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Herdsmen into Warriors. An Overview on Pastoralism and War in Ancient Central Italy

Abstract: *Il contributo è incentrato sull'Italia centrale in età preromana, e prende in considerazione in particolare due sfere che erano cruciali per le comunità antiche: pastorizia e guerra. L'attività pastorale e quella bellica sono elementi cruciali per una definizione degli assetti sociali e politici, anche perché si intersecano con questioni di tipo economico e religioso: ciò fa sì che una analisi di questi temi diventi basilare per avere una migliore comprensione delle comunità dell'Italia antica e della complessa dialettica tra egemonia e subalternità che era in atto al loro interno. Nel contributo si propone innanzitutto di dimostrare come in entrambi i casi l'immagine che deriva dalle fonti letterarie sia piuttosto distorta (anche se non sempre del tutto falsa) rispetto al quadro che si può tratteggiare basandosi sulla cultura materiale. Tra i temi più specifici di cui si tratta, per quanto riguarda la pastorizia, vi sono le effettive tracce (archeologiche e archeozoologiche) di queste attività nelle aree appenniniche e il loro collegamento con la transumanza. Sul piano della guerra invece si approfondisce l'aspetto simbolico dell'arma come indicatore di status sociale e di genere, soprattutto per quanto riguarda casi apparentemente anomali di sepolture femminili con armi.*

My contribution concerns the peoples of central Apennine Italy, of which we still have a rather confused picture, starting with their cultural definitions.¹ The effort to label them is ancient, linked on the one hand to what we might call Greek 'ethnography', and on the other to Roman imperialism's desire to 'nail' these communities to a territory. Today, given a closer look, it is increasingly evident that the picture we are able to draw from literary sources and the one we can sketch based on material culture do not always coincide; indeed, they sometimes seem to tell two different stories.² A long tradition of studies has tried to overcome this problem, especially in regard to the Samnites, who obviously have a privileged place by virtue of their role – at least during the fourth century BC – as enemies par excellence, and due to the part they played in historiography and Roman memory.³ A memory in which these populations are connected to two characteristics: pastoralism and war.

1 See the recent work of Gary D. Farney and Guy J. Bradley, eds., *The Peoples of Ancient Italy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

2 See Michel Aberson et al., eds., *Entre archéologie et histoire: dialogues sur divers peuples de l'Italie préromaine* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014).

3 Emma Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Gianluca Tagliamonte, *I Sanniti* (Milan: Longanesi, 1996); Rafael Scopacasa, *Ancient Samnium: Settlement, Culture and Identity between History and Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

To what extent does this image correspond to reality? We could describe the cultures of this area as ‘subaltern’, following Gramsci’s speculation:⁴ that they share a history which is ‘fragmented and episodic’ and have the characteristic of being voiceless. Furthermore, we may say that they have been victims of a double subalternity: in history, where they ended up being subjugated and assimilated by Rome, and in the history of studies, where they have often been regarded from a ‘classico-centric’ perspective. Today, this perspective is largely outdated, at least on paper: in the practice of historical and archaeological interpretation, classico-centrism does not infrequently resurface. Another order of subordination is the internal one, which concerns the internal structuring of communities, their articulations, power relations and ultimately, how these cultures chose to represent themselves. We must therefore talk about economics and power: topics that have been relatively neglected in recent years (at least in the field of pre-Roman Italy) in favour of what we may call a ‘religious turn’, and which have led to a significant delay in the study of social and economic issues.⁵

1 Pastoralism

Let us begin with pastoralism.⁶ The pastoral world, already in classical sources, is often considered a marker that is both chronological and cultural. Shepherding is perceived as a primordial stage of human evolution, preceding agriculture and the development of urban settlements.⁷ A further complication comes from the fact that when we think of these communities and their economic and subsistence activities, the image that is formed in our minds often tends to be conditioned by literary sources: Livy contrasted the Samnites, *montani atque agrestes*, to the peoples of the plains.⁸ As if that were not enough, the scientific literature of the twentieth century also contributed to creating a particular image. I am thinking of the powerful suggestion made by

4 Antonio Gramsci, “Quaderni del carcere 25 (XXIII) (1934)”: “La storia dei gruppi sociali subalterni è necessariamente disgregata ed episodica”; see Antonio Gramsci, *Subaltern Social Groups: A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*, trans. Joseph Buttigieg and Marcus Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021): 6–7.

5 A recent welcome exception is Jeremy Armstrong and Sheira Cohen, eds., *Production, Trade, and Connectivity in Pre-Roman Italy* (London: Routledge, 2022).

6 The literature on the topic is enormous. Philip C. Salzman, *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (London: Routledge, 2004) is fundamental; for the Mediterranean picture, see Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 549–52, and on Italy, Edoardo Vanni, *Economie senza gloria* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2021).

7 Cristiano Viglietti, *Il limite del bisogno: antropologia economica di Roma arcaica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011): 81–88.

