TRAJ | THEORETICAL ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY JOURNAL

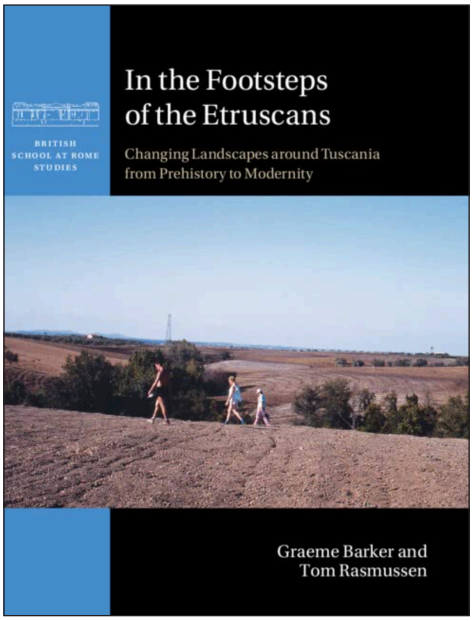
Witcher, Robert. 2025. Barker, Graeme and Tom Rasmussen. 2023. *In the Footsteps of the Etruscans: Changing Landscapes around Tuscania from Prehistory to Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-009-23002-5 hardback £100. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 8(1): 1–9. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/traj.23558

Open Library of Humanities

Book Review

Barker, Graeme and Tom Rasmussen. 2023. *In the Footsteps of the Etruscans: Changing Landscapes around Tuscania from Prehistory to Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-009-23002-5 hardback £100.

Overview



The small town of Tuscania lies approximately 80 km north-west of Rome and 25 km inland from the Tyrrhenian coast. Emerging as a central place during the late Bronze Age, the site has remained a focal point for the surrounding territory through to the present day. The volume under review presents the results of a field survey of Tuscania's hinterland. Part of an innovative 'New Wave' of Mediterranean surveys (Bintliff 1994: 7), the fieldwork was undertaken between 1986 and 1990. This marked a major methodological advance on earlier projects in the region, fully embracing probabilistic sampling, systematic quantification and off-site archaeology. Several interim articles have outlined the primary findings (e.g. Barker 1988; Rasmussen 1991); the current volume brings the results to full and final publication. Appearing some four decades after the project was originally conceived, *In the Footsteps of the Etruscans* inevitably arrives in a much-changed research landscape; moreover, as the various chapters have been prepared at different points over the intervening

years, there is some unevenness in the degree to which subsequent developments are integrated into the text. Such a long gap between fieldwork and publication is not unknown, however, and the book joins a group of other recently published volumes on landscape projects undertaken in Italy several decades ago (e.g. Small and Small 2022). Among these is the restudy (Patterson et al. 2020) of the pioneering South Etruria survey; the latter, undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s in the region between Tuscania and Rome, serves as a repeated point of reference throughout the current volume.

The book is organized into nine substantial chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the rationale, aims and objectives of the original survey. Chapter 2 describes the project's methods, both in the field and the post-survey processing of the results. Chapter 3 characterizes the physical landscape context with particular attention to the geomorphological evidence for shifts in climate and cycles of erosion and alluvial deposition. The core of the volume is a chronological presentation of the results and their interpretation: prehistoric (Chapter 4), Etruscan (Chapter 5), republican (Chapter 6), imperial and late antique (Chapter 7) and medieval (Chapter 8). The conclusions (Chapter 9) come back to the research aims and review the wider significance of the results in the context of Mediterranean landscape archaeology. The volume is generously illustrated with colour photographs, high-quality maps and pottery drawings, with tabulated data presented throughout.

Methods

Readers of the *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* will be primarily interested in the results relating to the Etruscan and Roman periods. It is worth acknowledging, however, the wider methodological contribution of the volume and the results relating to the prehistoric periods. Indeed, although neither of these is flagged as primary research aims of the original project, they arguably represent two of the most important outcomes. The Tuscania survey's methods were formulated in response to some of the inadequacies of earlier projects including the South Etruria survey and the Biferno valley survey (the latter directed by Tuscania project co-director, Graeme Barker). In place of extensive, judgmental coverage and the grab sampling of artefacts, the Tuscania project made use of sophisticated sampling procedures and the full quantification of finds. Taking Tuscania as the centre of a 10 km-radius territory, three distinct spatial sampling strategies were implemented: transects, random 1 km^2 blocks, and judgmentally located 1 km^2 blocks. Combined, these samples covered 97 km^2 (27% of the territory) of which 41.5 km^2 were available for survey. Evaluating the relative effectiveness of these different strategies, the authors note that they were equally good at identifying the distribution of well-dispersed and highly visible Roman-period

