefended villages. And while the role of each becomes increasingly better understood, confusion persists among researchers as to what to call these sites. To that end, it is worthy to consider what these different categories of settlements would have been called in antiquity. While we may never know precisely what Etruscan terms such as *spura* (city) and *zuta* (settlement) signified, we can instead look to the range of terms used in Latin authors such as Livy in reference to Etruria.¹

This paper will explore what the different terms for settlements connoted with the aim of relating these terms to the actual physical landscape. First each term will be carefully defined, with attention given to how they are used generally by ancient historians as well as within the context of central Italy. Once these terms have been defined, the distinctions between them can be further highlighted by collecting some of the sites that are specifically named and classified as one of these terms. This comparison will explore whether the physical characteristics of sites determined an ancient author's choice of terminology. It will be shown that these different terms were used as relative signifiers of size and level of urban functions of Etruscan settlements. This correspondence between the range of words for Etruscan settlements and the characteristics of the physical settlements themselves is striking, although the connection has not been fully explored.

The Latin term *urbs* describes a city or large town that is a political entity with its own territory. The names of Etruscan *urbes* are always given. Livy also mentions *oppida* in Etruria and their role there has not been sufficiently explained. The term *oppidum* is commonly translated as a 'town'. The names of *oppida* in Etruria are often given in Livy – these settlements were significant enough, whether in terms of size or regional importance, to be specifically discussed and remembered. Both *urbes* and *oppida* serve a central-place function in their immediate area.

In general, *oppida* are urban or proto-urban sites and are often fortified. The term *oppidum* does not necessarily denote a site situated on an elevated position. Greg Woolf, in his discussion of *oppida* elsewhere in the Roman empire, writes, «*oppida* are thus differentiated, on the one hand, from hill forts without urban functions and, on the other, from open settlements and farms». ² *Oppida*, like *castella*, vary in function, scale and population density depending on where they are located across Europe.

The primary meaning of *castellum* is a fortified settlement or garrison. Settlements termed *castella* were located within Italy, and across the empire. *Castella* mentioned in ancient sources were often built on elevated summits, which would have given them natural fortification. Although a naturally fortified topographical position occasionally complemented

¹ A. D'AVERSA, *Dizionario della lingua etrusca*, Brescia, 1994.

² WOOLF 1993, p. 224.

this situation, it is the man-made fortifications that characterize this type of settlement. A *castellum* is often an outpost, which implies that the *castellum* is located at a distance from the urban, territorial, or provincial center.

Now that the general meaning of *castellum* has been defined, I propose that there were a series of these *castella* within Etruria, which fall under a more restricted definition of the term. My research has shown that on the few occasions when *castella* in Etruria are mentioned in literature, they constitute more than just fortified settlements. Rather, they are a significant component of the Etruscan territorial infrastructure. Thus the primary difference between *castella* in general and the Italic *castella* mentioned by historical sources, is that the latter were not military settlements with garrisons but were permanently inhabited by civilians.¹

Finally, the term *vicus* signifies a village or a hamlet. Stephen Oakley observes that *vicus* is not a technical term and that it «doubtless [...] could be applied to any site where more than a very few houses were gathered together».² Oakley has noticed that in Samnium there are many nucleated sites and farmsteads, which could be considered *vici*, that are low-lying. Thus, the term *vicus* does not necessarily denote a settlement built on a high position. In addition, the term *vicus* does not refer to a fortified site. Further, it might be proposed that the terms *vicus* and *castellum* are antithetical, in that the former indicates a site that is *immunitus* and the latter one that is *munitus*.

In light of the definitions of these terms applied to settlements, it will prove fruitful to examine the relationships that exist between the various types of sites. To begin with, a hierarchy exists in the size of site described by each term: in declining order there are *urbes*, *oppida*, *castella*, and *vici*. But are there further hierarchical relationships between them? The *urbs* Tarquinia had *oppida* (Cortuosa and Contebra) in its territory, and the *urbs* Volsinii Veteres had *castella*.³ Within the Ager Faliscus, there were not just *urbes* but also *vici* and *castella*.⁴ In these relationships, the *urbes* appear to be preeminent within their territory.