8 See Dench, *From Barbarians*.

Arnold J. Toynbee's *Hannibal's Legacy*⁹ and his well-known thesis: after the terrible period of Hannibal's presence in southern Italy, conditions for a significant economic depression were created, ones that, in the long run, would substantially affect the region up to the present day. Today, the picture sketched by Toynbee has been revised,¹⁰ yet it still exerts an influence that makes us unconsciously imagine ancient central-southern Italy as a context of almost-empty spaces, in which flocks led by groups of shepherds/warriors move lazily. In contrast, projects such as Biferno and Sangro clearly (and not unexpectedly) show that these territories also experienced significant agricultural exploitation.¹¹

The problem once again is historiographical, with the complex narrative of the so-called Samnite Wars at the centre. According to Cornell,¹² rather than speaking of three different wars, we should recognise a long period of continuous belligerence made up of battles and skirmishes interspersed with moments of truce. In fact, in ancient sources and then again in modern literature, there has already been a temptation to describe the Samnite Wars as a 'clash of civilisations' with two different and irreducible ways of seeing the world: the Roman outlook, made up of cities and agriculture, and the Samnite view of scattered villages and sheep farming. More recent investigations, freed from this interpretative burden, have been able to highlight how, in reality, this 'Manichean' view has no reason to exist. However, it is perhaps appropriate not to fall into the temptation of going too far in the opposite direction. The Samnite world has come to be described as not being dissimilar to the Tyrrhenian ones, with relatively early urban form, magistracies, laws and monetary systems. In the end, this, too, can be seen speculatively as the result of a classico-centric attitude, as if the Samnites had to be redeemed from the allegation of being 'barbarians', and to do so, they had to be credited as having acquaintance with classical forms such as the city, among others. In fact, it is possible to admit that the Samnite world (like other cultures of Apennine Italy) had a late knowledge of urban forms, writing and state systems without implying that this made them inferior to the Romans and Etruscans. It is instead a matter of different responses to different cultural, and also environmental, situations. The spectre of 'environmental determinism' often leads to an

9 Arnold J. Toynbee, *Hannibal's Legacy: The Hannibalic War's Effects on Roman Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

10 See, e.g., Emilio Gabba, Gino Bandelli and Francesco Grelle, "Hannibal's Legacy. Trent'anni dopo," in *Modalità insediative e strutture agrarie nell'Italia meridionale in età romana*, ed. Elio Lo Cascio and Alfredina Storch Marino (Bari: Edipuglia, 2001): 13–32.

11 See Daniel Hoyer, "Samnite Economy and the Competitive Environment of Italy in the Fifth to Third Centuries BC," *Processes of Integration and Identity Formation in the Roman Republic*, ed. Saskia Roselaar (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 179–96; Scopacasa, *Ancient Samnium*: 165–66.

12 Tim Cornell, "Deconstructing the Samnite Wars: An Essay in Historiography," in *Samnium: Settlement and Cultural Change*, ed. Howard Jones (Providence: Brown University, 2004): 115–31; see also Lukas Grossmann, *Roms Samnitenkriege: Historische und historiographische Untersuchungen zu den Jahren 327–290 v. Chr.* (Düsseldorf: Wellem Verlag, 2009).

underestimation of the importance of the environment, the availability of resources and even the climate.¹³

In any case, one of the consequences of the traditional approach linking these communities to pastoralism is that it gives rise to a primitivist view, which would make them tendentially egalitarian societies. In old-fashioned anthropological terms, the so-called ‘primitive societies’ can be distinguished from the developed ones through their lack of a state, which consequently entails a lack of internal social articulation.¹⁴ It is worth stressing, nevertheless, that the idea of the ‘egalitarian society’ has been challenged in the last years.¹⁵ On the other hand, more adequate perspectives on the anthropological level allow us to understand that there are no purely agricultural or purely pastoral societies. There may be a prevalence of one form over the other, but they are two economic activities that do not only coexist but are necessary for each other’s flourishing.¹⁶ It is true that compared to other areas of the peninsula, the Apennine regions are clearly more bound to livestock because of the scarcity of vast, cultivable plains; nevertheless, the economic and productive contexts of ancient Italy are made up of both agriculture and pastoralism. Other activities must not be underestimated as well, such as handicraft, metalworking or wood and stone exploitation.¹⁷ In the end, even before considering economic aspects or lifestyles and the like, it is a matter of discerning power and power relations. It is then worth trying to better understand what we are talking about when we refer to pastoralism in the Apennine world.

13 See Tymon De Haas, “The Geography of Roman Italy and Its Implications for the Development of Rural Economies,” in *The Economic Integration of Roman Italy: Rural Communities in a Globalizing World*, ed. Tymon de Haas and Gijs Tol (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 51–82, for a picture of the geographic setting of Roman Italy that is at least partially useful for pre-Roman Italy as well, and Seth Bernard et al., “An Environmental and Climate History of the Roman Expansion in Italy,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44 (2023): 1–42, for climatic variations in Ancient Italy.

14 Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012). The sharp comments in Pierre Clastres, *La société contre l’État* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974): 161, are also worth reading.

15 See the recent book of Brais X. Currás and Inés Sastre, eds., *Alternative Iron Ages* (London: Routledge, 2020). A useful overview of the problem is Megan Laws, “Egalitarianism,” in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology* 2022, <http://doi.org/10.29164/22egalitarianism>.

16 See recent scholarship by Christian Heitz, “A Mobile Model of Cultural Transfer in Pre-Roman Southern Italy,” in *Production, Trade, and Connectivity in Pre-Roman Italy*, ed. Jeremy Armstrong and Sheira Cohen (London: Routledge, 2022): 223; Sheira Cohen, “Mechanisms of Community Formation in Pre-Roman Italy: A Lattice-work of Connectivity and Interaction,” in *Production, Trade, and Connectivity in Pre-Roman Italy*, ed. Jeremy Armstrong and Sheira Cohen (London: Routledge, 2022): 237; Valeria Acconcia, “L’Abruzzo: sedi e percorsi degli uomini in armi,” in *Le città visibili. Archeologia dei processi di formazione urbana*, vol. 1, *Penisola italiana e Sardegna*, ed. Marco Rendeli (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 2015): 150–51.