settlement but produced more variable results for the thinner and more clustered distributions of pre- and post-Roman sites (p. 288). Results such as these will be of value for those planning their own survey projects, although as noted by Knodell et al. (2023: 293), there has been a general decline in research on sampling strategies by Mediterranean surveyors since the intense methodological debates of the 1980s and 1990s — the context in which the Tuscania survey was conceived.

Another methodological advance was the use of total artefact collection and precisely defined criteria for differentiating sites from off-site activities, such as manuring. After correcting for variable walker spacing and surface visibility, scatters are categorized as sites (definite, probable or possible) or as 'non-sites'. The significance of the latter was another much-debated topic of the 1980s, though there was at least eventual agreement around the need for a more intensive off-site approach. This consensus persisted for several decades, though intriguingly, the publication of the Tuscania volume coincides with renewed debate on the topic (Meyer 2022; De Haas et al. 2023). As well as tackling the site vs. off-site debate, the survey also eschewed site categorization. Instead of the long-established typology of Roman settlement based on farms and villas, the survey deployed a wider and culturally neutral range of site types such as 'large, high-status settlement'. In contrast to this systematic approach to the processing of the data, however, the old terminology, and its implicit assumptions, resurface in the narrative interpretation. Small sites, for example, are repeatedly taken to be independent family smallholdings, and large, wealthy sites as villas.

Another site type that is more apparent in the narrative text than in the formal categorization of the data is the village. The intensity of field coverage around Tuscania was such that the survey documented an average density of 3.8 sites per km^2 (or 8.8 allowing for unsurveyed areas), with some clusters of 10 or more sites per km^2. These are very high densities by the standard of earlier — and, indeed, many subsequent — Italian surveys leading the authors to label some of these clusters as villages. However, the full significance of this interpretation is not explored in the volume. Roman-period villages were poorly known in the 1980s and they remain a comparatively neglected category of site today, so the identification of multiple examples here offers the potential for future consideration of the social and economic importance of rural agglomerations in the Roman countryside.

Alternatively, the results of the Roman Peasant Project (RPP; Bowes 2020) point to another possibility: 'distributed habitation'. Focused on an area of southern Tuscany, 75 km north of Tuscania, the RPP excavated a series of small surface scatters. The results demonstrate that what lies beneath is often far more varied than text-based typologies allow; indeed, only one of the sites resembled a farm, while most were

non-residential foci for the processing of crops, field drains, and so on. Might therefore the dense clusters of 'small, low-status' sites around Tuscania represent not villages or clusters of farms, but rather locales for intensive rural production? If so, this would be a much less densely populated Roman landscape than the current volume suggests. The findings of the RPP cannot be automatically applied to other landscapes without further testing; not least, the territory around Tuscania appears to have had a very different long-term historical trajectory compared with the more isolated RPP study area. Nonetheless, given its significant implications for interpretations of the Roman countryside, the 'distributed habitation' model merits consideration as part of any future investigation of the 'villages' around Tuscania.

As well as a time of methodological advances, the 1980s was also a period of intense theoretical debate. The authors note that the survey was undertaken at a moment of transition between processualism and post-processualism and, broadly, the volume takes an aggregative approach to these theoretical frameworks combining quantification with *Annales* history and taskscapes. The latter reflects the integration of theoretical innovations that have influenced landscape archaeology in the decades since the survey and is a reminder that the volume appears in a very different theoretical landscape. Generally, however, the text sticks with the project's original research questions and theoretical frameworks, strategically acknowledging the significance of subsequent developments, but without attempting to redefine the aims and approaches set out in the 1980s. Indeed, despite the broad theoretical framing, the three stated research themes relate to specific historical debates: the emergence of Etruscan urbanization, the impact of 'Romanization', and the process of *incastellamento* (the post-classical nucleation of settlement on hilltops) — all fundamentally questions of settlement aggregation and dispersal amenable to investigation through the survey of an urban hinterland.

