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Book Review

The Orientalizing and Lucanian Tombs from Loc. De Santis I at Pontecagnano

By Margit von Mehren (*AnalRom* 52). Rome: Edizioni Quasar 2019. Pp. 276. €32. ISBN 978-88-7140-936-8 (paper).

Reviewed by

[Marshall Joseph Becker](#)

Von Mehren's impressive volume provides one means of gauging the progress that has been made in studies of ancient cemeteries in the region surrounding the Gulf of Naples. The author has undertaken the daunting task of publishing funerary data that had been recovered decades earlier, during a period when physical anthropology in Italy remained a research area largely separated from mainstream classical archaeology. The information available to von Mehren had been collected during a four month "rescue project" in 1967–1968 at the Località De Santis I, after which the field notes and artifacts were held in storage. The area excavated was approximately 25 x 26 m "located in Picentino, the western cemetery" of Pontecagnano's "three large areas home to more than 10,000 tombs" (9). In 1985, Ingrid Strøm arranged for these warehoused materials to be restored to Naples and then studied by a small team of Danish students. The resulting publication is a beautifully presented collection of data relating to the grave goods from "sixty-two tombs, of which six are empty" (9). The Orientalizing period (defined herein as 725–550 BCE) is represented by 50 of the 56 tombs found with grave goods, and the "last six tombs are Lucanian and can be dated to the 4th and 3rd centuries BC" (9).

Part 1 of this volume, on the Orientalizing material, is presented in three chapters. Funerary ritual is summarized in eight pages, followed by an equally concise section on chronology. A detailed catalogue of more than 600 artifacts recovered from the Orientalizing-period tombs occupies nearly half the volume. Part 2 begins with a single-page summary of the scant Lucanian artifact material derived from six tombs of the fourth to third centuries. This is followed by a seven-page catalogue of these Lucanian objects. Part 3, filling the remainder of the volume, is devoted to the impressive illustrations that were created for and are central to this study. This part begins with three pages of useful illustrations that plot the positions of individual tombs within the excavated area, sorted by the age of the individuals and the tomb chronology. The outstanding drawings and photographs of restored vessels and other artifacts have been produced by experts. The photographs made during the excavations in the 1960s and incorporated here have been well chosen and optimally printed. Von Mehren is to be lauded for her diligence in bringing this volume to completion, now 35 years since the late Dr. Strøm first organized the project. The Carlsberg Foundation, which has provided funding for several of the Danish archaeological projects on which I have worked, richly merits von Mehren's gratitude for its support of this effort.

Von Mehren has successfully completed an impressive task. However, while the focus has by necessity been on artifacts from these tombs, much more could have been done to link these traditional data sets to the research standards of our era. Von Mehren politely ignores the excavators' nearly complete disregard for human skeletal remains at this site, an approach that had long characterized excavations throughout the classical world. As D. Piombino-Mascali and A.R. Zink remind us ("Italy," in N. Marquez-Grant and L. Fibiger, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeological Human Remains and Legislation*, Routledge 2011, 221–22), the traditional focus

primarily on intact skulls continued into the 1980s, rendering moot the recovery of full ancient skeletons and their valuable biological data. A major turning point in the integration of modern archaeological methods into classical studies can be seen in M. MacKinnon's "State of the Discipline: Osteological Research in Classical Archaeology" ([AJA 111.3, 2007, 473–504](#)) that includes a downloadable [40-page bibliography](#). His comprehensive review and other similarly relevant works are ignored by von Mehren.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should summarize my own human skeletal studies from this region of Italy. In 1987, I met Bruno d'Agostino (University of Naples "L'Orientale") and had an opportunity to discuss the bones from the vast numbers of tombs then being excavated by several teams at Pontecagnano. He had long recognized the value of studying the human remains from his excavations and was pleased to learn that I could examine some of these bones as part of my research program begun more than a decade earlier. A series of studies followed, resulting in several publications on various skeletal groups from Pontecagnano as well as on cremations D'Agostino had excavated at Pithekoussai (Ischia) and other sites in the region. Subsequently, I worked with Strøm (University of Copenhagen) and her Danish team, including Helle Horsnaes, to produce additional skeletal reports. Over a period of more than 15 years, I wrote approximately two dozen skeletal studies for various excavators working in the Gulf of Naples region. The specific human remains from Loc. De Santis I at Pontecagnano, however, had been studied by others and were never part of my research. Thus, I was surprised to find in von Mehren's volume a generous acknowledgement of my analysis of the skeletal remains (7).

Since 1985, when the Loc. De Santis I project was resurrected, dozens of papers have been published on the more than 10,000 human skeletons excavated at Pontecagnano. Several relate to the centuries corresponding to the periods addressed by von Mehren. Although a collected bibliography of these works is beyond the scope of this volume, the poor integration of the two skeletal studies that are specifically related is a notable deficiency. These two publications, both from the *Archivio per l'antropologia e la etnologia*, are cited only in scattered footnotes (nn. 76, 88, 91, 127), and most of their information is not incorporated into this volume at all. The first, by Edoardo Pardini et al. ("Gli inumati di Pontecagnano [Salerno] [VII–IV sec. a.C.]." *Archivio per l'antropologia e la etnologia* 112, 1982, 281–333), reports on many Pontecagnano inhumations of the sixth to fifth centuries BCE, including Lucanian burials. The second, by Elena C. Lombardi-Pardini et al. ("Gli inumati di Pontecagnano [Salerno] [VII–VI sec. a.C.]." *Archivio per l'antropologia e la etnologia* 114, 1984, 3–62), reviews bones from graves dating from the eighth to seventh centuries BCE. However, Lombardi-Pardini appears in the limited bibliography as "Pardini, E. L.," and neither of these studies is referenced in table 2: "Age derived from skeleton or length [*sic*] of tomb" (15–16). A simple listing of the relevant tomb numbers and findings from the bones that pertain to age and biological sex would answer several questions that relate to matters basic to understanding how this cemetery was used and would complement the limited information on biological age and gender that is included here.

The high percentage (well over 50%) of these tombs from Loc. De Santis I at Pontecagnano that held the remains of a single child under 5 years of age reveals a mortuary pattern vastly different from what was then being used in Tarquinia and other Etruscan cities (cf. M.J. Becker, "Childhood Among the Etruscans: Mortuary Programs at Tarquinia as Indicators of the Transition to Adult Status," in A. Cohen and J. Rutter, eds., *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy*, *Hesperia* Suppl. 41, 2007, 281–92). This finding alone calls into question von Mehren's suggestion that "very strong Etruscan elements support the interpretation of Pontecagnano as an Etruscan colony in southern Italy" (9). Making cultural comparisons on the basis of objects that can be traded and bought, while ignoring essential cultural behaviors such as funerary rituals, is an incomplete and outdated approach to understanding differences among ancient populations. While the impressive presentation of the information covered in this volume more than adequately fulfills the terms of Strøm's commitment to the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Salerno, Avellino e Benevento, an

opportunity has been missed to link past methods of archaeology to the much-enhanced present range of approaches now used to understand the classical past.

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