17 See de Haas, “The Geography”: 75.

Where can we see indications of pastoralism? The first thing we can look at is the funerary evidence, simply because it provides the most consistent data repository. In the funerary sphere, pastoralism is not evident unless we want to emphasise the presence of objects related to spinning and weaving in female tombs: but this is a phenomenon that also characterises cultures with a strongly agrarian matrix, as in the Tyrrhenian area,¹⁸ so it is not significant per se. For instance, we might speculate on the glass paste distaff from two rich female tombs (119, late seventh century BC; and 415, late seventh–early sixth century BC) in Campovalano, and the ivory spool from Tomb 2 in Capestrano,¹⁹ both located in modern Abruzzo. These are cases in which we may have the desire to assign a particular symbolic value to these objects (and to the associated activity); moreover, in these contexts, the artefacts related to the actions of spinning and weaving are only present in a few selected tombs, which has led to the supposition that they had the function of marking the special role that the deceased had within her community. On the other hand, glass distaffs have also been found in tombs in Cerveteri, Tolfa, Cales and other places with rather agrarian characteristics, so a connection with the pastoral sphere cannot be established.²⁰ It is also interesting to consider the presence of loom weights in sanctuaries in the Samnite area, as in the cases of Schiavi d'Abruzzo, Vacri and Fonte San Nicola: the presence of these objects in sacred places suggests their role as votive dedications.²¹ At the very least, these demonstrate the importance of textile activity in the context of Apennine communities.

Another possible indicator is the archaeozoological data, which reveal the strong presence of sheep in various contexts in the central Italic area. In particular, studies have pointed out that between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, there was an increase in the presence of sheep; moreover, from the beginning of the Iron Age, the increasing average age of sheep may be related to an intensi-

18 Margarita Gleba, *Textile Production in Pre-Roman Italy* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008).

19 On both, see Amalia Faustoferri, "Women in a Warriors' Society," in *Burial and Social Change in First Millennium BC Italy*, ed. Elisa Perego and Rafael Scopacasa (Oxford: Oxbow, 2016): 107, with references.

20 Gleba, *Textile Production*: 119–21. Joachim Weidig, "Früheisenzeitliche etruskische und italische Zepter," *Jahrbuch RGZM* 62 (2015): 1–46, interprets these objects as female sceptres, an interpretation that is not necessarily in contrast to the one that places emphasis on the textile aspect. In fact, in essence, there may be a wish to stress the importance of the female's role as a supervisor of the phases through which pastoralism produces its outcome: tanning of hides, use of fur for weaving, etc. In a social structure based on family/clan groups, such a role acquires a primary value. See, e.g., Margarita Gleba, "The 'Distaff Side' of Early Iron Age: Aristocratic Identity in Italy," in *Communicating Identity in Italic Iron Age Communities*, ed. M. Gleba and H.W. Horsnæs (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011): 26–32.

21 Alexandra Sofroniew, "Women's Work: the Dedication of Loom Weights in the Sanctuaries of Southern Italy," *Pallas* 86 (2011): 191–209.

fication of the exploitation of livestock in order to obtain wool.²² But even this picture does not differ much from the contexts of the Tyrrhenian world, and so it would seem that sheep do not play a distinct role in the Samnite context. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that animal remains on a site are not the best indicator of pastoral activities: in fact, dung and manure are more indicative.²³ But, of course, detecting these kinds of traces is much more difficult, and relies particularly on careful excavations, which are quite rare for the considered area.

The epigraphic evidence seems to go in the same direction.²⁴ One of the most important epigraphic documents of ancient Italy is the *Tavola di Agnone*, a bronze tablet discovered in the Agnone area in Molise in 1848.²⁵ It is a text of extreme interest for the reconstruction of the religious and social world of the community that produced it. The 'pantheon' (not an entirely appropriate term, but I use it for convenience) of the *Tavola di Agnone* seems to reflect the concerns of the local community. The main deity appears to be Ceres, to the extent that other deities also take on 'cererii' aspects;²⁶ even Hercules, who is often seen as representative of the pastoral world (see below), is referred to as 'Cererius'. It is clearly challenging to separate the figure of Ceres from agrarian activities. Obviously, it must be considered that the *Tavola* is dated to the first decades of the second century BC, and that cultural elements from Magna Graecia may have infiltrated the religious system represented in the text.²⁷ However, if we could trace a background of indigenous religiosity, this background would have agrarian characteristics.

22 Jacopo De Grossi Mazzorin, "Some Considerations about the Evolution of the Animal Exploitation in Central Italy from the Bronze Age to the Classical Period," in *Pecus: Man and Animal in Antiquity*, ed. Barbro Santillo Frizell, The Swedish Institute in Rome: Projects and Seminars 1 (Rome: The Swedish Institute in Rome, 2004): 38–49; Angela Trentacoste, "Fodder for Change: Animals, Urbanisation, and Socio-Economic Transformation in Protohistoric Italy," *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 3, no. 1 (2020): 1–17.

23 Christian Heitz, "Mobile Pastoralists in Archaic Southern Italy? – The Use of Social and Material Evidence for the Detection of an Ancient Economy," *Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift* 56 (2015): 140.

24 Suggestive, but essentially isolated, is Alessandro Morandi's proposal (*Epigrafia Italica* 2 [Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2017]: 123) to interpret the word *iorkes* from the Crecchio stele (province of Chieti, Frentanian area) as being equivalent to the Latin *hircus*. This serves as a reference to goat herds and, consequently, the passage as a text regulating the access of flocks to water. Such interpretation, all in all, seems more plausible than the one proposed by Crawford (who dubiously interpreted *iorkes* as *Orcus*: ImIt Frentani/ANXANVM/ORTONA 1), but it still remains problematic.