Results

Following the methods chapter, Chapter 3 addresses a supplementary question about anthropogenic vs. climatic explanations for phases of Mediterranean erosion and alluviation. The geomorphological and palynological findings suggest that climatic change (coinciding with the so-called 'Roman Warm Period') likely explains the area's highly dynamic fluvial regime, a response likely exacerbated by land use change during the republican and imperial periods, when woodland clearance and the intensification of agriculture destabilized soils with implications through to the present day.

Chapter 4, the first of five chronological chapters, presents the prehistoric evidence ranging from a few Palaeolithic lithics, via the first documented evidence for Neolithic settlement in the area, to the more extensive spreads of material dating to

the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages. The earliest evidence for a concentration of activity on the site (Colle San Pietro) that subsequently developed into Tuscania dates to the late Bronze Age in the late second millennium BC. The survey provides important evidence for a contemporaneous cluster of activity around Colle San Pietro, arguing against the idea that these late Bronze Age centres were the result of a sharp nucleation of population. In contrast, evidence for dispersed early Iron Age activity is sparse.

Moving to Chapter 5, the subsequent and dramatic reappearance of rural activity in the Archaic period speaks to the first of the project's stated research aims: Etruscan urbanization. With the emergent Archaic (early Etruscan/sixth-century) centre at Tuscania re-established, the surrounding territory saw a tenfold increase in the number of dispersed sites. As during the late Bronze Age, therefore, urbanization was not driven by population nucleation but rather reflects a parallel development of both urban and rural landscapes. The distribution of dispersed Etruscan-period sites recorded by the survey is uneven but taken to represent a 'distinct agricultural enclave' (p. 208), potentially indicating central administrative and marketing functions. Following this dramatic expansion of settlement, the late Etruscan period (fourth century BC), is characterized by a significant reduction in activity. In reality, this could reflect a lack of diagnostic pottery in circulation after the disappearance of *bucchero* pottery; indeed, some of the many Etruscan sites with only generically dated coarsewares might be of late Etruscan date, effectively offsetting some or all of this apparent decline. Certainly, the fourth century was a period of military and political disruption as competition and conflict between the major Etruscan cities intensified. In this context, it is important to note that Tuscania was subordinate to the much larger Etruscan city of Tarquinia, some 20 km to the south near the Tyrrhenian coast. Developments in the territory of Tuscania therefore likely depended on social and economic structures over which the town did not have full control, including the extraction of surplus and Tarquinia's complex relationship with another regional player: Rome.

This brings us to Chapter 5 on the Roman republican period, c. 300–30 BC. The chapter is titled, and framed with reference, to 'Romanization' (complete with scare quotes); indeed, as noted above, this Romanization forms the second of the Tuscania survey's original three main historical themes. Since the 1980s, of course, there has been intense and sustained debate about Romanization, which the authors acknowledge, though they opt to persist with it, noting that 'as far as central Italy is concerned, the balance of opinion has favoured retaining the term but taking account its many shades of experience' (p. 178). It is certainly true that the *term* has great purchase on Italian scholarship; more significantly, so too has the *concept* (e.g. see Cambi 2021 for a recent restatement). In the current volume, at least, Romanization is used simply to gloss the events of the final three centuries BC, including the questions of whether

incorporation into the Roman state led to settlement dislocation and, later, to a decline in the free peasantry. Ultimately, however, these are questions of a historical rather than theoretical nature, being concerned with settlement and economic processes rather than changing cultural identity. As such, the prominent use of the term here is arguably irrelevant to the particular interpretations presented.

