

The Gabii Project

The archaeology of first-millennium BCE Italy has in recent years become a booming field, with far-reaching historical and cultural implications. The major protagonists were those central Italian cities that were part of the first wave of urbanization in the Archaic period. Strangely enough, virtually none of them has ever been extensively excavated, with the obvious exception of Greek colonies. Paradoxically, the best-known Archaic Italian city at this point is Rome itself, where the record is very fragmentary and difficult to reach. The Gabii project represents the first opportunity, certainly since the introduction of systematic excavation techniques, to investigate a significant portion of one of these “metropoleis” under perfect conditions, being an abandoned site owned by the Italian state.

Gabii, located on a strategic position along the Via Prenestina about 12 miles east of Rome (fig. 1), was first occupied during the late Bronze Age and had emerged during the Iron Age as one of the primary urban centers in Latium. A rich body of textual evidence and epigraphic sources attests its cultural and political importance, especially during the Archaic and Early Republican ages (sixth–fifth centuries BCE). Extensive field surveys carried out in the late 1970s yielded an impressive quantity of material dating to the early phases but revealed that a major contraction occurred during the Late Republican and Imperial periods. It seems that Gabii has been only marginally impacted by the



Fig. 2. Magnetometry in progress.

great public monumental projects that characterize the vast majority of Italian cities at that time. If this is true, then it is extremely likely that the original urban layout and structures of the Archaic and early / mid-Republican periods have been substantially preserved.

In the summer of 2007 the Kelsey Museum launched intensive geoarchaeological investigations at the site, as a first step in a multi-approach and multi-staged project under the direction of this writer. A pilot campaign was first conducted in a 6-hectare area to test the response of the buried archaeology to magnetic susceptibility; a rapid assessment of the results proved magnetometry to be an optimal technique

(fig. 2). In the summer of 2008 the same method of investigation was adopted on a larger scale to survey an area of approximately 25 hectares corresponding to more than 40 percent of the estimated size of the settlement (ca. 60 hectares). In addition, 47 manual and 5 mechanical cores were drilled in 52 sample units of the survey area, with the goal of assessing the depth of the soil overburden and the underlying geology, obtaining a profile of the site stratigraphy along significant cross-section lines and refining the interpretation of the anomalies detected by the magnetometer (fig. 3).

The main acquisition of the geophysical survey is a regular pattern of linear anomalies that can be in all likelihood interpreted as streets. The urban layout appears based upon a previously unknown trunk road that follows a contour line around the lake of Castiglione, bending far to the north, presumably in the direction of Tibur. Secondary orthogonal streets branching off from this main artery delineate orthogonal blocks, wrapped around the truncated cone formed by the volcanic crater. This evidence strongly suggests a more southerly course for the Via Prenestina, which in previous reconstructions was assumed to be the main thoroughfare of Gabii. A later reorganization of the site topography is indeed revealed by the presence of a very strong rectilinear anomaly that traverses the entire extent of the surveyed area along its southern limit, intersecting the overall road network at an odd angle.

The subsurface sampling has demonstrated the existence of well-stratified archaeological deposits associated with the magnetic anomalies in most of the

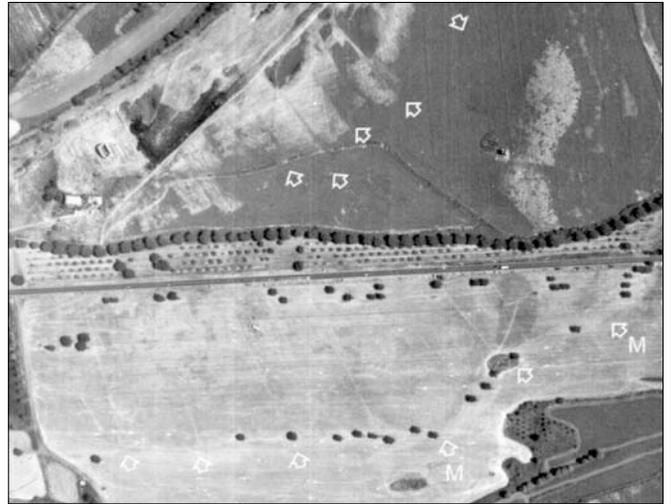


Fig. 1. Aerial view of Gabii.

sample units of the survey areas; evidence of terracing suggests that substantial parts of the earliest levels may have been sealed up.

On this basis, major excavation work at the site is scheduled to begin in the summer of 2009. Two excavation areas wide enough to include sections of three adjacent blocks will be opened to further our understanding of the structure of the settlement: one area will be centered on a massive rectangular anomaly (a podium?) to the north of the main artery; the other one will be opened to the south of the modern Via Prenestina. Over the next two to four years it is expected that the results of the excavation will offer a significant contribution in future discussions of planned urbanism in ancient Italy.

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Fig. 3. Dr. Jeff Becker (Boston University) and Jason Farr (IPCAA) record a core sample.