25 ImIt Pentri/TERVENTVM 34. On the context, see Bruno Sardella, *Archeologia di Agnone* (Rome: Scienze e Lettere, 2021).

26 Federico Santangelo, "Italic Ceres?" in *Gods and Goddesses in Ancient Italy*, ed. Edward Bispham and Daniele Miano (London: Routledge, 2019): 9–22.

27 See Paolo Poccetti, "Culti delle acque e stadi della vita muliebre," in *La Tavola di Agnone nel contesto italico*, ed. L. Del Tutto Palma (Florence: Olschki, 1996): 219–41.

A crucial topic is the alleged link between pastoralism in the Apennine area and the figure of Hercules. The profusion of bronze statuettes depicting the god from at least the fifth century BC onwards unequivocally shows the importance that Hercules had in the Italic context.²⁸ The iconographies of these bronzes seem to suggest that we are dealing with a god of different characteristics as compared to the Greek version. A well-established tradition sees a particular link between transhumance routes and pastoral activity in this divine figure.²⁹ In recent years, this connection has been questioned. Tesse Stek rightly noted that often, the shrines attributed to Hercules have no definite connotation, and indeed in some cases, the link to Hercules is deduced from the location, thus creating a vicious circle.³⁰ Bradley emphasised that the cult of Hercules in the Apennine area is ancient, while long-distance transhumance routes are evident in the last two centuries BC, and that Samnite shepherds would hardly have been able to finance the sanctuaries that had been monumentalised during that period.³¹ On the other hand, sanctuaries in the Samnite area are presumed to be the outcome of the monumentalisation of older cult areas, whose connection with the transhumance routes is rather evident. The importance of the cult of Hercules is apparent even without recognising an exclusive link to sheep-farming, which would indeed be limiting, or even a role as the principal deity of the Apennine peoples, which would be at odds with the god's secondary position in important cult sites such as Pietrabbondante and Agnone.

Here, another historiographical problem arises. In the past decades, there has been a debate on the possibility that long-distance transhumance routes existed even before the unification of the Roman era, when moving from one region to another was not a political problem. In contrast, in earlier periods, this free passage would have been hindered by political-administrative fragmentation. Other scholars have argued that the free movement of flocks must have been possible even in more ancient times, within the framework of mutual recognition systems or of tolls; as Emilio Gabba well observed, 'transhumance is a pre-political system'.³² This is a theme that

28 Giovanni Colonna, *Bronzi votivi umbro-sabellici a figura umana*, vol. 1, *Periodo arcaico* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970).

29 Frank van Woutherghem, "Il culto di Ercole e la pastorizia nell'Italia centrale," in *La civiltà della transumanza*, ed. Edilio Petrocelli (Isernia: Cosmo Iannone Editore, 1999): 413–28.

30 Tesse D. Stek, *Cult Places and Cultural Change in Republican Italy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009): 55–58.

31 Guy J. Bradley, "Aspects of the Cult of Hercules in Central Italy," in *Herakles and Hercules: Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity*, ed. Louis Rawlings and Hugh Bowden (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005).

32 On the topic, see Arnaldo Marcone, "Il rapporto tra agricoltura e pastorizia nel mondo romano nella storiografia recente," *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 128 (2016): 287–95, with references. An interesting scientific approach to the problem is Angela Trentacoste et al., "Heading for the Hills? A Multi-Isotope Study of Sheep Management in First-Millennium BC Italy," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 29 (2020): 1–17.

should be discussed together with the political systems of the Apennine world. In this area, the fragmentation we noted at the beginning could be seen in less rigid terms, as an occupation of territories that were not precisely well-delimited but rather a succession of occupied and generally controlled areas: a system in which, consequently, the mobility of peoples or groups would be natural. A recurring element in the ancient historiography of the Italic peoples is related to the movement of peoples: I refer to the fascinating and enigmatic tradition of the *ver sacrum*, that is, the custom whereby, in times of crisis due to overpopulation, part of a community would break away to seek fortune and land elsewhere, effectively becoming another people, often under the leadership of an animal representing the will of a god.³³ This complex tradition serves well as an introduction to my second point.

2 Warfare

The other fundamental social and economic activity traditionally associated with the Apennine peoples is warfare. In the last decades, the relevance of this sphere to social and anthropological developments has been widely exploited.³⁴ One of the most important achievements is the awareness that it would be misleading to neatly separate ancient warfare from other spheres, such as social structure and economy. This separation, often seen in past studies, is the outcome of a vision that regarded ancient societies as a pendulum swinging between states of war and peace. However, the most recent developments in anthropology and sociology show that there was instead a continuous state of fluctuation.³⁵ Similar to what happened in the ancient Mediterranean, where the boundary between merchants and pirates was very thin,³⁶ even in the Apennine mountains, the distinction between shepherd and warrior was mostly

³³ See Massimiliano Di Fazio, "Religions of Ancient Italy," in *The Peoples of Ancient Italy*, ed. Gary Farney and Guy Bradley (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017): 151. Salvatore M. Puglisi, *La civiltà appenninica* (Florence: Sansoni, 1959): 97, already hinted at connections between the *ver sacrum* tradition and pastoralism.

³⁴ See recent scholarship by Michael Parker Pearson and I.J. Nick Thorpe, eds., *Warfare, Violence and Slavery in Prehistory*, BAR International Series 1374 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005); Ton Otto, Henrik Thrane and Helle Vandkilde, ed., *Warfare and Society: Archaeological and Social Anthropological Perspectives* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2006). See also Peter Turchin, "Warfare and the Evolution of Social Complexity: A Multilevel-Selection Approach," *Structure and Dynamics* 4 (2010): 1–37.