Rome's early involvement in the territory of Tuscania played out in the context of complex relations with Tarquinia. After decades of conflict and stand-off, Rome finally defeated Tarquinia in the early third century (~281 BC) and the city-state's territory — including Tuscania — was dismantled. The imposition of a Roman colony at Graviscae (~191 BC), for example, cut off Tarquinia's access to the coast. There were also significant colonial interventions at Etruscan Vulci to the north-west of Tuscania (including the foundation of a Latin colony at Cosa, 273 BC) and across southern Etruria. At Tuscania itself, however, there is no direct evidence for any such colonial reorganization. Indeed, the survey reveals strong continuity of dispersed rural settlement, with most sites continuing in occupation from the late Etruscan period. This stability of individual sites is accompanied by a significant expansion of overall site numbers and the emergence of a clearer settlement hierarchy. The authors' interpretation of these trends aligns with Terrenato's (2019) model of elite negotiation: aristocratic families leveraging the opportunities of Roman expansion (under the acknowledged threat of highly targeted violence) in order to maintain and advance their status. Certainly the 'enhanced stability of the countryside' (p. 291) around Tuscania at this time contrasts with the disruption, sometimes violent, to settlement along the coast and across much of southern Etruria (e.g. Patterson et al. 2020: 103–112; De Haas 2023). The overall interpretation of the authors certainly differs from the profound colonial dislocation recently argued by Padilla-Peralta (2020) for Italy and by Fernandez-Gotz et al. (2020) for the western provinces. The authors suggest two reasons for Tuscania's apparently successful navigation of this otherwise turbulent period: new-found autonomy from Tarquinian control and (later) independent municipal status, and, secondly, the town's location on the Via Clodia connecting directly to Rome. The systematic dismantling of the Tarquinian city-state presumably allowed Tuscania to take control of its immediate territory as an independent municipal entity within the Roman state, while the Via Clodia reorientated the town's economy from the coast towards to the Tiber valley and Rome.

Chapter 6 turns to the landscape of the imperial period, c. 30 BC–700 AD. After the marked expansion of settlement during the republican period, the number of sites falls back slightly during the early imperial period. Moreover, in contrast with the strong continuity of sites between the late Etruscan and republican periods, only four-fifths of early imperial sites demonstrate continuity from the republican period and the

remaining one-fifth were newly founded. The authors attribute this 'substantial degree of dislocation' (p. 233) to the political and military convulsions of the first century BC. Whatever the explanation, this picture differs markedly from contemporaneous developments in rural landscapes closer to Rome. In the South Etruria survey area, early imperial settlement demonstrates very high levels of continuity from the late republican period combined with a significant expansion in overall numbers (Patterson et al. 2020: 129). Hence, although the South Etruria survey is taken as a point of reference throughout this volume, in practice, the emergence of the early imperial landscape around Tuscania is more similar to the situation in northern Etruria. In the latter region, during the fourth to second centuries BC, Rome had taken a more *laissez-faire* approach with the Etruscan cities before the civil wars, land appropriation and colonization of the first century BC precipitated widespread settlement dislocation. The trajectories of northern and southern Etruria were therefore very different at the end of the republic and start of the principate. Geographically, and politically as a former satellite of Tarquinia, the settlement history of Tuscania during these periods might have been expected to look more like that of southern Etruria, with disruption in the third century and then strong growth in the first centuries BC/AD.

Regardless of the slight fall in site numbers, however, the territory of Tuscania remained densely settled in the early imperial period, with a small number of 'large, high-status sites' (aka villas), a wide range of imported goods such as *terra sigillata* and Dr. 2–4 wine amphorae dispersed across the entire territory. Analysis of the off-site data indicates a peak in the amount of land under cultivation at this time, which the authors argue reflects Tuscania's location on the northern edge of Rome's immediate economic hinterland (*suburbium*), allowing landowners (whether old Etruscan families or Roman newcomers) to take advantage of the insatiable demand from the metropolis. Clearly, however, the Tuscania's territory was too distant from Rome for a convincing display of the sort of competitive elite villa building found closer to the metropolis, which explains at least some of the significant increase in site numbers attested closer to Rome.

Chapter 7 continues the story into the mid imperial and late antique periods, with the acceleration of settlement abandonment reflecting the wider trend noted across much of Italy. The developments of the medieval period, covered in Chapter 8, represent a story for another time and another venue. Chapter 9 provides a synthetic, long-term landscape history of Tuscania from prehistory to modernity with reflections on methods and key debates, and comparison of Tuscania's historical trajectory with other regions of Italy. The volume concludes with appendices presenting some of the Etruscan ceramic material, maps of the survey units and scatter locations, and a gazetteer listing the numbers of artefacts by period from each scatter.

