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Book Review

Elite Burial Practices and Processes of Urbanization at Gabii: The Non-adult Tombs from Area D of the Gabii Project Excavations

Edited by Marcello Mogetta (*JRA* Suppl. 108). Portsmouth, R.I.: Journal of Roman Archaeology 2020. Pp. 172. \$79.50. ISBN 978-0-9994586-2-4 (cloth).

Reviewed by

[Marshall Joseph Becker](#)

Mogetta's richly illustrated and very well produced edited volume includes contributions covering all the major approaches to understanding the 8 infant and young child burials that have been discovered in association with excavations at Area D at Gabii in Lazio, Italy. Area D is identified as "a residential compound that was abandoned c.500" BCE (19). Mogetta's introduction explores how city formation processes at Gabii are revealed by the evidence from these eight burials from this small portion of the site (9). He closes with composite photographs of the grave offerings from the four most lavishly furnished examples of these tombs. Chapter 2, by J.M. Evans, focuses on the "History of Settlement in Area D: Topography, Architecture and Stratigraphy." A summary of the earliest information concerning activities in Area D is followed by a collation of what is known regarding the Early Iron Age and Orientalizing periods, and then of the Late Orientalizing and Archaic periods. Around 600 BCE "the settlement in Area D assumed a monumental form as elements of stone architecture replaced the structures made from wattle-and-daub and adobe" (35). The settlement in this area ended during the late- and post-Archaic periods (41), as revealed by several later tombs that shifted the locus to a cemetery function. A review of urban development throughout the settlement at Gabii concludes this brief chapter.

Kristina Killgrove (ch. 3) provides a comprehensive study of the skeletons from the eight individuals, all nonadults, that are the focus for this volume. The remains from the adults in tombs from the Late Archaic- and post-Archaic-period burials, also studied by Killgrove, have been published elsewhere. Sheira Cohen's "The Tombs and Their Finds" (ch. 4) forms the core of the volume. This comprehensive description of the grave assemblages of the "rich" infant burials from Area D (51), and those of four more-typical child interments, establishes the material around which all these contributions revolve. Sketches of the individual grave plans are included, supplemented by rough section drawings.

Laura Motta, Daniela Fico, Francesca Alhaique, and Giuseppe E. De Benedetto (ch. 5) elicit concise insights from the macro- and micro-organic evidence, allowing them to speculate on

the meaning of the offerings and rituals associated with these graves (115). In chapter 6, Mattia D'Acri and Mogetta compile the extensive nonadult burial data from contemporary settlements in *Latium Vetus* (125), including from several other subadult burials known from Gabii. In chapter 7, Cohen is joined by Matthew Naglak to discuss "Infant Burials as Mediators of House Identity at Iron Age Gabii." Drawing on Lévi-Strauss' "House Society" model (141), they seek to understand these grave assemblages within Gabii and how they relate to this city's ancient development. Cohen and Naglak recognize that in Anna Maria Bietti Sestieri's (A.M. Bietti Sestieri, ed., *La Necropoli Laziale di Osteria dell'Osa*, Quasar 1992) groupings of the more than 600 burials at nearby Osteria dell'Osa, those dating from 770 to 580 may represent the people living in the initial hut cluster in area D (154, fig. 1.4).

Nicola Terrenato's brief conclusion offers the reader a lucidly written and logical overview of the many issues that are addressed by this volume. The two-page afterword by Anna De Santis, a major contributor to the research at Osteria dell'Osa, brilliantly brings the work at these two associated sites into their proper perspective.