It is evident that towns had settlements, in addition to larger cities. For example, the *oppidum* Troilum had five *castella* in its area.⁵ At the simplest level, these relationships indicate that smaller settlements are associated with the larger ones in their area. Smaller sites, such as the unnamed *castella* and *vici* are typically only mentioned in relation to the city in their area.⁶

This hierarchical deference in turn may hint at a socio-political hierarchy among the sites as well. In addition, while the idea of an Etruria governed by cities has long been dominant, clearly towns and smaller settlements peppered the landscape and were an important part of regional interaction and organization. This relationship further prompts us to consider just what functions sites such as *oppida* and *castella* may have served in their areas.

¹ The physical correlates for these terms can be relative within a territory. That is to say, while *castella* are best described as hilltop sites, the *castella* in the Ager Faliscus are perched on bluffs. Another relative factor is the size of Etruscan territories themselves. In South Etruria, *urbes* and *castella* are fairly close together, whereas they are more distant from one another in North Etruria where the territories are larger.

² OAKLEY 1995, p. 145. However, the term *vicus* could be used technically as an administrative unit, or could describe the cult official of a neighborhood (*magister vici*) (P. G. H. GLARE, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, Oxford, 1992, p. 2058). There is however a technical meaning of the term *vicus*, and the term is clearly technical when it appears in the context of *magister vici*, for example, when it is applied to districts within a city.

³ LIV. 6, 4, 9; LIV. 9, 41, 6.

⁴ LIV. 10, 12, 7-8.

⁵ LIV. 10, 46, 10-12.

⁶ *Uolsiniensium castella aliquot ui cepit; quaedam ex his diruit ne receptaculo hostibus essent; circumferendoque passim bello tantum terrorem sui fecit ut nomen omne Etruscum foedus ab consule peteret* (LIV. 9, 41, 6).

Veii, Volsinii, Perugia, Clusium and Arretium are all specifically called *urbes* by Livy.¹ Each of these sites is large and ranges from 80 to 190 hectares. Rusellae and Troilum are called *oppida*, but the *oppidum* of Troilum has not yet been positively identified.² Rusellae is 24 hectares in area, and based on the singular example of this named and locatable *oppidum*, it is probable that *urbes* tend to be larger than *oppida*. However, there is a strange exception in that Caere, an Etruscan metropolis measuring 130 hectares, is listed as an *oppidum* in Livy. One of the two instances in which Caere is described as an *oppidum* is during Livy's discussion of Aeneas's arrival in Italy.³ Livy writes that at that time, Caere was an opulent *oppidum*. This wording gives the great site of Caere a rustic character from the very beginning. Conversely, in that same era, Livy calls the tiny settlement of Rome an *urbs*, which lent it an urbane and sophisticated air. And so these terms for settlement could be appropriated to ascribe extra quaintness or urbanity to a given site.

Another limiting factor for the reliability of these terms is that a site might be classified as a specific type throughout its history, even if it outgrows the characteristics for that class of settlement. That is to say, the title of a village could become affixed to a site for its lifespan, even if it grew to be significantly larger than the original qualifications for a village. This phenomenon could also explain why one of the largest Etruscan sites, Caere, was not called an *urbs*.

The sites of Sutrium and Nepesin are called both *oppida* and *urbes*, which may indicate, in terms of classification, that the sites fell into an ambiguous zone where terminology was concerned.⁴ These sites are in the middle range among the settlement size for Etruscan sites, as large as 7.5 and 15.5 hectares respectively. If ranked by size, it is immediately clear that the sites are smaller than sites such as Veii and Volsinii. However, one would also see that they are indeed larger than the many small sites that dot the Etruscan landscape.

The alternation in the nomenclature for the two settlements may indicate that there was a dividing line between the characteristics of the terms *oppidum* and *urbs*, which was not explicitly defined, but rather implicitly perceived, thus causing Sutrium and Nepesin to fall into the grey area of terminology. The confused nomenclature could also indicate that the two terms for the largest settlements could be interchangeable because, in the end, both terms defined a site that was the largest in its immediate area.