Summary

The long-awaited publication of the Tuscania survey offers a dataset of high quality and importance. Its use of systematic and intensive sampling undertaken at a time when surface scatters were better preserved and more accessible delivers results that would be difficult, even impossible, to achieve today. The survey's most valuable contributions — arguably, the mapping of the prehistoric landscape for the first time, the characterization of the Etruscan rural landscape, and the development of field methods and data processing — were not among the survey's original three overarching aims. Such discrepancy only emphasizes the unexpected nature of archaeological research. The implications of some of the results presented are not fully worked through; for example, the survey provides a uniquely high-quality dataset for addressing questions of urban-rural relations but the volume does not provide a sustained final analysis of the significance of the findings for the concept of urban hinterlands. Some of the frameworks deployed — most obviously, Romanization — have also had their day. Others, however, retain currency: taskscapes have been advanced by the recent RPP and research on the Anthropocene is directing attention back to *Annales* history, an approach first championed by Barker as part of the Biferno valley survey in the 1970s and revisited by the Tuscania survey in the 1980s. In these ways, the volume speaks directly to a wide range of current approaches and debates.

The Tuscania survey set out with the 'primary aim… to contribute to Mediterranean landscape history by a focused study on the changing relationship between town and country' (p. 278). Forty years later, in the shadow of Horden and Purcell's (2000) *The Corrupting Sea* and its argument against towns and discrete hinterlands, the contribution of the Tuscania survey to Mediterranean landscape history lies in its detailed and systematic documentation of a micro-region (*sensu* Pirson et al. 2024). It is one more tessera in the mosaic of Mediterranean diversity that brings the bigger picture into view. The authors — including the late Helen Patterson and Marco Rendeli to whom the book is dedicated — are to be congratulated on bringing this important research project to full and final publication.

Robert Witcher
Department of Archaeology
Durham University
r.e.witcher@durham.ac.uk

References

Barker, Graeme. 1988. Archaeology and the Etruscan countryside. *Antiquity* 62: 772–785. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00075220

Bowes, Kimberly (ed.). 2020. *The Roman Peasant Project 2009–2014: Excavating the Roman Rural Poor*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Cambi, Franco. 2021. The Tuscan coast in the Classical period – research prospects: towards a new landscape archaeology. In: Alessandro Sebastiani and Carolina Megale (eds). *Archaeological Landscapes of Roman Etruria: Research and Field Papers*: 27–37. Turnhout: Brepols. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1484/M.MEDITO-EB.5.122209

De Haas, Tymon. 2023. Rural transformations in Middle Republican Central Italy: an archaeological perspective. In: Seth Bernard, Lisa Marie Mignone and Dan-el Padilla Peralta (eds.) *Making the Middle Republic: New Approaches to Rome and Italy, c.400-200 BCE*: 132–163. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009327978.008

De Haas, Tymon, Thomas P. Leppard, Jitte Waagen and Toby Wilkinson. 2023. Myopic Misunderstandings? A Reply to Meyer (JMA 35(2), 2022). *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 36: 127–137. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1558/jma.27148

Fernández-Götz, Manuel, Dominik Maschek and Nico Roymans. 2020. The dark side of the Empire: Roman expansionism between object agency and predatory regime. *Antiquity* 94: 1630–1639. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.125

Horden, Peregrine and Nicholas Purcell. 2000. *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Knodell, Alex R., Toby C. Wilkinson, Thomas P. Leppard and Hector A. Orengo. 2023. Survey archaeology in the Mediterranean world: regional traditions and contributions to long-term history. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 31: 263–329. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-022-09175-7

Padilla Peralta, Dan-el. 2020. Epistemicide: the Roman case. *Classica: Revista Brasileira de Estudos Clássicos* 33: 151–186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24277/classica.v33i2.934

Patterson, Helen, Robert E. Witcher and Helga Di Giuseppe. 2020. *The Changing Landscapes of Rome's Northern Hinterland: The British School at Rome's Tiber Valley Project*. Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 70. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Pirson, Felix, Brigitta Schütt and Thekla Schulz (eds). 2024. *Micro-Regions as Spaces of Socio-Ecological Interaction*. Tagungen und Kongresse 3. Wiesbaden: Reichert.

Rasmussen, Tom. 1991. Tuscania and its territory. In: Graeme Barker and John Lloyd (eds.) *Roman Landscapes: Archaeological Survey in the Mediterranean Region*: 106–114. London: The British School at Rome.

Small, Alastair and Carola Small. 2022. *Archaeology on the Apulian–Lucanian Border*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Terrenato, Nicola. 2019. *The Early Roman Expansion into Italy: Elite Negotiation and Family Agendas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108525190