I approach this review as an anthropologist trained in the four fields of Americanist anthropology, and as someone who has published the burials of Osteria dell'Osa (M. Becker and L. Salvadei, "Analysis of the Human Skeletal Remains from the Cemetery of Osteria dell'Osa," in Bietti Sestieri 1992, 53–191). This experience has sensitized me to the importance of studying human skeletons in their contexts and leads me to point out a number of problems with the analysis of the Gabii skeletons. Killgrove was not active during the excavation of the children at Gabii (47). This may have limited recovery of these skeletal remains and led to the loss of basic information such as the orientations of these small bodies. The identification of each burial in Area D as a "tomb"—even when several interments appear in different parts of the same chamber—is confusing. The authors generally presume a familiarity with the considerable existing literature relating to the Area D excavations. Many of these chapters reflect problems in field methods and data recording, including a complete absence of test pitting or trenching that would have revealed stratigraphic details. These failings are multiplied by several attempts to interpret the limited data beyond the records secured, using theories such as Lévi-Strauss' somewhat dated ideas of "the house" as a feature of social organization (the model was already criticized 25 years ago; see J. Carsten and S. Hugh-Jones, eds., *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press 1995).

Evans' overview (ch. 2) of the excavation mixes data summaries with possibly relevant theory and a variety of conclusions, without a logical sequence in their presentation. All are based on little evidence. Of the several features of varying size, construction and use associated with the three huts that are related to the intramural nonadult burials (*suggrundaria*), the "largest is a circular pit F2 in the SE quadrant of the area. Its S half was truncated by construction of a ditch" (29). This modern "ditch" is a sharply delineated trench that runs north to south through Areas C, D, and E. This modern feature provides an excellent opportunity to examine the actual stratigraphy of a large portion of the site, but the value of the cut was not recognized.

The title of chapter 2 suggests that the settlement history of Area D will be elucidated through use of stratigraphy. In reading this section, I recalled the project's earlier publication that refers to "stratigraphic excavations" at Gabii (M. Mogetta and J. Becker, "Archaeological Research at Gabii, Italy: The Gabii Project Excavations, 2009–2011," *AJA* 118.1, 2014, 171–88). Nothing that I would call stratigraphic appears in the method used. The excavators employed open area excavations that permit a form of archaeological seriation. Their elucidation of temporal sequences involves stripping off layers to reveal aspects of temporal change. The rough chronology used here is revealed by ceramic seriation. Archaeological section drawings are fundamental to understanding the chronology of a site, and simple stratigraphic section drawings would reveal sequencing more efficiently, more clearly, and in finer detail. At Gabii, the suspected beaten earth floors that had been unrecognized at the time of excavation (28) are the kinds of features that appear so vividly in section drawings of excavated test pits or trenches. The beaten earth floors of an elongated rectangular hut (H4) (31) are noted, but nowhere depicted by a section drawing.

The preface to this volume promises that "final publication of the stratigraphic archive from the tombs and the relevant sequences of built structures and occupation layers will appear in the Gabii Project Reports" (8) and indicates that "interim stratigraphic data and 3D models are currently available" online. My efforts to decode [this online information](#), most recently on 8 September 2020, were not encouraging. No instructions are given. The data available appear to include Areas C, I, and GH, but not Area D. In short, this is no substitute for actual section drawings or detailed stratigraphic presentation.

In lieu of section drawings to clarify the basic archaeological record, Cohen and Naglak offer inferences linking the people interred at the nearby cemetery of Osteria dell'Osa with the inhabitants of area D at Gabii. They refer to a Pompeian cemetery outside the Porta Stabia that contains more than 150 burials, the majority for individuals from the Epidii (152). Those burials of the pre-Roman *gens Epidia*, recovered from a specific Pompeian cemetery area may have parallels with the residential groups at Gabii, but this is not demonstrated by the eight child burials and a few floors that are not themselves linked to the graves by the stratigraphy at Area D. Cohen and Naglak's use of Lévi-Strauss' "House Society" model (141), without clarifying their interpretation of that much-discussed theory (see Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995), does little to relate the very limited evidence from within Area D to this assortment of subadult burials.

The data from the excavated areas of the village discussed here seem unrelated to the theoretical models used to interpret them. This volume does not provide enough evidence to warrant the extensive speculation presented. I suggest that scholars read the brief but excellent two final chapters before undertaking a journey through the other contributions to this important though flawed report.

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