



The Acroteria From the Archaic Building at Poggio Civitate (Etruria). How Should They Be Interpreted?

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Abstract

Poggio Civitate is the location of an ancient Etruscan settlement in present-day Tuscany which, in the Archaic period (c.580-c.480 BC), was home to a monumental courtyard complex, its roof adorned with a series of terracotta acroteria. These acroteria took the form of seated and standing men and women, which form the basis of this study, as well as fantastic and real animals. The question addressed will be the appropriate identification of these figures, regarding which there is currently no scholarly agreement. The matter is contentious because of the uncertainty about the function of the Archaic Building itself. This paper argues that the Archaic Building most likely functioned as a domestic complex, based on an analysis of the plan of the building and its relationship to the previous phase. It is then argued that the arbitrary categories of "mortal" and "divine" often applied to the acroteria are an anachronism and that the acroteria should in fact be identified more broadly as status markers: symbols of the wealth and power of the Archaic Building's elite occupants.

Keywords: Poggio Civitate, Etruscan, architectural terracotta decoration, Archaic period

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Introduction

Poggio Civitate is located in northern inland Etruria, near to the River Ombrone and the modern *comune* of Murlo, an hour's drive south of the major city of Siena (see **Fig.1**). It is situated in a prominent, highly visible position (Meyers 2003: 114) on the eastern portion of a hilltop plateau bordering central Tuscany (Donati 2000: 324; Meyers 2003: 72). Occupied since the Iron Age, the site was first monumentalized in the Orientalizing period (c.720-c.580 BC) (Haynes 2000: 115). After the Orientalizing Period complex was destroyed in the late seventh century BC (Turfa & Steinmayer 2002: 3), Poggio Civitate was rebuilt in the Archaic Period (Damgaard Andersen 1990: 79). It was upon the Archaic Building that the rooftop acroteria considered in this paper once stood.

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A descriptive overview of the rooftop acroteria from the site will be given in Part One. To interpret these acroteria, one must first decide upon the likely function of the Archaic Building, something that is still disputed. Therefore, Part Two of this paper is dedicated to demonstrating precisely how the varied scholarly interpretations of the site's function impact the understanding of the acroteria. From this discussion, the conclusion is drawn that the Archaic Building functioned as a domestic structure. Finally, in Part Three, the implications that this proposed function has on the interpretation of the acroteria are explored. All dates given will be BC.¹

Fig.1: Map showing the location of Poggio Civitate within wider Etruria.

Source: Plan by Renate Sponer Za for Winter, *Symbols of Wealth and Power*, 2009, page LII.

Part One: Descriptive Overview

The Orientalizing phase of occupation at Poggio Civitate (**Fig.2**) is dated from 650 to around 610/600BC, when a fire destroyed the site (Edlund-Gantz 1972: 198). The Orientalizing complex comprised three buildings; OC1, a residence; OC2, an industrial workshop; and OC3, a tripartite structure which has been interpreted as a religious building (Haynes 2000: 115).

Fig.2: Plan of the Orientalizing phase at Poggio Civitate.

Source: Drawing by Renate Sponer Za for Winter, *Symbols of Wealth and Power*, 2009, Plan 8.

The Archaic Building (**Fig.3**) was constructed between 600-575BC atop the remains of the Orientalizing complex (Haynes 2000: 117). It consisted of a monumental four-winged structure measuring 60 x 61.8m (Meyers 2012: 4), enclosing a colonnaded courtyard (O'Donoghue 2013: 269), surrounded by four wings of continuous rooms (Meyers 2003: 70). On the western side, a defensive structure extended the complex a further 30m (Tuck et al. 2010: 93).

Fig.3: Plan of the Archaic Building at Poggio Civitate.

Source: Drawing by Renate Sponer Za for Winter, *Symbols of Wealth and Power*, 2009, Plan 9.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper has argued that the function of the Archaic Building at Poggio Civitate was domestic, based on the internal layout of the building and its relationship to the preceding Orientalizing phase. As a consequence, this paper advocates the interpretation of the acroteria as status markers, symbols of the wealth and power wielded by the aristocrats who inhabited the Archaic Building. This approach is prioritized over that seen in existing scholarship, which favours the arbitrary categories of "mortal" or "divine".

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