Perhaps the most important technical difference between the terms *urbs* and *oppidum*, according to Varro, is that an *urbs* refers to a site that has been ritually founded and had a *pomerium*.⁵ Thus even though Rusellae is termed as an *oppidum*, it was an *urbs* in the technical sense.

In order to investigate what sites might be considered *castella*, it would be useful to survey the mentions of Etruscan *castella* in Latin literature. Livy specifically mentions *castella* in the Ager Faliscus, Ager Volsiniensis and near the *oppidum* of Troilum. Additionally, Diodorus Siculus mentions a town named *Kastóla* in the territory of Volsinii.⁶ The only *castellum* specifically named in Latin literature is that of Axia, modern Castel d'Asso, which Cicero mentions in his *Pro Caecina*.⁷

¹ Veii (LIV. 5, 2, 7; 5, 8, 7; 5, 19, 3; 5, 22, 8; 5, 24, 5; 5, 24, 6; 5, 25, 7), Volsinii (Veteres) (LIV. 10, 37, 2; 10, 37, 4), Perugia (LIV. 10, 37, 4), Chiusi (LIV. 10, 26, 8) and Arretium (LIV. 10, 37, 4; 27, 24, 6).

² LIV. 10, 37, 3; 10, 46, 10. Pliny the Elder wrote about an Etruscan *oppidum* named Trossulum which was nine miles to the south of Volsinii (PLIN., *nat.* 33, 9). Thus it may be that the town of Troilum is Trossulum, and was located in the Ager Volsiniensis (HARRIS 1971, p. 76).

³ LIV. 1, 2, 3.

⁴ Sutrium as an *oppidum* (LIV. 6, 9, 7) and as an *urbs* (LIV. 6, 9, 9; 6, 10, 6; 9, 32, 1-2); Nepesin as an *oppidum* (LIV. 6, 10, 4; 6, 10, 5) and as an *urbs* (LIV. 6, 10, 1; 6, 10, 6).

⁵ VARRO, *ling. Lat.* 5, 143. Also LIV. 1, 44, 4 on the definition of the *pomerium* (CATALANO 1978, p. 479).

⁶ HARRIS 1971, p. 59; DIOD. 20, 35, 5.

⁷ CIC., *Caec.* VII 20-21.

While the label *castellum* has been used by scholars in the study of Etruria, as yet no concerted effort has been made to relate the archaeological evidence to its usage in Latin literature. In so doing, we can better understand the significance of *castella* in relation to the other types of settlement. As a result of recent large scale surveys, a number of small fortified hilltop settlements have been identified across Etruria that are probably the physical correlates for the *castella* that Livy mentions. These sites are typically not larger than two hectares, were permanently inhabited and had their own agricultural territory. Most *castella* were fortified in the Hellenistic period, if not before.

Thus far there have been few *castella* excavated, making the internal character of the settlement difficult to discern. In general, *castella* are defined by fortification walls that enclose an area of limited size, one that is not overly urban in character. Intriguing results from the *castella* at Cetamura, Poggio Colla and Torre di Donoratico have documented the presence of an elite social class through the material remains from these sites and their surrounding tombs.¹

Castella, to an astonishing degree, have been located near territorial boundaries, and sometimes, as in the case of Fiesole, form a ring around the territorial border (FIG. 1).² The position of *castella* within a territory can inform us about the role that these sites played. *Castella* may have served as a first line of defense for the major settlements (*urbes* and *oppida*) in their area. In 308 B.C. the consul Decius and his army sought to intimidate the Etruscans in the Ager Volsiniensis by capturing several *castella*.³ In this instance, *castella* are forcibly taken by the Romans because it was understood that they could have been a place of refuge for people in the territory of Volsinii. Additionally, Livy relates that the destruction of these *castella* incited fear in all of the Etruscans, which reveals that their defeat was significant enough to affect the morale of local populations.

