Search for an ancient city
by Jeffrey Becker (Boston University) and Nicola Terrenato (University of Michigan)

In the time of the Tarquins a treaty was struck between Rome and the Latin city of Gabii (Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 4.58). The treaty was recorded on bulb-lock’s skin and displayed in the shrine of Semo Sancus in Rome, where it was said to be still visible in the 1st c. BC. In spite of its ancient fame, the city of Gabii slowly vanished over time and has seen only limited and sporadic attention from archaeologists. In the 1790s the Scottish antiquarian Gavin Hamilton conducted a campaign of excavation at the site, discovering what was reportedly a public building from which he recovered nearly 40 sculptures that went initially to the collection of the Borghese family, although some were later taken to Paris by Napoleon. It would not be until the 20th century that the site would see any systematic excavations. These came in the form of the archaeological survey of Gabii carried out by the Spanish School at Rome and work on an extra-mural sanctuary carried out by M. Guaitoli. But still the majority of the urban center remains unexplored, and it is there that the Gabii Project, under the direction of Nicola Terrenato of the University of Michigan, will begin major excavations in June 2009.

The project began in 2007 with geophysical survey in the urban area of Gabii, aimed at discovering subsurface features and gauging the degree of archaeological preservation at the site. The magnetometry survey results have revealed substantial evidence for the urban layout of the site, which has never been investigated before. Within the line of the city walls Gabii has a regularized layout consisting of main trunk roads that intersect with side roads at regular intervals. In addition to the magnetometry, core samples were taken across the site in order to assess the stratigraphic preservation and depth, data that shows a long-range of occupation deposits that begin with the Iron Age. The Project plans large-scale and long-term excavations at the site in order to pursue important questions related to the urban development of Gabii and the phenomenon of planned urbanism in Central Italy. To find out more about the project, please visit http://lapisgabi.blogspot.com/ or http://lapisgabi.nums.blogspot.com/

Jeffrey Becker is Managing Director of the Gabii Project and Visiting Assistant Professor of Classical Archaeology at Boston University. beckerja@bu.edu

Nicola Terrenato is Director of the Gabii Project and Associate Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Michigan.