³⁵ Michael Parker Pearson, "Warfare, Violence and Slavery in Later Prehistory: An Introduction," in *Warfare, Violence and Slavery in Prehistory*, ed. Michael Parker Pearson and I.J. Nick Thorpe, BAR International Series 1374 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005): 21, describes it as a 'third way' between war and peace, 'characterized by casual but sustained violence which operates at many different levels, from feuding and vendetta to larger scale skirmishing and fighting between clans and kin groups.'

³⁶ David Tandy, *Warriors into Traders: The Power of the Market in Early Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

situational. It is thus not surprising to find, for instance, in a rural sanctuary in the inland area of southern Latium – a territory connected by transhumance routes – small votives representing both animals (in clay) and warriors (in bronze).³⁷ Ultimately, the connection between war and pastoralism is hunting, an activity of crucial importance to Ancient Italy; but not by chance as among the most present weapons found in Apennine area burials is the spear, which is the proper weapon used by hunters.

War in the Italic world is a theme that has been explored at length since it is the feature that has emerged most from literary sources (understandably, as warlike events constitute the backbone of the annalistic narrative), which seems to be related to the perception that these same communities had of themselves.³⁸ On the other hand, iconographic and archaeological documentation confirms the importance of war for many of these communities.³⁹ The ecological context goes in the same direction because the scarcity of resources leads to an endemic state of conflict.⁴⁰ The importance of weapons is fully revealed by their presence in places of worship, where the weapon was regarded as an offering, especially when of foreign manufacture.⁴¹ Furthermore, weapons can of course be found in funerary contexts. An interesting question arising from funerary data concerns if and how the communities in the Apennine world used weapons as an indicator of one's status (that is, social, identity, gender and even 'ethnic').⁴² Shepherding issues concern communities as a whole, giving an indistinct image that is akin to a 'group photo'. Conversely, the question of weapons allows us to go into detail, almost into the personal lives of the members of these communities, through funerary documentation. This kind of documentation, as

37 Casale Pescarola, near Atina: Elena Marazzi, "Acque curative e percorsi di transumanza nel Lazio preromano: le dediche dal santuario di Casale Pescarola a Casalvieri (FR)," *Scienze dell'Antichità* 28, no. 2 (2022): 503–13.

38 Even if, in some cases, the perception seems to be 'heterodirected': Dench, *From Barbarians*.

39 See, e.g., Gianluca Tagliamonte, *I figli di Marte* (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1994); and more recently, Marlene Suano, "Armi nelle tombe: che fine hanno fatto i guerrieri?" in *The State of the Samnites*, ed. Tesse D. Stek, Papers of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome 69 (Rome: Quasar, 2021): 91–102.

40 Robert Layton, "Sociobiology, Cultural Anthropology and the Causes of Warfare," in *Warfare, Violence and Slavery in Prehistory*, ed. Michael Parker Pearson and I.J. Nick Thorpe, BAR International Series 1374 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005): 44; for the Vestine area, see recent scholarship by Elena Scarsella, "War and Warriors in the Archaic Aterno Valley (Central-Italy)," *World Archaeology* 51, no. 5 (2019): 673–88.

41 Gianluca Tagliamonte, "Dediche di armi nei santuari sannitici," *Cuadernos de Prehistoria y Arqueología* 28–29 (2002–2003): 95–125; Adriano La Regina, "Armi nel santuario di Pietrabbondante," in *Armi votive in Magna Grecia*, ed. Raimon Graells i Fabregat and Fausto Longo, *Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Tagungen* 36 (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2018): 241–60.

42 For a more general discussion, see Cristiano Iaia, "Bronzesmiths and the Construction of Material Identity in Central Italy (1000–700 BCE)," in *Production, Trade and Connectivity in Pre-Roman Italy*, ed. Jeremy Armstrong and Sheira Cohen (London: Routledge, 2022): 129–51.

is well-known, has several complexities. One aspect that has become increasingly evident in recent years is that it is difficult to identify precise rules: as space and time vary, so do customs. We know of necropolises in central Italy in which almost every burial of an adult is marked by the presence – and sometimes even abundance – of weapons (Fossa and Caporciano in Abruzzo, Atina in inland Latium).⁴³ In others, weapons are rare and do not regularly mark the male grave (for example, Alfedena and Satricum). The chronological aspect is relevant because, in many cases, a dramatic decrease in the presence of weapons has been observed in tombs dated to the fifth century BC.⁴⁴ A question arises here: If Apennine societies are characterised in the sources as warlike, we would expect a warlike self-representation at the funerary level. A case can be made about a community that has been described as aggressive in the historical narrative, namely the Volscians, who flowed from the Apennine areas towards the Pontine Plain in the fifth century BC, until they occupied Satricum. The Satrican necropolis has yielded few weapons: 16 examples from almost 200 burials. This apparent contradiction has been explained in various ways,⁴⁵ from the least convincing (that weapons could not have been preserved in the burials due to the chemical composition of the soil) to arguments that, in some ways, reverse the perspective. That is to say, weapons would have been particularly important, to the point of discouraging their ‘sacrifice’; especially in areas where mineral resources were more distant and inaccessible, which obviously would have increased the intrinsic value of the metal and thus of the weapons. Accordingly, the presence of weapons in a tomb might mark the burial of prominent individuals within the community. It is also worth emphasising that the weapons in Satricum were mostly placed in tombs of non-young individuals: this seems to reinforce the symbolic value of weapons, that of being a sign of social status. Such interpretation is likewise confirmed by the presence of lead miniature examples of weapons, one of which (a small axe) is extremely important because it bears the only inscription that can be traced back to the Volscian language.⁴⁶ More generally, recent chemical analyses show that in the Samnite area, some metal objects (particularly belts) were produced not for actual use but rather

⁴³ Notably, tomb 310 at Caporciano with twelve spearheads: Alberta Martellone, “La necropoli di Cinturelli a Caporciano (L’Aquila),” *Sui due versanti dell’Appennino: necropoli e distretti culturali tra VII e VI secolo a.C.*, ed. Fernando Gilotta and Gianluca Tagliamonte, Biblioteca di Studi Etruschi 55 (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 2015): 99. For the Samnite area, see Rafael Scopacasa, “Gender and Ritual in Ancient Italy: A Quantitative Approach to Grave Goods and Skeletal Data in Pre-Roman Samnium,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 118, no. 2 (2014): 241–66.