Furthermore, because some *castella* were located on the border of one territory, they also were near the territory of another. The *castellum* Cetamura, for example, is almost equidistant from Siena, Fiesole and Arezzo. For this reason, it can be hypothesized that *castella* may have had to form relationships with all the major settlements in their area, in order to resist being subsumed, even to the point of double dealing. Otherwise in a region where inter-territorial fighting was standard, a small fortified site could not survive. Thus it can be posited that most *castella* had semi-autonomous roles in their respective areas, having a small territory under their own control within the greater umbrella of a city-state's territory.

Sites that can be termed *vici* are found throughout Etruria. As a result of their small size and indefensible position, *vici* were often located in proximity to larger settlements, such as *urbes*, *oppida* and *castella*. It should be mentioned that single structured settlements and farms were also prevalent across the Etruscan landscape but are rarely ever mentioned singly by Livy. The surface remains of these sites can measure as much as a hectare, but are often smaller than 50 by 50 meters.

¹ For Cetamura see de Grummond (ed.) 2000. For Poggio Colla, see WARDEN, KANE 1997. For Donoratico, see TERRANATO, SAGGIN 1994, p. 470; A. GALLONE, *Excavations at Torre di Donoratico, Italy. Interim report, 2003-2004 seasons*, «Etruscan Studies», forthcoming.

² The *castella* presented in FIG. 1 were gathered for a master's thesis, H. BECKER, *The Etruscan castellum: fortified settlements and regional autonomy in Etruria*, 2002, written at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Preliminary findings have now appeared in BECKER 2002-2003. Undoubtedly there are many more *castella* than those portrayed on this map, and many possible candidates were presented at the "La città murata in Etruria" conference and can be found in this volume. It also should be noted that when I formulated the characteristics of this category of settlement, I established the maximum size as two hectares in order to be as conservative as possible. If *castella* were even larger, then the number of *castella* known grows in turn.

³ LIV. 10, 46, 10-12.



FIG. 1. Distribution of small fortified settlements (*castella*) in Etruria according to city territories. Map by H. W. Becker (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and T. Elliott (Ancient World Mapping Center, www.unc.edu/awmc). Territorial boundaries after Bonfante (ed.) 1986 with modifications. Reconstruction of ancient coastline following W. V. Harris (Maps 41 and 42) and N. Purcell (Map 44) in R. Talbert (ed.), *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman world*, Princeton, 2000.

A range of Etruscan settlement types can then be attested in terms of their archaeological presence as well as their function in ancient literature even though their role has not been sufficiently integrated into the work of many modern historians. Additionally, we have seen that the terms for ancient sites in Etruria are hierarchical in relative terms just as the settlement size of the sites themselves. Therefore, in those cases where sites are specifically classified as a certain type of settlement, we can come to understand, by comparing the text to the actual landscape, the general qualities of each type of settlement. This correlation should not imply that Livy actually visited each of these sites, however it is possible to posit that, as an historian, he was aware of the constitution of Etruscan settlements so that he might classify them appropriately in his text.

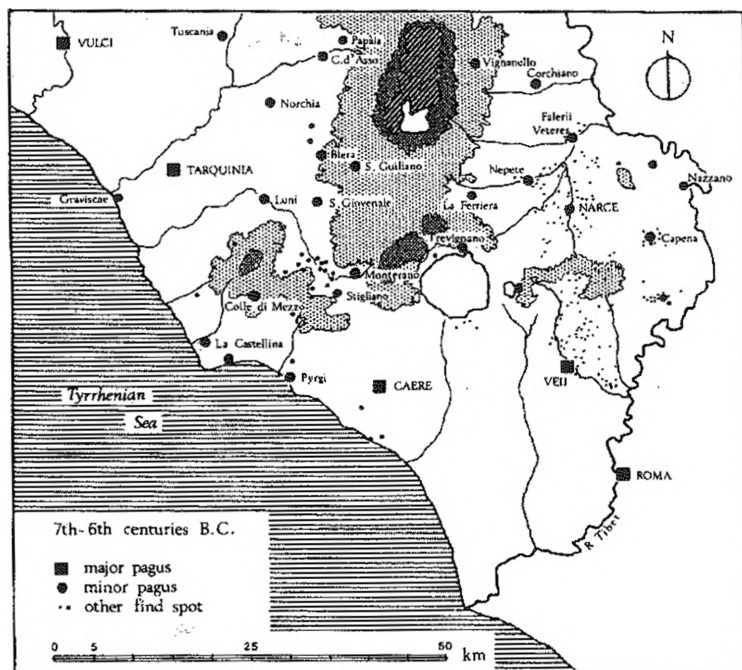


FIG. 2. Map of South Etruria with sites labeled as major and minor *pagi* (after T. W. Potter, *A Faliscan Town in South Etruria. Excavations at Narce 1966-71*, London 1976, fig. 107).