⁴⁴ Valeria Acconcia and Serafino L. Ferreri, “Crisis and Transformation: the 5th and 4th century BC in Pre-Roman Abruzzo as a Turning Point for Local Communities,” in *L’età delle trasformazioni: L’Italia medio-adriatica tra il V e il IV secolo a.C.*, ed. Valeria Acconcia (Rome: Quasar, 2020): 330–34.

⁴⁵ See Massimiliano Di Fazio, *I Volsci: Un ‘popolo liquido’ nel Lazio antico* (Rome: Quasar, 2020): 134.

⁴⁶ Di Fazio, *I Volsci*: 123–25.

for ceremonial functions⁴⁷ – a further hint that these objects had a strong symbolic function. The fact remains that the presence of weapons, be it widespread or rare, is an important indicator that refers to an activity crucial to survival and also serves to qualify the deceased and his role within the community. Just like other artifacts, weapons were selected to be part of the grave goods, which means that their symbolic value was considered to be high.⁴⁸ However, this also has a potentially misleading consequence: often, the presence of a weapon in a tomb is considered to be a sufficient indication that the tomb's owner is male. Reaching such a conclusion, nevertheless, is not as simple as it seems.⁴⁹

Only recently have we begun to overcome the mechanical equivalence that most researchers make – that if there is a weapon in a grave, the deceased must be male. The problem is that there are still very few inhumation necropolises in pre-Roman Italy that can provide us with reliable anthropological data, which complicates our analysis possibilities. Nevertheless, to be able to expound on this question, we first need to clarify the definition of a weapon. While objects such as spears and swords unquestionably belong to this category, more problems arise with other objects, such as knives, axes, and belts. With regard to knives, their dimension and shape should guide us in distinguishing them from a sword, but this distinction is not always easy; in any case, we do not consider knives as weapons when they are not associated with another weapon.⁵⁰ Belts are a relevant piece of ancient Italic clothing, often as part of the armour, but their frequent presence in female tombs shows that they are not exclusively associated with warfare.⁵¹ More problems arise with the axe, an object of important symbolic relevance in the ancient world. A good example (although still not adequately published) is Tomb 183 in Opi, which has been dated between the sixth and fifth centuries BC; in this tomb, a female individual over 35 years of age was

47 Cristina Riccucci et al., “Micro-Chemical and Metallurgical Study of Samnite Bronze Belts from Ancient Abruzzo (Central Italy, VIII–IV BC),” *Applied Physics A* 113 (2013): 959–70.

48 Joachim Weidig, *Bazzano – ein Gräberfeld bei L'Aquila (Abruzzen): Die Bestattungen des 8.–5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, Monographien des RGZM 112 (Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2014): 662, see also Amy Richardson, “‘Montani Atque Agrestes’ or Women of Substance? Dichotomies of Gender and Role in Ancient Samnium,” *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* (2008): 134.

49 On gender and archaeology in ancient Italy, see Ruth D. Whitehouse, ed., *Gender and Italian Archaeology*, Accordia Specialist Studies on Italy 7 (London: Routledge, 1988). See also Corinna Riva, “Keeping up with the Etruscans? Picene Élites in Central Italy during the Orientalising Period,” *The Accordia Research Papers* 9 (2001–2003): 78–80. More generally, important considerations can be found in Valeria Acconcia, “Superare il guado: Riflessioni su archeologia, storia sociale e modelli di autorappresentazione delle disparità: alcuni esempi dalle comunità antiche e moderne,” *EX NOVO Journal of Archaeology* 6 (2021): 125–56.

50 See Franca Parise Badoni and Maria Ruggeri Giove, *Alfedena, la necropoli di Campo Consolino: scavi 1974–1979* (Chieti: Soprintendenza Archeologica dell'Abruzzo, 1980): XX.

51 See, e.g., Acconcia and Ferreri, “Crisis and Transformation”: 333.

buried with a massive axe on her side.⁵² This case, of course, has raised doubts in its interpretation. The comparison with the Capestrano Warrior suggests an interpretation of the axe in the ‘political’ sense, as a symbol of power. But an axe is a tool that can also be part of a sacrificial discourse, like the knives that are frequently found in female burials.⁵³

As a matter of fact, there are some (very few known to me) sure cases of weapons discovered in female tombs in central Italy. A few examples are found in the Picene area. Recent excavations at Montedinove (AP) revealed a tomb (13) belonging to the second half of the seventh century BC that has two depositions, one above the other. The lower deposition is considered to be female due to the quantity and type of grave goods; a spearhead was found near the head.⁵⁴ In the same area, at Belmonte Piceno, old excavations brought to light two tombs (10 and 19) with rich grave goods, among which are some spearheads and (perhaps) a chariot.⁵⁵ Other interesting cases have recently come to light in the necropolises of Alife, in northern inland Campania,⁵⁶ which have been dated between the sixth and fifth centuries. Tomb 1 in loc. Serra Santa Croce, ‘probably’ belonging to a female, contains, besides pottery, typical elements of high-ranking male rituals: two skewers, a basin, a spear point and a knife. Tombs 39 and 48 in loc. Cimitero belong to females as well (more clearly is 39), each containing a few grave goods and a spearhead. The determination of sex was conducted on the basis of the morphology and size of the bone remains,⁵⁷ a procedure that has acquired a good degree of reliability, although it still cannot be considered absolute.

There are two issues arising from these cases. The first is more specific, the other more general. The first obviously concerns the possible interpretations of such an anomalous presence. I would tend to rule out an ‘Amazonian’ indication: that is, to think that there were women who fought in battle. It is true that in some cases, the

52 Faustoferri, “Women in a Warriors’ Society”: 104–5. It is worth mentioning that in some female tombs at Campovalano, pendants with lithic axes were placed, which could reinforce the interpretation of the object as pertaining to a symbolic (religious?) universe rather than to the sphere of war.

53 Faustoferri, “Women in a Warriors’ Society”: 105. Axes in female tombs have been found in the Orientalizing age: see, for instance, Cassino (t. 13) and the Sarno Valley (San Valentino Torio): Francesco Maria Cifarelli and Sandra Gatti, “Necropoli orientalizzanti e arcaiche dell’area ernica e volsca: contributi per un confronto tra l’Abruzzo e il Lazio meridionale interno,” *Quaderni di Archeologia d’Abruzzo* 2 (2010): 362.

54 Nora Lucentini, “Status e ruoli femminili nei corredi del Piceno meridionale,” in *Sui due versanti dell’Appennino: necropoli e distretti culturali tra VII e VI secolo a.C.*, ed. Fernando Gilotta and Gianluca Tagliamonte, Biblioteca di Studi Etruschi 55 (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 2015): 15.

55 Lucentini, “Status e ruoli femminili”: 15–16. The two women were referred to as ‘Amazons’ at the time of the discovery.

56 Studied by Antonella Natali in her doctoral thesis (I would like to thank the author for allowing me to refer to them here). See Gianluca Tagliamonte et al., “La necropoli sannitica di San Gregorio Matese (CE), loc. Serra Santa Croce,” *Orizzonti: Rassegna di archeologia* 24 (2023): 109–10.

57 Tagliamonte et al., “La necropoli sannitica”: 114.

male image is so predominant that we tend to forget that we also know of cases of female figures with a significant role in their society.⁵⁸ However, there are more plausible alternatives that fall into a symbolic sphere, identifying such grave goods as an expression of the bond between the deceased and a male, whether father or husband. A somewhat analogous context is that of La Tène communities in Central Europe, where female graves with weapons have been found. It has been suggested that such women were ‘honorary males’, heirs of the role and leadership of a related man who died in war or moved away.⁵⁹ the presence of weapons would merely be a short-lived response to a specific set of circumstances during a time of social flux. As a matter of fact, mobility was a consistent aspect of the lives of Apennine societies, as we have already mentioned. What happens in a community after a group of warriors has left for some reason (for example, war or the search for new land) is an issue that has been relatively neglected.⁶⁰ It is worth considering that some women could have undertaken the roles left by males. This, of course, implies that the weapon mainly had a symbolic meaning. From the same perspective, weapons in infant burials may have a similar value:⁶¹ the idea that infants and children in their early years actually used these weapons is unlikely, so the symbolic aspect has to be considered the most reasonable. A possible clue in this sense could come from the placement of the objects. The spears found in graves are often positioned in a functional manner, suggesting that the entire weapon was deposited, including the wooden pole: the remains of the wood are in fact often found in the handle, and not infrequently, the tip corresponds to the point (Fig. 1).⁶² Contrarily, in Tomb 39 of Alife, the position of the spearhead inside the humerus seems to rule out the possibility of the deposition of the entire weapon and suggests that the symbolic aspect of the object was prevailing. Similarly, in other cases, the spearhead is placed in a non-functional position outside the tomb,

58 For example, the Capetrano Warrior is not unique, because we also know of a ‘Lady of Capetrano’, whose relationship with the Warrior we know little of; but she does exist, even if there are no clues that connote her warrior nature. See Alessandro Naso, “Clan e *gentes* nell’Italia medio-adriatica in epoca preromana,” in *La società gentilizia nell’Italia antica tra realtà e mito storiografico*, ed. Massimiliano Di Fazio and Silvia Paltineri, Biblioteca di Athenaeum 61 (Bari: Edipuglia, 2019): 155–90.

59 Bettina Arnold, “‘Honorary Males’ or Women of Substance? Gender, Status and Power in Iron Age Europe,” *Journal of European Archaeology* 3, no. 2 (1995): 153–68; see Scopacasa, “Gender and Ritual”: 92. A possible example in northern Italy is also known, in the La Tène necropolis of Oleggio (NO), where a female burial with a complete Celtic panoply was found: Giuseppina Spagnolo Garzoli, ed., *Conubia Gentium: la necropoli di Oleggio e la romanizzazione dei Vertamocori* (Turin: Omega Edizioni, 1999): 112–15.

60 On the topic, see Richardson, “Montani Atque Agrestes”: 136–37.

61 See the list in Weidig, *Bazzano*: 665–67.

62 See, e.g., for the necropolis of Fossa, tbb. 16, 18, 38, 43 and others (often with the head towards the bottom of the body): Vincenzo d’Ercole and Enrico Benelli, *La necropoli di Fossa*, vol. 2, *I corredi orientalizzanti e arcaici* (Pescara: Edizioni Carsa, 2004).