understanding of the hierarchy of Etruscan settlements. Since it is apparent that these terms have archaeological counterparts, they may be applied to the relevant sites, keeping in mind that Livy's usage, while obviously careful, cannot be considered 'scientific'.

In order to understand how these terms can be useful in an archaeological context, we may turn to the survey of the Ager Faliscus, which has located a range of sites.¹ Some of the sites are large and urban, others are located on small fortified hilltops while others are smaller still and undefended. The survey results correspond to Livy's description of this area, wherein he mentions that there were *urbes*, *castella* and *vici*.

Inde in Faliscum agrum copiis reductis, cum impedimenta Faleriis cum modico praesidio reliquisset, expedito agmine ad populandos hostium fines incedit. Omnia ferro ignique uastantur; praedae undique actae. Nec solum

¹ M. W. FREDERIKSEN, J. B. WARD PERKINS, *The ancient road systems of the Central and Northern Ager Faliscus. Notes on Southern Etruria*, II, «*PSR*», XXV, 1957, pp. 67-208; POTTER 1976; T. W. POTTER, *The Changing Landscape of South Etruria*, London 1979.

This paper focuses on Livy's use of settlement terms because he is the only extant Latin author who deals extensively with pre-Roman Etruria and its history. And indeed we have seen that these Latin terms have a valid use for defining Etruscan settlement types. While we do not know all of the Etruscan words for these different types of settlement, the Latin serves as a meaningful surrogate because it is an ancient evaluation within the correct context. The correlation of settlement terminology employed by Livy and the archaeological landscape leads to an improved un-

modo uastum hosti relictum sed castellis etiam uicisque inlatus ignis: urbibus oppugnandis temperatum, in quas timor Etruscos compulerat (Liv. 10, 12, 7-8).

Astonishingly, when the surveyors analyzed the results of their survey, they did not connect the sites to Latin terminology nor to this passage from Livy.

In discussions of the settlement pattern, the sites are labeled either as major *pagi* or minor *pagi* (FIG. 2).¹ *Pagus*, or administrative district, was not a term that ancient historians applied to Etruria. Even aside from the ludicrous denomination of major Etruscan metropolises, such as Tarquinia or Caere, as *pagi*, the terminology is also not useful concerning the smaller settlements. On this map, sites that can be convincingly identified as *castella* or *vici* are all called, indiscriminately, minor *pagi*. For example, Axium, is called a *castellum* by Cicero.² Classifying this site as a *castellum* tells us a little about its character and we would expect to find that the site was fortified and elevated. But this information is lost if the site is termed a 'minor *pagus*'. The term was used to group data into two artificial clusters that only serve to obfuscate the significant differences in settlement types that would otherwise have been so important.

In conclusion, then, we have seen that there are hierarchical terms for settlement types in Etruria that generally correspond to patterns observed in the landscape. Further, in those cases where Livy associates sites known to us with a certain settlement term, we can infer that Livy's use of nomenclature for these sites was not random but was based on consistent definitions. That is to say that at least he used the terms as relative signifiers of size and level of urban function. Because these terms have been defined within the context of the Etruscan landscape, and were originally applied to it, it is appropriate that these words be adopted for future scholarly reference to the landscape. For using terms such as *urbes*, *oppida*, *castella*, and *vici* can provide archaeologists and historians alike with a meaningful handle for understanding and organizing topographical information.

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¹ POTTER 1976, fig. 107. Settlements are also labeled as *pagi* in WARD-PERKINS 1970. The recent work of the Tiber Valley Project led by the British School at Rome has avoided these problems.

² CIC., *Caec.* VII 21.

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