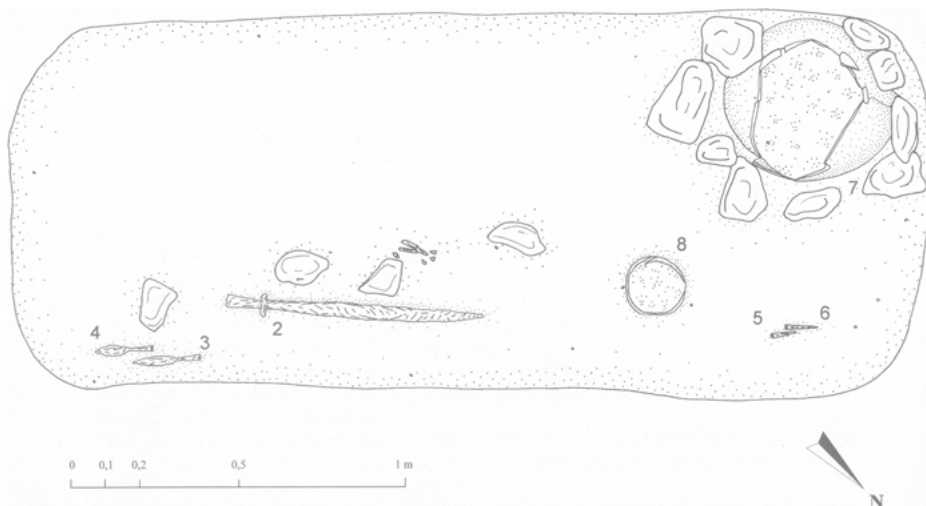


Fig. 1: Necropolis of Fossa, tb. 16, heads (nn. 3–4) and tips (5–6).

on the side or on top of the lid (Fig. 2).⁶³ In these cases, therefore, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the predominance of the symbolic aspect over the functional one: it is not an armed woman, but a woman buried with a weapon, which is different.

This is the more specific point. But perhaps even more important is the general point. For if we had only relied on the traditional weapon – male association, Tomb 39 in Alife would also have been labelled as male. Thus, we need to consider that other burials labelled as male because of their association with weapons might in fact have been female. The doubt is even stronger in cases of sub-adult graves, for which anthropological analyses are more difficult. This consideration has possible major consequences in our studies, if only as a matter of statistics: we often find in a given necropolis the preponderance of male burials over female ones. The doubt is that the picture of these communities is not conditioned by choices made in antiquity, but rather by inaccurate analyses made by us in the present.

If this were the case, we would have another example of the subalternity that characterises these populations, which not only concerns their historical events, but also, in some ways, their destiny over the centuries. If we could do nothing about the historical subalternity, we can at least try to redeem them through investigations and studies that would lead to a better understanding of their social structures and the economic structures that constituted the substance of these systems.

⁶³ See, e.g., Parise Badoni and Ruggeri Giove, *Alfedena*, for tombs 67, 91, 105, where the spear was placed outside. These three burials are considered male according to the morphological analysis performed on the skeletal remains.

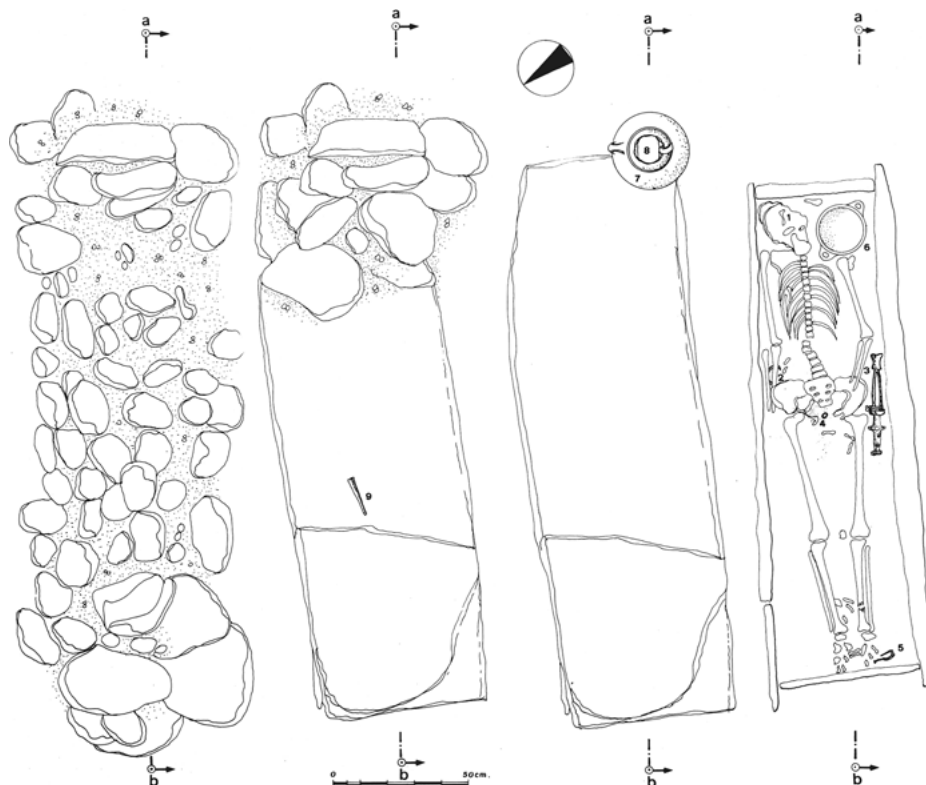


Fig. 2: Necropolis of Alfedena, tb. 91.

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